

Has Operation Pillar of Defense Enhanced Israel's Deterrence?

Written by Zaki Shalom

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ZAKI SHALOM, JAN 6 2013

Introduction

After eight days of fighting, Operation Pillar of Defense reached its conclusion with a declaration of a ceasefire agreement brokered by the United States and Egypt. In light of the fact that Israel did not ultimately carry out a ground invasion in Gaza, we can assume that this conflict will be called an operation and not a war. Although we still do not have the perspective of time to assess the significance and the consequences of this operation, we can already describe a number of the operation's characteristics, its achievements, and its limitations.

At a theoretical level, the meaning of deterrence is that a party that seeks to harm another party, its adversary, refrains from striking the other party because, in its estimation, the cost of such a strike is greater than the benefit it expects to receive from it. The considerations of the adversaries are based on two elements:

1. Each party's assessment of the power of the other party.
2. Each party's assessment of the other party's determination to make use of its power.

Deterrence is always temporary and limited in its scope. It is not possible to deter the other party all the time. Furthermore, deterrence that works against one state does not necessarily deter another state in close proximity to it. Deterrence is essentially fluid and intangible. We can make an assessment, with varying levels of probability, whether deterrence was strengthened in the wake of a particular operation or event. It is very difficult to assess how much the deterrence was strengthened, and certainly, what are the implications of the strengthened deterrence. [1]

The Background to the Escalation: Possible Explanations

Operation Pillar of Defense began when the deterrent image of the State of Israel in the eyes of Hamas seemed to have been at a relatively low point. This was demonstrated by the fact that in the weeks preceding the start of the campaign, the trickle of mortar and rocket fire from the Gaza Strip toward communities in the Western Negev increased, as did the attempts to damage IDF operations along the border. In some instances, this caused Israeli casualties. [2]

The current government's policy was based on a complete rejection of the concept of restraint and containment that characterized the policy of the previous government over the years. Israel's leaders made it clear that they would respond to any attack on the country's citizens or soldiers and would also initiate operations whenever they considered it necessary. Israel has in fact made sure to implement this security concept, with varying degrees of intensity.

However, the Israeli response to Hamas' provocations in the period preceding the operation was not compatible with this security concept. As far as we can tell, it was a measured response, restrained and cautious. Even if it was not the intention of Israel's leaders, the low profile character of the Israeli response clearly broadcast a message that, at this particular period of time Israel had no desire for an armed conflict with Hamas and was willing to accept rules of

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the game in which Hamas is 'allowed' to fire sporadically at Negev communities, and at the same time, Israel is 'allowed' to undertake a moderate response in the Gaza Strip. Israel most probably estimated that, under this framework of rules, Hamas will have no incentive to further escalate the tension along its border.

It may well be that the aggregate of events that preceded the start of Operation Pillar of Defense led to an assessment by Hamas that Israel's resilience and the firmness of its response were being eroded to an extent that is difficult to estimate. It may be, though we have no evidence of it, that a widespread belief prevailed in Hamas that at the present time the government of Israel is seeking to preserve peace for the following main reasons:

1. The approaching elections. The heads of Hamas were almost certainly aware that one of the main claims in the Likud election campaign is that, during Prime Minister Netanyahu's term, there has not been a single military conflict with a large number of casualties, as was the case during the term of Olmert and Livni. This has been attributed to the firm retaliation policy that had been adopted and implemented during Netanyahu's premiership. According to Likud leaders, this policy has created a stable and reliable deterrence vis-à-vis Hamas and Hezbollah. From this point of view, Hamas may have made an assessment that the current government would not have an interest in escalating the tension in a way that would develop into a military conflict.
2. The lack of certainty concerning President Obama's positions toward the State of Israel. After Obama's election to a second term, there were reports in Israel that, because of Netanyahu's support for Republican candidate Mitt Romney, Obama would seek to "take revenge" on Israel and would adopt a hostile policy toward it or at least be alienated from it. Under such circumstances, it would not be desirable for Israel to engage in a military conflict with unclear results.[3]
3. The fear of Israel's leaders that a military campaign against Hamas would push aside the issue of Iran's nuclearization, which is the most critical issue for the security of the State of Israel.

In these circumstances, Hamas may have reached an assessment that it had been given an opportunity to further strengthen its standing in the Arab world and vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority by escalating the conflict with Israel. There can be no doubt that Hamas was well aware that the scope and character of its operations against Israel, in particular firing on IDF forces operating along the border on the Israeli side, deviate from the rules of the game and are a gross provocation that it would be difficult for Israel to accept.

Another possible explanation for the escalation initiated by Hamas in recent weeks is perhaps connected to an Iranian request to it to escalate the conflict vis-à-vis Israel. This speculation is based on our assessment that: 1) Iran is providing Hamas with the vast majority of the strategic weapons in its possession and, therefore, it has significant leverage over Hamas; and 2) The Iranian request may have been intended to achieve two possible goals:

1. To divert international attention from Iran's recently-accelerated nuclear activity. It is well known that the International Atomic Energy Agency announced only recently that Iran has completed installation of the centrifuges in its nuclear facility in Fordo. Iran could have made an assessment, correctly, that a military conflict between Israel and Hamas would push the issue of its nuclear activity aside. Iran did in fact achieve this goal.[4]
2. To demonstrate to Israel's leaders and people the possible price of an Israeli action against Iranian nuclear facilities. In all likelihood, the Iranians assumed that hundreds of long-range rockets falling on Israel's cities would be very traumatic and would deter Israel's leaders from initiating a military action against Iran. The Israeli public could make an assessment that in the event of an operation against Iran, the response would be much more severe and would include massive firing of missiles and rockets by Iran and Hezbollah.[5]

The Background to the Operation and the Opening Move

The achievements and failures of Operation Pillar of Defense must be defined on the basis of the goals set for it by the political echelon. During the week of fighting, many discussions were held about the operation in the electronic and print media. In a large number of cases, various commentators sought to assess the achievements of the campaign on the basis of what appeared to them to be the targets that should have been set for the war. This trend

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created confusion and misled the public, and ultimately, it also contributed to an erosion of a sense of victory in the war.

We believe that an assessment of the achievements and failures must be done on the basis of the official goals set for the campaign. The prime minister and defense minister stressed at the beginning of the operation that it had limited objectives. It is very likely that the goal of the government was to lower expectations and prevent a feeling of disappointment at its lack of ability to fulfill the expectations, such as occurred in the Second Lebanon War. According to Defense Minister Ehud Barak, the operation was intended to bring about "stronger deterrence, serious damage to the rocket arsenal, a painful blow to Hamas and the terror organizations, and a reduction in strikes against our civilian front." [6]

Did the operation achieve the goals set for it, as described above? Israeli officials claimed that the operation "reached all goals". According to various sources, the operation has indeed caused a painful blow to Hamas. Among others, it has caused serious damage to Hamas' rocket arsenal. [7] Presently, almost two months after the end of the operation, the areas bordering Gaza are calm. The main question for discussion is how long the current lull will last. The answer depends, of course, on Israel's deterrent image in the eyes of Hamas.

Israel's Operational and Intelligence Capability

Operation Pillar of Defense proved that the State of Israel has impressive operational, intelligence and technological capabilities, as demonstrated by the killing of Ahmed Ja'abari and the hard blow to Hamas' long-range rocket arsenal at the beginning of the campaign. [8] To this we should add the operation to destroy the rocket convoy in the Sudan several weeks before the Gaza confrontation, which was attributed to the State of Israel. [9] The impressive performance of the Iron Dome system will require Hamas to take into account that Israel has, or will have in the foreseeable future, the ability to largely neutralize Hamas' ability to threaten Israel by attacking it with missiles. To the best of our knowledge, during the operation, there was no operational activity that could be called a significant operational failure, even though the scope of aerial operations was much greater than what took place in Operation Cast Lead.

Under these circumstances, in our assessment, it can be said with a high degree of probability that Operation Pillar of Defense will lead Hamas to conclude that the operational and intelligence power of the State of Israel has grown tremendously since Operation Cast Lead and that the balance of power between Israel and Hamas now favors Israel. The significance of this is that any time in the future that Hamas considers escalating the tension with Israel, it will need to take into account that, from its point of view, the cost involved is growing, apparently well beyond the benefit that it expects to gain from it. [10]

The Diplomatic Dimension

In the diplomatic sphere, too, the responses from the international community are likely to enhance the State of Israel's deterrent image. Operation Pillar of Defense largely refuted the assessments, widely held in Israel, that the new Egyptian leadership headed by Mohamed Morsi has an extremist Islamic ideology, and that given the state of conflict between Hamas and Israel, Egypt would have to take far-reaching steps against Israel, including the possibility of severing relations and annulling the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

In practice, it emerged that the Egyptian leadership headed by Morsi is pragmatic and seeks to continue to maintain working relations with Israel, even if they have a very low profile. Although the Egyptian leadership is made up of figures connected to the extremist religious group the Muslim Brotherhood, it has not responded to belligerent calls to sever its ties with the State of Israel. On the contrary, from the very beginning of the operation, Egypt undertook to lead the moves toward achieving a ceasefire agreement in the region. From this point of view, the policy of the current Egyptian leadership is not significantly different from that of the previous regime, headed by Hosni Mubarak.

If, in fact, Israel's assessments and hopes that Egypt has agreed to take responsibility for preventing weapons smuggling into the Gaza Strip are fulfilled, and it has made a commitment to the U.S. government to fulfill this

Has Operation Pillar of Defense Enhanced Israel's Deterrence?

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commitment effectively, this will have far-reaching implications for the balance of power between Israel and Hamas. It means that Hamas' capabilities to arm itself with long-range missiles and rockets and other strategic weapons will be significantly reduced, and its ability to pose a significant threat to Israel will be greatly damaged.

Operation Pillar of Defense refuted the assessments, widely held in Israel, that President Obama would be hostile toward Israel in general, and toward Prime Minister Netanyahu in particular. In the course of the operation, the president showed broad support for Israel. Moreover, the administration became involved in intensive efforts to bring about a settlement to reduce the possibility that another military conflict between Israel and Hamas would break out in the near future. At the same time, European countries, particularly Germany, France, and Britain, expressed positions sympathetic to Israel. However, it is important to emphasize that this support was accompanied by, and to a large extent, made conditional on the demand that Israel refrain from a broad ground operation in the Gaza Strip.

We believe that this support will lead Hamas to assess that, in the future, it cannot expect that a military conflict with Israel will lead to intensive international pressure on Israel, which would negate, or significantly reduce, the operational achievements. We believe that if, in fact, Hamas accepts this assessment, this will greatly enhance Israel's deterrent image vis-à-vis the organization and will be likely to deter it from renewed escalation.

The Domestic Sphere

Lastly, the conduct of the campaign thus far indicates that there has also been a change in Israeli public opinion, the extent and depth of which it is difficult to assess. During the operation, public opinion in Israel, by a vast majority, gave Israel's leaders massive support for continuing the offensive operations against Hamas until there was a fundamental change in the situation between the two sides. Israel's citizens, and especially those who have lived for years on the firing line, openly pushed the government of Israel to work tirelessly against Hamas, even at the price of continuing the tremendous suffering inflicted on them.

In military conflicts in the past, there have been cracks in the national consensus, and on the surface, serious disagreements have occurred among the political echelon and the general public. These disputes have greatly reduced the government's freedom of action. The picture today is different, at least at the present time, which is also likely to deter Hamas from renewed military initiatives.

The Limits of Force

Following the Second Lebanon War, it was widely believed in Israel that in another military conflict between Israel and the terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, the State of Israel would have to act to achieve immediate deterrence, mainly through heavy blows to the national infrastructure, centers of government, military bases, and the like. Major Generals Amos Yadlin, Giora Eiland, and Gadi Eisenkot, and probably also other IDF generals, have given expression to the difficulty of achieving a decisive victory in a war against terrorist organizations, through an exhausting effort to hit rocket launchers, organization fighters, and the like.

The proposed course of action adheres to the IDF's moral principle throughout the years of attempting to avoid, to the extent possible, harm to innocents.[11] However, it takes into account the possibility of harming non-combatants during the operation. Nevertheless, it adheres to the assessment that only such a method of action, which has been called the "Dahiya doctrine," will ensure that the war is as short as possible and that a sense of victory is achieved.[12]

Operation Pillar of Defense proved that, even if this method of operation is acceptable to the senior echelon of the IDF, Israel has difficulties implementing it in practice. A number of factors, including international pressure, especially from the U.S. administration; the fear of international commissions of inquiry such as the Goldstone commission; the fear of internal commissions of inquiry such as the Winograd commission; and the fear of harsh reactions in the region, especially the undermining of relations with Egypt and Jordan, have neutralized the chance of putting it into practice. We believe that, under existing circumstances, Israel must recognize the limitations of its power. Bellicose statements by figures in Israel's leadership on Israel's ability and need to "eliminate the Hamas government," to

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"flatten Gaza," and the like create expectations that cannot be fulfilled in practice. In these circumstances, a credibility gap might be created, and this could also lead to the erosion of Israel's deterrent image.

Conclusions

In the weeks which preceded Operation Pillar of Defense, Hamas had carried out a provocative policy towards Israel. This was demonstrated in the launching of rockets almost on a daily basis against Israeli targets in the Negev area, the southern part of Israel. Hamas also shot IDF troops moving inside the Israeli area of the border. Israeli defense authorities have concluded that Israel's deterrent image vis-à-vis Hamas has been reduced. We have no clear explanation why Hamas has undertaken such a provocative policy, which it could have estimated might almost certainly lead to an Israeli retaliation.

Operation Pillar of Defense has certainly demonstrated Israel's growing military capabilities. We assume that this would tend to enhance Israel's deterrence against Hamas. On the other hand, the operation has also demonstrated some facets of Israel's weakness in its ability to decisively exert its military superiority. Hence, we cannot be sure that this deterrence will last for long. Various considerations might lead Hamas to renew the fighting.

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[1] Zaki Shalom, "Building Israel's Independent Deterrent Power: Continuity vs. Change," *Ma'arachot*, No. 439, October 2011 (Hebrew).

[2] Speech by Defense Minister Ehud Barak at a press conference, November 21, 2012.

[3] See for example Alexander Marquardt, 'Israel's Netanyahu Takes Heat After Obama Victory', *ABC News*, November 8, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/11/israels-netanyahu-takes-heat-after-obama-victory/>; Tovah Lazaroff, 'PM to Obama: Election win was 'vote of confidence'', *Jerusalem Post*, November 8, 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=291088>.

[4] "IAEA: Iran Completes Installation of Centrifuges at Fordo," AP/Reuters, November 16, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/1.1866574> (Hebrew).

[5] "Iran: We Supplied Hamas with Technology for Fast Manufacturing of Fajr Missiles," AP, November 21, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1870649> (Hebrew).

[6] "Defense Minister Ehud Barak: The Assassination of Ahmed Ja'abari, Pillar of Defense," http://ehudbarakhaatzmaut.blogspot.co.il/2012/11/blog-post_1478.html (Hebrew).

[7] I.D.F Chief of Staff, b. Gantz: Operation Pillar of Defense reached all goals', *Jerusalem Post*, November 23, 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=293199>

[8] Clay Dillow, How Israel's 'Iron Dome' Knocks Almost Every Incoming Missile Out Of The Sky' *Australian Popular Science*, November, 19, 2012, <http://www.popsci.com.au/technology/military/how-israel-s-iron-dome-knocks-almost-every-incoming-missile-out-of-the-sky>

[9] Sudan blames Israel for Khartoum arms factory blast, BBC NEWS, 24 October 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20050781>

[10] Even now, those close to the development of Iron Dome are saying that in the not-too-distant future, it will be

Has Operation Pillar of Defense Enhanced Israel's Deterrence?

Written by Zaki Shalom

possible to achieve neutralization of some 95 percent of the missiles launched against Israel. See Danny Gold, "We'll Reach 95 Percent Success," *Yisrael Hayom*, November 23, 2012, p. 19 (Hebrew).

[11] Gary Rosenblatt Fighting Fair: The Ethics Of Warfare, New York, The Jewish Week, 02/21/2012, http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial_opinion/gary_rosenblatt/fighting_fair_ethics_warfare. see also: Ashkenazi: IDF – Still World's Most Moral Army, *Arutz 7*, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/130574>

[12] See for example, Amos Yadlin and Asa Kasher, "A Just War of a Democratic State," *Ha'aretz*, April 24, 2009 (Hebrew). See also "The Dahiya Doctrine," Reut Institute, <http://reut-institute.org/Publication.aspx?PublicationId=3672> (Hebrew).

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