

Israel's Policy Options in the Gaza Conflict

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The legacy of Israel's inconclusive thirty-four-day war with Hizballah in 2006 hovers over Israel's current military operations in Gaza. Israel believes its deterrence was lost in that war, and Israel's current campaign against Hamas should be seen as an effort to regain that deterrence. Israeli military officials believe that if Hamas feared Israel, they would not be firing rockets at Israeli towns but would have instead renewed the six-month ceasefire.

Yet the current conflict is coming to the point where Israeli policymakers have to decide whether escalating the conflict enhances its deterrence or erodes it. A key lesson of the 2006 war is that the conflict will be judged more by how it ends than by how it is fought. As such, current Israeli policy options should not be seen in a vacuum. Specifically, there are multiple reports emerging from Israel that Defense Minister Ehud Barak sought an early end to this conflict on December 30, believing the surprise attack last Saturday was a sufficient show of force. However, the limited operation could be extended because Israel does not want the conflict to end on a high note for Hamas -- which today fired a rocket into Beersheva, about twenty-four miles from Gaza, the deepest strike into Israel to date.

In short, Israeli decisionmakers will try to define an optimal end of conflict while enhancing deterrence. However, this is complicated by the likelihood that Hamas defines success for itself in the narrow terms of survival, just as Hizballah did in 2006. As such, Hamas may want to lure Israel into a protracted conflict that will be seen as inconclusive. In that case, Hamas -- unconstrained by the need to find military targets -- will seek to continue firing rockets indiscriminately, saying it is fighting to a standoff.

Similarities between 2006 and 2008

First, it is worth noting some important commonalities between the two confrontations. Both in 2006 and now, Arab officials blamed the conflict on nonstate players acting at the behest of Iran. At the outset of the 2006 conflict, states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia held Hizballah responsible for the outbreak of hostilities and did not view Hizballah as an aggrieved party, as the group had hoped.

Also, at the outset of both conflicts, the Israeli public across the political spectrum rallied in support; the general view in each case was that Israel has the right to strike nonstate actors like Hizballah and Hamas in self-defense, since these groups have been operating from across international borders and firing from within dense civilian populations, especially since Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005. The Israeli public does not see either group as having legitimate grievances, given those withdrawals.

Key differences between the conflicts are also apparent. Preliminary signs show that Israel has learned the lessons of 2006 put forward by the Winograd Commission, which studied the mistakes of the war. Israel did not retaliate reflexively as it did in 2006, but rather planned its retaliation carefully and even achieved an element of surprise. And if Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert raised expectations by telling the Knesset that Israel will smash Hizballah, Israeli officials are largely trying to lower expectations by saying it seeks to restore quiet to Israeli towns and cities near Gaza.

If the 2006 conflict is a guide for what to do and what to avoid, Israel is now fast approaching the fork in the road regarding whether to expand the operation -- a point where in 2006 two contrasting schools of thought emerged in Israel. The maximalist school believed that Israel's failure in that war was due to lack of operational competence of the IDF, then headed by neophyte defense minister Amir Peretz, and that better tactics would have led to the destruction of Hizballah. The minimalist school believed that Israel had reached a point of diminishing returns in the war and further action would undermine Israel's deterrence, since it had no means to score a knockout victory when a group is embedded in a civilian population.

Both Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Ehud Barak, who was not in the cabinet in 2006, were associated with the minimalist school at that time. Those two believed the lack of exit strategy enabled Hizballah to declare itself the victor after more than a month of fighting. They felt vindicated when Hizballah's momentum and the change in sentiment within Arab states forced Israel to accept an international peacekeeping force under UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Although it prevented a new outbreak of hostilities, this resolution enabled Hizballah to rearm far above its prewar levels.

Israel's Policy Options

Obviously Israel's military steps should be a function of its policy objectives. But what are the objectives today and how do the military steps relate to them? The options today seem to be:

- Continue the aerial assault. This approach is designed to compel Hamas to accept renewal of the ceasefire on the terms of the last six months.
- Accept an international proposal for ceasefire. Multiple reports in Israel indicate that Barak favored accepting the French proposal for a 48-hour humanitarian ceasefire. However, once Beersheva was struck, Israeli cabinet officials rejected the proposal. The French plan could maintain Arab regime enmity toward Hamas and avoid protracted conflict that may serve Hamas's aims.
- Open the southern Rafah crossing point between Gaza and Egypt while closing all other crossing points leading into Israel. This would bolster those who say that Israel has a strategic interest in linking Gaza to Egypt, thus enabling Israel to wash its hands of Gaza. The downside would be that it would lead to Israeli-Egyptian tension, as Egypt would do everything possible to avoid responsibility for Gaza and will portray the move as dividing the Palestinian people. Moreover, Israel's detractors at the UN and elsewhere will assert that Israel should still be held accountable for Gaza, since Israel will continue to control the airspace and shoreline. Finally the Israeli defense establishment will fear that opening the crossing point could enhance flow of weaponry into Gaza.
- Initiate a ground assault in southern Gaza to destroy tunnels that have been used as conduits for more sophisticated rockets such as Katyushas or Grads that have longer range, and/or commence a ground assault in northern Gaza against Palestinian launchers. While the advantage of a southern ground assault is designed to halt the flow of weaponry, this tactic would also carry the risk of Israeli soldiers becoming targets in messy urban warfare. Moreover, it would allow Hamas to exploit accidental misfires against civilians -- garnering sympathy on Arab satellite television -- in order to sway Arab governments to mute their opposition to Hamas. If Israel does want control of the Egyptian-Gaza border area, it needs to think through who it views as controlling the area after the conflict is over. Will it be Israel? Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority? A Muslim force led by an established army that has relations with Israel like Turkey?
- Launch a full-scale ground assault in Gaza to expel Hamas. Israeli security officials say it could take up to a year to fully reoccupy Gaza. If it pursued this course, many say Israel would lose numerous soldiers in urban conflict, face possibly insurmountable international opposition, and give Tehran a possible victory in uniting Arabs against Israel. Others say the objective is worth pursuing regardless of the cost.

Gaza and the Obama Administration

Too many variables are involved to predict with certainty how this conflict will affect the new U.S. administration. It is reasonable to believe that Israel will see too many pitfalls to this operation for it to continue until President-elect Barack Obama's inauguration: the landscape by January 20 could look very different. Beyond the specifics of the operation, serious thought needs to be given in Washington about how to deal with both the changing nature of warfare and the impact of such warfare on conflict resolution. Wars between states that dominated the Arab-Israel conflict from 1948 through 1973 are being replaced by nonstate actors firing indiscriminately from civilian populations in areas from which Israel has withdrawn and then expecting immunity from retaliation.

Whether the Palestinian intifada between 2000 and 2004, the Hizballah war in 2006, or the Gaza conflict in 2008, this changing nature of warfare against civilians needs to be squarely addressed. Failure to do so virtually guarantees that Israel's approach to yielding territory in the West Bank will only harden, thereby scotching prospects for a two-state solution.

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