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IDF Military Action in Gaza: Options and Implications

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This PolicyWatch is the second in a two-part series examining the situation in Gaza as the December 19 expiration date of the Israeli-Hamas ceasefire approaches. The first part 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, "The Challenges of Israeli Military Action in Gaza."

According to press reports, the IDF has already presented the Israeli cabinet with several military options for a Gaza invasion and has indicated that it is ready to act, pending a government decision. Opinion among military and civilian officials on the necessity and efficacy of military action is divided, and for good reason: many serious implications exist for such an engagement, and a clean and beneficial outcome is not a certainty. Israel's relationship with the region and beyond would be seriously complicated, as would intra-Palestinian affairs.

Options

The military plans under consideration probably envision three basic scenarios. First, Israel could return to the same level of military action it conducted prior to the ceasefire, which involved air and artillery strikes against high-value targets and immediate threats, raids by special forces, and small incursions. This strategy inflicted losses on armed Palestinian elements; made it more difficult for them to train, equip, and operate; and presented their leadership with a continued unsettling threat. The operations, however, led to IDF casualties and did not prevent Palestinian rocket and mortar fire on military and civilian targets inside Israel. Although a return to this approach would be unlikely to fundamentally alter the situation, it could contain Hamas's expanding military power and perhaps decrease the group's popularity, since such activity would inevitably make life even more difficult for Gaza's population, for which Hamas would receive some of the blame.

Second, Israel could undertake a larger but still relatively limited operation, with deeper and longer penetration into the Strip, using stronger ground elements combined with intensified special forces and air attacks on high-value personnel and infrastructure targets. Such operations could reduce the threat from rockets and mortars, while eliminating more terrorist leaders, fighters, and infrastructure. This option would have longer-lasting military consequences for Hamas and other armed organizations, but would be only partially effective if Hamas and others retained their core leadership, organization, and military capabilities. This kind of offensive would risk a "rolling" political-diplomatic crisis for Israel, Western states, and moderate Arabs. Under this scenario, Hamas and the other organizations would make every effort not only to defend themselves, but also to intensify attacks inside Israel.

The third option would be a large, multiple brigade- or division-level operation with equivalent, stepped-up action by other forces, involving deep if not complete penetration of the Strip, with the intention of breaking Hamas's military power and weakening its grip on Gaza. This could involve prolonged occupation of at least some territory, and extensive efforts to rake out terrorist organizations and their infrastructure. Although the

most challenging from a military standpoint, this kind of operation would offer the best prospects for long-term security improvements in southern Israel. Of course, this option would entail the greatest political complications and risks, and could lead to an escalation of military tensions with Hizballah in Lebanon. It would also require a clearly defined exit strategy.

Current discussions in Israel seem to be focusing on larger operations, rather than a return to the status quo prior to the ceasefire.

Implications

The IDF appears better prepared for action than it did in summer 2006: it has new means and methods for irregular opponents, including improved equipment, tactics, and organization for urban combat; it has enhanced intelligence capabilities and countertunneling equipment and units; and it has had plenty of time to plan and prepare. In all likelihood, the IDF's performance in Gaza would substantially exceed what was seen in Lebanon. Finding a workable exit strategy that does not reverse its military gains, however, could be more difficult to attain.

The outcome of a Gaza invasion would most likely be messy. The longer the IDF stays, the more it will be subject to popular resistance and international pressure to withdraw. A protracted invasion would also strain Israel's relationship with the United States, other Western nations, moderate Arab states, and the Palestinian Authority (PA). If the IDF leaves too quickly or is only partially successful, however, Hamas could reestablish itself or Palestinian factions could renew their power struggle. Worse yet, an invasion of Gaza could further radicalize Palestinian politics, boosting violent elements and weakening those supporting negotiations with Israel.

Nevertheless, an Israeli invasion may precipitate several positive outcomes. Depending on which option Israel chooses, a resumed offensive in Gaza would reduce the rocket and mortar threat to southern Israel, while Hamas and other violent Palestinian factions would find it more difficult to expand their military power. Also, the value of breaking Hamas's hold on Gaza should not be dismissed -- a prospect that currently seems unlikely. This probably cannot be achieved without IDF intervention, and resultant conditions might allow the PA to reassert itself in Gaza, though the PA cannot be seen as the handmaiden of an Israeli invasion.

An Israeli invasion, or the imminent threat of one, could also cause Hamas to modify its behavior. Hamas has shown that it will adapt to survive, and might make tactical modifications aimed at preserving the organization -- reducing or halting rocket and mortar attacks by its own forces and by other terrorist organizations, and reducing tensions with the PA -- rather than shift its strategy or goals.

A major IDF operation in Gaza would dramatically change the military and political dynamics in Israel and in the region in uncertain ways. A successful operation, one that achieves its goals and provides an effective exit strategy, would be politically advantageous for the Israeli government and reduce the diplomatic fallout. Failure, however, would be a political disaster for Israel and all those supporting the peace process, much to the advantage of Israel's enemies -- Hamas, Hizballah, Syria, and Iran. These concerns explain why some in the IDF and Defense Minister Ehud Barak have argued for caution.

Caution, nonetheless, comes with its own costs and risks. Life for Israelis within range of Palestinian rockets is difficult, and as Hamas and other organizations acquire longer-range rockets, the number of settlements subject to bombardment will grow. Hamas and the other terrorist elements are seeking to extend their capabilities and presence all the way up to the perimeter fence, forcing the IDF into a more defensive posture. Hamas will continue to expand its military capability and deepen its control in the Strip, and will remain a political, if not military, threat to the PA.

Conclusion

Whether Israel will carry out a major operation in Gaza in the near term is uncertain. Although many are pressing the IDF to act soon, at the moment caution seems to be the watchword. Whatever happens, military action in Gaza is not likely to be surgical or final. Hamas's entrenched position, literally and figuratively, rules out quick and easy military solutions, while large operations carry serious complications and risks, with no guarantee of success.

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