

Operation Cast Lead: Israel's Assault on Hamas

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Brief Analysis

Israel's current Gaza operation represents the strongest attack on Hamas since summer 2006, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are creating the conditions for broader military action. Although it is unclear how far the IDF will take the current operation, its attacks are already posing a significant challenge to Hamas. The Palestinian group has no means of defending against Israel's air raids and can take measures only to reduce the effects. Similarly, Hamas's offensive options, while potentially painful for Israel, cannot prevent the destructive air attacks. Although Operation Cast Lead may not aim directly at toppling Hamas, it will certainly weaken the organization's military and police capability and hence its capacity to enforce its rule in Gaza.

Nature of Current IDF Action

The first two days of IDF operations focused on weakening Hamas's organizational and physical infrastructure. Over 300 air sorties were flown against some 300 targets, with attacks continuing for a third day on Monday; Israel's media is reporting that the Israeli navy is now involved. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) focused on two pillars of Hamas power in Gaza: its military and security forces and the infrastructure that supports the organization's ability to govern. The IDF has not gone after Hamas's leadership in any systematic way and is conducting air strikes in a manner designed to avoid excessive civilian casualties and resultant criticism. Israeli officials have indicated the operation will be extensive, aiming to achieve a substantial change and not just an end to rocket and mortar fire. As Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak stated, "Our intention is to totally change the rules of the game. . . . This is an all-out war against Hamas and its branches." A senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) leader was also killed, indicating that Israeli strikes are not confined to Hamas targets. Operation Cast Lead has substantial potential to expand in scope, means, and goals.

The Hamas Response

Hamas rolled the "iron dice" with its decisions not to renew the ceasefire and to escalate attacks on southern Israel. Although the reasoning behind the decisions is not clear, this may well prove to be fateful because the organization must respond both militarily and politically to Israel's assault.

Military response. Hamas does not have good military options. Israel's monopoly of air power means the group's

defensive actions will be mostly passive, at least until IDF ground forces become involved. Hamas's defensive priority is the protection of high-value targets, especially leadership and any special capabilities it has acquired, such as antitank, anti-aircraft, or anti-ship weapons. Hamas would most likely preserve these for use against a major Israeli incursion.

Hamas will attempt to bring its military forces to full readiness to confront an Israeli ground incursion by mobilizing and moving forces into defensive positions, providing them with arms and ammunition, activating command and control systems, and readying whatever tactical surprises it has prepared. Hamas will probably retain some capability for the post-conflict situation since even a large-scale Israeli operation will eventually end, leaving Hamas competing with Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA) for power in Gaza.

Offensively, Hamas has limited options, especially given the pressure of ongoing IAF attacks, increased IDF presence along the border, Israeli civil-defense measures in the south, and a broad security alert throughout the country. Hamas has already begun firing rockets and mortars, mostly toward civilian targets within Israel, including two Katyusha-type rockets that landed near Ashdod, the deepest rocket strikes to date. The group will attempt to sustain rocket attacks for as long as possible to demonstrate its potency and to create pressure within Israel to end the operation. Hamas will likely attempt to carry out suicide attacks/bombings within Israel and against the border crossing points, including operations by Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades (IDQB) cells and other Palestinian terrorist organizations based in the West Bank. IDQB elements, along with the Popular Resistance Committees, PIJ, and other terrorist organizations may also attack IDF units along the Gaza border fence. Such actions would be highly risky for the Palestinian forces involved, and have a low probability of achieving anything significant, other than demonstrating combat spirit.

Political response. Hamas's behavior since the 2006 elections has limited its political options. It must first rally support within Gaza, the group's power base, and keep the support of the population, as it is currently attempting to do by projecting defiance and deflecting blame. Diplomatically, Hamas could hope to gain support from the Arab world and its allies, play the humanitarian card, and work toward some accommodation with Egypt. Initial reports indicate mixed prospects for success, with some verbal support from within the EU, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Nothing, however, has been concrete. The Arab League does not seem to be in a hurry to come to Hamas's rescue, and Egypt has publicly blamed Hamas for the situation while criticizing the IDF action.

Hamas could work to achieve an accommodation with Fatah and the PA, but this appears unlikely, since they do not seem inclined to let Hamas off the hook, even though they have condemned the operation. Hamas could also leave open the possibility of an arrangement with Israel to end the current fighting. Although Hamas would attempt to do this on as advantageous terms as possible, the group, in the end, would probably settle for any arrangement that would leave them in power. Operation Cast Lead has generated anti-Israel street demonstrations in the West Bank and elsewhere in the Middle East, and these could grow more intense as the conflict continues. Hamas will use its own media outlets as well as those in the Arab world to stoke similar types of activity.

Potential for Escalation

The situation may escalate beyond the current level for several reasons. First, Israel does not want to return to the ceasefire conditions, which left much of the political and security initiative with Hamas and allowed the group to expand its military capabilities. In keeping with Barak's remarks, the commander of Israel's southern command indicated before the operation that Israel had plans involving sizable ground forces to inflict large-scale damage on Hamas. A major ground operation, however, could be less than a full-scale reoccupation of the entire Strip. For example, Israeli ground forces could move to sever land and tunnel access to Egypt across the narrow border strip called the Philadelphia Corridor. Israel has already mobilized some reservists and deployed additional heavy forces to the Gaza border.

Second, now that the conflict is underway, the war will have its own dynamics, including "mission creep" for the IDF, Israeli domestic pressures to finish Hamas, civilian casualties on both sides, and the requirement to respond to Hamas's military moves. While Israel was able to precisely control the start of the conflict, it is unlikely that the IDF will so precisely control its course.

Indicators of an escalating conflict could include concerted IDF attacks on Hamas leaders, raids by IDF ground forces inside Gaza, significant mobilization of IDF reserves, persistent Hamas rocket and mortar strikes on Israeli civilian targets, and high casualties among civilians. Obviously, a much deeper and broader crisis would involve the spread of violence to the West Bank or opening a front with Hizballah in the north. Hamas attacks based from the West Bank could create a crisis between Israel and the PA, unless rapidly and successfully brought to a halt. The PA would have to walk a difficult line, balancing Israeli pressure to act against Hamas terrorist cells and internal Palestinian pressure to either help Hamas or at least avoid any cooperation with Israel. Attacks on Israel by Hizballah would move the conflict to a regional one, risking the resumption of full hostilities between Israel and Hizballah, with the possibility of dragging in Lebanon and Syria. Although this kind of escalation seems unlikely in the current situation, a broad-scale operation in Gaza could increase pressure on Hizballah to act.

Conclusion

Israel's use of airpower limits Hamas's ability to respond, but also limits the scope of damage Israel can inflict. Hamas is a resilient and adaptive organization that has faced crises before, and it appears confident -- at least in public -- following months of preparation for renewed hostilities. It is questionable whether air power alone will force Hamas to respond the way Israel wants, since the group could attempt to ride out the attacks until diplomatic pressure forces Israel to end IDF operations. And since Israel knows that Hamas will do its utmost to avoid the consequences of its failure to renew the ceasefire, the IDF will escalate the scope of its military actions when deemed necessary.

The current conflict does not appear likely to end quickly, with plenty of dangerous potential for widening and escalating in intensity. For its part, Israel seems determined to change the situation in Gaza in critical ways and is prepared to run the necessary political, diplomatic, and military risks. Israel did not rush into this fight; it will not rush out of it either.

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