

Preliminary Assessment of Israel's Operation Cast Lead

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Brief Analysis

On January 18, Israel announced its military withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, following the three-week offensive Operation Cast Lead. Although no definitive judgments can be made at this point -- post-conflict arrangements are concluding while scattered gunfire is still occurring -- Israel has made several tangible gains during the Gaza campaign in contrast to the inconclusive outcome of the 2006 war with Hizballah.

One thing is clear: Israel has sharply degraded Hamas's ability to fire rockets at Israeli cities. At the start of the war, Hamas was able to fire up to eighty rockets per day, but by the end, that number dropped to no more than twenty. In contrast, during the 2006 war, Hizballah was able to fire more than 150 rockets per day throughout. In addition, some of the tunnels that Palestinian groups use to smuggle rockets were destroyed. Overall, the Israeli army was much better prepared for this conflict on nearly every level -- planning, training, equipment, and force readiness -- than it was in 2006. In particular, reserve units were carefully deployed and only committed after a period of training.

Israel sustained far fewer fatalities and injuries than it did in 2006. Arab casualties likewise were lower in Gaza than in Lebanon, but were still considerable. Much of this decrease in casualties resulted from Hamas's inability to offer serious opposition on the ground -- a fact that will make it difficult for the organization to credibly claim that it defended Gaza, let alone scored a victory. In contrast, Hizballah in 2006 offered substantial resistance and determined opposition to Israeli ground forces, employing the full range of its capabilities. Although many thought Israel's deterrence was eroded in the 2006 war, Israeli officials state that it was restored after the current fighting with Hamas. In fact, Hizballah's absence during the Gaza campaign can be seen as an indicator of this renewed deterrence.

Another Israeli achievement is a fresh international focus on the tunnel network between the Egyptian Sinai and Gaza. The issue of border security has become increasingly important for Israel, and since the network is crucial to Hamas's ability to rearm, this renewed focus is critical. During the recent conflict, Hamas fired 122-mm Grad artillery rockets -- a type of rocket that is manufactured in Iran to fit through the tunnels -- hitting Gadera, twenty miles south of Tel Aviv. One million Israelis are now within this rocket's range, including the largest city in southern Israel, Beersheva. If more sophisticated, longer-range rockets are smuggled into Gaza, Israel's international airport could come within range in the near future.

In 2006, UN Security Resolution 1701 addressed the issue of arms smuggling by calling for an embargo on weapons to Lebanese militias; the provision, however, has never been enforced. As a result, Israeli sources estimate that Hizballah has nearly tripled the number of rockets in its arsenal since 2006. This time, in contrast, a practical means of interdicting the rockets -- instead of another UN resolution -- has been the focus. Last week, the United States and Israel signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that authorizes U.S. assistance to Egypt to halt the flow of arms. Last weekend, European leaders offered their support to the interdiction effort as well. This international assistance could potentially involve U.S. Navy and NATO elements to help police international waters, since the Grads are believed to come from transit points in Iran, Somalia, Eritrea, and Yemen. The Obama administration must follow up, work with allies, and make sure that verbal commitments to stop arms smuggling are transformed into reality.

For Egypt, the stakes are high. The Gaza conflict sobered Egypt to the implications of an Islamist-ruled entity on its eastern border, armed with sophisticated weaponry. The hope is that Cairo will now take steps to prevent Hamas from rearming -- rather than casting a blind eye to the smuggling -- and thereby protect Egyptian security interests. Moreover, failure to act could lead Israel to occupy the southern edge of Gaza, where the tunnels are located, which in turn could lead Palestinians in the Rafah area to force their way across the border and pour into Egypt. If the current effort fails, the Egypt-Gaza border will assuredly become a flashpoint, triggering another Israeli intervention. Consequently, the moment seems right to consider an added mission for the U.S.-led Multinational Forces Organization (MFO) in the Sinai, which was created after the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty to prevent renewed hostilities. Given the thirty years of bilateral peace, the MFO could be enlisted to halt weapons smuggling on the few roads traversing the Sinai.

Another significant difference between 2009 and 2006 was the ability of moderate Arab regimes to maintain their antagonism for Hamas. To be sure, Arab enmity toward Israel rose sharply as pictures of Palestinian casualties filled Arab satellite television programs, putting pressure on the Arab regimes to support Hamas. Some key Arab leaders, however, seemed to withstand these public demands. For example, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak withstood protests throughout the Arab world, and refused to give in to Hamas's demand to open the Rafah crossing. In addition, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia boycotted an Arab conference in Qatar, which they deemed too supportive of Hamas.

An additional success is the broad support, even from Hamas, for the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA) to return -- after their violent expulsion by Hamas in June 2007 -- to operate the crossing points in southern Gaza. Furthermore, in a major policy change, Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert indicated clearly to visiting European leaders that his country does not oppose reconstruction of Gaza -- so long as it does not bolster Hamas. A challenge for the Obama administration and others will be to find a way for the PA, and not Hamas, to get credit for the reconstruction. One solution might be to establish a mechanism involving key players, such as the PA, Egypt, the United States, Israel, and perhaps others, to coordinate Gaza reconstruction and ensure that the PA receives credit.

Some critics say the Israeli offensive was not successful because Hamas remains in power in Gaza. The Israeli government, however, clearly indicated from the outset that this was not an objective of the campaign. This stance contrasts with Israel's contention in 2006 that it would deal Hizballah a blow from which it would not recover.

Both conflicts featured urban warfare. Hamas and Hizballah both used Arab civilians as human shields to launch attacks on Israeli cities, forcing Israel into making terrible choices, as its enemies care little about their own populations. Israel must grapple with how to stop rocket attacks on its own citizens while also minimizing the Arab human toll. Israel believes that its actions during the offensive, such as dropping leaflets before bombing an area or evacuating wounded Palestinians, is something that Hamas would never do. Moreover, Israelis note that the United States fired on mosques in urban areas in Iraq where arms caches were located. Nonetheless, given the shift of warfare away from traditional battlefields to urban areas, Israel might consider setting up an "urban corps" dedicated to designating safe havens for civilian evacuees.

Conclusion

The Hamas war of 2009 and the Hizballah war of 2006 present many differences. Israeli officials seem confident of their successes and, indeed, a preliminary assessment reveals some concrete achievements. But the durability of those achievements will surely be tested in the post-conflict period.

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