

“Operation Pillar of Defense”: A Window into the “New” Middle East

Uzi Rabi

Israel’s latest large-scale military action against Hamas (“Operation Pillar of Defense”) is the first to occur in the new strategic environment that grew out of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. The conduct of Israel and Hamas as well as the views and actions of other regional actors have been significantly influenced by the new regional landscape.

As an Islamist movement, Hamas was encouraged by the Arab Spring uprisings, and particularly by the strengthened positions of fellow Islamist movements throughout the region. Hamas has received significant support from post-Mubarak Egypt, which is now led by Hamas’s parent Muslim Brotherhood organization. Hamas has also received backing from Turkey and Qatar, both of which clearly prefer Hamas to Mahmoud Abbas’s (Abu Mazen’s) Palestinian Authority. All of this led Hamas to think that the rules of the game vis-à-vis Israel had changed in Hamas’s favor. Hamas was well aware of Israel’s military might, but believed that Israel had less room to maneuver in the newly altered regional and international arenas. Because of this, during the weeks and months that preceded Israel’s surprise launching of its operation on November 14, Hamas either ignored or tacitly supported the firing of an unprecedented number of

rockets into southern Israel by other Gazan militant groups. Israel's restrained response to these provocations was interpreted by Hamas as an indication that Israel was unlikely to undertake a major military operation against it. Further, Hamas believed that newly re-elected US President Barack Obama would be less supportive of Israel than in the past and that Israel's desire to avoid doing anything which might provoke a sharp deterioration in relations with post-Mubarak Egypt would hold Israel back.

Israel's sustained assault, which began with the assassination of Ahmad Ja'bari, the operational commander of Hamas's military wing (the 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades), put Hamas in a difficult position. After the initial shock, Hamas collected itself and responded in three ways: in terms of morale, Hamas demonstrated a willingness and ability to absorb the Israeli attack; on the diplomatic front, Hamas called for Egypt to respond harshly, for example by breaking off of diplomatic relations with Israel; and operationally, Hamas responded by continually firing missiles at residential areas in southern Israel and revealed its ability to launch longer-range missiles at the heavily populated center of the country.

During the past two months, Israel had taken note that Hamas was increasingly emboldened and that Israel's ability to deter attacks was being significantly undermined while the lives of more than a million citizens in the south were being regularly and systematically disrupted. In preparation for the operation, Israel engaged in an intensive diplomatic campaign, which resulted in the US and several leading states in Europe and elsewhere in the world recognizing that Israel, like all sovereign states facing such a situation, could not allow this situation to continue.

Through an almost continuous series of surgical air strikes during the past week, Israel has sought to demonstrate not only its decisive military and technological advantage but also its determination to alter Hamas's strategic calculus. Israel's use of terms such as "bank of targets" and "scaled response" is meant to show that it is acting according to an organized plan. Of course, as in earlier conflicts,

the longer the operation continues, the more likely that Western understanding for Israel's actions will erode, thus damaging its international standing.

Both Israel and Hamas understand that the public perception of who gained and who lost more from the conflict is crucial for the future. Hence, the indirect negotiations for a ceasefire are especially complicated. Neither side is likely to end the conflict by admitting, in Hamas's case, that it had miscalculated and thus paid a heavy price, or, in Israel's case, that its goals had not been achieved. Israel is insisting that all Gazan armed organizations completely cease the firing of missiles and maintain a ceasefire for years to come as well as halt the smuggling of weapons into the Gaza region. Underlying Israel's actions is the desire that Hamas will conclude that the continuation of its attacks will lead to devastating results, as happened with Hizballah following the Second Lebanon War in 2006. Such an outcome, Israel believes, will send a clear message to neighboring countries on both its northern and southern borders, where there has recently been an increase in tensions.

Hamas, for its part, has declared that it will reject a ceasefire that limits its spheres of activity. As far as Hamas is concerned, the continued firing of missiles, especially the ability to fire at the center of Israel, constitutes a moral victory; a ceasefire that is signed while Hamas is still 'on its feet' would be proclaimed a true victory. Therefore, every rocket fired by Hamas or by other organizations active in the Gaza Strip—particularly those that reach the center of Israel—proves in their eyes that they are successfully responding to Israel's challenge. This will force Israel to escalate its operation and attempt to strike more targets, with the understanding that an increase in casualties will result in very vocal regional and international protests. In light of that, the conflict may continue for some time, particularly if the Egyptian-led mediation fails to display the necessary "teeth." Moreover, even if a ceasefire is instituted quickly due to both sides' desire to end the current round of fighting, there is a likelihood of renewed conflict.

As in the previous Israel-Hamas confrontation in Gaza nearly four years ago, the Palestinian Authority has remained on the margins of the conflict. Mahmoud

Abbas's leadership is conspicuous for its feebleness. The latest round of fighting has further weakened his position as the leader of all Palestinians. Both the Emir of Qatar's visit to Gaza, and Egypt's and Turkey's overt preference for Hamas as the leading faction in the Palestinian arena, have reduced Abbas's relevance. Given the need to take a firm stance against Israel, Abbas will probably have to push his current agenda—requesting observer status for Palestine as a non-member state at the UN—even harder.

At the end of the current conflict, Israel will have to formulate a unified position and develop a plan of action regarding the moderate camp in the Palestinian arena. Such a plan might answer the expectations of the Western countries that are giving Israel support during this operation. In the absence of a significant diplomatic breakthrough, it is not unlikely that in the short or mid-term, the Abbas camp, and all that Fatah represents, will end its historic role and be overtaken by Hamas's political Islam.

The events surrounding the latest Israel-Hamas conflict reveal the contours of the new geopolitical map of the Middle East and offer a number of conclusions regarding mediation and leadership in the region. Turkey, an aspiring regional hegemon under the Islamist government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has not been an influential player. The unconditional support that Erdoğan has accorded Hamas and Erdoğan's blatant anti-Israel agenda have made him an unacceptable interlocutor with Israel, thus marginalizing him in the diplomatic end game and damaging his image as a regional leader.

Muhammad Mursi's Egypt, on the other hand, has been given an opportunity to play a significant role. The Israel-Hamas confrontation poses a true test of Mursi's leadership. If successful, Egypt could register significant regional and international gains. With all eyes on him, both in Egypt and out, Mursi will need to demonstrate his ability to bring about calm. Continued escalation of the conflict is not in Egypt's interests because it will increase criticism from within the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood and others against the Egyptian regime. This could pressure Mursi to implement measures harsher than recalling its

ambassador to Israel, such as cancelling the peace treaty. Such developments will come with a heavy economic and political price for Egypt in the international arena. Mursi's Egypt is walking a thin line. While vocally supporting Palestinians (e.g., Prime Minister Hisham Qandil visited Gaza, and the Rafah border crossing was opened for wounded Palestinians), Mursi has so far avoided taking steps that could result in a heavy blow to the Egyptian economy. In any case, Egypt will have a central role in any ceasefire agreement because it is the only country capable of guaranteeing such an agreement.

In the absence of vigorous American and effective European involvement, and limited Turkish and Qatari involvement, the Hamas-Egyptian line of communication has become central to the negotiation process. Finding acceptable terms for a ceasefire is proving to be a very difficult task. A more coordinated and vigorous mediation process by both regional and international players would enable a faster resolution of this latest round of fighting between Israel and Hamas.

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