



## DETERRENCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: STATECRAFT IN THE INFORMATION AGE

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# Deterrence in the Gaza Conflict: Hamas Case Study Analysis

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## Introduction

Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the international Muslim Brotherhood movement, took over the Gaza Strip in 2007. Fully cognizant of its disparity of power vis-à-vis Israel, it deployed a strategy of gradual encroachment designed to get Israel accustomed to Hamas's breaching of Israel's sovereignty in the South. It in fact utilized this strategy during the period leading up to Operation Cast Lead in 2008–9, Operation Protective Edge in 2014, and most recently in the lead-up to Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021.

In each instance, Hamas's approach has involved a very slow and steady increase in violence, as mortars, then Qassam rockets, and then Grads have been fired first at open territories, then at industrial zones, and finally at inhabited areas, including the central city of Tel Aviv, and even Israel's capital city, Jerusalem. Hamas's plan has been designed to psychologically wear out Israeli resilience and deter Israel from exercising its military power in the Gaza Strip.

Along with these physical attacks, Hamas has engaged in another form of deterrence, disinformation, and the combination of the two concepts is unique in the history of warfare, and most probably will be used in the future in other conflicts as well. Following the abduction of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006, Hamas warned that the Strip is lined with attack tunnels and is booby-trapped; that they possess an arsenal of superior weapons and personnel; that Israel will pay a high price in terms of the lives of civilians bordering the strip as well as those far deeper inside Israel;

that more hostages will be taken if the IDF breaks into Gaza; and that Hamas combatants are unafraid of dying and are even willing to produce their own civilian casualties, for which Israel will be blamed, as has occurred at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. These threats were a mixture of fact and fiction but were nevertheless effective. In ensuing operations (2012, 2014, 2021, 2022), Hamas used disinformation techniques extensively in order to direct blame toward Israel and cover its own failures and losses. This chapter will outline Hamas's use of deterrence and disinformation strategies over the past two decades, and how it has eroded Israeli sovereignty and resolve and interfered with and disrupted Israeli strategic objectives using a variety of tactics and techniques.

## The Strategy of Deterrence

During the Cold War, a theory of nuclear deterrence evolved. At its core was the notion that nuclear war could be averted by psychologically influencing one's adversary to carefully weigh the costs of aggression. However, in order for deterrence to be effective, the theory posited, the threat should exact a cost that outweighs the benefits that the opponent hopes to achieve by his act. Deterrence, then, is an attempt to influence the opponent's strategic calculation with regard to its cost (Inbar & Sandler, 1993).

Applying that theory to conventional military deterrence—as opposed to nuclear deterrence—Israel has maintained a strategy of signalling to Gaza terror groups that Hamas will pay a very heavy cost should it and its cohorts overstep certain red lines. This was demonstrated in the case of the planned “mega” terror attack on Israel that was in the final stages of preparation by Zuhir alQaisi (also known as Abu Ibrahim), a terror chief who headed the Popular Resistance Committees in Gaza. An IDF strike on 9 March 2012 resulted in alQaisi's assassination. What followed was four days of intense rocket attacks on Israel from Gaza during Operation Returning Echo. However, notably, Hamas claimed not to have participated in the fighting *directly*, observing that escalation would “be devastating to the Palestinian people” (Brulliard, 2012).

## Defiance in the Face of Kinetic Deterrence

To understand better the wider context in which Hamas uses disinformation against Israel, it is first necessary to appreciate the odd deterrence dialogue between the belligerents. Israel's kinetic-based deterrence is having only a

limited impact on Hamas's willingness to fight. At the end of the March 2012 conflict, a senior IDF military officer was quoted as saying, "We taught them a lesson with a hint that they should think twice before they contemplate whether to mess with us again" (Melman, 2012). However, Hamas and its fellow-travellers failed to take that hint, considering that over 2,600 rockets and mortars were fired into Israel from the Gaza Strip during the two-year period ending December 2019 alone (Aronheim, 2019). All of which begs the question: Who is being deterred? The reality is that rather than deterring Hamas from launching rocket attacks and tunnel warfare on Israel, it is Israel that has been deterred from taking decisive—or even provisional—reprisal against Hamas. Thus, the would-be deterrent, Israel, has become the *de facto* object of deterrence.

## **Ersatz Air Force**

Given the effectiveness to date of Israel's Iron Dome system in shooting down missiles, rockets, and other such conventional offensive weapons, Hamas, undeterred, has resorted to simpler, less sophisticated weapons to do the same damage. In order to bridge the power gap with Israel, Hamas deployed creative substitutes to not only cause physical harm, but also to wage psychological warfare. For example, the organization's lack of an air force capable of striking Israel's economic infrastructure has been compensated by the use of incendiary balloons and kites—airborne explosive devices that destroyed hundreds of acres of crops in southern Israel—leaving Israeli farmers defenceless as they watch their fields and livelihoods go up in flames year after year. Hundreds of fires have resulted in millions of shekels' worth of damage (Gross, 2018). Hamas's wind-carried weapons are not just intended to produce economic damage; they serve as part of its PSYOPS strategy of terrorizing citizens of the South. Balloons carrying an explosive device landed on a trampoline in a family's backyard in southern Israel. "Balloons on a trampoline in the backyard—that's a decorative play area and beckons the most innocent ones, and yet our children have lost their innocence because of this phenomenon," said Meirav Vidal, the mother of that household (Gross, 2018).

In a step-up from armed balloons and kites, Hamas and its affiliates have also developed the weaponizing of drones. In May of 2019, Hamas located an Israeli Matrice 600 drone that had been lost in Gaza in a previous operation, repaired it, took control of its systems, and attached a rocket-propelled grenade launcher to its hull. The drone was then sent into Israeli airspace, and a

few minutes after it crossed over the border above Israeli territory, the drone's Hamas handler spotted tanks in a military base. The handler quickly attacked one of the manned tanks by dropping a grenade on it from the height of a hundred metres. The grenade failed to detonate (Zitun, 2020). The embarrassing incident remained shrouded in secrecy by Israel until seven months later, but the seriousness of Hamas's technological advances—as well as the damage to Israeli morale and the corresponding boost to Hamas's—could not be ignored. The message delivered thereby to Israel was, “We are creative and will use your own forces against you.”

### **“An Army in Every Way”**

As reported in 2017, Hamas is built like an army in every way, with 27,000 armed men divided into 6 regional brigades, and with 25 battalions and 106 companies. Nukhba, Hamas's elite unit, is comprised of 2,500 armed men. One-third of these troops is intended to be sent to carry out attacks inside Israeli territory. These operatives are supposed to strike from the sea (the naval commandos), from the air (using flying ATVs or motorized gliders, for example), and from the ground, mainly via cross-border tunnels, from which they would emerge to raid an Israeli residential community or army base (Issacharoff, 2017).

### **Hamas's Elite Nukhba Naval Commandos**

In March of 2014, Hamas operative Ibrahim alAloul was killed in an explosion during what was characterized as a “training exercise.” However, within days of his death, rumours circulated that he in fact had been the commander of Hamas's previously unknown naval unit. Confirming the rumours, Hamas created a commemorative video featuring members of alAloul's unit sailing on boats, patrolling Gaza's beaches and launching rockets from the coastline into Israel, and alAloul himself training with his nascent navy (Ben-Zvi, 2014). However, the broad distribution of the video represented far more than just an attempt at self-promotion both at home and abroad; rather, it again granted Hamas control of a large part of the playing field: it forced Israel into expending vast amounts of resources, both financial and military, to deal with this new seaborne threat. It also caused a sea change in Israel's strategic thinking as to where future threats would come from—now not merely from the air or via tunnels, but from beyond its coastline as well.

This new naval threat, which some sought to dismiss as a mere assemblage of swimmers and divers, proved itself as a force to be reckoned with on 8 July 2014, at the very start of the Gaza war (Operation Protective Edge): five Hamas scuba divers armed with rifles, RPGs, and explosives emerged from the sea near Kibbutz Zikim in southern Israel, intent on carrying out a massive terror attack at the kibbutz and nearby IDF bases (Israel Defense Forces, 2015). IDF observers spotted them on camera and all five terrorists were neutralized, following their attack on an IDF tank.

By 2018 Hamas had built up a formidable maritime strength, training hundreds of divers for its elite Nukhba naval commando unit. This caused Israel to employ the IDF's 916th Division, the unit responsible for the maritime sphere around the Gaza Strip and home of Israel's elite naval commando unit, Shayetet 13, focusing its operations on thwarting Hamas's continuous attempts to launch attacks on Israel via the sea. In fact, around 50 per cent of the targets attacked from the air by the Israeli Air Force (IAF) during the round of escalation that started at the beginning of June 2018 were naval targets belonging to Hamas, including naval outposts and sea vessels, according to a senior Israeli naval officer. In northern Gaza, the IAF bombed a terror tunnel intended for use by Hamas's elite Nukhba naval commandos to secretly go underwater (Zitun, 2018).

Why the focus on Hamas's "blue tunnel" strategy? One reason is because, according to Israeli naval assessments, as far back as 2013, Hamas planned to resume attempts to smuggle rocket-building materials from Sinai to Gaza via boats, following a pause in such efforts. "The sea is one big blue tunnel," stated an Israeli naval source at the time, and Egypt's continuing demolition of tunnels between Sinai and Gaza was expected to increase attempts to smuggle via the sea (Lappin, 2013). Another reason is due to the fact that Hamas received Iranian operational instructions on how to prepare swarm-like boat attacks for use in clashes with Israel: "It [Hamas] is improving its diving commando units, and creating sea forces that are much more capable than they were before. Hamas has received battle doctrines from Iran—which is also building up its sea capabilities—on how to deliver 'stings' through swarms," the source said. "They will try to attack our vessels with swarms" (Lappin, 2013).

## **Hamas's Terror Tunnels**

Aside from Hamas's advances in aerial attacks—both with rockets and missiles as well as their crude but effective homemade flying incendiaries—and

their sophisticated amphibious skills and weaponry, it is the ever-present threat of “terror tunnels” that has been highly effective in keeping Israel on guard, because of the security threat they pose to both Israeli civilians as well as IDF bases, and in deterring Israel from launching full-scale operations against Hamas. The tunnels, dubbed “the Metro” by Israeli military intelligence, due to their being constructed as an expansive underground network beneath every major urban centre in the Gaza Strip, are ubiquitous: following Hamas’s takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007, they proceeded to dig in excess of five hundred tunnels, employing seven thousand workers, and spreading out from underneath such urban areas as Khan Yunis, Jabalia, Shati, and numerous other densely populated towns and cities (Piven, 2014).

Although initially serving a commercial purpose by circumventing overland surveillance of the smuggling of goods, weapons, and other contraband from Egypt into the Gaza Strip, even before their official takeover, Hamas discovered a practical offensive value of the vast network: on 25 June 2006, a cell from Hamas’s Izz ad-Din alQassam Brigades infiltrated into Israel via a tunnel originating from the Rafah area, passing under the security fence to the area between the Kerem Shalom and Sufa crossings. Under cover of mortar and anti-tank fire from within the Gaza Strip, the cell attacked an armored personnel carrier, an IDF tank, and a watchtower. Two IDF soldiers were killed, and a twenty-year-old corporal, Gilad Shalit, was wounded and abducted. His captors forced him back into Gaza via the same tunnel from which they had emerged (Israel, 2006). IDF forces subsequently uncovered the opening of the tunnel inside a Palestinian house located about 350 metres from the border fence. The length of the tunnel was about 650 metres.

The abduction of Corporal Shalit set off what was to become a five-year ordeal of not only familial anguish but of national torment as well, as Israelis felt both helpless to secure the swift release of the soldier, and a new sense of vulnerability exposing their sons to a newfound danger unrelated to the battlefield experience for which they were trained. In addition, the five-year-long ordeal was replete with messages and rumours orchestrated by Hamas regarding the whereabouts and the welfare of the kidnapped soldier. As if this was not enough of a sublime victory for Hamas, it also culminated in the successful release of over a thousand Palestinian security prisoners held in Israeli jails, among them the infamous Hamas terrorist Ahlam Tamimi, who planned and participated in the attack on Sbarro’s pizzeria in Jerusalem on 9 August 2001, which left 15 civilians killed and 130 seriously injured

(“Interpol said to drop warrant,” 2021). The practical as well as PSYOPS value of the Shalit tunnel abduction was not lost on Hamas.

## **A New Front Is Opened**

Having learned how effective a weapon the tunnels could be, Hamas attempted numerous additional kidnappings of IDF soldiers. On 17 July 2014, thirteen Hamas operatives emerged from an underground tunnel inside Israeli territory at Kibbutz Sufa, close to the Gaza Strip (Kershner, 2014). Although the air force neutralized most of the invaders, some escaped, and two IDF soldiers were killed in the ensuing battle. The next day, the IDF said it had already uncovered ten tunnels with twenty-two exit points and that there were dozens more “terror tunnels” spread around Gaza. In a statement, it described tunnels crossing the border from Gaza to Israel (Kershner, 2014).

But the IDF’s efforts to uncover Hamas tunnels were only partially successful, and on 19 July, a group of Hamas operatives crossed under the border and emerged 700 metres from Kibbutz Ein Hashlosha. Again, IDF soldiers spotted the group in time and prevented them from attacking civilians in the village. The next day, a massive tunnel was discovered by IDF forces 170 meters inside Israel, near Kibbutz Netiv HaAsara. Residents of the village had to stay inside and lock their doors and windows until it could be confirmed that no terrorists had yet used the tunnel. On 21 July, more than ten heavily armed Hamas operatives infiltrated Israel through another tunnel. They were planning to split into two groups: one to attack Kibbutz Erez and the other Kibbutz Nir Am. They were wearing IDF uniforms to deceive civilians and Israeli security forces. Ten were killed by the IDF, but four IDF soldiers were also killed during the battle (Israel, 2014).

## **From Vietnam to Mosul to Gaza**

During the Vietnam War, in just the first six months of 1967, booby traps killed 539 American GIs and wounded an additional 5,532. By the end of the war, of the 47,322 servicemen killed, 7,432 (15 per cent) died from such explosives (Sheehan, 1966). By the time of the West’s war against ISIS, booby-trapped tunnels had become the weapon of choice by jihadis fighting Kurdish Peshmerga troops. As they fled areas being overrun, ISIS left behind a trail of destruction in the form of booby traps and secret tunnels underneath houses, thus making it difficult for Iraqi troops trying to capture and hold territory in a dense urban area like Mosul (Solomon, 2016). As civilians returned

home to Mosul and other areas of northern Iraq freed from the Islamic State, homemade bombs and explosives, laid on an industrial scale by the insurgents, claimed hundreds of victims and hampered efforts to bring life back to normal. Everything from houses, schools, mosques, and streets were all booby-trapped; beyond Mosul, in villages and fields stretching from the Nineveh Plains to the Kurdish autonomous region, retreating Islamic State fighters sowed a vast area with improvised bombs and mines (MacSwan, 2017). During a two-week period in October 2020, ISIS employed a booby-trap technique in the Sinai Desert, killing more than a dozen civilians by way of explosive devices laid down in several homes (Sweilam, 2023).

It is no wonder, then, that the extensive array of booby-trapped tunnels, schools, mosques, hospitals, and other infrastructure throughout the Gaza Strip have served as a formidable deterrent to Israeli policy-makers who have become circumspect with regards to sending soldiers into the Gaza Strip. During the 2014 Operation Protective Edge conflict, exploiting a vast network of secret tunnels to snipe at enemy troops and blast their vehicles even inside Israel, Hamas killed thirty-two Israeli soldiers—almost three times as many as in the previous major ground clashes in the 2008 conflict (Browning, 2014). Describing the destruction of an armoured personnel carrier lured into a booby trap and the killing of the IDF soldiers inside, Hamas declared, “Our holy warriors detonated the minefield with such force that (the carrier) was destroyed. They advanced on it, opened its doors and finished off all left inside” (Browning, 2014). Noting that this was more than the typical Hamas bravado, an Israeli military spokesperson responded, “They have undergone extensive training, they are well supplied, well-motivated and disciplined. We have met a more formidable enemy on the battlefield. We are not surprised about it because we knew that they were preparing for this battle. They didn’t just invest in the tunnels for the last two or three years” (Browning, 2014). For Hamas, the underpinning of deterrence—exactng a cost that outweighs the benefit—is a foreign concept. It thrives upon the ideology of martyrdom and suicide as a principle of warfare.

### **“Dual-Use” Material Diversion**

Shortly after the conclusion of Operation Protective Edge, a tripartite agreement between Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the UN was crafted with the aim of rebuilding Gaza. Known as the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM), the heavily funded, highly ambitious mega-construction project

was intended to build new housing, entire neighbourhoods, and vast infrastructure projects, including a state-of-the-art water de-salinization plant. With such humanitarian goals in mind, Israel agreed to allow dual-use material into Gaza, such as concrete and rebar (World Bank, 2018).

But despite the import safeguards that Israel insisted be included in the GRM as to cement and other construction materials—provisions that Israel and Egypt deemed crucial to the GRM—as early as December 2014, Hamas nevertheless managed to divert various quantities of cement, which had recently entered Gaza for the purpose of housing and infrastructure repair efforts, to the reinforcement of its damaged tunnel network (“Report: Hamas using Gaza reconstruction,” 2014).

A year later, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories reported that Hamas had seized the wood and other construction materials that Israel had permitted to be imported into the territory, thereby further delaying the reconstruction program: “Hamas operatives have forcefully taken over storage facilities for housing construction imports, and seized them for the organization’s underground infrastructure,” noted IDF major general Yoav Mordechai (“Hamas diverting construction materials,” 2015). The problem of Hamas’s misappropriation of material and Palestinian Authority recalcitrance in working with Hamas was echoed by Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2017) in an update regarding the slow pace of reconstruction in Gaza.

Hamas’s eagerness to threaten Israel therefore takes precedence even over housing, sanitation, and every other quality-of-life infrastructure improvement that could benefit its own populace, and any strategy of deterrence that Israel thought it could apply in bringing about pressure from Hamas supporters for improved conditions simply has no effect upon the Hamas equation of one-sided deterrence. The bottom-line message of these deeds is to cause despair among Israeli decision makers in the face of Hamas’s never-ending resolve.

## **Disinformation—a Further Tool**

How does it come about, then, that the strongest military power in the Middle East is effectively stopped from utilizing that power to eliminate—or even deter—continuing rocket and arson attacks by the most active anti-Israel terrorist organization in the region? The answer lies in the non-military tools

that Hamas has in its arsenal—whether or not these are directly under its control. One of these is disinformation.

Disinformation is different from a lie, as it uses large parts of the truth, though not all of it. For example, Hamas has been constantly disseminating information about Israel's cruelty toward the Palestinians (the siege on Gaza, war crimes, harming civilians), leaving out of its story its own violent activities. It sends out visuals of ruined buildings, without mentioning that Israel almost always warns the residents to clear out of a structure before bombing it; more than once it has staged supposed attacks on children, and although Israel proved the story to be false, the damage had already been done. The demonization of Israel was successful.

As Israel holds world opinion in high regard, in many instances it has refrained from taking full-scale action in order to minimize the negative coverage such actions might receive. In other words, in this case disinformation is being used as a method of deterrence; in fact, it is a key element in deterring Israel from using its full range of military abilities.

More directly, the above-mentioned announcement that the entire Gaza Strip is booby-trapped, as well as other pieces of disinformation, has had an effect on Israeli decision making, as the Israeli public is particularly averse to loss of life in what some might consider an unnecessary or hopeless battle.

One example where Hamas has been quite successful in using subtler forms of disinformation was in 2014, when Israeli citizen Avera Mengistu, an immigrant from Ethiopia, entered the Gaza Strip in an unknown way; he has been kept hostage by Hamas ever since. In January 2023 Hamas released a clip in which a person calls for the Israeli government to act for Mengistu's release (Martinez, 2023). The clip is unclear, raising doubts of its authenticity. The ensuing public debate discussed whether computer technology was used to produce a fake clip. Hamas never supplied another clue in authenticating the video. It presumably prefers to stoke Israeli internal disagreement and social unrest, as Ethiopian political activists accuse the government of not releasing Palestinian terrorists in exchange for a dark-skinned person (Mualem, 2015).

## **The Tools of Diplomatic Deterrence**

Yet another tool widely used by Hamas is the diplomatic channel, which is building on general disinformation against Israel. After 11 September 2001, the European Union established a list of persons, groups, and entities involved in terrorist acts and subject to restrictive measures. Those on the "EU

terrorist list” are subject to both the freezing of funds and other financial assets, as well as enhanced measures related to police and judicial co-operation in criminal matters. However, in September 2010, Hamas brought its case before the European Council’s General Court, challenging its continued presence on the terrorist list, and, in December 2014, the General Court annulled (albeit on procedural grounds) the council’s decision to maintain Hamas on the list. One month later, the European Council decided to appeal against the judgment of the General Court (European Council, 2021), but the threat of full engagement with and legitimization of Hamas still looms large, as underscored by the writings of Hugh Lovatt, a policy fellow with the European Council on Foreign Relations, in which he advocates that “the EU should welcome Hamas’ new political platform and seize the opportunity to engage moderates within the movement” (Lovatt, 2017).

More insidious is the threat of criminal charges against Israeli officers and statesmen alike. In September 2005, as Israeli major general Doron Almog’s plane landed at Heathrow Airport, an Israeli embassy attaché boarded the aircraft and warned him not to deplane. A warrant had been issued for the arrest of the general over the demolitions of terrorist operatives’ houses in Gaza—a punitive measure dating, ironically, back to British Mandatory rule. He escaped being detained (“Israel slams general arrest bid,” 2005), but the episode unveiled a new non-military weapon to be deployed at will by Hamas sympathizers. Threats of arrest in the United Kingdom were also faced by former Israeli military chief Moshe Yaalon, who cancelled a charitable fundraising trip to London for fear of arrest on war crimes charges, and by then Israeli chief of staff General Dan Halutz, who was also warned against travel to Britain (McGreal, 2005).

It is not only military officers who have been threatened with criminal action in the United Kingdom. In December 2009, a British court, again acting under its “universal jurisdiction” premise, issued a purported war crimes arrest warrant for Israel’s former foreign minister Tzipi Livni, based solely on the fact that she was a cabinet member during the 2008 Operation Cast Lead. The warrant was only withdrawn after it was determined that she was not in fact in the United Kingdom (Black & Cobain, 2009). In January 2017, Livni was forced to cancel a speaking engagement at a European Parliament event after Belgian police confirmed that it intended to question the former Israeli foreign minister upon her arrival in Brussels in regard to “suspected war crimes” (“Tzipi Livni cancels Brussels trip,” 2017).

The campaign by Israel antagonists to further besmirch the country's reputation on the world stage and to endanger the freedom of movement of its political and military leaders reached a new low on 5 February 2021, with the ruling by the pre-trial chamber of the International Criminal Court (ICC) that The Hague has jurisdiction to open a criminal investigation against Israel—and the Palestinians—for war crimes alleged to have taken place in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem (Magid, 2021). But lest anyone believe that the inclusion of “Palestinians” in the ruling signalled even-handedness, ICC chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda had already made clear in 2019 that a criminal investigation, if approved, would focus on the 2014 Israel-Hamas conflict (Operation Protective Edge), on Israeli settlement policy, and on the Israeli response to protests at the Gaza border (Magid, 2021).

Another tool in Hamas's non-military arsenal, building on disinformation, is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which, since its inception, has issued many official condemnations of Israel (Sherman, 2015), and its evidence can be used by prosecutors of the ICC in cases brought against Israel. These and other such non-military threats have limited Israel's ability to successfully function on the battlefield.

## The Numbers Game

One of the very effective ways that Hamas uses disinformation is by concealing reality through the diffusion of false numbers of victims in its conflict with Israel. During Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 2021), Israel executed a deception plan (code-named “Lightning Strike”) that was designed to deal a blow to the Nukhba elite force. The IDF mapped the Gaza tunnels and announced an incoming raid. Nukhba soldiers entered their underground positions and were hit by targeted and precise bombing. To conceal their casualties, Hamas announced that it suffered a minimal loss, and the dead were buried in unmarked graves or announced as deceased due to health problems. This ploy proved very effective, as it caused a bitter argument in Israeli media, involving among others former IDF officers who claimed this long-planned deception plan was wasted as a result of political reasons without bringing any significant results (“Report: IAF bombing,” 2021).

On the other hand, Hamas inflated the number of civilian casualties during armed conflict (which it tries to prevent as much as possible) with Israel. Israeli intelligence noticed that a large number of these clashes involved

males aged eighteen and over. Following more digging, their organizational affiliation was revealed, but by then the political damage was already done.

## **The Impact of Hamas's Deterrence Built on Disinformation**

Hamas's successful campaign of deterrence has resulted in a trajectory change in Israel whereby the IDF and its political handlers have orbited away from the IDF's underlying mission to "preserve the State of Israel, to protect its independence, and to foil attempts by its enemies to disrupt the normal life within it" (Israel Defense Forces, n.d.). Rather, instead of engaging in first-strike, pre-emptive measures that Israel used so successfully in the Six Day War as well as in other battles—thereby taking control of the battlefield from the enemy—current policy has been relegated to a series of tit-for-tat responses to Hamas's highly aggressive disruption of normal life. This policy is now almost always reactive—coming only after rockets have been fired, acres of fields destroyed, or, in the worst case, casualties inflicted—and hardly ever proactive. After the 2008 Operation Cast Lead, then Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert declared, "Iran and Hamas mistook the restraint Israel exercised as weakness. They were mistaken. They were surprised" (Israel, 2009). In fact, not only does Hamas always regard Israeli restraint as weakness, but they have furthermore succeeded in giving certain Israeli policy-makers pause to consider whether or not "restraint" should be incorporated as part of Israel's defence policy.

Yaakov Amidror, former IDF major general and national security adviser to former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, underscored the fact that Israel's military strategy has not been aimed at winning the war against Hamas for quite some time. "The purpose of all the Gaza operations over the past fifteen years has been to hurt Hamas and restore quiet to people living in the south—not to topple the terror groups or conquer the Strip," he stated during an interview with *Mishpacha* magazine. "Israel didn't embark on Operation Guardian of the Walls with the goal of winning," continued Amidror. "The goal was to inflict maximum damage on Hamas' military capabilities, in hopes of establishing deterrence" (Schulman, 2021). There is perhaps no greater proof of the failure of those deterrent hopes than the fact that, despite the fifteen-year history of that strategy, Hamas was not at all deterred from launching attacks on Israeli civilians in 2008, 2014, or even as recently as May 2021, while its capacity to influence Israeli calculus through disinformation has remained unchallenged.

## Dictating Ceasefires

Israel's inability to deter Hamas's aggression has had ramifications not only as to how and when wars start, but also as to how and when they end. In each of the past three wars, Hamas chose the timing of the start date by utilizing indiscriminate rocket fire—first into Israel's southern Gaza envelope region, and then expanding as far north and east as Hamas desired—thereby drawing Israel into military engagement. And, partway through each of these wars, after gaining enough sympathy points with visuals of death and destruction across global media outlets, Hamas then complained and employed its diplomatic resources to prevent Israel from accomplishing its operational goals. In the course of Operation Guardian of the Walls, President Joe Biden called Prime Minister Netanyahu four times to express his concerns over Israel's campaign, despite initial public statements of support for Israel's right to defend itself. Finally, on 19 May 2021, the president informed the prime minister that he expected “a significant de-escalation today” in Gaza (Macias & Wilkie, 2021). But as to how long ceasefires last, Amidror expressed some resignation: “The cease-fire will last as long as Hamas wants it to. The fact that Israel is dependent on Hamas' whims is a real problem that we don't have a solution for at the moment” (Shulman, 2021).

## Payouts in Lieu of Protection

A further effect of Hamas disinformation can be seen through indirect changes in Israeli policies and programs. In December 2020, Israel proudly announced the unveiling of its new LahavOr (Light Blade), a laser system designed to intercept airborne incendiary threats from Gaza (Saban et al., 2020). The Light Blade “provides a near conclusive response to everything relating to balloons and kites, and delivers a safe and effective solution to the drone threat,” boasted Border Police commissioner Major General Yaakov Shabtai (Saban et al., 2020). Yet it should be remembered that LahavOr is merely another strictly defensive measure. Indeed, just ninety days later, Israel's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Finance formulated a joint decision to support Israeli farmers along the Gaza Strip with up to NIS 8 million to encourage early harvesting of their crops before the arrival of “arson season” blowing in from Gaza (Savir, 2021). Dr. Nahum Itzkovich, director general of the Ministry of Agriculture, explained that “this support provides a sense of security and certainty for the

surrounding farmers and improves their resilience to continue cultivating the land near the border” (Savir, 2021). Never before in Israel’s history were attacks on civilians and their property responded to with “anticipatory payments” to would-be victims in place of providing real security and serenity for its citizens.

By contrast, in January 2013, the Egyptian military came up with a novel—albeit noxious—new tactic to shut down Hamas’s tunnels: flooding them with sewage. Advisers to then Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, himself a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood’s political arm, responded to critics by stating that he was determined to shut the tunnels to block the destabilizing flow of weapons and militants into Sinai from Gaza (Akram & Kirkpatrick, 2013). The response from Hamas—also an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood—was muted, unlike when former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak used far less effective methods to close the tunnels (Akram & Kirkpatrick, 2013).

For Israel, the notion of employing such a simple but environmentally and physically threatening offensive tactic would be unthinkable. Rather than risk global condemnation and further accusations of war crimes, Israel instead embarked on a NIS 3 billion project beginning in 2017 to erect its “anti-tunnel barrier” along the Gaza border (Harel, 2020). In the course of the construction, Israel discovered about twenty tunnels, the latest being one that was dug from a point east of Khan Yunis to near Kissufim, inside Israel; it was comparatively deep underground and penetrated a few dozen metres into Israel, but although it didn’t get past the barrier, it seemed to have been “a work in progress and was discovered before it was finished,” according to the IDF Spokesperson (Harel, 2020).

### **“The Devil You Know”**

One of the most ironic elements of Hamas’s deterrence against Israel is accomplished through its ongoing commitment to floating the notion that “things could be worse” in the information environment. When confronted with the possibility of regime change from one bad actor to another, one of the guiding inquiries for policy-makers has been to weigh “the devil you know versus the devil you don’t know.” Is it strictly deterrence by Hamas that restrains Israel from acting decisively and resolutely? Or is Israel perhaps further deterred by the prospect of “the morning after Hamas”? While the terrorist organization does pose a very real threat to the livelihoods, normalcy of life, and indeed

life itself for thousands of Israelis living within the Gaza Strip region, and while it is true that Hamas's obsession with destroying Israel has only brought misery to its own populace, Hamas's continued control of Gaza might nevertheless also serve Israel's interests. Hamas is but one of the Palestinian groups opposed to Israel. Jihadist groups more akin to the Islamic State and al Qaeda also have limited followings in Gaza, as does Hamas's long-time rival, Palestine Islamic Jihad, which works closely with Iran. In addition, members of Hamas's own military wing have radical leanings. At times, Hamas has allowed these groups to operate in order to put pressure on Israel, but Hamas also cracks down on these groups, arresting some members and even killing others. Hamas fears that these radicals will precipitate an unwanted massive clash with Israel and ultimately endanger Hamas's own power (Byman, 2018).

### **The Ultimate Effect of Hamas Deterring Israel through the Information Environment**

In the midst of Operation Guardian of the Walls, Michael Armstrong, an associate professor of operations research at Brock University in Canada, observed that unless Israel occupies Gaza, it will be impossible to disarm Hamas. Hamas has shown that it can rebuild its destroyed capacities, so unless Israelis want to stay in Gaza and occupy it, he really can't see how they would disarm it (Vohra, 2021).

However, the prospect of putting boots on the ground in Gaza has been dismissed as nothing more than an idle threat. The threat tactic worked well when, on 14 May 2021, the IDF announced that "ground troops were massing on the Gaza border," only to "clarify" the miscommunication a short while later. But after the announcement succeeded in drawing hundreds of Hamas fighters into their "Metro" tunnel network, ready to execute suicide measures against the would-be invaders, Israeli jets used the opportunity to pound the tunnels, thereby dispatching hundreds of Hamas fighters (Vohra, 2021).

But if the reality of four thousand rockets being fired into Israeli civilian population centres—including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem—was not enough to motivate Israel's military planners to dismantle Hamas's rocket industry, as Professor Armstrong noted, then it is hard to imagine that Israel will ever regain the resolve to enter Gaza, even as a limited incursion, as it did in 2009 and 2014. To actually exercise the option of sending in ground troops would entail a large-scale, long-term, bloody campaign, one for which Israel's current military planners seem hesitant to claim responsibility.

## Conclusion

For how long can Israel's southern civilian population tolerate continued attacks and threats of attacks from Hamas rockets, incendiary devices, and tunnel invasions? In reality, if Israel is going to live up to its mission statement of safeguarding the security, life, and normalcy of all of its citizens, then it is time for a sea change in Israeli foreign and defence policy. Hamas will never be placated by Israeli restraint, nor will it be deterred by Israeli military hardware obstacles coupled with brief, periodic incursions. To continue along the current path means to remain in a constant state of vulnerability, and this is true not just for citizens living in the Gaza region, but—as Hamas has demonstrated repeatedly—also for those in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and residents of all of Israel's major population centres within range of Hamas's arsenal.

Israel's current strategy of deterrence vis-à-vis Hamas has run its course and all that remains, in all practicality, is the option of military confrontation to dismantle the military wing of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip (Dekel, 2019). It is indeed a costly proposition both in terms of human sacrifice and national losses, but sometimes the Latin adage *Si vis pacem, para bellum* (If you want peace, prepare for war) offers the only practical solution. So far, Hamas has been successful in maintaining the psychological and informational notion that invading and permanently occupying the Gaza Strip is an unthinkable option.

*See Postface on page 351 for reflection on current events.*

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