

Israel changes the facts on the ground, militarily and diplomatically

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On Sunday morning, Israel declared a unilateral ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and halted military operations - at least temporarily. After the ceasefire began at 2 a.m. local time, Hamas fired several more rockets into Israel, then declared a ceasefire of its own. The Israelis have said they will pull back into Israel if the ceasefire holds. Hamas says the ceasefire won't hold until the last "Zionist" soldier is gone.

Liberal Israeli pundits have already concluded that Israel gained almost nothing militarily: Hamas continues to rule Gaza and retains military capabilities and the loyalty of Gazans, and breakaway *jihadi* factions such as Islamic Jihad will relaunch rockets after a short lull. The small gains Israel achieved, they believe, are more than balanced by the huge diplomatic price Israel paid as daily pictures of Palestinian deaths drew widespread condemnation throughout the world and alienated Israel's few "friends" in the Muslim world, most notably Turkey.

Are they right?

When Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defence Minister Ehud Barak said from the very start of the air offensive on Dec. 27 that the aim of the Israeli incursion was to put an end to the rocket fire, they also stressed their goal to change the "situation on the ground." Before Dec. 27, Hamas's military capabilities - its command and control systems, its rocket smuggling and launching abilities, its 15,000 regular/irregular ground forces - were intact. Hamas leaders had repeatedly threatened that if a single Israeli entered Gaza, it would become an Israeli cemetery. Three weeks of fighting proved that to be an empty boast. The reality is that Hamas's forces have been seriously beaten down.

Some analysts may claim that the core of Hamas's military capability has survived in the bunkers and tunnels of Gaza City. Possibly. But the military initiative is now Israel's. The Israel Defence Forces set the agenda, drove the fight, kept the enemy on its heels, destroyed significant enemy capability (including many of the smuggling tunnels) and showed Hamas that IDF soldiers are now highly skilled in urban insurgent war. Israel now has the military initiative in the south and will set the terms. It is no longer merely Hamas's antagonist; it is its unquestioned military superior. The lesson will not be lost on Iran or Hezbollah.

Strategically, the "situation on the ground" has clearly changed. But the Gaza fight was not just a military demonstration — it had political objectives as well.

Israel taught Hamas that future provocation will be painfully costly. It also taught Hamas in Gaza that it is very easy for its titular leader, Khaled Meshaal, and his entourage in Damascus to call for a fight to the last breath against the Zionists. After all, he is protected by Syria. But he has clearly lost touch with the reality of Gaza. Signs of a split are obvious. Hamas in Gaza is certainly not about to sign a peace treaty with Israel, but if the crossings are open and foreign aid is on its way, the split will most assuredly widen. If both Israel and Hamas can agree to a long-term, monitored truce, Mr. Meshaal will lose all relevancy.

Israel taught Hamas that no one but the Arab street really cares about the plight of Gaza under Hamas rule and, though noisy, the Arab street doesn't matter. No other country attacked Israel. Jordan maintained diplomatic relations. Iran fulminated but did nothing. Egypt, which once openly tolerated the tunnels, will no doubt clamp down hard on Hamas's smuggling. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was especially shrill in condemning Israel, but the \$141-million Christmas deal between Israeli firms and the Turkish air force to upgrade Turkey's F-4 Phantoms remains intact.

Israel also taught Hamas that the streets of Europe may be crowded with pro-Hamas demonstrators for a few days or a few weeks, but that European countries, the United States and even Russia and China have no love for Hamas and view it, rightly, as Iran's proxy. And that is not likely to change.

Israel changed the facts on the ground diplomatically as it did militarily. It imposed its will on Hamas. And it has gained greater diplomatic leverage. Hamas has been humbled and with it, Hezbollah and Iran.

It is, of course, tragic that hundreds of Gazans were killed. But it is hard to understand how Hamas did not see that this would happen. Maybe it doesn't really care about Gazans, either.

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