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The Futility of Operation Cast Lead

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A review of the strategic, operational, societal and diplomatic dimensions of Israel's operation against Hamas in Gaza produces an overall audit that is far from favorable. "Deterrence" is not a strategic objective and "punishment" is not a tool of *realpolitik*. Hence, it is not surprising that the operation has not produced any viable results. On the contrary, it threatens to backfire in several ways.

Now that the dust of combat has begun to settle, it is time to consider what Israel might have gained – and lost – by launching Operation Cast Lead. To that end, this paper addresses four dimensions of the Israeli action: strategic, operational, societal and diplomatic.

Strategic

In his classic work, *On War*, Clausewitz commented that:

No one starts a war – or, rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter its operational form. This is the governing principle that will set the course of the war, prescribe the scale of means and effort that is required, and make its influence felt throughout down to the smallest operational detail.

Looking back, did Operation Cast Lead meet those criteria? Were its objectives clearly defined? And were the measures taken commensurate with those ends?

The questions are worth asking because many of the answers glibly trotted out by those who consider the Operation to have been a success hardly stand up to close examination. For instance, one commonly cited justification for the operation is Israel's need to "punish" Hamas for its protracted record of indiscriminate missile attacks against civilian targets in southern Israel. "Punishment," however, only warrants depiction as policy when it is administered in accordance with a deliberately considered – and publicized – statement of intent, which announces in advance the retaliation that Israel will inflict for every rocket that Hamas fires. In the absence of any such "price list," the longer Operation Cast Lead went on the less it appeared to reflect hard-headed thinking. Rather, it gave the impression of an instinctive response, provoked by frustration at Israel's failure to find any other answer to what had by the end of 2008 become a most humiliating experience.

No wonder, then, that by the second week of Cast Lead the operation seemed to be dragging on without any apparent purpose. Ultimately, we should remember, it was the Israeli side that declared a unilateral cease fire, a step that – rightly or wrongly – gave the impression that its political and military leadership had run out of ideas as to what more could be done. After all, the Israeli offensive had not physically harmed most of the Hamas leadership; despite reducing much of the Gaza Strip to rubble, neither had it induced the local population to raise its hands in a display of abject surrender. Even rocket attacks on Israel's southern region – ostensibly the original reason for the entire venture – had not ceased. On the contrary, during the course of the fighting their arc spread to include Gedera, an area of Israel previously considered entirely immune to this sort of threat.

Senior Israeli spokesmen (a category that includes ministers, generals and a few academic analysts) sometimes seek to mask the imprecision that characterized Israel's strategic objectives in Operation Cast Lead by talking vaguely of "the restoration of deterrence." In this formulation, the Hamas missile attacks over the past seven years resulted from – and contributed towards – the erosion of the IDF's deterrence capability vis-à-vis its possible foes. That process had begun as early as the first *intifada* of 1987, and was subsequently reinforced by Israel's non-response to the Iraqi "Scud" missile attacks of 1991, by her withdrawal of the IDF from southern Lebanon in the year 2000, by the outbreak of the second *intifada* later that year, and – above all – by the IDF's poor showing in the second Lebanon War of 2006.

Given that string of humiliations, Israel certainly had a need to improve her image as a regional power to be reckoned with. But it should have been clear that she

would not be able to do so simply by declaring “the restoration of deterrence” to be a war aim. The reason is obvious: as strategic thinkers repeatedly pointed out during the Cold War (which is when most of the theoretical work on deterrence was done), the side intent on attaining deterrence is never in a position to determine whether or not that aim has been achieved. Ultimately, the decision rests with the putative deteree: Only if he acts in accordance with my wishes does he signify that my deterrence has been “successful.” But as long as he refuses to make any such move, he in fact forces me to try to “deter” him by resorting to a far greater dosage of force than was my original intention.

In other words, operations aimed at attaining deterrence in fact leave the intended target of the exercise with far more liberty than the would-be administrator of deterrence to decide whether or not the desired effect has been attained.

Genuine statesmen do not allow themselves to be caught in this situation. Instead, they formulate concrete and tangible aims (the conquest of a particular slice of territory, control over a strategically important resource, the surrender of a hostile government, or – in the present context – the repatriation of a soldier held captive by the enemy). These are the sort of objectives that, because they are immediately visible, are likely to make the most profound impact. “The restoration of deterrence,” by contrast, is far too slippery a concept to provide a policy guideline. Properly speaking, it should be considered the consequence of a successful strategy – and not a strategic aim in itself.

Israel’s failure to appreciate this rule of thumb in effect left Hamas with far more room for strategic maneuver than the movement really had a right to expect. Given the imprecision of Israel’s war aims, the Hamas leadership did not have to make any formal concession at all in order to bring about a cessation of the IDF onslaught. Hence, it could always claim that the attack had in fact failed. And provided enough Hamas leaders survived to tell that tale – which was indeed the case – their work was done.

The IDF’s Operational Performance

Much has been made of the “improvements” evident in the IDF’s performance in 2008, especially in comparison to its embarrassingly below-par showing in 2006.

Common sense warns against euphoria on this count, principally because the cards were in 2008 stacked even more heavily in the IDF’s favor than had been the case two years earlier. For one thing, in Operation Cast Lead Israel was able to choose

the moment of attack (as opposed to the Second Lebanon War, the moment of whose outbreak was dictated by the need to find an immediate response to the embarrassment caused by the ease with which a Hizballah team had managed to ambush of an IDF patrol along Israel's northern border).

Equally evident was the disparity in the terrain encountered during the two conflicts. Contrary to popular misconceptions, not all of the Gaza Strip consists of thickly-populated urban concentrations. Much of the area consists of open agricultural ground, which is where the IDF for the most part deployed. This landscape presented nothing like the topographical problems encountered in the hills and ravines of southern Lebanon in 2006. Those conditions also eased the military-logistic burdens, which from the IDF's point of view were much lighter in 2008 than they had been two years earlier. By contrast, Hamas in Gaza (unlike Hizballah in Lebanon in 2006) had almost no source of re-supply – other than the food and medicines that it seized from the humanitarian convoys that Israel allowed to enter the Gaza Strip during the course of the fighting.

But most striking of all was the disparity in forces. Israel's air force, which carried by far the majority of the operational burden in Operation Cast Lead, was able to fly with absolute impunity. Israel's naval vessels, which were also used as platforms for bombardment, were equally immune to any reprisal, and ran none of the risks that in 2006 very nearly brought about the sinking of a Saar destroyer, which was unexpectedly hit by a Hizballah ground-to-sea missile.

Ultimately, then, the only danger to Israeli troops lay in the urban jungle of Gaza City and the surrounding neighborhoods. But although here too the IDF enjoyed an overwhelming advantage in terms of both numbers and firepower, it clearly hesitated to penetrate those areas. Even after subjecting Hamas to an entire week of heavy aerial bombardment, IDF commanders seem to have remained wary of direct confrontations and hence to have advanced into the Strip at a snail's pace, and to have left large proportions of the region (including areas containing entrances to supply tunnels) entirely unoccupied. Even then, the operation was not an unqualified success. Ten IDF soldiers lost their lives – four as a result of fire inadvertently directed at them by their own comrades.

Given these results, there are few grounds for the claim that Operation Cast Lead has restored to the IDF some of the glory of its golden era. If anything, quite the opposite might be the case. For over two decades now, Professor Martin Van Creveld, who is probably the most respected military analyst that Israel has ever

produced, has been warning the IDF that engagements with an obviously inferior enemy can only blunt its skills.

Certainly, the results of such lop-sided encounters allow no predictions whatsoever as to what the outcome might be should Israel ever have to fight a serious war against foes capable of deploying large quantities of air, sea and armored force of their own. Particularly premature, and dangerous, are self-congratulatory pronouncements to the effect that the current Chief of Staff, General Gabi Ashkenazi, has wiped away all of the cobwebs that accumulated during the stewardship of his immediate predecessors. Military organizations are far too cumbersome to be thus easily reformed, and it will take years yet before the IDF manages to close the gaps revealed in 2006 with respect to the preparedness of the troops and the adequacy of their supplies.

Societal

Here, too, first impressions might have been misleading.

Certainly, the initial displays of public support for the operation showed that the Israeli public was on this occasion, especially, prepared to rally around the flag in support of what was widely considered a “war of no choice.”

Responses to summonses to reserve duty were overwhelming; instances of conscientious objection to service so few as to be statistically insignificant; and altogether public opinion was overwhelmingly favorable. Clever handling by the IDF undoubtedly accounts for part of this success; the IDF’s Spokesman’s Unit, especially, performed on this occasion much more professionally than had been the case in 2006. Luck also played a role: apart from the “friendly fire” incidents already referred to, the IDF was in Operation Cast Lead mercifully spared many of the accidents and misadventures that had sullied its record two years earlier.

But the principal cause seems to have been the most obvious. By and large the public genuinely believed that the IDF was capable of getting the job done, and that under the down-to-earth leadership of Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi was capable of doing so.

The performance of the Rear Command, although not always perfect, certainly helped to strengthen that impression. True, here too comparisons with 2006 are potentially misleading. After all, in 2008 Hamas fired far fewer missiles at southern Israel than were directed against the Galilee by Hizballah during the 34 days of the

2006 conflict. Even so, the Rear Command deserves credit in Operation Cast Lead for providing the civilian population with warning, instruction and some assistance on a scale far more satisfactory than had been the case two years earlier.

That said, the end of the operation left a somewhat bitter taste, principally because it seemed to be so indecisive. There was no dramatic *finale*, such as the hoisting of an Israeli flag over a Hamas headquarters, or the surrender of a large number of Hamas leaders, or – all the more disappointingly – the release of Gilad Shalit. Neither did the operation end with the arrival – nor even the promised arrival – of an international peacekeeping force, as had been the case in 2006. Instead, all Israel got out of a series of protracted negotiations carried out in Cairo – ostensibly with Egypt, but to all intents and purposes with Hamas itself – was an agreement to consider the extension of a truce.

Under those circumstances, it is hardly surprising that within a few weeks after the formal cessation of Cast Lead (by which time, of course, Israeli townships in the south had been subjected to yet further bombardments directed from the Gaza Strip) the tone of public comment began to change. Some analysts now asked whether, once it had been unleashed, the IDF should not have been allowed to “finish the job” (presumably, by reducing even more of the area to rubble). Others, by contrast, wondered aloud whether the paucity of the results achieved by Israel did in fact justify either the amount of bloodshed that she had caused or the images of Gaza’s destruction that had been beamed around the world. After all, they argued, punishment on such a scale of severity – even when warranted by seven prior years of attacks on Israeli civilians – hardly reflects honor on its administrators.

And lurking behind both sides to this debate was the suspicion, all the more powerful for being so opaque, that the timing of both Cast Lead’s initiation and cessation owed less to strategic calculations than to electoral considerations and the tense triangular relationship between Olmert, Barak and Livni – with Netanyahu and Lieberman lurking in the wings. This is a particularly insidious danger. Should evidence indeed come to light that party political interests intruded upon military decision-making at any stage, the bonds that have traditionally bound Israelis to their armed forces could begin to unravel at an alarming pace.

Diplomatic

Much of the freedom of action enjoyed by the IDF during Operation Cast Lead stemmed from the fact that it was launched during the dying days of the Bush administration. In this respect, Israel seems to have learned much from the 1956 Sinai Campaign, which had aroused American ire – amongst other reasons because it commenced just as the United States was going to the polls. On this occasion, the presidential die had been cast. Mr. George Bush was clearly a lame duck and incapable of doing much to stop the Israeli action, even had he wanted to do so. On the other hand, Mr. Barack Obama was not yet in office, and hence constitutionally incapable of playing any role whatsoever.

In retrospect, however, in this respect the Israelis seem to have been too clever for their own good. Was it really such a bright idea to generate a situation in which the need to stabilize the situation in Gaza would be at the very top of the pile of files heaped upon Mr. Obama's "in" tray as soon as he entered the White House? Even with the best will in the world, there is no way that either Secretary of State Hillary Clinton or Senator George Mitchell will be able to avoid clashing with their Israeli interlocutors over several points in whatever program for Gaza they manage to come up with. Friction and disagreement, even when communicated against a background of long-standing cooperation, are surely not the best ways to start a relationship. One can think of at least half a dozen other topics with which Israel would do better to open the dialogue with the new administration – Iran being one, Syria another and the world economic crisis and its effect on the continuation of US aid to Israel being a close third.

Always a priority, the need to court the Americans has become even stronger in the wake of Operation Cast Lead, principally because of the diplomatic fall-out provoked by the operation. Here too Israel would do well to more soberly reconsider some of the generally optimistic assessments that were initially bandied around. True, an impressive bevy of European leaders graced Mr. Olmert's dinner table as soon as Operation Cast Lead had been shut down, and most refused to bow to the wave of anti-Israel protests that had swept much of the continent during its course. True, too, not one Muslim state broke off diplomatic relations with Israel while the operation was in progress, or in its immediate aftermath. On the contrary (and as noted above) Egypt – which had for long resisted Israeli appeals to play a more active role in the Gaza area – cooperated closely with Israeli representatives in the negotiations that resulted in a cease fire.

Nevertheless, Israel's diplomatic horizon is not entirely cloudless. Without doubt, the images that will be the Operation's most lasting testimony – to Israel's friends and foes alike – will be those of destruction. Admittedly, Palestinian reports may

have exaggerated the numbers of children killed and homes destroyed as a result of the Israeli bombardments (as they did so blatantly with respect to Jenin in 2002, for instance). Moreover, Israel can – and does – claim that much of the responsibility for the deaths and damage rests with the Hamas leadership, which deliberately and illegally used civilians as human shields and placed rocket launchers in or alongside civilian facilities. Even so, the pictures and reports that came out of the Gaza Strip following the Israeli assault were shocking.

The harm thus caused to the image of Israel as an essentially humane and rational society should not be underestimated. The backlash visible in European cities will not soon evaporate. On the contrary, feeding on other sources of discontent in migrant communities, it is likely to intensify and spread. Already, local Jewish communities in several parts of the continent have been made to feel more insecure than at any time since the 1930s.

Moreover, the notion that several Middle Eastern governments, including those of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, were somehow pleased that the IDF was giving the Hamas a good hitting, and hence tacitly supported Israel's action, must surely be considered fanciful. Certainly, Israel would be well-advised not to rely on the persistence of those sentiments – if they at all exist.

There is not a single regime anywhere in the Muslim world that can today remain impervious to the sight of Arab fatalities, whose deaths have been caused by an army consisting for the most part of Jews. Even those governments who have no particular love for the Palestinians, and even less for Hamas (and there are many) cannot be expected to turn their backs very easily on centuries of ingrained prejudices. Only by substituting wishful thinking for strategic realism is it possible to imagine that Israel will endear herself to her possible Arab partners by killing and maiming hundreds of their co-religionists and wreaking havoc on their homes, schools and mosques.

Turkish reactions to Operation Cast Lead in many respects epitomize this situation. Virtually overnight, a country that many Israelis considered to be a vital strategic partner has publicly shown that she is prepared to play the role of a major critic of Israeli policy. This does not of course mean that Turkey aligns herself on the side of Israel's foes – at least, not yet. But it does raise once again the sort of questions with respect to Turkey's reliability that have always been in the air, and that became especially pronounced when she refused to allow US forces to make use of military bases on her territory during their 2003 attack on Iraq.

Given the delicacy of the Israeli-Turkish relationship, which is itself of course exacerbated by the complexion of the Turkish government, there are grounds for wondering whether the diplomatic costs to Israel of Operation Cast Lead might also not have outweighed its possible benefits.

Conclusion

But perhaps the most telling criticism of Operation Cast Lead is also the most straightforward. Bluntly put, it contradicted *realpolitik*. After all, in the last analysis Israel has no choice but to try and reach some form of accommodation with the Palestinians. Only thus can she hope to halt the bloodshed on and by both sides.

The way in which Operation Cast Lead was carried out can hardly be said to have improved the chances of turning over a new leaf. On the contrary, precisely because of its scale, the action has probably delayed the possibility of breaking the vicious cycle. Inhabitants of Gaza who survived a fortnight of heavy bombardment against which they had no possible defense will not soon forget or forgive that experience. If past history is anything to go by, their determination to seek revenge by resorting to violence will grow exponentially. It would not be surprising if those sentiments were shared by large numbers of their fellow Palestinians – on both sides of the Green Line.

Amazingly, there is a school of thought in Israel that even now advocates turning the screws around Gaza even tighter. Arguing that any act of magnanimity on Israel's part will be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness, it hence proposes severely curtailing the flow of humanitarian supplies to the region and is opposed to the reconstruction of the worn-torn shanty towns that are prominent features of Gaza's urban landscape. Ultimately, this school of thought argues, the Israel-Palestinian conflict is about pain – its infliction and the willingness to withstand its effects. Israel's survival depends on not flinching from this contest.

Of the many fallacies in that argument, two are particularly relevant in the present context. First, the strategy it advocates rarely succeeds. In very few cases indeed have "hearts and minds" been won over by coercion. ("Burning their consciousness" was the unfortunate phrase coined by Moshe "Boogie" Ya'alon during his unhappy and unsuccessful tenure as IDF Chief of Staff).

Second, and more important, even when apparently successful, the infliction of pain has a tendency ultimately to backfire. No society can remain untainted by the application of force for its own sake. Sooner or later, the misuse of power

inevitably contaminates those who apply it, thereby undermining the legitimacy and moral fiber of the entire national enterprise.

The sad truth about Operation Cast Lead is that it shows how near Israel might be to unwittingly falling into this condition. From that perspective, the venture deserves to be considered not merely futile but foolish too.

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