

The Eight-Day War

Written by Glen Segell

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GLEN SEGELL, JAN 14 2013

Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense was waged against Hamas from 14-21 November 2012. After eight days of battle, both sides claimed victory. However there was no territorial or any other tangible physical gains for either side. Neither side denies that although the battle is over, the war between them continues. What are the consequences tactically and strategically? And does this have an effect on the biggest military threat facing Israel – Iran's quest for nuclear capability ?

Escalation to Battle

There was a steady escalation in the month prior to the conflict, including 92 separate attacks in October 2012, of which 80 rockets were fired on 24 October 2012, after the alleged Israeli destruction of a rocket factory in Sudan. On 2 November a road-side bomb exploded, injuring Israeli soldiers. On 8 November a further four Israeli soldiers were wounded, and on 10 November an anti-tank missile struck an IDF Jeep on patrol wounding four soldiers, one of whom lost an arm.

In response to growing public anger, and against the background of a general election called for on 22 January 2013, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak said that "Israel's reaction will come at the appropriate time."^[i] The response came shortly after the statement, with the assassination of Ahmed Jabari, a leading figure in Hamas's military operations. Hamas supporters shouted from the roof tops that the assassination had "opened the gates of hell" and intensified their rocket attacks on Israeli cities and towns.

Coincidentally, the operation started just after the conclusion of a joint Israel-US military exercise to test anti-missile defenses.^[ii] Israeli units had just practiced what they were about to enact. The exercise had been planned for earlier in the year in the Spring months of April-May, however it was postponed. Rumors circulated widely that the exercise would be the forward deployment of American forces partly for a strike on Iran and partly to defend Israel against an Iranian response.^[iii] The postponement was linked to the American elections where the incumbent President Obama had reputedly asked the Israeli Prime Minister to delay any military action against Iran until after the elections.^[iv]

Indeed at the onset of the Eight-Day War against Hamas in November, shortly after the American elections, it was speculated that this was the first step of an attack against Iran. One possible scenario of an attack on Iran's nuclear capabilities was the expectation of a rocket and missile response from Hamas in Gaza, coordinated and linked to their Iranian sponsors. Operation Pillar of Defense was seen as a preemptive strike against Hamas's rocket capability, paving the way for a strike on Iran.^[v] Although Israel did not strike Iranian nuclear facilities, the destruction of Hamas's capabilities will make it easier for Israel decision makers both in military planning as well as selling the idea to the Israeli public. For the former Israel has already neutralized the potential of a multi-front battle. For the later the Israeli public see that the worst is over on the Home Front and now the Deep Front has also to be successfully resolved – Iran's bellicose statements.

Although this may have been a catalyst, there was also another apparent catalyst on the other side. The Emir of Qatar was the first foreign leader to visit Gaza, a few days before the onset of the battle. He entered Gaza through the crossing with Egypt and offered financial and moral support for the struggle against Israel which sparked youth bravado.^[vi] As the saying goes "there is no such thing as a free lunch" and the youth in Gaza were quick to parade

The Eight-Day War

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their gratitude in the streets to justify the recognition and handout. Needless to say it was the perception and misperception of each side of the other side which probably was the true escalatory factor.

The Battle and the Casualties

Israel's Operation in strategic military terms was small; it was a tactical Operation against Hamas' capabilities. The IDF targeted more than 1,500 military sites in the Gaza Strip. In total over 1,456 Iranian Fajr-5, Russian Grad rockets, Qassams and mortars were fired into Israeli population centers. Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system intercepted about 409 rockets, though 58 rockets hit urban areas in Israel while others fell short in Gaza. The Gush Dan region of Tel Aviv was hit for the first time since the 1991 Gulf War, and rockets were aimed at Jerusalem falling short in the Gush Etzion area. [vii]

Rocket attacks killed five Israeli civilians – three of them in a direct hit on a home in Kiryat Malachi and two Israeli soldiers. By the termination of hostilities over 252 Israelis had been physically injured in rocket attacks.[viii] The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights announced that 158 Palestinians had been killed: 102 civilians, 55 militants and one policeman. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that 1,202 Palestinians had been physically wounded.[ix] In addition a bomb attack against a Tel Aviv bus wounded 21 civilians, receiving the “blessing of Hamas” on its Al Aqusa Television Station.[x]

The Ceasefire

While the battle raged, intense diplomacy was also waged for a ceasefire. Israel classifies Hamas as a terrorist organization and Hamas refuses Israel's right to exist, negating direct negotiations and leaving the role to intermediaries.[xi] Mohamed Kamel Amr, the Egyptian Foreign Minister, and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the ceasefire that would take effect on 21 November 2012 at 21:00 local time.

In claiming victory, Israel said that it had achieved its aim of crippling Hamas's rocket-launching ability.[xii] So was this a victory for Israel? Hamas can easily re-arm with more rockets if Egypt does not prevent their passage through the Sinai Peninsula. The Iron Dome missile defense system is excellent but at \$60,000 per missile it is costly against a \$500 donated rocket. Will Israel need to wage a similar operation every two or three years? Will Hamas find other ways to wage terror now that the rockets have been shown to have little effect?

The Consequences

In the short term, Israel faces a challenge of arms control and disarmament and negotiations with Egypt to prevent the passage of rockets into Gaza from Sinai. In the medium term, Israel faces Hamas a terrorist organization not willing to recognize Israel's right to exist as the Jewish national homeland. In the long term, no-one is willing to solve the ticking demographic bomb of 1.5 million Gazans on a 300 km² piece of desert unable to sustain such a population.

However the path is now open for a strike on Iran's nuclear ambitions. The question on the mind of Israel's populations is whether Prime Minister Netanyahu will strike before the general elections on 22 January 2013 as a consequence of two options. Either to boost his popularity for reelection or if the polls show him to be losing to gain a lasting place in history as a guarantor of Israel's survival.

Hamas has little if any rockets left and the Israeli Defense Force is confident that the Iron Dome will be able to defend Israel's population from both Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon if Israel were to strike Iran before Hamas rearmament.

Israel commentators also stress the technological edge in the longer term. The Iron Dome is a short range rocket defense system. In addition Israel also has the Magic Wand medium range rocket and missile defense system and the American made Patriot and locally designed Arrow long range missile defense systems.[xiii] This is expected to deter Iran in contemplating an offensive strike or a retaliatory strike on Israel. It is also hoped to dissuade Iran about

The Eight-Day War

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military nuclear capability negating the need for a preemptive Israeli strike.

Without regard to such thinking on military operations they cannot resolve the underlying conflicts of which they are a manifestation. The one issue that prevents an end to the Israel-Palestine issue is the willingness of leaders on all sides to take the risk and the chance of compromise to get something which is better than nothing.

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[i] Segal, Udi (15 November 2012). "Under the surface: The Israeli deception that preceeded the operation in the Gaza Strip" (in Hebrew). Channel 2 News. IL. <http://www.mako.co.il/news-military/security/Article-812624f87c00b31004.htm>.

[ii] Israel and the United States to hold joint exercise, Arutz 10 News, 17 October 2012.

[iii] Israel TV Channel Ten, News 31 May 2012, 22:00

[iv] Israel Gala Tsahal (Armed Forces Radio in Hebrew) discussion 4 June 2012, 17:00-18:00

[v] Israel Gala Tsahal (Armed Forces Radio in Hebrew) discussion 15 November 2012, 17:00-18:00

[vi] The Emir of Qatar is the first Foreign Leader to visit the Gaza Strip, Galei Tsahal radio 12:00, 10 November 2012.

[vii] "Operation Pillar of Defense: Summary of Events". IDF. 22 November 2012.

<http://www.idfblog.com/2012/11/22/operation-pillar-of-defense-summary-of-events/>.

[viii] "Operation Pillar of Defense: Summary of Events". IDF. 22 November 2012.

<http://www.idfblog.com/2012/11/22/operation-pillar-of-defense-summary-of-events/>.

[ix]
http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_escalation_in_hostilities_gaza_southern_israel_20121121.pdf

[x] "Israel-Gaza crisis: 'Bomb blast' on bus in Tel Aviv". BBC. 21 November 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20425352>.

"Israel and Hamas, the diplomatic dance behind the deal". CBC News. 22 November 2012.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2012/11/21/f-israel-gaza-diplomacy.html>.

[xii] Israel dealt Hamas 'a heavy blow' and is prepared to resume offensive if need be, Netanyahu says, Times of Israel 22 November 2012.

[xiii] Israel Gala Tsahal (Armed Forces Radio in Hebrew) discussion 28 November 2012, 17:00-18:00.

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