

What Israel Won in Gaza & What Diplomacy Must Now Gain

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - September 16, 2014

TEL AVIV -- For the time being, people are going about their business. Hamas is not raining rockets down on residents here, daily ear-piercing air-raid warning sirens are not sending everyone running for cover, and the city has returned to its bustling self. The Egyptian-brokered cease-fire between Israel and Hamas implemented on Aug. 26 is holding. Whether the cessation of hostilities will survive the discussion of longer term issues expected to take place in Cairo in the coming month, the argument over Israel's 50-day Operation Protective Edge will continue.

Some here say Israel lost the war. Some say Israel won. Nobody is satisfied with the outcome.

The ambiguous results testify to the elusiveness of a conclusive resolution—particularly in the near term—to the conflict with the Palestinians.

Immediately after the cease-fire went into effect, Hamas proclaimed victory. According to a Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research [poll](#) conducted on the West Bank and Gaza during the last week in August, Hamas enjoyed a surge of popularity with 79 percent of Palestinians affirming that Hamas won the war.

One wonders how deep those feelings run, and how long they will last. For one thing, the war represented a staggeringly tangible setback for Gaza. And the people who live there know it. As Deputy Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau Mousa Abu Marzook declared last week, "If the situation remains as it is with current circumstances persisting, and I say this openly, Hamas will be compelled to turn to this path [the conduct of negotiations with Israel] because this is the people's demand throughout the Gaza Strip."

The train of events that culminated in the war was set in motion in mid-June when Hamas members kidnapped three Israeli teenagers on the West Bank and murdered them. Israel responded by arresting hundreds of West Bank Palestinians, many of them former prisoners. In early July, after the funerals of the teens, three Jewish Israelis perpetrated a revenge killing of a 16-year-old Palestinian boy in East Jerusalem -- a vicious act that was promptly investigated by the Israeli police and for which the three Jewish Israelis were quickly indicted. Subsequently, Hamas in Gaza provoked Israel's Operation Protective Edge by launching rocket bombardments, and undertaking attacks by sea and through its extensive network of terror tunnels, on Israeli civilians.

Hamas's war plan revolved around multiple, flagrant war crimes: operation from within densely populated urban areas; spurning uniforms; using Palestinian noncombatants as human shields; and targeting Israeli civilians and civilian infrastructure.

The war proved exceedingly costly for Hamas and their Gaza brethren. In its efforts to bring the rocket attacks on Israeli citizens to an end and destroy the tunnels designed to inflict mass atrocities, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) struck more than 5,000 Hamas targets. The IDF eliminated a significant proportion of Hamas's store of rockets and rocket launchers, smashed numerous weapons production facilities, and demolished 32 of Hamas's terror tunnels. It also killed some 1,000 fighters, including several of Hamas's senior commanders. Despite the IDF's efforts to avoid civilian casualties, and as a direct result of Hamas's decision to militarize civilian areas, more than a thousand Palestinian noncombatants were killed, thousands more were wounded, and hundreds of thousands were left homeless.

Hamas ultimately accepted the same cease-fire terms it rejected after the first week of fighting. Having persistently demanded the opening in Gaza of an airport and seaport, free passage over land in and out of Gaza, the lifting of Israel's naval blockade, and release of prisoners, Hamas settled for small changes to the status quo: increase in the humanitarian aid that had actually flowed continuously during the fighting, and a three kilometer extension of fishing waters.

After the cease-fire went into effect, jihadists danced in Gaza's rubble-strewn streets in celebration of their military prowess. They resembled "Baghdad Bob," Saddam Hussein's risible spokesman who day after day in the spring of 2003 brazenly boasted to reporters of Iraq's annihilation of American forces even as U.S. airstrikes were shaking Baghdad and U.S. troops were advancing on Iraq's capital.

In contrast to Hamas's incongruous jubilation, the Israeli public was divided; and even those who touted Israel's achievements did so in subdued tones. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was attacked from both flanks. On the right, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Economics Minister Naftali Bennett criticized him for not carrying out a full-scale ground invasion of Gaza that would have wiped out Hamas. Strangely enough, prominent voices on the left condemned Netanyahu for similar reasons.

Netanyahu and Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon emphasized the accomplishment of the operation's declared objectives: substantially degrading Hamas's capacity to launch rocket attacks on Israel and destroying much of Hamas's elaborate tunnel network. They also stressed the remarkable success of Iron Dome, a crucial component of Israel's air-defense system, in knocking down incoming rockets.

This did little to assuage Israelis' desire for more definitive military success, a yearning expressed by those across the political spectrum. As a thoughtful reserve air force pilot, himself devoted to a political solution to the conflict with the Palestinians, wrote to me

during the fighting, "In contrast to previous operations in Gaza, the people this time want an unequivocal and long term solution, and are willing to pay the price of longer fighting."

But there is a gap between what the people wanted and what the people were willing to ask the IDF to do.

It is doubtful that a majority of Israelis are really prepared to pay the price necessary to crush Hamas. Israel faced a force of perhaps 20,000 fighters; they were deeply ensconced in Gaza City and their headquarters was strategically positioned under Al-Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest medical center. Delivery of a fatal blow would have produced a degree of carnage among Palestinian civilians that would have greatly intensified the vehement international condemnation of Israel. It would have also heightened the anguished internal Israeli debate.

Furthermore, to ferret out Hamas fighters operating from Gazan homes, schools, mosques and other civilian buildings, Israel would have had to incur substantially more deaths among its citizen army. Each of the 73 soldiers who fell in Operation Protective Edge was mourned on the front pages of Israel's newspapers and featured on the evening news. Each casualty constituted another heartbreaking loss in a small country where almost every family has a son or daughter, husband or wife, or father or mother wearing the uniform.

Post-cease-fire opinion polls captured Israel's ambivalence. While a majority applauded the job done by the IDF, a majority also thought the war had no winner, and the seven weeks of fighting saw a substantial drop in Netanyahu's popularity. These findings make perfect sense: Israelis were dejected that the mission's success brought not peace but only another temporary lull before the next round of fighting.

The 2014 Gaza conflict shook Israelis as recent Gaza conflicts -- Operation Cast Lead in 2008, and Operation Pillar of Smoke in 2012 -- have not. This time Israelis have been compelled to confront more squarely Hamas's implacable aim, which, as Israeli journalist Khaled Abu Toameh put it recently, is to "liberate Jerusalem and all Palestine." Hamas has "never recognized Israel's right to exist" and it rejects "any attempt to make peace with the 'Zionist entity.'"

If those are the stakes, only a decisive victory over Hamas can lay the foundation for a lasting peace. But such a victory over Hamas demands a price that Israel's humanitarian conscience prevents it from paying. The elusiveness of the most desirable outcome, however, is no reason not to identify the least bad political options and pursue them vigorously.

Looking ahead to the Cairo talks, Netanyahu should, for example, be stating boldly every day what he said quickly and decorously in August: Israel will enthusiastically contribute to the rehabilitation and development of Gaza in exchange for Hamas's demilitarization. Netanyahu should also take advantage of the anti-Hamas alliance that emerged this summer in Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt by pressing for an inter-Arab force to police Gaza's borders, block arms smuggling, and prevent the rebuilding of the tunnels. And

Israel should encourage Egypt to develop the international airport and seaport in Al Arish, located about 30 miles to the west of Gaza in the Sinai Peninsula, as hubs for Palestinian commerce.

The Israeli military achieved much in Operation Protective Edge. Much remains to be achieved. Only shrewd diplomacy can turn the unsatisfactory military results into a less unsatisfactory political outcome.

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