

The IDF in Gaza: Operational Concepts, Lines of Effort, and Effects

by [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



Brief Analysis

Almost three weeks into Operation Cast Lead, Israel clearly intends to compel Hamas to accept an end to its attacks on targets in southern Israel. If Hamas does not comply, Israel will destroy as much of Hamas's organizational capacity as possible, leaving the group in a significantly weakened position. To this end, and with the hard-won experience of the 2006 Lebanon War, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are conducting a coherent military campaign that poses a serious, but not yet existential, threat to Hamas.

Operational Concepts

Cast Lead appears to be guided by a number of important operational concepts: continuous attacks on Hamas and associated entities, allowing Hamas little time to regroup; pervasive attacks throughout the Gaza Strip and against the entire Hamas target system; precision attacks to ensure target destruction with minimal collateral damage; isolation of Gaza from Egypt by air attacks along the Philadelphia Corridor; division of Gaza in half by ground forces; attention to humanitarian requirements while maintaining operational freedom of action; attention to information and psychological aspects of the battle; and minimizing IDF casualties through the application of heavy firepower and avoiding clashes in built-up and densely populated areas. Although these concepts are not immutable and some tension exists among them, particularly between the requirements to destroy enemy forces and facilities and to avoid civilian casualties, they shape the direction, emphasis, and intensity of IDF actions.

Lines of Effort

In military terms, lines of effort (LOE) represent sequences of related actions intended to be mutually supportive in achieving the overall goals of a plan. Operation Cast Lead appears to be proceeding along multiple LOE, with each producing effects on a critical sphere of activity for Hamas.

Counterforce. From the beginning of Cast Lead, the IDF's principal LOE has been the reduction of the military capabilities of Hamas and other Palestinian combat elements. In the first week of the operation, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) and Navy primarily conducted this LOE, and ground forces joined the effort on January 3. Israeli forces have been striking Palestinian rocket and mortar units with success. For example, between January 10 and 12, the IAF reported strikes against sixteen rocket-launching targets, including launch teams, launchers, and launch sites.

Israeli ground forces operating primarily in northern Gaza have occupied some traditional launch areas and also engaged mortar and rocket crews. The number of rocket launches has been reduced by about half since the beginning of the conflict, and launch sites have been pushed deeper into Gaza, reducing the threatened area within Israel. Ground force action is also killing Hamas combatants. While Hamas has avoided open combat with the IDF on the ground, attrition of Hamas gunmen who oppose Israeli activity is continuous and increasing. Israeli intelligence sources are reporting some signs of loss of coherence among Hamas units, and in some cases a lack of will to fight. Hamas has had no significant success against Israeli combat forces.

Counterleadership. IDF actions are taking a toll among Hamas leaders, especially in the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and other terrorist organizations. Among those reportedly killed are Nizar Rayyan, a senior Hamas leader, Abu Zakaria al-Jamal, a senior Hamas military commander, and Amir Mansi, a senior commander in the Hamas rocket forces. The killing of experienced leaders reduces the effectiveness of Palestinian forces, limits their ability to act in an organized or cohesive way, and sends a message to other leaders that they are personally at risk.

Counterleadership actions have included strikes against the offices and homes of Hamas and other groups' leaders. Hamas leaders are reportedly hiding in locations they believe the IDF will not strike, moving from place to place.

Counterlogistics. IDF attacks on Hamas logistics have had three major aspects. First, the IAF has conducted numerous strikes against the tunnel system connecting the Strip to Egypt. The intensity of Israeli strikes on the tunnels likely reflects, at least in part, their presumed use in smuggling long-range rockets into Gaza. Although the precise extent of damage to the system is not known (there were reportedly as many as 300 tunnels), traffic has likely been disrupted substantially because of damage to the tunnels, casualties among operators, and concerns about safety. A second element of this LOE is cutting Gaza into two with IDF ground forces. This action greatly reduces Hamas's ability to move personnel and material within the Strip. The third counterlogistics measure has been direct IAF attacks on storage facilities for arms and ammunition. A number of these attacks have been on mosques and the homes of Hamas military wing leaders that are serving as weapons storage facilities for the organization. Secondary explosions from within these targets and video taken by IDF ground forces operating in northern Gaza indicate that the IDF has good intelligence on these targets. Together, these actions make it more difficult for Hamas to bring anything into Gaza and move personnel and material within the Strip, and reduce the group's ability to resupply combat forces and positions.

Counterinfrastructure. IDF actions have reduced the extensive physical infrastructure that supports Hamas. Government offices and facilities have been widely attacked. Rocket development and production facilities, including the so-called rocket research and development facility at the Islamic University in Gaza have been struck, and the IAF attacked Hamas's al-Aqsa television facility. Although Hamas is adept at work-arounds, and physical facilities can be rebuilt, its capacity to rule and sustain attacks on Israel has been weakened.

Cumulative/Synergistic Effects

Effectively executed LOE produce both cumulative and synergistic effects on the targeted systems and the organizations as a whole. Attacks on combat forces, leadership, logistics, and infrastructure comprehensively weaken Hamas's military capabilities and capacity to rule Gaza. Loss of military capabilities weakens Hamas's claims that it is the leader of the "resistance" and "defender" of the Palestinian people. Attacks on leadership can produce internal tensions between those who run the risks of combat and those who evade the violence. Destruction of infrastructure makes it more difficult for Hamas to govern within the Strip. Loss of tunnels reduces Hamas's control, income, and ability to sustain the flow of essential services and goods, including weapons and ammunition.

Next Phase

Israel reportedly has a four-phase operation, two of which have already been carried out: the initial air attack, and

the combined air and ground attack to divide the Strip and penetrate northern Gaza. Phase three is said to be a more comprehensive and intense ground operation involving the movement of ground forces into more densely populated and built-up areas in order to increase the destruction of Hamas combat elements and infrastructure. This phase would require a substantial increase in IDF ground forces and the likely use of reserves in combat roles. Although Israel has already mobilized, trained, and deployed reserve forces in Gaza to support phase-two operations, phase three would increase the violence because the IDF would have to penetrate built-up areas, while Hamas would likely risk more of its forces in engagements on somewhat more favorable terrain.

Phase four involves the reoccupation of the Strip, perhaps as an extension of phase three. Implementing phase four would create additional demands on the IDF, especially in terms of ground forces, and would substantially increase the risk of casualties for the IDF, Hamas and its associates, and the civilian population.

Conclusion

Since Operation Cast Lead has not ended, drawing conclusions about its future course and prospects for success is risky. Execution of phase three, or even continuation of phase two, depends both on progress, or lack of it, in the Egyptian-brokered ceasefire discussions, and on Israel's political and military calculations. As of January 14, the situation appears delicately balanced: Hamas seems to be getting closer to accepting a ceasefire arrangement, while Israeli political and defense officials are said to be divided between expanding Cast Lead and seeking an arrangement that would allow the IDF to terminate the operation. Although Hamas has suffered a serious blow and Israel has demonstrated its readiness to respond robustly to Hamas violence, Hamas retains most of its combatants and substantial reserves of rockets. While Israel seeks to compel Hamas to accept an end to violence for the long term, Hamas has yet to clearly accept that as necessary.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq and the Levant. ❖

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