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בשיתוף:

קרן פרידריך אברט

Senat 362 for political issues:

Operation Cast Lead - Causes, Conduct, Preliminary Results and Significance

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1. Executive Summary

- Operation Cast Lead is another milestone in the conflict between Israel and Hamas, but its significance, causes and results, go beyond the narrow borders of the Gaza strip. The operation will be assessed mainly by its long-term regional consequences, and not for its immediate, palpable results.
- Two critical decisions of Hamas: adding national Palestinian goals to its social-Islamic goals in 1987, and joining the political arena as a party in 2006.
- The growth of Hamas was founded on several elements: the lack of significant progress in the political process between Israel and the PLO, the intensification of Israeli occupation in the West Bank (the Security Barrier, roadblocks and the like). The abduction of Gilad Shalit in June 2006 in order to free Hamas prisoners, the results of the Second Lebanon War, Iranian-Syrian support, the continuous attacks on Israeli residents around the Gaza Strip in order to break the “siege,” and the six-month “period of calm” up to the operation.
- The operation had two major public objectives: stopping the fire from the Gaza Strip towards Israel, and stopping the smuggling of arms from Sinai to the Strip. The first objective can only be obtained by pressuring Hamas, and the main way for doing so was by significantly diminishing its military capabilities. The second objective can only be obtained by pressuring Egypt, with which Israel is working both in the political track and through covert warnings.
- The Egyptian mediation initiative, following Security Council Resolution 1860, restored Mubarak and Egypt to the center of influence in three spheres: the local, the regional and the international. The Egyptians are interested in containing the present round of violence, and at the same time to return the PA, headed by Abbas and Fayyad, to the Gazan arena. The Egyptians are striving to create a situation in which Hamas, which is becoming weaker and losing public support, is newly integrated in the PA and maybe in the PLO at an inferior position, producing one Palestinian partner for negotiations with Israel. In the regional sphere, as of now, Egypt succeeded in overcoming the Iranian-Syrian axis, and in the international sphere it even won acclamation from the European Community.
- Failure in achieving the long-term objectives will turn the wheel back: Hamas will become stronger and PLO weaker, Iranian and Al Qaida influence will be enhanced, confrontations in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem will start again, and relations between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and other countries will be undermined.

Operation Cast Lead is another milestone in the confrontation between Israel and Hamas, but its significance, causes and results, go beyond the narrow borders of the Gaza strip, and even beyond the borders of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These are all part of local and regional, social and religious conflict zones, which include many major players – Hamas, PLO, Israel, Egypt, Hizbullah, Iran, Syria, Jordan and Turkey, and also other players in the wider circle such as the US, the EU, the UN and others. Therefore, the military operation in the Gaza Strip and its consequences cannot be assessed and explained without a good understanding of the development of events leading to the operation, and of the various conflicts linked to it. The actual fighting took place in the Strip, but it is interlinked, both in its causes and in its consequences, with the West Bank, neighboring countries in the region, and even further regions. In many ways, the operation will be assessed mainly according to its consequences for long-term processes in the regional context, and not for its immediate results of a “body count,” tunnels destroyed or infrastructure damaged. The latter are of temporary effect, as they can be easily overturned by the deeper trends.

2. The political and national rise of Hamas

Since the first Intifada of 1987, the Hamas movement adopted two decisive resolutions concerning its status and social and national future. The first one, at the start of the Intifada, was the decision to add nationalistic ideas to its social-religious platform taken from the position and vision of the Muslim Brothers, its mother-movement. That is, to include the particularistic, national Palestinian aspect in its operations, and even to give it a place at the fore of its actions, together with – and sometimes before – the Islamic aspect of a universalistic religion, expressed in its *Dawah* work. In its second decision, Hamas chose to institutionalize as a party, “the Reform and Change Movement,” and to take part in a political-democratic contest by joining the elections for the Palestinian Parliament in 2006. These two moves were not aimed at emulating the ways of the elder sister-movement, Fatah, which had to abandon the armed struggle for a political process as a strategy for establishing a Palestinian state. Rather, their objective was to take the place of Fatah, while bringing a radical change to the goals and strategies of the Palestinians. These aspirations were reflected in the rhetoric of the Hamas leaders before the elections; for example, Ismail Haniyeh, the future Prime Minister, said: “the goal of Hamas is to create a broad historical change... Hamas’ attempt... is to create a new PLO,” and Khaled Mashal, Chairman of the Political Bureau, made clear that “resistance is the strategic option until all of Palestine’s land is liberated and until the last refugee returns.” In other words, the national-religious doctrine of Hamas rejects any permanent deal with Israel based on compromise, which is prohibited according to Muslim law. Although Mahmud a-Zahar, one of the movement’s prominent leaders, said after the targeting of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and his successor Rantissi that “if we can achieve our goals without violence, we will do so...,” in practice, he views violent Jihad as the only possible means for “liberating all of Palestine” in order to establish a Islamic Palestinian entity.

Therefore, Hamas adamantly rejects the distinction made by PLO in November 1988 in the Algiers Conference and during the Oslo Agreements, when it relinquished a “homeland” in all of Palestine in favor of a Palestinian State on 22% of the land. However, recognizing the present strength of Israel, Hamas introduced the concept of stages as a means to achieve its final goals. At the same time, it makes clear that Israel will be compelled to concur with every stage, without being compensated with any political gain.

3. Hamas - growth and isolation

The failure of the political process between PLO and Israel and the corruption of the PLO leaders nurtured and strengthened Hamas, which did all it could to obstruct the negotiations between Israel and PLO by performing terror attacks. Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon, which was attributed to Hizbullah’s credit and to its strategy – resistance, led the Hamas leaders to intensify their ties with Hizbullah, which had been created when 415 Hamas activists were deported to Lebanon. Political isolation and limited financial means later led Hamas to a “marriage of convenience” with the Iranian sponsor, in spite of their profound ideological differences. But the most significant support for its policy and strategy was received from Israel with the execution of the Gaza Strip Disengagement plan in 2005. This support was given when the Israeli Government, headed by PM Sharon, adamantly refused to any talks or agreements with Abu-Mazen, and insisted on a unilateral move in spite of the many warnings it received as to the strengthening of radical factors in Palestinian society and the weakening of moderates.

This move had immediate consequences. The democratic elections to the Palestinian Parliament, imposed by the Americans with cultural and political blindness, decisively raised Hamas to power, and it compiled the government. But the Palestinian government did not survive the basic tensions between Hamas and Fatah, leading finally to the military takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas in the summer of 2007. The response was an intensifying of the political isolation imposed on Hamas by Israel, Egypt, the PLO and most of the international community until it agrees to three conditions: recognition of the agreements signed between PLO and Israel, including the Oslo agreements, stopping support of terror and recognition of Israel. Political isolation was augmented by the physical isolation imposed by the closure of the Rafah crossing and the limitation of goods coming in from Israel to basic goods only. Everyone assumed that the “siege” will temper Gazan public opinion, leading it to cease its support of the inexperienced Hamas leadership.

Hamas refused to cooperate with this plan, and did it all it could to assure the survival of the Islamic experiment. Hamas worked consistently in order to strengthen its ties with Iran and Syria, to receive financial and political support from other countries, and to legitimize its military force. Iran, from its side, was glad for the opportunity to complete its fundamentalist vice-grip on Israel, already maintained in the North by Hizbullah.

They are supposed to serve two Iranian goals: the first, to serve as a loaded gun aimed at the Israeli home front, in case the latter decides to send its air-force to strike at the Iranian nuclear program, and to divert international attention from it.

The second, to serve as another stake of Iranian hegemony in the region, against Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Inside the Strip, Hamas succeeded in controlling the Palestinian factions, and in directing their military actions against Israel, in two main moves:

First, by creating a local balance of terror against Israel, by developing and smuggling long-range rocket weapons, using the tunnels under the “Philadelphi” route, and by exploiting the deliberate helplessness of the Egyptians. Mubarak viewed the disengagement, the closure of crossings from Israel to Gaza and the severance of Gaza from the West Bank as an Israeli attempt to push Gaza’s troubles onto Egypt. He believed that a certain amount of fire between Israel and the Hamas would assure a link between Gaza and the West Bank under any political solution. Therefore, in parallel to his attempts to renew the internal Palestinian dialogue, he tried to compel Hamas to join some umbrella institution under Abu-Mazen.

Second, by training their forces using semi-military methods, and by the fortification of Gaza in preparation for a Lebanon-type Israeli ground invasion.

4. On the eve of the operation

A series of developments in the past three years have created a sensation of power and even confidence in Hamas concerning its strategic choices. First, the abduction of Gilad Shalit in June 2006 in order to release Hamas prisoners led to Operation Summer Rains in the Strip, which came to an end without any conclusive results and with an erosion of Israeli deterrence. Second, the results of the Second Lebanon War, which had restrained Hizbullah, but also strengthened it in the inter-Lebanese political arena. Moreover, the lack of any real progress in the political process between Israel and PLO/Fatah, under US arbitration, including the Annapolis Process, helped Hamas to promote its doctrine. It emphasized both the hopelessness of the alternative of negotiations, adopted by Abu-Mazen, for advancing the interests of the Palestinian people, and the intensity of Israeli occupation in the West Bank, as exemplified by the Security Barrier, roadblocks, and the like. The continuous attack on the Israeli residents around Gaza in order to raise the “siege” was seen by Hamas as a triumph. So was the six-month “calm,” which it believed it had compelled Israel to sign, especially concerning the clause stating that the calm would be expanded to the West Bank after six months. As Hamas understood it, this was the beginning of the second stage of the victory of its social-national policy and strategy over that of Fatah among the Palestinian population, in the West Bank as well.

On the eve of Operation Cast Lead, the arrogance of Hamas was at its peak. This arrogance was expressed in the refusal of Hamas to conduct the internal Palestinian dialogue with Fatah under Egyptian auspices, and in its attempts to undermine Egypt’s status as a sole arbitrator, including its accusation of

pro-Israeli bias. In the military sphere, Hamas decided to put a higher price than in the past on the targeting of some of its fighters by Israel, and fired rockets towards Israel, thereby breaking the “calm” a month before it ended. Later, Hamas refused to renew the “calm,” and then challenged its rivals in an unprecedented fashion when its leaders started to relate publicly, in many forums, to the oath of allegiance to the Muslim Brothers movement – the “bay’a.” By doing so, Hamas indicated that its struggle and accomplishments should be considered a model for all the branches of the Muslim Brothers in their struggle against the “corrupt” pro-Western regimes (the PA and Egypt) and the “infidels” (Israel).

5. Israel releases the spring

Israel had continuously prepared for a confrontation, a result of the Winograd Commission and the change of guard in the Security Ministry and the IDF. These changes, together with the support of many countries following Israel’s restraint in the prior months and the tactical military surprise, led to harsh results for Hamas already in the first two aerial strikes which opened Operation Cast Lead. At first, the political leaders – Olmert, Barak and Livni – were ambiguous as to the Operation’s objectives, but these became clearer with time. The Israeli public and the international community understood that the Israeli government does not intend to destroy the Hamas regime for two reasons. The overt reason - Israel was not interested in the IDF controlling Gaza instead of Hamas, with all the political, security, financial and other problems that this entails. The covert reason – Israel is abstaining from prior mistakes in which it attempted, and was seen as attempting, to help its allies become leaders with the help of the IDF’s power. The understanding that there is a need to maintain Hamas as a temporary effective regime, which will prevent chaos in the Strip and will continue to be responsible for 1.5 million Palestinians, was the reason for the gradation in the IDF operation, with the intention of creating a possibility of stopping the operation whenever the objectives are met.

The overt objectives of the operation were only two: stopping the fire from the Gaza Strip to Israel and stopping the smuggling of arms from Sinai to the Strip. The first objective can only be obtained by pressuring Hamas, and the main way for doing so was by significantly diminishing its military capabilities, as they ensure its survival in the Strip. On the part of Hamas, both in the Strip and out of it, the ability to continue controlling the Strip was the most important objective. Israel’s second objective could only be obtained by pressuring Egypt. This was performed on the political level, through the known possibility of agitation among the Egyptian populace and through a covert threat of a mass of Gazan refugees who will enter Egyptian territory in case of the full occupation of the Strip by the IDF.

The IDF’s military action, mostly from the start of the ground operation, was characterized by massive use of fire, unhurried, careful movement, continuous aerial assistance for the ground forces and the usage of advanced control and supervision technology. These, together with comprehensive prior preparation of the emergency services under the aegis of the Home Front Command, prevented the

citizenry from being substantially harmed, which may have created internal pressure to stop the operation. In addition, the police was deployed in the Arab sector and East Jerusalem.

This kind of operation in a built-up area, together with the cynical exploitation of citizens by the Hamas militants, resulted in high numbers of innocents hurt by the IDF, and amplified the consequences of the operation among Arab countries and internationally. The anger was not diminished by the pictures of humanitarian assistance supplied by the IDF's to the Strip's residents – hundreds of truckloads of food and medical equipment.

However, although international Palestinian supporters are vocal in their opposition to Israel, their governments usually hold a more balanced position towards it.

6. A Change of Direction?

Security Council Resolution 1860 from the 9th of January was not respected by the sides to the conflict at the time. Although Hamas wasn't mentioned in the resolution, it gave it a certain amount of political legitimacy, as opposed to Israel's position of preventing such legitimacy even at the cost of unilateral withdrawal. Despite the fact that the resolution contains all the elements needed for stopping the present conflict, it did not indicate any concrete mechanisms for supervision or execution, as Israel demanded. However, the last clauses of the resolution do indicate the support of its 15 members for the creation of one Palestinian entity led by Mahmud Abbas, and for a future permanent solution, based on the "two states for two nations" model, already approved in resolution 1850.

Some of the resolution's clauses – at this stage only the first ones – were in fact implemented this week with the Egyptian mediation initiative, which restored Mubarak and Egypt to the center of influence in three spheres: the local, the regional and the international. The Egyptians, who have again become the central player in the region, to the chagrin of Hamas and against its will, are interested in containing the present round of violence, and at the same time in returning the PA, headed by Abbas and Fayyad, to the Gazan arena. The Egyptians are striving to create a situation in which Hamas, which is becoming weaker and losing public support, will be newly integrated in the PA, and maybe in the PLO, while it is at an inferior position, creating one Palestinian partner for negotiations with Israel. In other words, the Egyptians wish to make use of their short-term mediation to create a situation in which Israel will not be able to evade a total solution of the Palestinian problem, with Abu Mazen as the representative of all the Palestinians in the territories. In exchange, Egypt will act more effectively to prevent the strengthening of Hamas by arms smuggling through the tunnels. This will also serve the interests of Egypt, which has experienced the effect of the images from Gaza on the Egyptian and Arab population, accompanied by agitation of the Muslim Brothers in the past months, and especially in the weeks of the Operation.

In the regional circle, Egypt together with Saudi Arabia and the PLO, succeeded in blocking the militant axis of Syria and Iran, which was heard in the Qatar Conference. Proposals for declaring Israel a "terrorist entity" and for a withdrawal of the Arab League peace initiative, which has been offered to Israel in the past 7 years, were heard there.

Egypt chose to use the convention in Kuwait for the creation of a unified moderate Arab front, calling for inter-Palestinian agreement and for Arab unification versus Iranian involvement. Against the aid promised by Iran to Hamas for the rebuilding of Gaza Strip, the moderate front succeeded in raising guarantees of \$2 billion. Through this package, Mubarak and Abdullah hope to strengthen Abu Mazen and to create one partner for negotiations with Israel. At the same time, they are reminding Israel that if it does not take the Arab League Initiative seriously, the initiative will be suspended. In support of Egypt's execution and upholding of the Security Council resolutions, the leaders of Europe took part in a summit he convened in Sharem a-Sheikh, and also in a more modest tribute to Israel in Jerusalem.

Operation Cast Lead exposed and also influenced the objectives of the new American Regime, headed by Barack Obama. Like Israel, the US believes that the Iranian nuclear program and the ideology of the Mullah regime is a more serious threat and challenge to its foreign policy, and therefore it prefers to prepare for this threat, and not to wear itself out in a confrontation with its Hamas branch in Gaza. Thus we were informed that as opposed to prior estimations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to remain as first priority, and not be replaced by the Syrian issue. However, the President and his Secretary of State intend to take a more substantial role in resolving the conflict through a permanent agreement, instead of backing marginal agreements concerning crossings or the number of roadblocks and outposts in the territories. Israel contributed to this by completing the withdrawal from the Strip on January 20, 2009, before Obama's inauguration.

The fragility of the ceasefire is apparent to all. The fighting may commence at any time, if Hamas cannot enforce it on all the Palestinian factions. Hamas itself may decide to end it in order to repair its image, which was badly damaged; more than 1315 Palestinians died and more than 5000 were injured, 80% of the tunnels were hit close to 30,000 buildings were damaged, and most of Hamas services in Gaza collapsed. Fighting may resume at any time, also by attacks in the West Bank, with Hamas attempting to achieve the opening of the crossings – its main objective for establishing its regime.

Therefore, in the next days, we will see the IDF in waiting positions on the borders of the Strip, restrained but prepared to resume fighting. With the need to reconstruct Gaza and Israel's control over the crossings, Israel's bargaining power has become greater, both concerning Gilad Shalit's release and the interest of Hamas to maintain the ceasefire.

However, the assessment of the Operation's success will depend also on the prevention of smuggling by Egypt, and especially on the latter's ability to form inter-Palestinian reconciliation, led by Abu Mazen, and the renewal of negotiations with Israel immediately after the elections in February. Failing to achieve these objectives will turn the wheel backwards: Hamas will become stronger and PLO weaker, Iranian and Al Qaida influence will be enhanced, confrontations in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem will start anew, and relations between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and other countries will be undermined.