

Position Paper

Israel's Two Options in Gaza



Attacking Gaza and Netanyahu's Dilemma: Invasion or Truce

There are many indications that the Zionist offensive against Gaza might not achieve the objectives declared by the Israeli government. These were: restoring deterrence in confronting the Palestinian resistance; preventing Hamas from changing the rules of confrontation between it and the occupation army, and ending the firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel. Furthermore, the form the confrontation took in the early days has reduced the level of credibility of the Zionist army in the eyes of the Israeli public. Israel began its military campaign by assassinating Ahmad al-Ja'bari – the deputy leader of the military wing of Hamas, the Qassam Brigades, and targeting what it claimed to be storehouses of Hamas' long-range missiles. It then assassinated activists from Qassam and bombarded what it called the 'infrastructure of the resistance'.

Hours after the Ja'bari's assassination, in a press conference held at Israel's Ministry of Defense compound in Tel Aviv, Zionist prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and minister of defence Ehud Barak praised themselves by saying Ja'bari's assassination and the targeting of missiles would guarantee the restoration of deterrence and diminish Hamas's ability in targeting Zionist cities. Soon after, the Israelis found that Netanyahu's and Barak's assessment was different from the reality. The political and security elite in Israel thought that assassinating Ja'bari, considered the most prominent Qassam leader, would generate immense psychological pressure on Hamas, shake the morale of its leadership and hence force it to seek external mediation in order to reach a truce which would set new conditions, which in turn would guarantee the attainment of Israeli objectives.

Israel's Miscalculation

Hamas not only behaved contrary to Israel's expectations, it even surprised Israel with a response that emphasised that Israel's initial excessive and unwarranted satisfaction with Ja'bari's assassination. While Hamas' rockets previously could target Zionist cities and settlements within forty-five kilometre of the Gaza Strip, the missiles now reached Tel Aviv where a million Zionists live. This was the first time since it was hit by Iraqi missiles in 1991 that the city of Tel Aviv fell under an Arab strike. But there is no doubt that Hamas's biggest surprise was the ability of its rockets to strike occupied Jerusalem, the first time this area has been targeted with such weapons since 1967.

The route the confrontation took indicated that Israel suffered from an intelligence deficit in assessing the capabilities of the resistance. While Israel declared, at the beginning of its campaign, that it had destroyed the entire stock of long-range rockets which Hamas had managed to smuggle, Israel was surprised at Hamas's success in concealing its real firepower and its ability to continue firing rockets on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Israeli leaders thought that carrying out 'surgical' assaults primarily targeting Qassam members and leaders, while keeping the number of civilian casualties to a minimum, would only

result in only minor regional and international responses to the Israeli military operations which would, anyway, end in a relatively short time; but this did not happen.

One of the most significant factors that led to Israel escalating its operations against Gaza was Israel's refusal to accept the rules of confrontation set recently by the resistance movements, thus causing the resistance to respond to every military action against Gaza. Since the end of the war on Gaza in early 2009, Israel has had a great deal of freedom in acting against the resistance in Gaza in that the resistance often did not retaliate to Israeli escalations. And, in the case of retaliation, it would usually be the targeted group which responded, while other groups took no action. This included Hamas, the largest and most powerful of the Palestinian resistance groups.

Furthermore, after the 2008–2009 war, Israel was able to dictate its own interpretation of the indirect truce agreements reached between it and resistance groups because of Egypt's mediation. Although the truce agreements emphasised ceasefire by both parties, Israel kept asserting that it did not mean that Israel would give up the right to act against what it considered military operations by the resistance against Israeli targets. Israel's pretext was that once its intelligence agencies had obtained information about a military operation planned by a Palestinian group aimed at Israeli targets, it became Israel's right to prevent the execution of such plans by assassinating individuals from the relevant group – and the resistance would have no right to respond. It was on such grounds that previous truce agreements failed, with Israel using assassinations based on alleged intelligence in order to drag the resistance into escalation in accordance with Israel's rules of the game.

The Israeli army believed that the 2008–2009 war would provide it with increased deterrence capacity in confronting resistance movements so that these movements would be more likely to refrain from responding to Israeli escalations. Israel interpreted the Hamas' lack of response to Israeli military operations as a reflection of the movement's need to maintain its power in Gaza and not to allow that power to be threatened by a confrontation with Israel. Thus Israel was enticed to set even more extreme rules of engagement. It allowed its army to conduct wide-range and large-scale operations within the Gaza strip, 300 metres past the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel. In fact, Israel regards this as a 'security belt' in which the occupation army is able to operate freely, without expecting strong responses from the resistance, despite these operations targeting Palestinian civilian populations in these areas that are referred to as 'contact zones'. The current military campaign was an Israeli attempt to persuade the resistance movements to return to the old rules of engagement that allow Israel a greater space for manoeuvre in conducting military operations.

Inland Campaign or Truce

In light of Israel's failure in betting on the success of the military campaign in its current state to achieve its goals, the ruling elite is left with two options: either launch a ground military campaign against Gaza as it did in 2008, or reach a truce in which it acknowledges the impossibility of achieving its stated objectives through the current campaign. Netanyahu is aware of the major complications which may result from a large-scale ground campaign like the war Israel waged in 2008, which resulted in the killing of more than 1 500 Palestinians while injuring thousands. That assault also led to the destruction of thousands of homes and institutions. In Israel, it is believed that launching such a campaign carries big risks on two levels. On the one hand, given the capabilities of the resistance which has surprised Israeli intelligence, the Zionist security system believes that the Palestinian resistance could inflict huge losses that greatly exceed the Israeli losses in the war on Lebanon in 2006, should Israel engage in a face-to-face confrontation with the resistance. At the same time, launching a wide-scale inland campaign will inevitably lead to a large number of casualties and deaths among Palestinian civilians. This is a dangerous scenario in light of the current regional circumstances, especially after the revolutions of the Arab Spring.

Israel has realised that its fears and concerns about the Arab revolutions and the democratic transition are justified. The strong position expressed by the Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi, in which he warned Israel of the repercussions of continuing the attack on Gaza, has drawn great interest from Israeli elites. Most worrying for Israel about the evolution of the current campaign into a ground campaign is the possible deterioration of relations with Egypt, which may threaten the Camp David accord – considered by Israel to be a pillar of its national security. Decision makers in Tel Aviv are convinced that Arab public opinion can now exert a great deal of influence in light of the revolutions and democratic transition, meaning that the Egyptian masses can put pressure on the new Egyptian political leadership to take political and diplomatic steps that can reduce Israel's manoeuvrability, again placing the Camp David accord at the centre of Egyptian internal debate. Israel is fully aware that the Egyptian reaction can cause great harm to the Zionist entity, even without an armed confrontation. For example, Mosad, in addressing political decision makers, expressed fears that, without the intervention of the Egyptian government, the Egyptian masses were likely to ban Israeli maritime traffic from accessing the Suez Canal. More than a third of Israeli trade is shipped through the Red Sea. Israel also fears that a long operation in Gaza might create conditions for further escalation, such as jihadist Salafis from Sinai conducting operations against Jewish settlements in the southern part of occupied Palestine – especially in Elat – or firing missiles on settlements and military bases in the Negev desert.

Israel also fears that a long operation in Gaza might provide the opposition in Jordan with greater legitimacy to demand the Jordanian regime changes its policy towards

Israel. Ron Tira, who writes for the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies, warned about the serious implications of any major operation in the Gaza Strip on the Jordanian regime – whose survival and strength Tira regards as of strategic interest to Israel. Furthermore, Netanyahu takes into consideration the fact that any large-scale military action against Gaza is likely to have a negative impact on the international focus on Iran's nuclear power programme, thus clashing with Israel's strategic interests. It may also reduce Israel's ability to persuade more states to impose sanctions on Iran. At the same time, Netanyahu is worried that a large-scale operation against Gaza, in which there are casualties among Palestinian civilians, might shake Israel's international position, given that Israel is still paying the cost of its 2008–2009 war on Gaza.

All these factors demonstrate that Netanyahu is in fact not excited about escalating the current campaign to a ground offensive. Yet he announced the recruitment of 75 000 reservists, pushing them towards the borders of Gaza in preparation for launching a ground offensive.

The second option available to Netanyahu is a truce. There is evidence that Israel itself requested the intervention of the United States and Europe and appealed to them to make Egypt put pressure on Hamas to accept a truce that would save Netanyahu's dignity. But Hamas didn't make things easy for Netanyahu; instead, it listed three conditions for a truce.

- Israel's pledge to stop assassinations;
- Israel's refraining from imposing high security measures along the border between Gaza and the Zionist entity; and
- Lifting the siege imposed on Gaza.

It is clear that Netanyahu finds it difficult to accept these conditions, because his political opponents are likely to confront him wondering: 'What is the objective of the campaign if Hamas is to impose its agenda?' There is no doubt that Netanyahu is very sensitive to Israeli public opinion, especially in light of general elections to be held in January 2013. It is in Netanyahu's interest to seem a firm leader at the security level. Hence, the solution that can prevent the transformation of the current campaign into a ground campaign is to reach a compromise as part of a truce. One formula that was proposed was that Hamas and Israel would agree to a mutual ceasefire where Egypt, the United States and the European Union would work to mediate an agreement on the conditions of the truce. Regardless of the likelihood for this scenario, it is clear that the failure to reach a truce necessarily means that an Israeli ground campaign is inevitable, despite all the fears that have been referred to, which complicate matters to a large extent.

Comparing external factors in favour of preventing a large-scale ground invasion of Gaza and the factors that may lead to it shows that halting any plans for an invasion is likelier. This is because the United States, Egypt and the majority of Arab states, and even Israel, will face more harm than good. All these powers will work towards reaching a truce which will somehow reduce the future Israeli capability to mobilise.

In conclusion, the current confrontation shows that Israel has failed miserably in its strategy of 'sting operations' developed by the body of the Israeli army to force the Palestinian resistance to return to the previous rules of engagement; that in itself is a great strategic achievement for the resistance.

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