



REFLECTIONS ON THE WAR ON GAZA

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This essay looks at the Gaza war of winter 2008–2009 within its broader politico-military context. At the political level, Israel's post-2005 disengagement policies and initiatives with regard to Gaza (and Egypt) and their implications relative to the future of the West Bank are emphasized. Militarily, in examining the background and objectives of the war, the author gives particular importance to the testing of lessons drawn from the past, especially the summer 2006 war on Lebanon, in the aim of regaining a kind of “Dabiya” deterrence based on reprisals against civilians rather than on battlefield victory.

THE MASSIVE DESTRUCTION AND SUFFERING wreaked upon the Gaza Strip from late December 2008 to mid-January 2009 was not the result of an earthquake, the breaking of a dam, or a sudden flood. The causes were bullets, bombs, and rockets launched by soldiers in uniform. How did we get to this point, and what is the political and strategic significance of this humanitarian tragedy, created by war but also long nurtured by an increasingly draconian blockade?

To uncover the roots of the current situation, it is necessary to go back to the days following the Oslo accords. While explicitly recognizing the territorial unity of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and providing for a “safe passage” between them, the accords were in fact the starting point of an Israeli policy aimed at isolating Gaza from both Israel and the West Bank. The policy involved establishing a security belt around the Strip and preventing travel into and out of the territory, except for persons to whom the military authorities granted permits, the validity of which could depend on age, gender, family situation, profession, or function. Needless to say, the second intifada provided a pretext to consolidate and tighten these restrictions on movement and reduce the number of permits issued.

Nonetheless, it was not until the summer of 2005, when Israel pulled its military forces out of the Strip and dismantled the Gaza settlements under its unilateral disengagement plan, that a significant threshold was crossed. At first glance, the two measures did not seem likely to exacerbate the Strip's isolation

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or its separation from the West Bank. In fact, however, the troop redeployment and the settlement dismantlement appear to have been intended from the outset precisely to create additional conditions apt to facilitate Gaza's removal from what Israelis call the "envelope"—the line, controlled by the Israeli military, border police, and customs officials, that since 1967 has surrounded the entire Israel-West Bank-Gaza geographic entity. Success in removing Gaza from the envelope—an Israeli objective at least since unilateral disengagement was first envisaged—would convert the line separating Gaza from Israel into an international border and thus reduce the Palestinian-Israeli demographic imbalance by a million and a half Gazans, while simultaneously facilitating the further settlement of the West Bank and rendering impossible the creation of a Palestinian state. In addition, such a success would make Gaza an "Egyptian problem" instead of an Israeli one. It is interesting to note that the Oslo accords concluded by Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in the 1990s, including the Protocol on Economic Relations (Paris Protocol), confirmed the envelope concept by formally acknowledging Israeli control over external security, as well as over the movement of people and goods across both the Egypt-Gaza and the Jordan-West Bank borders.

To move forward on this strategy—which I will call the Gaza-Egypt strategy—Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon decided that the tightened military belt that was to surround Gaza in the post-disengagement period (via land, sea, and air) would have to allow one notable exception, along the southern border with Egypt. Instead of reinforcing the security measures in place to prevent the arms smuggling across the Philadelphi corridor that had increased steadily since the al-Aqsa intifada, Sharon ordered a sudden and total evacuation of the corridor. In his eyes, the security risk to Israel brought about by the anticipated intensification of smuggling was a reasonable price to pay for his politico-strategic goal: inducing the Gazans to stop looking to the West Bank (which had already been out of bounds for the overwhelming majority of the population for at least a decade), and to look instead to Egypt.

To succeed, Sharon's Gaza-Egypt strategy needed Egypt's approval and/or the Palestinian Authority's (PA) acquiescence—the latter based on the rationale that Palestinian independence could be attained in stages: Gaza today, the West Bank tomorrow. Weeks after the Israeli redeployment (including the evacuation of the Philadelphi corridor), negotiations between Israel and the PA on the conditions to govern the passage of people and goods at the Egyptian-Gaza border's Rafah crossing began under the aegis of Quartet special envoy James Wolfensohn, later joined by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Given that the border was now devoid of any Israeli military presence, the Palestinians initially argued for exclusive PA control over the passage of people and goods on their side of the crossing. They quickly understood, however, that this would play into Sharon's hands by allowing the Israelis to claim that exclusive Palestinian control at Rafah would have the legal effect of relieving Israel of its international responsibility for the Strip (since foreigners, non-Gazan Palestinians, and goods could enter Gaza without Israel's consent, thus

superseding the Oslo agreements, including the Paris Protocol) and even of depriving Israel of its very sovereignty at the border with Gaza (since a West Bank Palestinian could for instance enter Gaza through Erez with an Israeli permit and then cross to Egypt without Israel's knowledge). For Israel, the logical sine qua non of exclusive PA control of the Rafah crossing would be the latter's acknowledgment that the line separating the Gaza Strip from Israel would henceforth become an international border.

Realizing that such a move would undermine the common status and consequently the common destiny of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, President Mahmud Abbas did not insist on exclusive Palestinian control of the Rafah crossing. Instead, within the framework of the agreement on the crossing brokered by Rice and Wolfensohn that was finally reached in November 2005, Abbas accepted terms that legally maintained the crossing in Israel's hands: Israeli scrutiny by remote control of Gazan travel documents; the presence alongside Palestinian police of European monitors (acting as Israeli proxies) to check luggage and prevent the uncontrolled passage of non-Gazans; and a prohibition on passage through the crossing of Egyptian goods, the latter to be shipped across the Israeli Kerem Shalom terminal instead. Thus, the Erez crossing was saved from officially becoming an international border, even if, de facto, Israel had been treating it as such for several years (for instance, by stamping the passports of foreigners passing through Erez into Gaza with exit stamps and with entry stamps when they return). From a legal standpoint, Erez continued to be governed by the same (arbitrary) rules of military occupation that govern the crossings between the West Bank and Israel, while the Rafah terminal maintained the same legal status as the one at the Allenby Bridge.

With the Gaza-Egypt strategy thus thwarted, Tel Aviv had to find another approach, this time "mechanical": the establishment of a blockade that could be tightened on any pretext to increase the pressure on Gaza. It is important to emphasize that Israel did not wait either for Hamas's victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections or for its takeover of Gaza's government buildings and security services seventeen months later to begin this pressure. It must be recognized, however, that the intra-Palestinian division between Hamas and Fatah—between one government in Gaza and another in Ramallah—greatly facilitated Israel's task of separating the two territories and reinforcing the perception that they constituted two distinct entities on separate paths.

In January 2008, Israeli pressure had become such that the Gaza-Egypt strategy almost succeeded: guided by Hamas, which rather surprisingly breached the barriers separating Gaza from Egypt in the name of Palestinian-Egyptian brotherhood, frustrated Gazans poured en masse into the Sinai to stock up on all kinds of goods and produce no longer to be found in the Strip. Readers of the Israeli press at the time could not have failed to notice the satisfaction

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expressed by Israeli analysts at this development. Egypt, misunderstood both by Arab and Palestinian public opinion, had to use all means at its disposal, including force, to regain control of its side of the border and frustrate Israel's aims. The lesson to be drawn from this episode is that neither Israel's blockade of Gaza nor its unilateral measures have been able to transform Erez into an international crossing, and that if anything is to succeed in making it so, it will be the way the PA and Egypt react to the blockade.

In the meantime, the border separating the Gaza Strip from Israel had become a veritable military front from the moment unilateral disengagement was first announced: Hamas rockets, Israeli retaliation (more or less limited, but always bloody), truces, and violations thereof. What is generally referred to as asymmetric warfare in this case constituted on one side primitive rockets, but also an ideology of resistance, and on the other side a preponderant military capacity, but also a powerlessness to prevent the primitive rockets from being launched. This polarization on the Gaza front was taking place within a broader context: the undermining of Israel's deterrence during the war on Lebanon (July–August 2006); the findings of Israel's Winograd Commission on responsibilities for the shortcomings and errors in the conduct of that war; and the Israeli military's efforts to draw lessons from the war. Without going into the internal and international circumstances that facilitated the launch of hostilities in December 2008, it can be said that Israel chose the Gaza Strip as a war theater to achieve three objectives: to apply the operational lessons of the Lebanon war; to rebuild Israeli deterrence at the regional level; and to score as many points as possible in Gaza. Unfortunately for the Strip's civilian population, these three objectives—at least two of which had nothing to do with the Gazans themselves—made it inevitable that they would become the war's direct target.

To achieve the first objective—applying the operational lessons drawn from the unhappy experience of the land incursion into southern Lebanon in 2006—the Israeli army had to prove that it could advance on the ground with only negligible casualties in its own ranks. This in turn required that the ground troops be given an inordinate degree of protection: intensive aerial and ground bombardment aimed at methodically destroying any obstacle (trees, buildings, houses, including persons seeking refuge therein) prior to the smallest infantry advance, itself already covered by accompanying tanks. The underlying premise of such tactics was that any physical destruction or loss of Palestinian civilian life necessary to avoid endangering the lives of Israeli soldiers in battle was justified.

Although such conduct in itself already constituted an unjustifiable violation of the principle of proportionality, the implications of the second objective were far more alarming. Among the lessons it drew from the military occupation of Arab land (including the West Bank, Gaza, and southern Lebanon), and the 2006 war on Lebanon, the Israeli political-military leadership had to consider new challenges inherent in any future regional conflagration: the possibility that aerial bombardment of strategic and military sites would no longer

suffice to win; the extreme difficulty of holding onto and absorbing conquered territories; and the fact that the enemies to be confronted were more likely to be nonstate actors almost impossible to dissuade or defeat through direct strikes. From these potential challenges emerged what the Israeli military named in the wake of its second Lebanon war the “Dahiya doctrine” in reference to its systematic destruction of Dahiya, the Shi‘a suburbs of south Beirut in the summer of 2006. The Dahiya model was based on the notion that the necessary restoration of deterrence could be achieved by means other than a decisive battlefield victory on the 1967 model, notably by demonstrating that Israel in the future would not hesitate to target hundreds or even thousands of civilians *as civilians*. Israel’s targeting of Gaza civilians and civilian infrastructure was precisely such a demonstration addressed to other regional actors, whether states or nonstate organizations.

Finally, the formidable destructive and bloody pressure exerted on the Palestinians had a third objective focused on the situation in Gaza itself. But here, in contrast to the first two objectives, the nature and extent of the aims were left to the circumstances and the evolution of the campaign (on the battlefield, in the Palestinian home front, on the Egyptian-Gaza border, and in the international arena). What the Israeli decision makers hoped was to be in a better position at the end of the war than at its start: either through the military collapse of Hamas or at least its weakening from a political standpoint in the eyes of the population, or through the success of the Gaza-Egypt strategy as outlined above.

In concluding these few reflections on the war on Gaza, I cannot but note the failure—or at least the inconclusiveness—of Israel’s three objectives. First, the Israeli army did not prove that it would be capable of waging a successful future land war without casualties in its ranks against an enemy better armed than Hamas. Second, deterrence, unless nuclear and linked to the very survival of the nation, cannot be counted on to succeed if it is limited to threatening civilians with annihilation. The purposeful targeting of civilians depends very much on the degree of permissiveness of the international community when such targeting occurs, and thus cannot be the basis of a military strategy. Third, Israeli pressure did not compel Gaza’s civilian population, Hamas’s leadership, or Egypt to choose between two alternatives for Gaza: a humanitarian catastrophe or a return to the Egyptian fold. In other words, the Gaza war was a tremendous waste: a war for nothing, civilian victims for nothing, but a deliberate violation of the laws of war.