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Netanyahu's Dilemma: From the War in Gaza to the War at Home

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to face significant political problems at home and a far less empathetic diplomatic environment abroad once the guns fall silent in Gaza. Calls in Israel for an inquiry into the government's handling of the Gaza crisis and what is being described as an intelligence failure regarding tunnels built by Hamas are mounting. In addition, Israel's relations with its closest allies, the United States and the European Union, have been bruised even if they continue to uphold the Jewish state's right to defend itself.

Commentary

ISRAEL'S RATIONALE for its assault on Gaza has shifted during the last three weeks of almost uninterrupted hammering of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, one of the world's most densely populated territories. The war launched first to counter Palestinian rockets fired in response to an Israeli crackdown on Hamas operatives on the West Bank following the kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers has since focused on underground tunnels that potentially allow Islamist militia fighters to penetrate Israel, and in recent days on critical infrastructure such as Gaza's power supply.

While Israel may be succeeding in severely damaging the military infrastructure of Hamas and other Islamist groups in Gaza, it realizes that international discomfort with its heavy-handed approach that has cost the lives of some 1,300 mostly Palestinian civilians and wreaked devastating material damage that will cost billions to rebuild, means that it does not have a lot of time to militarily achieve its objectives. It also is dawning on Israel that the diplomatic and political price it may have to pay is rising by the day. The war in Gaza will no doubt strengthen calls for a boycott of and sanctions against Israel and could accelerate EU moves to ban dealings with Israeli entities based in occupied territory.

Intelligence Failure

Increasingly, proponents of Israel's assault on Gaza, who constitute a majority of the Israeli population, question whether Israel could have countered Hamas' increasing military prowess in ways that would have been less costly. Military analysts, after four wars in the last eight years against non-state actors, the Shiite Islamist militia Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas, are calling for a review of Israeli military strategy and reorganization of the armed forces.

Revelations that the government long knew about Hamas' tunnelling operation but did not consider it a serious enough threat to counter, have sparked demands for an investigation of what the Israeli media and some analysts are describing as an intelligence failure. At the core of the alleged failure is whether the government and the military ignored Hamas' tunnelling because it had in recent years downgraded the security threat posed by Palestinians and elevated Iran's nuclear program to the most existential threat the Jewish state was facing. As a result, Israel focused its political, diplomatic, intelligence and military energies on Iran rather than Hamas and other militant Palestinian groups.

The revelations also raise questions on the government's real motive in first cracking down on Hamas on the West Bank and then launching its attack on Gaza. Critics of Israel charge that the government's real goal was to prevent the emergence of an effective Palestinian national unity government that would group all factions, and that had tacit support from Israel's allies, because that would have made it more difficult for Israel to sabotage peace negotiations while maintaining a façade of seeking to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Hamas strengthened

An indication of the political fallout that Netanyahu can expect once the fighting in Gaza is brought to a halt, is evident in Hamas' ability to reject ceasefires despite the punishing Israeli assaults that do not involve a lifting of the seven-year old Israeli-Egyptian blockade of Gaza. Rather than weakening Hamas, Israel's attacks appear to have strengthened it politically to the degree that it feels it can impose conditions of its own in dealings with Israel rather than simply respond to Israel's requirements.

Israeli defence and intelligence sources say the threat posed by the tunnels only became evident when Palestinians taken prisoner in the early stages of the Gaza operation disclosed plans for Hamas fighters to infiltrate Israel in a bid to carry out a massive attack during this coming fall's season of Jewish high holidays. Until then Israel had paid limited attention to the tunnels and discarded various plans involving water ditches, drones, sensors and radars that could have either neutralized the threat or alerted Israel to them in a timely fashion.

The damage to Israel's reputation and relations with its allies is prompting Israeli leaders to consider whether it should quickly end the fighting in Gaza despite Netanyahu's warning that Israelis should brace themselves for a long campaign. Those considerations are being complicated by Hamas, which is unwilling to let Israel that easily off the hook and needs to show more than resilience to Palestinians who have paid dearly in the group's confrontation with Israel. A lifting of the Gaza blockade would fit the bill.

Political accounting and military review

Hamas' demand also makes it more difficult for Israel to claim that it has inflicted debilitating damage on the group and that it may not survive politically because Gazans will hold it to account. It also puts to rest Israeli claims that Hamas is desperate for a ceasefire. Hamas has moreover demonstrated that its command and control remains intact.

The Israeli drive to continue the assault on Gaza is fuelled by the fact that the resolution of its two earlier conflagrations with the group ultimately failed to produce results. Israel agreed in 2009 to an unconditional ceasefire in the hope that it had sufficiently weakened the group and created enough of a deterrence. Three years later it hoped that a vague, unsigned agreement mediated by Egypt would do the job. Israel's problem is that continuing the assault would likely force it to expand its ground operations at considerable military, political and diplomatic risk.

With military analysts noting that various incidents in which rockets and mortars have killed Israeli soldiers, questions are being raised about the military's ability to protect Israeli civilians despite the effectiveness of Israel's Iron Dome anti-missile defence shield. The questions fuel demands for a post-war political accounting and a military review.

“Despite many achievements that the army brass can point to, the current war in Gaza reveals once again the necessity of a comprehensive reorganization of the military. The training of forces, the equipment in use, combat doctrine, and operational plans — all will need to be thoroughly investigated when the hostilities are over,” said Amos Harel, the military correspondent of Ha’aretz newspaper.

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