

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Hollow Victory

by Haim Malka

Sometimes, you just can't win. Take the latest military confrontation between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, for example. Despite a massive military advantage, Israel was unable—or perhaps unwilling—to defeat Hamas decisively. It is beginning to be a pattern.

The Israel-Hamas mini-war lasted only eight days. In that relatively short time-frame Israel scored some impressive points: it unveiled its much-anticipated Iron Dome anti-rocket defense system; it minimized civilian casualties on both sides compared to previous confrontations; and it reminded Hamas that it can strike Gaza massively at will. Israel also demonstrated its willingness to act despite the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the new regional geopolitical environment. Yet, Israel's failure to secure any decisive strategic benefits from its assault on Gaza underscores the fact that it is locked in a stalemate with Hamas which it can manage but cannot win. The issue may be less one of capability than of will.

From the outset of hostilities last month, Israel's political and military leadership set modest goals: destroy, or at least damage, Hamas's rocket infrastructure and restore the IDF's deterrent along the Gaza border. Compared to the Gaza war in 2008-2009, when Israel's political leadership declared that the IDF intended to topple Hamas, Israel kept both the rhetoric and expectations relatively low. Israel's upcoming Knesset elections in January played a role here. The government preferred to fight a quick battle, re-establish a ceasefire, declare victory, and resume the election campaign. Yet, elections are only part of the story. The bigger dilemma for Israeli policymakers is that using enough force to push Hamas from power in Gaza would create unbearable costs and yield uncertain benefits.

There are several reasons for this. First, the diplomatic and political costs of an Israeli war in Gaza massive enough to threaten Hamas's rule are unacceptably high. The current Israeli leadership appears to have internalized this lesson after the 2008-2009 Gaza war, which ended with over 1,300 Palestinians dead, 13 dead Israelis, and a damning UN-sponsored report on Israel's military tactics. It

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Call for Aid

The Middle East is bucking the global trend on HIV/AIDS infection, and not in a good way. While new infection rates are dropping in many regions, in the Middle East they have jumped 35 percent in the last decade—from 27,000 new cases in 2001 to 37,000 in 2011. An estimated 300,000 people live with HIV in the Middle East. The true number may be even higher, as social stigmas in largely conservative Muslim societies likely inhibit reporting.

It's not all bad news, though. Despite a mix of social taboos and outright denial, more governments are addressing the issue. A council of Arab health ministries launched an AIDS initiative in March to develop a regional HIV/AIDS prevention and care strategy. Morocco launched its own AIDS strategy a month later.

Iran has been the region's poster child for progressive policies, promoting both condom use and needle exchange programs. Still, it saw an increase from 66,000 estimated cases in 2005 to 96,000 in 2011, a 45 percent jump. According to the BBC, prevention programs are now falling prey to broader budget pressures. Programs elsewhere are seeing international funding dry up. Jordan recently learned that it will no longer receive international money to fund its HIV/AIDS programs. The director of UNAIDS recently urged Morocco, which funds nearly half of its programs through international assistance, to shoulder more of the financial burden for its programs.

Cases appear concentrated among high-risk populations in the Middle East up to now; it will take redoubled government efforts to keep it that way. ■

Gulf Roundtable on The Gulf in a Changing Region

Princeton University Professor of Near Eastern Studies Bernard Haykel led a Gulf Roundtable discussion at CSIS titled "The Gulf in a Changing Region" on November 30, 2012, focusing in particular on Saudi Arabia and Qatar. He explored both the Gulf monarchies' stability and their approaches to managing transformations in the surrounding region. Haykel emphasized Gulf leaders' sophisticated understanding of the societies over which they rule and their ability to respond flexibly to unrest with increased social spending. He also highlighted the divergence of Saudi and Qatari approaches to assisting the Syrian uprising and Saudi Arabia's relative détente with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood based on mutual opposition to Iran. You can read a full summary of the event [HERE](#). ■

created a diplomatic nightmare. The prospect of an Israeli reoccupation of Gaza is even more unpalatable, given the global response and the direct costs to Israel.

On the home front, the Israeli public and IDF are increasingly casualty-averse. The Israeli public increasingly judges conflicts by the number of IDF casualties, judging the 2006 Lebanon war a failure, for example, because more than 115 IDF soldiers were killed. By contrast, they see the 2008-2009 assault on Gaza as a victory, because it resulted in only 10 combat deaths.

Second, if Israel is not fully confident it can dislodge Hamas, it has a paradoxical interest in Hamas's preservation. Israel needs Hamas to be strong enough to enforce any ceasefire understanding and prevent smaller militant groups from launching rockets against Israel, yet not so strong that it feels confident to challenge Israel and provoke it by launching military operations. Without a strong authority in Gaza, a multitude of extremist groups—from the Iranian-linked Palestinian Islamic Jihad to Salafi jihadi militants—would operate with few constraints. Hamas has its own violent ideology and capabilities, but it has imposed a sense of order among this toxic mix of extremist ideologies and arsenals. A security vacuum would be much more dangerous and more costly for Israel to control. For the moment, Hamas is Gaza's only capable enforcer.

For all of its hateful rhetoric and talk of destroying Israel, Hamas and Israel need each other. Over the last several years, the two enemies have indirectly negotiated a number of ceasefires and a prisoner exchange deal. Israel provides the majority of Gaza's electricity and water. It collects and transfers tax receipts to the Palestinian Authority, which in turn pays government salaries in Gaza, helping sustain the economy there and Hamas rule. As long as there is no viable alternative Palestinian leadership in Gaza with which Israel can work more effectively, Israel is stuck with Hamas.

While Israel is trying to change the unsatisfactory equation, its efforts thus far do not give it any fundamentally new options. The newly deployed Iron Dome rocket defense system, for example, provides Israel important political and psychological benefits, reportedly shooting down over 85 percent of the rockets that its radar systems detected. Yet, the system does not directly strengthen Israel's deterrent or change the strategic balance in the Israel-Hamas confrontation. Despite more than 1,500 Israeli air strikes against Hamas' military infrastructure, rocket depots, and launch sites, Hamas and other Gaza militants still scored impressive successes.

In one week of fighting during Operation Pillar of Defense, Gazan militants fired more rockets into Israel than they did during three weeks of Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009. Moreover, Palestinian rockets killed four Israeli civilians in one week of fighting, one more than was killed during three weeks of Cast Lead. Rather than deter Gazan militants from firing rockets, Iron Dome may have motivated Hamas to fire longer-range Fajr-5 rockets. In this confrontation, those rockets sent Israelis in the Tel Aviv area running for bomb shelters and secure rooms.

Israel has a further problem, which is that the boundary between calm and war in Gaza is increasingly blurry. While Western media attention focuses on the violence when it reaches a tipping point, the reality is that low-level violence permeates Israel-Gaza interaction even between wars and military campaigns. Different interpretations of ceasefire arrangements create openings for ongoing violations and endless rounds of provocation and retaliation.

Israel appears resigned to managing this set of problems rather than solving it. Most see periodic military operations against Hamas as inevitable and routine. While the policy might be effective in the short run, Israel's latest victory in Gaza does not seem to be part of a strategy to improve its long-term security. Rather than break the pattern of muddling through, this latest round in Gaza reinforced it. ■ 12/14/2012

Links of Interest

[CNBC](#) quoted Jon Alterman in “[The US Has a Trust Problem in the Persian Gulf.](#)”

Reuters quoted Jon Alterman in “[With focus on opposition, U.S. races against time in Syria.](#)”

[Bloomberg Businessweek](#) quoted Jon Alterman in “[Mursi Branded Pharaoh as New Egypt Gives Way to Protests.](#)”

Haim Malka appeared on “[This Week in Defense News](#)” to discuss [what's next for Israel and Gaza.](#)

[CNN](#) quoted Haim Malka in “[Obama's Telephone Diplomacy on Gaza.](#)”

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