

PolicyWatch #1440

The Challenges of Israeli Military Action in Gaza

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This PolicyWatch is the first in a two-part series examining the situation in Gaza as the December 19 expiration date of the Israeli-Hamas ceasefire approaches. The first focused on the challenges the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would face in undertaking any large-scale action; the second looks at the IDF's choices, and their implications, regarding the scope and duration of a potential incursion.

[Read the companion PolicyWatch](#), "IDF Military Action in Gaza: Options and Implications."

The nominal December 19 expiration date of the Israeli-Hamas ceasefire, in conjunction with the agreement's erosion over the past several months, has generated increased discussion about Israel's military options in the Gaza Strip. Much of the recent talk has centered on the prospects and problems of a large-scale military operation in Gaza, and even if the ceasefire is renewed, the issue of Israel's appropriate military response to Hamas will likely remain on the table. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would face a number of military challenges in the course of a major operation, and understanding those challenges is critical to any assessment of potential outcomes.

Operational Challenges

Intelligence. In any military operation, information gaps exist; some information will be wrong or incorrectly interpreted, and some information will be imprecise. During a potential Gaza operation, the IDF will obtain intelligence on a continual basis to avoid pitfalls such as new weapons (antitank and anti-aircraft missiles), unexpected capabilities (doctrine, maneuver, command and control), and unanticipated defensive measures (fortifications, obstacles, mines). Although Hamas and other Palestinian elements have most likely prepared some surprises for the IDF, these need to be kept to a minimum.

Achieving surprise. Large-scale operations require a buildup of forces and other advance preparations. Hamas observes the IDF closely along the Gaza border and probably some distance away as well. Media attention to Israeli mobilization and movement of heavy forces has been a feature of previous IDF actions in Gaza, and Hamas may be able to acquire intelligence on IDF activity from Iran and Syria. Prior to the summer 2006 war with Israel, Hizballah operated intelligence collection centers in southern Lebanon with Iranian assistance, and Hamas may have similar capabilities inside Gaza. Nevertheless, the IDF will want to achieve at least tactical surprise in relation to time, location, nature, and scope.

Depth of penetration and operational tempo. The depth of the IDF's penetration will be a function of the operation's objective; the more expansive the goals, the deeper the IDF will need to penetrate. A deep incursion will likely require the IDF to use heavy (armor and mechanized infantry) and/or special forces in built-up, densely populated areas. Fighting in these arenas creates a whole range of problems, including the likelihood of increased IDF and Palestinian civilian casualties, as well as a slowing of operational tempo. The IDF has prepared for fighting in this environment, but urban operations are historically messy and slow.

A complex battlefield. Once the IDF has entered Gaza, it must find and defeat its enemies. Hamas has its own

military force -- the Izz al-Din al-Qassam brigades -- but there are a number of other armed Palestinian factions in the Strip. While most of these are relatively small, they complicate the battle space for the Israelis. Additional complications include Hamas's military training of women and youths, and the potential for popular resistance: casualties among women, youths, and civilians receive full media attention, even if they are acting as combatants.

Locating fleeting and elusive targets. Palestinian forces, drawing on Hizballah's tactics in the 2006 Lebanon war, will probably look for fleeting engagements. They will attempt to inflict losses and then move or hide, hoping to avoid destruction. Additionally, Hamas and other organized armed elements will likely attempt to withhold some forces from combat in order to fight again at some future point. To deal with these kinds of tactics, the IDF will need to put a premium on rapidly identifying and engaging targets, as well as on ferreting out Palestinian combatants attempting to blend into the population or taking cover in built-up areas.

Palestinian leadership cadres will seek to avoid capture and engagement by Israeli forces. Leaders will likely change operating locations or go into hiding once they determine an Israeli incursion is imminent, and the IDF and Shin Bet (Israel's internal intelligence service) will need to prevent their escape. This demands knowledge of potential escape routes and means, fast action to close potential exits (tunnels, Egyptian border crossing, the sea), and locating and engaging targets that are on the move.

Dealing with extended resistance. Once the IDF has broken the initial resistance and occupied its territorial objectives, armed opposition will not necessarily end. Hamas and other Palestinian armed organizations have the capability to mount prolonged resistance to any IDF presence, even if at a relatively low level. Rooting out armed cells from within the population is likely to prove time consuming and result in additional IDF and civilian casualties.

Eliminating organization and infrastructure. If a large-scale operation is to be worth the cost and risk, it must deal with the organization and infrastructure of its opponents. Hamas, as well as other groups, has had time to deepen its organizational base within the Strip and to expand its material infrastructure. While some of this is overt and relatively well understood, other parts of the organization and infrastructure are less visible, even hidden, and will have to be found amid the complex human and physical terrain in Gaza. The IDF and Shin Bet will need time to identify these and break them up.

Dealing with the civilian population. In whatever portion of Gaza the IDF controls, Israel will be responsible for meeting the humanitarian needs of the population, some 1.5 million people, and dealing with potential civil disturbances and demonstrations. This will require the commitment of IDF personnel and other resources, and will receive significant media attention.

Constraints. No military operation is conducted in an unrestricted environment. Political constraints are likely to impinge on the time that Israel has to act, the geographic scope of the action, what can be targeted, and the intensity (violence) with which operations can be conducted. Only the most resolute Israeli government could ignore political realities for long, if at all.

Densely populated urban terrain provides a set of military constraints. In built-up areas, targets can be difficult to find and tricky to distinguish from civilians and civilian activity. The use of heavy weapons, which may be militarily effective, risks collateral damage. These problems are compounded by the willingness of the terrorist groups to fight from behind civilians, essentially employing them as "human sandbags." This tactic forces difficult choices on Israeli commanders and decisionmakers. If the IDF does not act, or acts with less effective means, the enemy will have a military advantage. If the IDF acts and civilians are injured, the situation creates opportunities for media events portraying Israel's disregard for civilian life and property.

Terminating the operation and withdrawing. Choosing benchmarks for determining success and setting appropriate conditions for withdrawal are critical elements of the planning and decisionmaking process. In any large-scale action, these benchmarks should be determined and understood in advance, not improvised after

the fighting has begun.

Implications

Discussions of potential IDF operations are often very general in nature. But the IDF faces a difficult and complex reality in Gaza. Without doubt, the IDF can prevail militarily against Hamas, but the speed of execution, the number of casualties -- military and civilian -- on both sides, and the conditions at the end of operation will be shaped by how well the IDF deals with the military challenges. A rapid operation that inflicts substantial attrition and damage on the enemy, but with limited civilian casualties, produces one result, even if a complicated one from the political and diplomatic standpoints. An operation that is slow or hesitant, producing few concrete military results and significant civilian losses, creates a much different military, political, and diplomatic reality.

If Israel decides to wage a major offensive in Gaza, the government needs to think carefully about what is required militarily, and the IDF needs to perform at its best. And since the conditions under which Israel leaves Gaza are as important as how it enters, Israel needs a well-conceived exit strategy establishing the political and military conditions under which it will withdraw.

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