



Israel Debates No. 1

26. February 2009

The Israeli domestic discussion on the Gaza war

The Cast Lead military operation that the Israeli military waged against Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, from December 27, 2008 through January 17, 2009, was and is still being intensely discussed in public in Israel, as well as among Israeli politicians and security experts.

From the outset, Israeli public opinion – with the exception of the country's Arab citizens – was overwhelmingly in favor of the operation. When the hostilities ended after 22 days, some 50% of Israelis even called for the fighting to continue, not believing that the threat from the Gaza Strip has been definitively dealt with. Another characteristic of public opinion is that practically there were no expressions of empathy with the large number of casualties among the Gaza Strip's population, among the population generally as well as in the media.

Below we present the opposing views of two renowned Israeli security experts, illustrating the range of the Israeli domestic debate on the handling and results of the military operation. Although the two authors reach radically different conclusions, they both advance valid arguments for their positions.

Dr. Reuven Pedatzur, a lecturer at Netanya College, represents a highly critical position on Operation Cast Lead. He concludes that the "use of military force against Hamas was unavoidable," but that this does not justify the "excessive use" thereof. He also identifies the unclear objective and the lack of an exit strategy, and in light of the "satisfaction and self-praise" on the part of the military and the politicians, he warns against drawing inappropriate conclusions from this operation, which was "not war – it is not even a real battle."

In contrast, Prof. Ephraim Inbar of Bar-Ilan University believes that this time – as opposed to the 2006 Lebanon War – the Israeli military did its job very well. For him, it made appropriate use of military means. He indicates that, although Hamas was greatly weakened, it will still continue to rule the Gaza Strip. He sees the two-state solution as a "meaningless undertaking," and calls for a "more realistic basis" for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Dr. Ralf Hexel
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26. February 2009

A commentary on Operation Cast Lead

by Dr. Reuven Pedatzur

Israel began its Cast Lead military operation without clear-cut targets being set. The prime minister declared that it had been decided to use military force in order to bring about “a change in the security policy situation on the border with Gaza.” The military leadership who were entrusted with planning Cast Lead had the task of turning these unclear targets into operational military steps. The IDF’s general staff clearly decided, by killing as many people from Hamas circles as possible, to put the Palestinians into a state of shock.

Clearly the assumption was that killing several hundred individuals would make the Hamas leadership capitulate or beg for a truce. Among other things, this explains why the air raids came as a surprise. The Israeli military had planned attacks on buildings and other targets where there were hundreds of people. The attacks then took place without warning and with the intention of killing as many of the people inside the targets as possible, and in this the IDF were successful. The military force used to this end was excessive. Since it was clear that the fighting would end with a ceasefire, which will eventually lead to a settlement in which the Palestinians will also be involved, the only purpose of using military force was to demonstrate that Israel is capable of hitting every single target in the Gaza Strip, and that the Hamas leadership would therefore be well advised to try and achieve a ceasefire as soon as possible in order to avoid further killing. It is not necessary to kill hundreds of people in order to impart credibility to such a demonstration of power. Ultimately, Israel will in any case be forced to negotiate with the Palestinians in Gaza. So why add thousands of people to the vicious circle of hatred and revenge?

For example, it is not clear what the advantage or tactical benefit would be of deliberately killing hundreds of Palestinian policemen lined up for roll call. Killing these people certainly does not help combat terrorism, and only disseminates more hatred.

In terms of military planning, the major strategic mistake of Operation Cast Lead would appear to be that it reached its peak right at the outset, and as a result additional air attacks basically lacked the potential to improve on this state of affairs. If in the first round, using dozens of aircraft, a hundred targets were attacked, and this first blow was not held up as a warning, nor did Hamas capitulate as a result, all the subsequent air raids must necessarily have been smaller in scope. The air force liquidated practically all the targets in what was called the target catalogue. It was practically impossible to find additional targets whose destruction from the air could have fundamentally influenced Hamas’ decisions.

When what should in any case have been clear from the outset became obvious to the operation’s planners, i.e. that after the destruction of the first hundred targets and the killing of 300 people, the Hamas government was not going to fly the white flag, the ground operation became unavoidable. Since it was not feasible to further escalate the air raids following the initial blow, the air force was forced to find new targets which corresponded “qualitatively” to the targets which had already been destroyed; and since it was obvious that the pressure on the Palestinians must be increased if a ceasefire agreement was to be achieved, the only remaining option was a ground operation.

However, the targets laid down for the use of the ground troops which, as expected, were only sent into the Gaza Strip when the IDF ran out of targets for air attacks and an acceptable ceasefire agreement

still looked remote, remained unclear. Should Gaza simply be besieged and more Hamas members killed, or should the troops perhaps advance into the city center and the refugee camps and become embroiled in a search for the Hamas leadership in house-to-house fighting?

The operation's mishaps, which caused the death of four soldiers as a result of friendly fire, should not be considered indications of its failure. Such incidents occur in every war. However, the mishaps and mistakes which led to the deaths of hundreds of civilians, including attacks on schools and on a warehouse which is annexed to an UNRWA building, were inevitable given the method of fighting adopted by the Israeli military. At the beginning of the operation the General Staff had decided to reduce the risk to its soldiers to the minimum, even at the price of larger numbers of casualties among the civilian population. This explains why, when advancing into the Gaza Strip, the Israeli army made such liberal use of its fire power. After the end of the hostilities, the senior commander of the Givati infantry brigade explained the doctrine as follows: If there is any suspicion whatsoever that a house has been mined, then it must be fired on in order to check this out, even if unfortunately it turns out that there are civilians in the building. Only after this should the troops advance. The large-scale destruction and high number of fatalities among the civilian population are to be ascribed, among other things, to this military doctrine. According to the data from the Israeli military, some two thirds of the Palestinians killed were civilians.

During the fighting, additional targets were set for Operation Cast Lead. These were informal targets, not explicitly stated by the government, which were expressed only by ministers and high-ranking members of the armed forces.

The first of these targets was preventing Israel from being shot at by Qassam rockets. However, the latter continued to

land in Israel until the very last day of the fighting. According to estimates by security circles, Hamas still has more than 1,000 rockets at its disposal.

Another goal which was discussed during the 22 days of fighting involved preventing smuggling into the Gaza Strip, and especially preventing the smuggling of arms and rockets from the Sinai desert into the Gaza Strip through tunnels dug on the border with Egypt. This goal was not achieved. The head of Israel's domestic intelligence service (the GSS or General Security Service), Yuval Diskin, provided cabinet members with an estimate to the effect that the smuggling of weapons, munitions, and rockets could start again within a few months. The Memorandum of Understanding signed by Israel and the USA, in which the USA commits to ensuring that no more weapons will reach the Gaza Strip, is primarily of a declaratory character. It is not clear how it is to be put into practice. Prohibiting smuggling can only be successful if Egypt states its willingness to adopt anti-smuggling measures on its border with Gaza, along the so-called Philadelphi Route. When Israel agreed to a unilateral ceasefire, such an agreement had not been reached.

The third goal was to re-establish deterrence. This means bringing about a situation which in the future will deter Hamas from again shooting rockets at targets in Israel. Whether this goal has been achieved cannot yet be determined. It will only be possible to determine to what extent this military operation has been able to restore deterrence in a few months.

The fourth informal goal was to re-establish the operational capabilities of the Israeli military, and above all to re-establish its reputation, which was damaged in the 2006 failed Second Lebanon War. This goal was apparently achieved. The fighting in Gaza was presented as an impressive victory, intended to blot out the setback of the Lebanon War and prove that the right

lessons were drawn from that badly waged war.

However, the greatest danger is that the military might become convinced that they won the war, whereas actually no war took place. The satisfaction and self-praise in light of the results of the ceasefire which can be heard from the General Staff could persuade the military to reach false conclusions. Unlike the picture arising from Israeli media reports, to the effect that the Israeli military performed its task in this war almost to perfection and the lessons from the Lebanon War have been drawn, in the 22 days of hostilities in Operation Cast Lead, there was not one single real battle.

The Hamas fighters did not try to hold up the advancing Israeli troops, but preferred to withdraw without conflict. Thus as Israeli soldiers advanced on Gaza City, in contrast to what they expected from the warnings of the General Staff prior to Operation Cast Lead, they were not confronted with battle-ready fighters, armed to the teeth and prepared to make sacrifices, but with booby traps and mines and here and there with marksmen. That is not war – it is not even a real battle.

The battles undertaken by the Israeli military as part of Operation Cast Lead have nothing in common with the Second Lebanon War. As a result, the assertion that the fighting in Gaza proves that the Israel army has drawn the lessons from that war is completely unfounded. True, the soldiers were better equipped, the commanders were present on the battlefield instead of sitting in front of plasma screens, and the field intelligence service was also somewhat better than in 2006. However, none of this alters the fact that the events in the General Staff actually boil down to a military operation which was limited to the advance of troops in hostile, densely populated territory, without any direct military contact with the enemy.

The air force was also highly praised, and the media indulged in compliments about its performance, as if this had proven that it is the best air force in the world. The quality of the Israeli air force is undisputed, but it would be awkward to base such an evaluation on its performance during the hostilities in Gaza. The Israeli Air Force planes operated in a setting lacking in air defense, and as a result they had absolute air supremacy. Flying in the direction of Gaza and dropping overwhelmingly “precise” bombs from a relatively great altitude is not a difficult assignment. Flights over Gaza may be compared with shooting exercises, dozens of which are undertaken every year by every single pilot.

However, in contrast to all of the factors referred to above, the operation did do one thing. Israel's reputation sustained serious damage. Given the massive firepower that was used, and the large-scale destruction inflicted on Gaza by the Israeli military, Israel now looks like a violent, brutal country that makes unlimited use of its military force. In addition to resulting in mass demonstrations throughout the world, this has also led to open condemnations of Israel by friendly countries, such as the cases of particularly vigorous anti-Israel attacks by the Turkish prime minister and Jordan, which recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv. However, it is still too early to evaluate the potential damage caused in the diplomatic sphere by the combat methods used by the Israeli military in Operation Cast Lead.

The use of military force against Hamas in December 2008 was inevitable. Hamas had had sufficient opportunity to stop shooting rockets at the Israeli home front, but it simply continued this policy. For its part, Israel declared that it was prepared to extend the ceasefire, but Hamas refused. No state can allow rockets to be shot at its civilian population. However, this does not justify either the excessive use of military

force, nor defective objectives and the lack of an exit strategy.

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Gaza – An Interim Assessment

by Prof. Efraim Inbar

In the Middle East, the use of force is part and parcel of the rules of the game. Governments of the region are not averse to the utilization of violence and they understand that political entities often need to inflict pain on their opponents to attain political goals. In the Middle East, sticks are a more effective political currency than carrots.

Israel's government, under growing public pressure and with national elections in sight, finally chose the military path in dissuading Hamas from launching missile attacks from Gaza. On December 27, 2008, Israel initiated Operation "Cast Lead" to restore deterrence and to force Hamas to cease terrorizing over a million of Israeli civilians in the southern part of the country. Three weeks later, Israel's government decided to cease fire unilaterally and a few days later, just before President Barack Obama took office, the Israeli troops left Gaza.

In contrast to the 2nd Lebanon War of 2006, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) performed very well. The intelligence collected was remarkable, particularly in allowing the Israeli air force to conduct so many precision bombing sorties. In the second stage of the operation, the troops, regular and reserve, were committed to action after intensive training for a Gaza scenario. They were well equipped and had clear orders. They were successful in gaining control of the targets usually ahead of schedule. Noteworthy, the IDF suffered minimal casualties shattering the myth that conventional armies have little chance of winning battles in asymmetric warfare and particularly in urban areas.

The IDF was extremely careful in minimizing civilian casualties. How many armies in the world are making calls to the

residents of a home warning them of an impending attack?! In contrast, Hamas consistently targeted civilians. Moreover, it cynically use of children and woman as a human shield, and Mosques and schools as firing positions. The often-aired charges of disproportionate use of force by the Israeli military betray ignorance of international law or plain desire for Israel-bashing. The proportionality of the damage done in the course of military action is measured in relation to the goal to be achieved by the use of force. The legitimate amount of force for the removal of the rocket threat from over a million of Israelis is the true test of proportionality. Causing the death of any number of armed Hamas terrorists is obviously a proportionate course of action. A few hundreds of Gazan civilians hurt in a defensive battle as collateral damage are worth the lives of hundreds of thousands of Israeli civilians.

Hamas took quite a beating, as hundreds of terrorists, including very high ranking, were killed; large amounts of armaments and many of the shops for weapon production were destroyed; and Hamas offices demolished. It seems that pain inflicted upon Hamas has restored a modicum of deterrence if the learning curve of the leadership in Gaza is flexible enough

Many foreign governments displayed understanding for the need to react militarily after an incredible period of Israeli restraint. The US obviously supported Israel, but so did most European states. Despite the hostile media coverage, polls show that a significantly larger proportion of Europeans supported Israel rather than Hamas. Even the moderate Arab countries refrained from criticizing Israel, while Egypt squarely blamed Hamas for the escalation.

Despite the achievements of the IDF, the supportive international environment and the victory speeches of Ehud Olmert, the Prime Minister, and Ehud Barak, the

Defense Minister, the end of war left most Israelis disappointed. Frustration over the "unfinished business" was due to the general feeling that the well deserved blow administered to Hamas could have been stronger. Moreover, the reluctance of the government to push for the release of Corporal Gilead Shalit, over two years a prisoner in the hands of Hamas also left a bitter taste. Finally, no effective mechanism was established to curb the smuggling of weapons into Gaza from Egypt.

The expectations that Egypt will put an end to the traffic in the tunnels under the Egyptian-Gaza border are not realistic. Egypt that sees Israel as a competitor in the quest for hegemony in the Middle East, and has for years turned a blind eye to the arming of Hamas via the tunnels. Simply put, it had, and still has, an interest in bleeding Israel. In contrast to its rhetoric, Egypt is not interested in a resolution of the Arab-Israel conflict that will free Israel from an immense security burden and will allow the Jewish state to become even stronger than it is nowadays.

Egyptian behavior is intriguing and cunning. After all, Hamastan in Gaza is a danger to Egypt too, since part of the weaponry going to Gaza could be siphoned off for the Moslem Brotherhood along the Nile. Similarly, the growing influence of Iran in Gaza by arming, training and financing Hamas has been a source of concern for the Egyptian regime. Nevertheless, Egypt probably has reached the conclusion that it cannot prevent Hamas rule in Gaza, and that Hamas' continuous presence actually is after all useful both against Israel and at home.

Actually, the end of the war shows that almost everybody accepts Hamas to be the ruling party in Gaza. Israel even did not try to uproot Hamas from Gaza. It is beyond Israel's power; Israel cannot install a new government in the Strip. Outsiders have little capacity to dramatically change

realities in the Middle East. Change can come only from within. Even the powerful US is failing at political engineering in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With little chance for the emergence of a new Palestinian leadership able to successfully grapple with the challenges of modernity and state building, the Islamic forces within Palestinian society will continue to dominate in the near future. The Islamists are the only group successful in providing a modicum of the services needed for society and this is the main source of their political power. Therefore, Hamas is here to stay and Israel cannot but feel sorry for the Palestinians doomed to ignorance, poverty and fanaticism – the inevitable result of Islamist rule. Yet, as the tunnels will continue to be the highway for arms from Sinai into Gaza, it is only a question of time until Israel will have to go back into Gaza and refresh the memory of Hamas.

While a Hamastan in Gaza is not the ideal neighbor for Israel, there are several advantages to continuous Hamas rule. First, the entrenchment of Hamas makes it crystal-clear who rejects peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel is largely off the hook. Second, the Hamas military coup of June 2007 dealt a death blow to the two-state paradigm that the world is still paying lip service, but is patently not working. A growing realization of the futility of this paradigm might allow the emergence of a more realistic approach to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In light of the depressing reality among Israel's neighbors, and in particular the Palestinians, the strategy of the Jewish state should be modest. Israel should refrain from trying to influence the societies in its vicinity. Israel is located in a truly dangerous neighborhood and the bitter truth is that the country has little to gain from cultural and economic interactions with its neighbors.

Therefore, what should be of exclusive concern to Jerusalem is the ability of the neighboring Arab states to inflict harm. Israel's diplomatic and military resources should be directed toward just that objective – minimizing the damage they are capable of inflicting against Israel. This has been partially achieved by Operation "Cast Lead".

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