

Lessons learned?

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If policy changes turn out to have strengthened Israeli deterrence, the ceasefire may last longer than the few years of the previous round.

When Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu approved the targeted killing of top Hamas commander Ahmed Jabari, he and other Israeli officials realized that this would trigger a massive rocket attack against Israel – from Sderot to Tel Aviv. The cost was going to be high, with significant casualties, the usual NGO chorus of false “war crimes” allegations, and tension with the new government in Egypt, and perhaps with the Obama administration.

The assessment was based on the experiences of the 2006 Lebanon War and the previous Gaza confrontation (Dec. 2008-Jan. 2009) But in many ways, the Israel leadership avoided these costs, showing that, for the most part, it had learned the lessons of the previous rounds.

#### Iron Dome and the Restoration of Deterrence

The missile age began for Israel in 1991, when Saddam Hussein launched Scud-class missiles at Israeli cities, primarily in order to draw us into the war. Prime Shamir resisted the pressure to counterattack, but the precedent was set. For the first time since 1948, an Arab leader could boast that he had struck Tel Aviv, Haifa and other Israeli targets, and forced millions of Israelis wearing gas masks into shelters during the attacks. Amid these images, Israel’s already weakened deterrence image was further eroded. The lessons were not lost on Hezbollah and Hamas, which stocked-up with thousands of Iranian and Syrian rockets. The 2006 Lebanon war demonstrated the effectiveness of even “primitive” rockets hidden in schools, homes, mosques and other protected civilian sites.

Although the Israeli Air Force destroyed the longer range missiles, thousands of smaller rockets remained, and for six weeks, Northern Israel, including Haifa, was paralyzed and over one million Israelis fled chaotically to the South.

This pressure contributed significantly to a premature cease-fire, including a virtual UN-based force which was supposed to prevent the rearming of Hezbollah. In practice, Hezbollah quickly restored and increased its deadly rocket arsenal, as a means of deterring Israeli attacks.

While some deterrence remained via threats of targeted killing of leaders such as Hassan Nasrallah, who remains underground, this was offset by Hezbollah’s rocket threat.

Hamas’s use of undiminished use of rocket attacks during the first Gaza war (2008/9) demonstrated that Israel still did not have a means to counter this threat. As discussed below, Israeli efforts to attack the rockets and launch crews (there are an estimated 15,000 members of the Qassam rocket brigade in Gaza), fed the NGO political war, campaigns alleging war crimes.

In contrast, this time, the Iron Dome missile intercept system changed the balance completely. Of the 1500 rockets launched by Hamas, two-thirds fell in the water or empty fields, and over 400 were intercepted by the IDF’s hi-tech aces. In contrast to Hamas war expectations, Israelis did not flee, and

there was little pressure for a quick cease fire.

Furthermore, the effective anti-missile defense forced Hamas to take greater risks in launches, giving the IDF more information for targeting them. In this round, Iron Dome was a game changer, and was part of the reason that Hamas leaders desperately sought a cease fire. Overall, Israeli deterrence was enhanced significantly.

#### The No-Goldstone factor

After the notorious NGO Forum of the 2001 UN Durban Conference, which launched the NGO political war (including Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, and many more groups using the façade of human rights), Israeli responses to terror and rocket attack are automatically condemned as “war crimes”. During Defensive Shield (2002), the NGO network promoted the “massacre” myth, which was echoed by the BBC and other media platforms. The Sharon government and the IDF were entirely unprepared for dealing with this demonization and their refused to meet with the bogus UN “investigators added to the PR damage.

In the Lebanon war, the political assault expanded to hundreds of false “reports” and condemnations of the Israeli response to Hezbollah’s murderous attacks. Human Rights Watch (whose leader, Ken Roth, has a transparent obsession with Israel), led a “war crimes” campaign accusing the IDF of hitting a building in Qana that was unrelated to the conflict. The accusations were repeated blindly in the media, and by political leaders. Under pressure, Prime Minister Olmert ordered a 48 hour halt in air operations –allowing Hezbollah to regroup. HRW later admitted that its initial allegations were wrong, but the damage was done.

Two years later, in the first Gaza war, the Islamic majority in the UN Human Rights Council and the allied NGO network issued a flood of allegations of “war crimes” and “deliberate policies to kill civilians”. Following the war, Richard Goldstone, a member of HRW’s board, agreed to head a patently biased “investigation”, producing a report a few months later focusing on 36 specific incidents, based on unverified, and in many cases, clearly false NGO claims. The Goldstone report was the ultimate weapon in the demonization campaign, but the Israeli government and IDF seemed unable to defeat this form of warfare.

This time, however, there will be no Goldstone and no report with similar allegations. Partly reflecting Goldstone’s belated retraction, and partly due to the Israeli recognition of the need to pre-empt such warfare, these threats are largely off the table. The use of more precise weaponry, and immediate refutation of the standard claims made by ideological groups like Amnesty and Oxfam made a huge difference in the second Gaza war.

The decision not to launch a ground war further reduced the options for a repeat of the Goldstone scenario.

#### Keeping Obama Close

In both the Lebanon and first Gaza wars, the US, under the Bush Administration, initially supported Israel’s right to self defense, but this support waned as the images (often artificial) of Palestinian casualties increased, and the war dragged on. This time, Netanyahu, Defense minister Barak and Foreign Minister Lieberman were careful to work closely with the Obama administration at each stage, including the cease-fire negotiations.

This close cooperation between Jerusalem and Washington nullified another important dimension of Hamas' strategy. In addition, the Israeli leadership agreed to give the new Egyptian government, under Morsi, a central role as a mediator and co-guarantor, along with the Americans, of the cease-fire terms. While there are many risks in this strategy, for the short term, this enhances Morsi's prestige, and adds to the friction between the Hamas leadership and Cairo.

On the diplomatic front, and following the strong American lead, European leaders who have been highly critical of Netanyahu and not particularly supportive of Israeli security requirements, also demonstrated sympathy.

The usual European governmental expressions of support for the suffering of the people of Gaza, and standard calls for the unilateral end to Israel's blockade of Gaza disappeared, at least for the duration of the war. Perhaps European leaders also now understood that free passage of people and goods into Gaza would add significantly to the arsenal of rockets and other weapons, rather than actually helping the civilian population.

These three basic changes in Israeli policy resulted in a far better strategic outcome, and demonstrated that in these areas, important lessons were learned. If these turn out to have strengthened Israeli deterrence, the ceasefire may last longer than the few years of the previous round.

At the same time, the ongoing process of making the necessary changes to prepare for the next confrontation must continue.

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