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The gains and losses of the Gaza war (Part 1)

Nader Bakkar assesses the extent to which Israel's goals in its latest Gaza war were met, concluding that none were

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Why did Israel decide to attack Gaza?

It is difficult for me to believe that Israel's political leaders are so superficial and naïve to think they can entirely eliminate Hamas with such a military operation. Therefore, whether it is proclaimed or not, I believe the military campaign aimed to curb Hamas's capabilities and to destroy a large part of Gaza's infrastructure, to distract Hamas with rebuilding efforts until the next war. Second, tactically, to appear in front of Israeli public opinion as willing to go to the farthest point to maintain Israel's security in response to the kidnapping and killing of three settlers. Third, strategically, to obstruct reconciliation between the governments in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which seemed to be closer than at any other point. In reality, reconciliation would mean returning to a united negotiating stance for all Palestinian factions. Fourth, destroying Gaza tunnels to prevent Hamas from developing its defence capabilities through smuggled weapons.

So, did they succeed in any of these goals?

The assumption that thorough destruction of the Gaza Strip would negatively impact Hamas's popularity and trigger mass Palestinian anger against the group is no less naïve than the assumption that Hamas can be entirely annihilated through the use of military operations, no matter how thorough. The more Palestinians are killed, the greater is Hamas's capability and influence in the Gaza Strip and the less influence for the government in Ramallah. This is what Israel does not understand. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) is too weak to influence Hamas and other resistance groups. Perhaps if we were talking about Yasser Arafat and his weight, it would have been a different matter. But with Mahmoud Abbas, it is a non-issue.

In contrast, the more Israelis are killed the more embarrassing the position of the Tel Aviv government and more domestic pressure on it. This, despite the fact that Israel's greater loss is not in the number of dead military personnel — although it is a very high number compared to previous operations — but the economic loss and moral struggle for the people during weeks of war. Netanyahu has repeatedly said his army will continue its operation for the sake of Israel's security, but it is interesting that despite few successes on the ground in terms of destruction inside Israel (compared to the destruction accomplished by Hizbullah rockets in 2006), Hamas was able to demolish Israel's security theory. Its rockets are now able — even if only theoretically — to reach all corners of Israel, which is a strategic victory that changes the rules of the game between Israel and Hamas after the ongoing war.

Many foreign airlines suspended their flights to Ben Gurion Airport for the first time in nearly four decades, and several private and public business sectors were paralysed because of the threat of Palestinian rockets. This is a strategic shift in the cost of Israeli military operations against the Gaza Strip, and will change many future calculations. What is new this time is that Hamas redefined itself morally in the eyes of the world as an honourable combatant, choosing to target the military in combat operations, although it is able to target civilians. Hamas's warning before showering Tel Aviv with rockets can be interpreted as part of this message, which is also a psychological war that I will discuss later.

On the battleground, resistance operations were very diverse and innovative, including landing behind Israeli military lines, which happened more than once with great success. More than 70 officers and soldiers were killed, at a time when Israel cannot announce to its people the number of Hamas deaths, because the whole world can only see the bodies of dead civilians, especially children, women and elderly. While one can claim that Israel benefited tactically from Iron Dome, although the system only successfully blocked 30 per cent of Hamas rockets, it is certain that Iron Dome cost the Israel government great strategic losses. One cannot compare the high cost of one Israeli missile that intercepts a much cheaper Hamas rocket (even if ineffective) during intense Hamas shelling. This makes a future war painfully expensive for Israel.

Meanwhile, Iron Dome's protection of Israeli civilians compared to the very high number of Palestinian victims put Israel in a moral predicament in front of the world. It is as if Israel is adversely paying the price of technological superiority. The level of sympathy towards the Palestinian cause by masses around the world, especially in the West, rose sharply like at no other time and took the form of demonstrations in many capitals in the West. Despite the bias of

the Western media machine towards Israel, the horrifying pictures of Palestinian victims — and the limited damage from Hamas rockets — increased sympathy with the Palestinians. Israel's media loss does not mean Hamas won the media war, but that the level of global popular awareness of the integrity of the Palestinian cause increased remarkably. Israel's government, which has an almost seasonal cycle of carrying out such operations against the Gaza Strip, did not realise that of late the world is focused on the Middle East and cautiously monitoring the deteriorating situation in Iraq, and before that Syria and Libya. This is a key factor that undermined what Israel often did in the past by quietly killing and displacing Palestinians under the radar of the media.

Social media, especially Twitter, was buzzing with support for the Palestinian cause this time, especially after the creation of the hashtag #IsupportGaza, which hours later became a trend. Israeli television showed deserted Tel Aviv streets before 9pm — the time Hamas said it would launch rockets against Tel Aviv — which was a strategic victory on the psychological level of war. Irrespective of the feeble destructive capability of Hamas rockets, such a step conveyed clear psychological messages: namely, Hamas can seize the initiative and make its opponent be on the waiting end. Israel failed to identify the locations of the launch pads, although it knew the zero-hour ahead of time and owns the skies with surveillance planes covering the Gaza Strip throughout the day.

In conclusion, Israel failed to achieve any strategic success. Instead, Tel Aviv substituted it with massive random destruction as collective punishment for all of Gaza and used it as a means of distracting Hamas with reconstruction after the end of operations. Finally, it had to mislead domestic public opinion by fabricating false victories.