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Assessing Operation Guardians of the Wall

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As Israel and Hamas announce a ceasefire last week, IDF MGs (ret.) Yaacov Ayish and Yaakov Amidror discuss the success of Operation Guardians of the Wall, what can be gathered from the latest clash, and the effects of the operation on future deterrence strategy.

I. What Happened?

- On Thursday afternoon, May 20, 2021, Israel and Hamas announced a ceasefire brokered by Egypt. The ceasefire was without any conditions attached and brought an end to Operation Guardians of the Wall.
 - *“At the end, there is no question that Hamas tried to build itself as the defender of Jerusalem. That is why it is so important that the Prime Minister said it was a ceasefire with no conditions. ‘No conditions’ means Hamas didn’t succeed in connecting the results of the ceasefire in Gaza with any change of policy in Jerusalem.” – IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror*

II. What did Hamas hope to achieve by initiating the latest clash and did it do so?

- Hamas attempted to tie itself to Jerusalem in order to portray itself as the primary advocate of the Palestinian resistance. Hamas had some success with this objective.
 - *“Another achievement of Hamas is that Hamas put itself in front, leading the Palestinian agenda, unlike Abu Mazen and PA’s authority in the West Bank, which is much less active.” – IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror*

III. What did Israel hope to achieve in its response to Hamas’ aggression and did it do so?

- In the short term, the goal was to damage Hamas’ military capabilities as much as possible, and this objective was largely fulfilled.

- *“The goal of the operation was not to destroy Hamas, but to eliminate as many military capabilities of the organization as possible...The ceasefire is probably a good thing, because we don't have any big ideas about how to eliminate Hamas.”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror
- *“The strategic goal is the way the political level explains to the military what achievements are expected. What was the definition given to the IDF? To restore to deterrence...and to eliminate significant capabilities of Hamas... There was no strategic goal told to the IDF to remove the Hamas regime from Gaza.”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish
- *“I think this is a clear example of an operation in which, at the military level, we are very satisfied with the results (although we have one weak point—we did not destroy the capability of Hamas to launch rockets).”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror
- *“Hamas has suffered a very severe blow. Most of its production capabilities and underground strategic capabilities were demolished. Other special capabilities, such as UAVs, drones, small submarines that they have developed, were demolished. More than 150 operatives of Hamas and PIJ were taken out of the equation.”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish
- In the long term, the goal is to deter Hamas and prevent them from ever building up such military capabilities again, though that will also involve considerations of how to mitigate Iranian support of Hamas.
 - *“We are speaking about weakening Hamas, deterring them in the future, and not letting them build more rockets and missiles in the future. And for that, we try to destroy as much of the infrastructure as possible.”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror
 - *“We know that a majority of rockets were built with the support of Iran—with funds from Iran—but quite a lot of them were manufactured in Gaza. Raw materials came in, workshops were built, engineers were brought into Gaza. With the guidance and know-how and funds from the Iranians, they succeeded in building quite the impressive arsenal we experienced in the last 10 days.”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish
- While the operation was largely successful, the IDF still faced instances in which it was unable to act on reliable intelligence due to civilian considerations.
 - *“In certain cases, we knew exactly where the launching pads and launcher were located. And we decided not to attack it because it was totally embedded in a very heavily populated area. And then you have a very tough question. Are you going to take this launcher together with 200 non-combatants or are you going to wait for them to launch? We aren't talking about just one launcher, but all over Gaza. These are very tough questions.”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish

IV. What did Israel learn from Operation Guardians of the Wall?

- Despite the successes of Operation Protective Edge in 2014, Hamas managed to preserve some of its military infrastructure and capabilities, as well as procure steady support from the Iranian regime, both of which allowed Hamas to launch this most recent offensive.
 - *“In Operation Protective Edge, Hamas lost 2,300 people, 1,700 or 1,800 of them were terrorists. This was in 2014. Quite a lot of infrastructure was taken out of the equation and demolished. Having said that, it seems like they succeeded in keeping quite a lot of factories and workshops that produced what we have seen and experienced lately, vis-a-vis rockets and some other capabilities.”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish
- Despite the polarization of U.S politics, the United States gave Israel time it needed to complete its military objectives for the first ten days, while European support for Israel's right to self-defense has arguably improved.
 - *“At least in the first week or more, it was good that America gave the Israelis the time it needed. In the last two days, America has said that they think [this conflict] should be ended.”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror

V. What did Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran likely learn from Operation Guardians of the Wall?

- The chief takeaway that Israel's enemies will gather from the most recent clash is that the Iron Dome is extremely effective at defending against rockets, missiles, and other capabilities.
 - *“I think this lesson [the success of the Iron Dome] will be learned by the Iranians and Hezbollah. My understanding is that they don't have any solution to the capability of the Iron Dome...And missiles and rockets is the main capability of Hezbollah, and it is the main threat Iran is using against Israel...It [the recent events] gives them a hint of what to expect if they start an operation against Israel.”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror
 - *“They [Hamas and the PIJ] will learn very carefully the intelligence capabilities that were performed in this operation—the number of targets, the effectiveness of the IDF, less collateral damage due to very accurate intelligence and very accurate capabilities.”* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish
- The supposed political victory over the Palestinian Authority may not have been worth the military damage Hamas suffered, particularly since the ceasefire made no mention of Jerusalem, and Hamas may come to this realization in time.

VI. What Comes Next?

- Israel must make squashing Hamas' lower-level operations a top priority.
 - *"The real results will be judged by time. It would be a huge mistake to judge it too early... Israel should be more determined to prevent the low level actions of Hamas... We don't want another operation, but we should be ready to take the risk to stop them from making any changes on the ground."* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror
- It will take time to determine if deterrence was genuinely achieved.
 - *"Deterrence is something that cannot be judged immediately. You can understand if it was achieved or not only after a few months or years... There are very high chances it was achieved, but I cannot be sure about that."* – IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror

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