

## Report

# Predictions of the Third War on Gaza

*This paper was originally written in Arabic by: **Saleh Naami** \**

*Translated into English by: **AMEC***



24 July 2014



Israel carries out strikes civilian homes in Gaza during the ongoing "Operation Protective Edge" [AP]

## Abstract

Israel's Operation Protective Edge on Gaza is the third largest military confrontation between the Zionist entity and the Palestinian resistance movements since Hamas became the sole ruler of the Gaza Strip in July 2007. This paper deconstructs the war environment and identifies the objectives that both Israel and Hamas seek to achieve through this confrontation, and discusses the assumptions that lured Israel into initiating its "Operation Protective Edge". It also analyses the influence of the regional climate and the balance of power on the battle's course.

## Introduction

Israel's current onslaught against Gaza is the third largest military confrontation between the Zionist entity and Palestinian resistance movements in the enclave since Hamas became the sole ruler of the Gaza Strip in July 2007. The battle was launched in the aftermath of drastic transformations in the regional landscape, distinguishing it from Israel's November 2012 "Operation Pillar of Cloud" and this is likely to affect its outcomes. Decision-makers in Tel Aviv have realised that it is impossible to stop rockets from Gaza through military means. Israel also realises that the chances of implementing a truce whose conditions are restricted to simply a mutual ceasefire are almost zero, in light of the fact that the resistance groups are unwilling to compromise in this regard. This strengthens the chances of arriving at another truce that takes into account the interests of both sides, especially amidst mounting calls in Tel Aviv to improve the economic conditions in Gaza, since its deteriorated economy entrenches a social

environment that incubates resistance. This paper deconstructs the war environment and identifies the objectives that both Israel and Hamas seek to achieve through this confrontation, and discusses the assumptions that lured Israel into initiating its “Operation Protective Edge”. It also analyses the influence of the regional climate and the balance of power on the battle’s course.

## War environment

Although Israel has declared a broad goal for its current onslaught on Gaza – “to reduce threats and risks to Israel’s national security originating from Gaza”, (1) Tel Aviv’s decisions and strategic choices indicate that there are specific goals which Israel seeks to achieve. The key impetus for Israeli leadership’s decision to wage the war is the need to re-establish Israel’s deterrence capabilities with regards to resistance groups, particularly Hamas. Tel Aviv realised that its ability to deter had been immensely and continually eroded, and had to be renewed. (2) Apart from wanting to restore its deterrence capacity, Israel also hoped to send a clear message to the Jihadi groups that had established footholds in Arab countries surrounding Palestine, especially Syria. This message carries the warning that they should not attempt any move against Israel. (3)

Simultaneously, Israel has sought, through its field tactics, to degrade the military structures, organisational framework and human resources of the Palestinian resistance. The Israeli army announced that it sought, through the bombardment of Gaza, to destroy the sites where rockets are made and stored, especially medium-range rockets that Hamas possesses, as well as the rocket launchers set up by resistance groups around the enclave, and the military tunnels allegedly dug to infiltrate into Israel. The Israeli military was also keen to eliminate the maximum number of Hamas military commanders and operatives, especially those involved in the manufacture and use of the rockets. Israel wants to take advantage of the battle to disrupt the implementation of the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement, which Tel Aviv views as a strategic threat because division among Palestinians enhances Tel Aviv’s ability to manoeuvre in its dealings with both movements. According to Israeli logic, a confrontation with Hamas during which the latter targets Israel’s heartland would help Tel Aviv convince the international community, especially the West, to withdraw recognition of national unity government that was formed as a result of the reconciliation agreement. (4)

Israel planned a quick war to avoid prolonged (Israeli) civilian hardship and economic losses. However, Israel incurred about \$2.4 billion in losses in the first three days of its operation. (5) Israel was not keen on a long confrontation as it faced security threats on more than one front; Tel Aviv also feared the reaction of the Arab street to its crimes in the strip. It calculated that Arab public anger triggered by its acts would embarrass

decision makers in Arab capitals, while Tel Aviv bet on the gains it could generate from sharing interests with these capitals, since they face common challenges. (6)

Although the battle was imposed on Hamas, it is trying to capitalise on it to find a way out of the crisis, particularly because it believes it has nothing to lose. The group's leadership offered every possible compromise for internal Palestinian reconciliation in order to ease the burden of ruling Gaza amid deteriorating economic and living conditions in the strip. Hamas was, however, surprised that the reconciliation deal exacerbated Gaza's economic situation, since the Palestinian Authority declined to pay the salaries of more than 45,000 government employees in Gaza, and Israel refused to transfer Qatari financial aid to pay these civil servants. Therefore, any truce between Hamas and Israel is likely to include terms and conditions to comprehensively ease the Israeli siege on Gaza, and an Israeli commitment to allow the money transfer and to release Palestinians re-arrested in the past few weeks (7) after the kidnapping and murder of three settlers in the West Bank.

### **Israel's motives for war**

When Israel decided to wage a war against Gaza, it acted on the assumption that the regional transformations witnessed over the past three years had tremendously weakened Hamas. Tel Aviv was thus tempted to strike at the group which it believed would not receive political support from any regional player. Such support would have diminished Israel's ability to achieve its goals. Israel placed its bets largely on the gains made against Hamas by the coup authorities in Cairo, especially after Egypt destroyed the tunnels that had been used to smuggle weapons, especially rockets, to the resistance groups inside the enclave. The assessment of Israeli intelligence services was that, on the eve of Operation Protective Edge, Hamas had limited stocks of projectiles whose maximum range would allow them to strike Tel Aviv, the centre of the Zionist entity. (8) Israel waged the operation with the assumption that it had sufficient intelligence on Hamas and its capabilities to enable it to deliver a paralysing blow to the group's military assets, especially regarding rocket power.

### **The course of war**

Israel started the war with continuous air strikes aimed at destroying the homes of resistance leaders and operatives, especially fighters in the military wings of resistance organisations in order to eliminate as many of them as possible, in addition to destroying civilian infrastructure and facilities that Israel alleged belonged to Hamas. In retaliation, Hamas directed rockets deep into Israel and infiltrated into Israel through the sea and tunnels.

Israel aimed at forcing Hamas to accept the offer extended by General Yoav "Poli" Mordechai, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories at the Israeli defence ministry, for a mutual ceasefire without mediation, or what he called "quiet for quiet". The Palestinian resistance turned down the proposition, sticking to its demands. It continued to fire rockets into Israel, while the occupation army continued with its airstrikes. The failure to convince Hamas through Israel's violent and intensive airstrikes prompted Israel to seek a third party mediator. Several countries, including Qatar and Turkey, volunteered, while Egypt initially declined. Cairo later stepped forward later with a ceasefire deal, supported by the US, which met only Israeli conditions. (9)

The resistance factions refused Egypt's truce offer because it had adopted the Israeli position and relieved Tel Aviv from any commitment to ease its siege on Gaza, and from any commitment regarding the release of prisoners. In addition, the deal would provide Israel an exit strategy after it became apparent that Tel Aviv would find it impossible to achieve its goals through the airstrikes. The Palestinian resistance factions stressed that they had not been consulted about the Egyptian proposal. Undoubtedly, the proposal's riskiest element was that it would pave the way for stripping the resistance movements in the Gaza Strip of their weapons' arsenal, especially rockets, a goal that Israel has failed to achieve through the use of force. (10) Apart from proposing a truce based solely on consultations with Israel, Egypt's coup government also blamed the Palestinian resistance groups for the consequences of the failure of the one-sided truce, thus legitimising Israel's brutal carnage. (11)

After Egypt's ceasefire failure, Israel embarked on a broad ground assault on the Gaza Strip in addition to the continuous air and sea bombardment. Netanyahu claimed the objective of the land invasion was the destruction of military tunnels that Hamas had allegedly dug for launching commando operations inside Israel. The Israeli army called 60,000 reserve troops and began searching for the tunnels, claiming it had located thirteen. What the Israeli military commanders did not consider was that their extensive military presence would not prevent Palestinian resistance fighters from sneaking behind Israeli lines and striking from that position. The most painful strike for the occupation army was the ambush by the al-Qassam Brigades (Hamas' military wing) at the eastern edge of the Shuja'iyah district in Gaza's on 19 July 2014, when a column of Israeli tanks was lured into a minefield and blown up. The troops that approached to remove the dead and the wounded also came under grenade attack, leading to the deaths and injuries of dozens of Israeli soldiers. This success was the reason that the occupation army committed a heinous massacre against civilians in Shuja'iyah on the morning of 20 July, when Israeli artillery shelled the homes of Palestinians in the neighbourhood, destroying dozens of homes, injuring hundreds of Palestinians and killing ninety people, including forty-five women and children. Thus far, the war has claimed almost 700 Palestinian lives, with almost 2,000 injured, while about 500 houses, hospitals, schools and

mosques have been destroyed. (12) According to the Palestinian health ministry, ninety per cent of the Palestinians killed were civilians. (13) OCHA estimates that seventy-five per cent were civilians.

Despite the high death toll among Palestinians in the Shuja'iya skirmish, the Israelis considered it a turning point in the confrontation between the Palestinian resistance and the occupation army. (14) There are indications that the overall performance of Palestinian resistance groups contributed to convincing the Israelis that the calculations which had enticed Israel to launch its current operation were false. They discovered that their assumption that regional transformations had helped weaken Hamas, and had given Israel an edge in a military confrontation was not accurate. Prominent researchers and writers had gone as far as saying that the changes in the region had made Hamas "more persistent and fierce" since the group was fighting for its survival. (15) Israel realised it had also erred in assuming that Egypt's destruction of tunnels had diminished Hamas's military capabilities. It discovered that halting arms smuggling through the tunnels had pushed Hamas to rely on made-in-Gaza rockets whose range was longer than those smuggled through the tunnels. This explains why Hamas was able to fire the R160 rocket, whose range is 160 kilometres, thus threatening areas in the far north of occupied Palestine. Israel soon figured out that its confidence in its intelligence abilities had been hugely exaggerated. Two days after the war was launched, Israel's military intelligence unit acknowledged that its intelligence on Hamas's capabilities was very limited and that it had no information about where the medium-range rockets, which had caused much damage in the Israeli heartland, were stored. (16) Of course, the military balance is overwhelmingly tilted in Israel's favour. The military capabilities of the resistance are "primitive" compared to that of the Israeli army, which is a global leader in employing advanced war technologies.

Haaretz's military commentator Amir Oren said, "In light of the current balance of power, it is not logical for anyone to expect that Hamas would defeat Israel. However, the failure of the Israeli army to bring the military wing of the movement into submission – despite the former's tremendous superiority, and the continuous and extensive firing of rockets, indicate that Hamas has gained more achievements in this confrontation". (17) Although the Israeli army has carried out more than 3,500 air strikes in the past two weeks, and despite the continued ground assault, the Israeli army did not only fail to stop the rocket fire into Israel, it also failed to reduce the frequency of the rocket barrages, with 5.5 million settlers remaining a target for these projectiles.

### **Price of war**

Decision makers in Tel Aviv have realised that it is impossible to stop the firing of rockets from Gaza through military means. They've also become aware that the chances

of implementing the “quiet for quiet” formula are almost zero, since the resistance remains firmly committed to its rejection of this proposal. At the same time, the mounting civilian losses among Palestinians have prompted international endeavours to stop the war. Despite support for the Egyptian ceasefire initiative by the US and a number of European countries, it is evident that insistence on this initiative will prolong the conflict. This increases the potential for arriving at a new truce deal which considers both sides’ interests, especially amidst mounting calls in Tel Aviv to improve the economic conditions of the Gaza Strip because the abysmal economy entrenches a social environment that incubates resistance. (18)

There are signs that in the next truce, Israel will eventually agree to increase the goods allowed to enter Gaza through commercial crossing points, and will allow money transfers that will solve the crisis of Gaza government employees, in addition to freeing the prisoners it has arrested. In return, Israel will secure Hamas’s commitment to compel all Palestinian factions to stop their attacks inside Israel. Tel Aviv is expected to enjoy a period of calm, probably a long one, during which Israel will work to re-address the various strategic threats that it faces.

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\***Saleh Naami** is a lecturer in economics and political science at the Islamic University in Gaza. He specialises in Israeli affairs, and is the author of *The Army and the Press in Israel*, and *Israel: Between Militarism, Religion and Corruption*.

#### Endnote:

- 1) Yedioth Ahronoth, 9 July 2014.
- 2) Yechiel Bar, “*The real solution to confront Hamas*”, 9 July 2014, <http://www.thepost.co.il/news/new.aspx?pn6Vq=EE&Or9VQ=FKLIJ>.
- 3) Yedioth Ahronoth, 12 July 2014.
- 4) Amnon Abramovich, on Israeli Channel 2, during a news bulletin at 8 pm on 12 July 2014.
- 5) Globes, 12 July 2014.
- 6) Maariv, 12 July 2014.
- 7) They were released in the 2011 prisoner swap with Israel and re-arrested right before Operation Protective Edge began.
- 8) *Israel Hayom*, 9 July 2014.
- 9) Egypt drafted the initiative in complete coordination with Israel, without consulting the Palestinian resistance. See Haaretz, 15 July 2014.
- 10) Avi Issascharoff, “*Livni’s initiative: A ceasefire to resume the political process*”, 14 July 2014, *Walla! News*, [http://news.walla.co.il/?w=/2764924&utm\\_source=twitterfeed&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://news.walla.co.il/?w=/2764924&utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter).
- 11) *The coup authority’s Sameh Shoukry blamed Hamas for the consequences of rejecting the initiative and for Palestinian blood spilt after the proposal was announced*. See Al-Quds, 16 July 2014.
- 12) *Statement by the interior ministry in Gaza on 20 July 2014*.
- 13) *Statement by the health ministry on 20 July 2014*.
- 14) *Israeli military correspondent Amos Harael said the Shuja’iya battle represented “an event that ushers a new stage in the confrontation with the resistance and became iconic for the Palestinian resistance”*. Amos Harael, “*Battle of Shuja’iya: The event that may shape the face of the war in Gaza*”, *Haaretz*, 20 July 2014, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2382016>.
- 15) Ari Shavit, “*Rockets of extremism*”, *Haaretz*, 10 July 2014, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/.premium-1.2372027>.
- 16) *Israel Hayom*, 10 July 2014.
- 17) Amir Oren, “*Israel discovers that military supremacy is not enough to make achievements*”, *Haaretz*, 11 July 2014, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2373465>.
- 18) Israeli finance minister Yair Lapid, in Yedioth Ahronoth, 17 July 2014.