

ISRAELI HISTORY, POLITICS AND SOCIETY

# Israel, the Arabs and Iran

International Relations and Status Quo,  
2011–2016

Ehud Eilam



# Israel, the Arabs and Iran

Israel borders four states – Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon – and two entities – the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza strip. In recent years, despite incidents on the border with Syria and Egypt, the basic strategic status quo with these countries has not changed, and the overall balance of power between Israel and the Arabs has been maintained. Due to its military might, none of Israel's Arab neighbours are able to defeat it. Israel, however, for political, economic and military reasons, avoids enforcing its will and interfering in internal Arab matters and has successfully managed to stay out of the Arab turmoil.

*Israel, the Arabs and Iran* gives a detailed overview of the various national security challenges that Israel has faced since 2011. It explains the key considerations and constraints Israel has had to deal with on several fronts, from its northern border with Lebanon to its southern border with Egypt. The book provides the reader with a deep understanding of why and how Israel has struggled to keep the status quo, whilst a large part of the Middle East remains in turmoil.

The book is aimed at anyone studying Israel, its Foreign Policy, Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations. It will also appeal to government officials, military officers and anyone working or interested in national security issues concerning the Middle East and particularly Israel.

**Dr. Ehud Eilam** has been dealing with and studying Israel's national security for more than 25 years. He served in the Israeli military and later on he worked as a private contractor for the Israeli Ministry of Defense. He is now a writer and an independent researcher.

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# Preface

Israel borders four states – Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. Apart from those states there are two more entities bordering with Israel, the PA (Palestinian Authority) in the West Bank, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In recent years, the overall and basic balance of power between Israel and the Arabs has been maintained with no fundamental change. Israel and Arabs, on each of Israel's borders, were aware of their constraints. Neither of Israel's Arab neighbors, not even a coalition of them, is able to defeat Israel due to its military might. Israel, however, for political, economic and military reasons, avoids enforcing its will by interfering in internal Arab matters, such as causing regime change. Nevertheless, there were cracks in the already fragile status quo between Israel and Arabs, manifested in tension, crises and even clashes. This book examines those factors, along with relevant events and their implications.

The biggest challenge to the status quo between Israel and Hamas was the confrontation in July–August 2014, when Israel could have seized the entire Gaza Strip and toppled the Hamas. Israel rejected that option due to the various ramifications of such a move. Instead, as in previous rounds, Israel sought to strike the Hamas up to the point that the latter agreed to a cease fire. The problem with this concept was the political, military and economic distress of the Hamas, which fed its uncooperative mood, forcing it to come out with some achievement or continue the fight.

Hamas was unable to inflict a major blow to Israel after firing more than 4,500 rockets and mortar shells at Israeli targets. Hamas did not stop Israel's air strikes and land offensive either. The Hamas did manage to cause the Israel defense forces (IDF) dozens of casualties, such as by firing and laying down improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The Hamas also managed to maintain its command and control during the entire fight.

The Arab turmoil that started in 2011 created shock waves all over the Middle East. It started hundreds of kilometers away from Israel, in places like Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, countries not involved much or almost at all in the Arab–Israeli conflict. Yet the Arab storm made its way closer to Israel, Egypt and Syria. The latter exploded into a civil war, from which Israel has been striving to stay out, except for a few sorties aiming to block the delivery of advanced weapons to the Hezbollah. There were also some skirmishes on the border between Israel

and Syria in the Golan Heights. In spite of all that, the status quo between Israel and Syria remained more or less as it has been since 1982, the date of the last war between those two countries. Neither side attempted breaking the stalemate through escalation or alternately restarting the peace talks that ended in 2008.

The looming danger of an Iranian nuclear weapon troubles Israel very much. Israel has been preparing for a confrontation against Iran and its Lebanese proxy, the Hezbollah, while running a cold war against both. A direct collision might have occurred between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, but it was postponed following the war in Syria, where Iran and Hezbollah have been heavily involved. Israel's avoidance of attacking Iran's nuclear sites relieved Hezbollah from the need to fight Israel. Therefore the status quo between the two sides was kept.

Egypt has been busy with its huge internal hardships, the crumbling economy, insurgents and so on while going through volatile times with its former patron, the United States. Israel carefully monitors Egypt's struggles, concerned about their possible repercussions on the 1979 peace treaty, particularly if Egypt becomes a failed state. There were also some violent incidents in recent years on the border between Israel and Egypt in the Sinai Peninsula.

The wars in Libya and Syria, which were different in their scale and nature, brought about a drastic change in the status quo within those Arab countries.

The text includes hundreds of endnotes supporting my ideas. This book is based on sources published in books, articles and so on. The information is incorporated into the text itself in a way that does not disrupt the flow of reading. The only purpose of the endnotes is to reveal the details of the source. The links appearing in the endnotes were last accessed in March 2017.

My MA thesis and PhD dissertation dealt with Israel's national strategy and military doctrine. I have been studying this subject for more than twenty years. I worked for a few years for Israel's Ministry of Defense as a private contractor in my field. This book is a completely personal project, and it is not a part of any research I did for the Israeli Ministry of Defense. The book expresses my personal views, and it does not necessarily represent the opinions of others. I have worked on this study both in Israel and where I now reside, in the United States.

Of course all the errors here are mine alone. For readers with questions, comments and so on about the book, please write to Ehud Eilam at *Ehudei2014@gmail.com*.

# Glossary

CW – Chemical weapons

Gulf – the Persian/Arab Gulf

IAF – Israeli air force

IDF – Israel defense forces

IED – Improvised explosive device

IRG – Iran’s revolutionary guard

GCC – Gulf cooperation council

MB – Muslim brotherhood

PA – Palestinian Authority

PLO – Palestine liberation organization

SCAF – Supreme council of the armed forces (in Egypt)

UAV – Unmanned air vehicle

# Introduction

This research examines how Israel tried to keep its status quo in regard to states and non-state organizations in the Middle East.

Chapter 1: In June 2014 Israel conducted a vast operation in the West Bank, after three Israelis were kidnapped there. Israel, which blamed the Hamas for that affair, sought to make the Hamas weaker and also to bring down the Palestinian unity government.

Chapter 2: During the confrontation in July–August 2014, Israel could have conquered the Gaza Strip and, by that, topple the Hamas. Israel avoided that because of the possible ramifications. Instead Israel strove, again, to inflict a limited blow to Hamas, that is, to destroy some of its infrastructure, cause casualties and so on. The Hamas fought back, hoping to bring an end to the siege on the Gaza Strip, that is, to improve its desperate economic situation.

Chapter 3: The United States, Turkey and Arab state tried to reach a cease fire during the 2014 confrontation. Egypt opposed Hamas, whereas Turkey and Qatar supported Hamas. Therefore Israel preferred to have Egypt as a broker. The American involvement created tension between Israel and its American patron. Following that war there were calls for talks between Israel and Palestinians, and there were also various proposals for how to rehabilitate the Gaza Strip.

Chapter 4: Bashar al Assad wanted the Golan Heights back, but the civil war in his country forced him to focus on his survival. In 2013–2016 Israel launched several air strikes inside Syria, aiming to destroy advanced weapons that were supposed to be given to the Hezbollah. Assad did not respond because his military lost much of its strength, so Assad had to be careful not to get involved in a war against Israel. Assad's partner, Iran, also did not wish him to take such a risk. In addition there were some minor clashes in the Golan Heights between Israel and Syria, following the Syrian civil war, but they did not escalate into a larger conflict.

Chapter 5: Israel hopes that world powers can prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Israel has considered launching a strike against Iran's nuclear sites in case it has no other choice. Iran's Lebanese proxy, the Hezbollah, has been busy fighting for Assad. Nevertheless if Israel had attacked Iran, the Hezbollah might have fired thousands of rockets at Israel. Israel would have retaliated against Lebanon by conducting a major land and air offensive.

## 2 *Introduction*

Chapter 6: Egypt is struggling to save its crumbling economy while fighting insurgents like those in the Sinai Peninsula, where Israel has been cooperating with Egypt in this matter. Yet there might be a friction between Israel and Egypt. Israel has to take that into consideration if only because of Egypt's military might.

Appendix I: There were all kinds of aspects of the status quo regarding Israel's national security in 1948–1982. Those were strategic ones like the asymmetry between it and the Arabs. Others were showed in wars such as the 1956 and 1982 wars that were initiated by Israel to create a better status quo for it. Another kind of status quo had to do with the IDF's combat doctrine and buildup.

Appendix II: The wars in Libya and Syria, which were different in their scale and nature, brought about a drastic change in the status quo within those Arab countries. This chapter looks into these matters, focusing on Western policy toward those confrontations and Western leaders' considerations whether and how to support the rebels.

# 1 The West Bank in 2014

Both Israel and the two Palestinian entities – the PA and the Hamas – wish to control all the territory that is now the state of Israel, including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, Israel, Hamas and the PA have maintained a fragile status quo.

## **Overall background**

In the beginning of the 1948–1949 war, the Palestinians had their best chance to gain a state because the British Mandate was over and the Jews were quite weak militarily. Yet the Jews won that showdown, and since then Israel has been able, as a state, to gather enough military might to defeat the Palestinians, particularly as the latter have been spread in several Arab states.

In 1964 the PLO (Palestine liberation organization) was established, but even at the peak of its military strength, in the early 1980s, it was no match for the IDF, as proven in the 1982 war. The PLO not only failed in seizing any part of Israel but also lost the territory it had in Lebanon. Since the showdown in 1948, the only hope Palestinians had beating the IDF in a full-scale war was based on other Arab militaries accomplishing that. However, even the most successful war Syria and Egypt had carried out against Israel, in 1973, demonstrated they could not overcome the IDF. Therefore, since the 1990s the Palestinians chose another way: conducting negotiations with Israel aiming to acquire at least part of their lost land while continuing to confront Israel. Israel for its part relied on its superior military might to deter, punish and prevent the Palestinians from seizing by force any territory Israel wished to keep in its hands.

In the 1967 war Israel seized the West Bank from Jordan, which gave up its claim for that territory in 1988. During the 1990s, following the Oslo accords and other agreements, Israel relinquished parts of the West Bank to the newly established PA. In the 2000–2005 confrontation, the IDF recaptured areas in the West Bank and later on retreated from them while keeping a strong presence in the entire West Bank.

The Gaza Strip was conquered twice by Israel – in 1956 and in 1967. In 1994 Israel retreated from most of the Gaza Strip, and in 2005 Israel withdrew completely from that territory.

#### 4 *The West Bank in 2014*

The West Bank and the Gaza Strip served as a battlefield between Palestinians and Israel mostly in 1987–1993 and in 2000–2005.

Max Abrahms argued in regard to the 2000–2005 war that “the disconnect between the PLO’s policy demands and Israeli perceptions of Palestinian objectives has been explained by (1) inconsistent rhetoric on the part of Palestinian leaders about the aims of the intifada, and (2) Jewish apprehension that contemporary violence against Israel is akin to previous traumatic experiences in which Jewish survival in the Diaspora was threatened.”<sup>1</sup>

Since 2005 there might have been confrontations such as the one in 2000–2005, marked by a massive use of firearms by both sides, or that of 1987–1993, when Palestinians’ arsenal was stones, firebombs and so on to which Israel responded with guns and nonlethal measures. Clashes in the West Bank might have been also a mix of the 1987–1993 and the 2000–2005 fighting, or it might have started as in 1987–1993 and then escalated to the more severe level of the one in 2000–2005.

In August 2014 “in the West Bank, the PA’s security forces have proved relatively effective in maintaining security. There has been good cooperation with Israeli security forces, and considerable progress has been made in building the governmental institutions of a potential Palestinian state.”<sup>2</sup> In 2007 the Palestinian security forces in the Gaza Strip were defeated by Hamas. Israel has been concerned this might repeat itself in the West Bank. Ironically the PA does wish Israel to leave the West Bank but needs the IDF’s presence there to deter Hamas or be on standby to protect it from a Hamas attack.

The security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank has also helped protect Israeli Jews, those who live inside the West Bank as well as outside it. This was not a precedent. Along its history Israel collaborated with Arab governments, secretly or not, to secure Israeli civilians from guerrilla and terror assaults. If the Arabs failed or refused to contribute their share of the agreed deal, Israel took matters into its own hands.

Israel has been using soft power against both the PA in the West Bank and the Hamas in the Gaza Strip, but there’s a difference in Israel’s handling the two Palestinian factions. In the West Bank Israel imposed economic restrictions. In the Gaza Strip Israel maintains an aerial and naval blockade, deciding what products can be delivered there, and does not talk nor work directly with the Hamas.

Elie Podeh argued in 2014 that the Arab Peace Initiative “has been an available policy option for more than a decade, yet no Israeli government has embraced it as a viable peace option.”<sup>3</sup> Efraim Karsh claimed in that year that “for nearly a century, Palestinian leaders have missed no opportunity to impede the development of Palestinian civil society and the attainment of Palestinian statehood.”<sup>4</sup> Efraim Inbar said in May 2014 that “following the failure of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, ‘doing nothing’ and managing the conflict is Israel’s most sensible approach to the situation.”<sup>5</sup> The PA and Israel expressing their will to solve their problems through diplomatic activity made or pretended to make an effort to try and reach an agreement that would lead to a Palestinian state. As things stand now, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict is not curable, but it is treatable.

Israel has to tackle several adversaries in the region, the Hamas not always being its top priority. The Hamas, on the other hand, notwithstanding all its disputes with the PA and Palestinian groups like the Islamic Jihad, has concentrated its efforts against Israel.

Hamas may seem to be more determined to fight Israel than the PA, that is, the Fatah. It might be because the Fatah has been colliding with Israel since the 1960s, gaining much more experience than the Hamas in confronting Israel, which serves to moderate the PA. The Hamas that was established only in the late 1980s sticks to the strategy of armed conflict.

In 2006 the Hamas participated in the elections in Gaza, thereby ignoring aspects of its 1988 treaty.<sup>6</sup> In 2014 Israel recognized Hamas as the authority in the Gaza Strip, that is, the one that is accountable for any hostile actions that come out of there. Over the years the Hamas and Israel have thus developed their relations by conducting military steps, delivering public announcements, using brokers and so on. The knowledge the two sides gathered about each other deepened the understanding both had about their foe. This involved ways of confrontation but also means of preventing or limiting mutual collisions. As time has passed the two sides have continued to learn about their rival's constraints, information which eventually might bring an historical compromise between them.

### **Conditions for a flare-up within the West Bank**

Anthony Cordesman evaluated in March 2014 that “both the Israelis and Palestinians are too divided internally, too suspicious of each other.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, at that time the peace talks between Israel and the PA reached a dead end. It was not a surprise considering the overwhelming obstacles the two sides have faced since the beginning of this process. Those problems were well-known, but solving them demanded both sides to pay an enormous price, so each of them obviously tried to give up as little as possible.

The armed confrontation of 2000–2005 came at a high cost for both sides. Since then Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the PA, opposed initiating a similar confrontation. If the PA had decided to collide with Israel, it would have probably preferred the model of the 1987–1993 uprising, based less on armed clashes and more on riots and demonstrations, some of them quite violent. The 1987–1993 Intifada led to the Oslo accords and to the establishment of the PA, but such a precedent did not guarantee that the next fight upgraded the PA into a state. The results could go the other way if things got out of control and jeopardized the survival of the PA, causing the Palestinians in the West Bank to return to the status they had had before 1993 and live under direct Israeli rule. Israel itself does not wish such an outcome, for its security, political and economic ramifications. Furthermore, even some members of the Israeli government and its political and military elite, who reject a Palestinian state, regard the PA as the lesser of two evils. If Palestinian security units had vanished, Israel would have not only lost their assistance in security matters. Those men could have used their weapons and training to harm

Israelis, blaming their former ally for losing their jobs. In mid-2014 “security cooperation has been put under strain. The Palestinian public has taken to protesting against, and at times even throwing rocks at, Palestinian security forces, accusing them of being Israel’s policemen.”<sup>78</sup>

If there was a confrontation like the one in 2000–2005, Palestinian assaults would have included suicide bombers trying to spread terror all over Israel. In 2002, in response to those attacks, Israel launched a massive offensive. The fence built since then, surrounding most of the West Bank, has made it difficult for Palestinians to harm Israelis throughout the state. This measure protected the PA as well because it lowered the chances of a major Israeli retribution, such as an offensive in the West Bank that could have undermined the PA. However, keeping Palestinian terror and guerrilla activity within the West Bank meant that about 350,000 Israelis living there would have to survive in a battlefield, while the rest of the Jews in Israel would be safer. The level of solidarity between Israelis residing within the green line and those beyond it in the West Bank territories could have a substantial impact on the consequences of a confrontation, including the fate of the PA.

An ongoing deep frustration has been brewing among many Palestinians in the West Bank as well as within the refugee camps, owing to their grim economic and political situation. This explosive potential may flare up even against the interest of the PA, whose leadership has been aware its people might turn not only against Israel but against them too. In fact, the rage among Palestinians might even focus on the PA. The latter might try diverting the wrath of the masses by turning them against Israel, but this old maneuver might fail this time. The turmoil that has struck the Arab world since 2011 might reach the West Bank, somewhat overdue, but for many Palestinians it would be “better late than never.”

The Hamas called for a third intifada<sup>9</sup> that could bring down its rival in the Palestinian camp, the PA. If Israel retakes all the West Bank, the Hamas could exploit the collapse of the PA and the hostility in the West Bank toward Israel to increase its operations against it. The Hamas would present itself to the Palestinians as their only political option. If then the Hamas continue to oppose negotiating with Israel, a fight would ensue. The Hamas could not prevent Israel from controlling all the West Bank, and Israel, with all its power, might not be able to crush the Hamas completely.

As long as the PA survives, there is a chance, if only remote, that Israel and the PA will resume negotiations and reach an agreement. A Palestinian state in the West Bank seems to be the most plausible compromise as a one state solution would not work. In spite of the crises and clashes Israel and the Palestinians have lived through, they might eventually learn how to live side by side, aided by the experience gained since the establishment of the PA. The alternative, one democratic state – where Palestinians and Jews rule together – would create enormous and insurmountable problems. Palestinians forming at least half of the population would demand senior positions in the government. Most Israeli Jews would not accept a Palestinian in charge of any security service, let alone the Ministry of Defense. Moreover, the two groups have a different culture, language, history,

religion and so on. Israel would risk losing its identity, and once again Jews might become a minority in the country they live in.

### **Egypt's role in the peace talks**

Israel and the PA face tough decisions in known key issues such as the status of Jerusalem, the “right of return” and so on. However, even if they manage to reach some kind of an accord, at least one factor is beyond their control: the role of other players in the Middle East in this process.

Saudi Arabia, particularly its king, Abdullah, wanted the United States to pressure Israel into “accepting a two state solution based on the 1967 lines with a Palestinian capital in Jerusalem.”<sup>10</sup> The American mediator’s role was essential, but no more than that of major states in the Middle East, maintaining substantial impact on the negotiations even without participating directly in the talks.

The Arab peace initiative from 2002 formed a strategic base for talks between Israel and the PA,<sup>11</sup> but the Arab turmoil has shocked the region and with it the ability of Arab states to support an agreement between Israel and the PA. It might therefore be necessary for Israel, the PA and the United States to wait for a calmer period to pursue their negotiations or alternatively to speed up their efforts to reach an agreement before this process is disrupted by the unrest and problems in Arab countries, particularly those that have a border with the West Bank and or the Gaza Strip, that is, Egypt and Jordan.

Egypt has strategic importance in the region due to its history, location and being the most populated Arab country, with more than 80 million people. Egypt endorsed the Oslo accords in the 1990s and the talks between Israel and the PA that have taken place ever since. Since 2011 Egypt’s economy deteriorated sharply, the country has been facing serious security problems such as in Sinai and its political system has been struggling too. Those hardships keep Egypt busy and might prevent it from helping much in reaching and keeping an agreement between Israel and the PA.

Egypt might even become an obstacle. In spite of the overall moderate policy toward Israel, there is an anti-Israeli attitude in Egypt that went on at the times of Mubarak,<sup>12</sup> who allowed anti-Israeli incitement for political reasons, diverting attention from the troubles inside Egypt. The current unrest inside Egypt might increase and cause the government there to point to Israel as a cause for Egypt’s problems. Furthermore there could be an assault inside Israel, launched from Sinai by an armed group wishing to create a severe crisis between Israel and Egypt. Due to the influence of the latter, any friction between Egypt and Israel might have negative ramifications on the relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

### **Jordan as a buffer for both Israel and the PA**

Some assume Jordan might turn into a Palestinian state.<sup>13</sup> Shimon Shamir emphasized in February 2013 that raising the idea that the Palestinian state should be in Jordan “destroys Israel’s relationship with Jordan, exacerbates the Jordanian

leadership's reservations about Israel's ultimate objectives, and is perceived as a slap in the face after all that Jordan has done to help achieve peace."<sup>14</sup> Jordan should be part of the solution by helping create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Charles Freilich wrote in June 2014 that "Jordan faces a dire economic crisis and a threat to its stability, already endangered by its growing Palestinian majority."<sup>15</sup> In recent years about a million Syrian refugees have fled into Jordan. During the war in Iraq, since 2003, about half a million Iraqis have escaped to Jordan as well. This has intensified Jordan's severe economic hardships.

Jordan was in 2014 "a key element in securing the Arab-Israeli peace process."<sup>16</sup> Twenty years before, in 1994, a peace treaty was signed between Israel and Jordan, formalizing a situation that had existed long before that, namely that Jordan had ceased to be a major foe of Israel. The last time the two countries fought against each other was in 1973, which was carried out in a quite limited way. In recent decades Jordan became a partner of Israel, expressed mostly in security matters: preventing guerrilla and terror assaults from its territory against Israel. However, the volatile condition of the Hashemite kingdom might change that. As far as Israel is concerned, the worst-case scenario is the collapse of the current regime in Jordan. Israel has already experienced how Mubarak's rule in Egypt, another friendly Arab state in peace with Israel, crumbled quite quickly. Furthermore, whereas Egypt barely manages to hold on, Jordan might turn into a failed state. Anarchy in Jordan might be exploited by radical Islamic groups to attack Israel along the 230 kilometer border it has with Jordan.

A large part of that border is with the West Bank, where the Jordan rift valley is located. During the talks between Israel and the PA in 2013–2014, the United States, serving as a broker between the two sides, suggested that Israel make concessions regarding its control of the Jordan rift valley. Israel refused out of concern that Jordan might run into unrest, which would destabilize the security of the Jordan rift valley. That area is not only the home of several thousand Israelis but could be a corridor through which insurgents from Jordan might reach the rest of the West Bank.

In June 2014 the border between Israel and Jordan was "wide open," so Israel planned to build a fence there.<sup>17</sup> This preventive move was destined to prepare for a possible crisis in the kingdom, just as Israel did in the Golan Heights following the civil war in Syria, upgrading its defenses near the border while it was still quiet there. A fence, however, would not be enough. Israel would also need to reinforce its units across the border, particularly in the Jordan rift valley. Ironically the very PA, that is, the PLO, that penetrated the West Bank from Jordan aiming to attack Israel in the late 1960s – now fearing radical Islamists – might join forces with Israel to prevent this mutual enemy from infiltrating from Jordan into the West Bank in the same way the PLO had done.

Anthony Cordesman emphasized in March 2014 that "as Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states already seem to recognize, Jordan is effectively a Gulf state – a strategically critical shield to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states."<sup>18</sup> "In the last two decades Jordan has made a strategic decision to ally closely with America.

Today the country is one of America's closest partners in counter-terrorism. After U.S. forces lost access to Iraqi military bases in 2011, Jordan emerged as the most important base for the CIA in the region.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the United States and Saudi Arabia would help Jordan against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as well as some of the Palestinians, because they are a majority in Jordan, have gained social and economic power and oppose radical Islam. Jordan could also rely on its military, which is based on Bedouin tribes, loyal to their king, contrary to Iraqi units, comprised of Sunni troops who in mid-2014 were not willing to fight for their government in Bagdad.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore "Jordan's special operations forces are considered by military experts to be professional and competent."<sup>21</sup> Those factors should assist Jordan to survive and by that to continue to shield both Israel and the PA from Islamic extremists. This might help not only security wise, but politically too, during negotiations between Israel and the PA.

### **The kidnapping in June 2014**

On 30 June 2014, three Israeli teenagers, kidnapped in the West Bank on the thirteenth of that month, were found murdered. During this period Israel conducted a vast operation in the West Bank. Israel reinforced its units there with outfits from four regular infantry brigades, special forces and other security services. This major deployment allowed Israel to scan large areas, to put pressure on the kidnappers and to demonstrate how seriously Israel saw this affair. Another purpose was to inflict a blow on Hamas, blamed by Israel as the entity responsible for the kidnapping.

Some assumed the Hamas initiated the kidnapping hoping that the Israeli response would ignite a "third Intifada" in the West Bank and inside Israel as well.<sup>22</sup> Others thought the Hamas, at least the one in the Gaza Strip, was not involved in the kidnapping.<sup>23</sup> Later on one of its leaders claimed its group did it.<sup>24</sup> But Moussa Abu Marzouk, a senior Hamas figure, claimed the kidnappers were Hamas members but they acted "as individuals, without the knowledge of the organization's leadership."<sup>25</sup> The Hamas preferred a vague policy. This way Hamas could have exploited a kidnapping if it succeeded, that is, if its members had managed to hold Israelis as prisoners, but since things went wrong, Hamas tried not to be accountable.

In 2013–2014 Israel's security services foiled sixty-four attempts to kidnap Jews in the West Bank.<sup>26</sup> Ironically the failure of Israel's security forces in preventing the kidnapping in June 2014 allowed Israel, at least from its perspective, to exploit this opportunity to bash the Hamas in the West Bank. Israel considered the infrastructure of the Hamas there as a danger to the status quo, apart from the threat of a successful kidnapping encouraging the Hamas or other Palestinians to repeat it. However, the fierce Israeli response put at risk both its fragile relations with the Hamas and the relative quiet in the West Bank, which were parts of the status quo.

Although Abu Mazen, the head of the PA, announced that "the three teens are human beings like us and they should be returned to their families. . . . Those who

kidnapped the three teenagers want to destroy us. We will hold them accountable,”<sup>27</sup> other Palestinian leaders did not support his position.<sup>28</sup> Abu Mazen had to maneuver between Israel and the international community, where some had criticized the kidnapping and Palestinians who approved it. In a way, and not for the first time, Abu Mazen and the PA played the “good cop,” while Israel was the “bad cop.”

Israel strongly opposed the establishing of a unity government between the PA (Fatah) and Hamas in early June 2014. In 2007 there was another Palestinian unity government, which ended in June that year, after Hamas took over the Gaza Strip by force. In June 2014 Israel was worried the current unity government might lead to Hamas seizing parts of the West Bank. Israel therefore hoped its operation in the West Bank would topple the Palestinian unity government, leaving the Hamas out of the Palestinian regime in the West Bank. The kidnapping itself caused tension between Hamas and Fatah and shook their new government, which already faced major obstacles as far as its ability to function properly.

The Hamas, in spite of the unity government, retained control over its armed forces in the Gaza Strip. During the crisis on June 2014, a few dozen rockets and mortar shells were launched from the Gaza Strip at the south of Israel. The Hamas might not have fired them but, as the actual ruler of the Gaza Strip, it did not prevent this provocation. At the beginning Israel ignored that fire, owing to its focus on the grip the Hamas had in the West Bank, although the latter’s ability to cause harm was much worse in the Gaza Strip. It’s possible that Israel acted against the Hamas in the West Bank out of frustration because it did not wish to confront this organization in the Gaza Strip.

The IDF discovered many tunnels and secret hiding places containing explosive devices and grenades in the West Bank.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless the Israeli operation was practically a police action much more than a military one. Israel used its security forces, including its military, to search and incarcerate troublemakers. There was an ongoing friction between the IDF and the Palestinians, demonstrated in clashes in the West Bank, which caused the lives of several Palestinians.

In 2011 1,027 Arab prisoners were exchanged in return for the release of one Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. This deal encouraged Hamas to try to capture Israelis and then use them as bargaining chips, and it’s probable the original purpose of the kidnapping of the three Israelis on 13 June 2014 was to exchange them with Palestinians prisoners. This plan failed when the three Israelis were murdered by their captives, but the Palestinians who stayed in jail might still be released in a future transaction. Those deals with terror and guerrilla groups went back to late July 1968, when an Israeli plane was hijacked to Algeria.

In 2014 Israel used the kidnapping as a reason to arrest hundreds of Hamas men and to damage its economic-social infrastructure in the West Bank, which helped the organization gain political support. Some people in Israel, including inside the IDF, protested that devoting efforts for those activities came at the expense of looking for the kidnappers.<sup>30</sup> This may indicate that Israel considered the reaction to kidnapping as a way to cripple the Hamas and deter them from further kidnapping.

It is not the first time Israel used the capturing of one of its people to bash the Hamas. Three days after Shalit was captured on 25 June 2006, Israel arrested dozens of the heads of the Hamas in the West Bank. This action, which assisted the Fatah, was not necessarily related to the effort to release Shalit. Israel also put pressure on the Gaza Strip by launching raids and bombing infrastructure, killing several hundred Palestinians in the process. Shalit however remained locked up.

In July 2006, the capture of two Israeli troops by the Hezbollah served as a trigger for war in Lebanon. As with the kidnapping in 2014, in 2006 the real reason for the severe Israeli response was to hit hard a non-state organization. In other cases Israel's response was aimed solely at releasing its prisoners; the most famous one was the rescue operation in Entebbe in Uganda on 4 July 1976.

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## **2 The 2014 confrontation between Israel and Hamas**

### **The goals and the battles**

The confrontation between Israel and the Hamas in July–August 2014 was another round between them, following the former ones in December 2008–January 2009 and in November 2012. Israel’s main goal was to keep the status quo, whereas the Hamas wanted to change it.

#### **The goals of the Hamas**

The population in the Gaza Strip suffered because they did not receive sufficient aid from the rule of both the PA, in 2005–2007, and the Hamas, ever since 2007. The PA was too corrupted, and instead of developing the Gaza Strip, funds were invested in oversized security forces. The Hamas was focused on building its military capabilities to fight Israel.<sup>1</sup> “Hamas’s rule in Gaza has been disastrous for its people.”<sup>2</sup> The Hamas was not willing to be satisfied with a mini state in the Gaza Strip, although it could become a base for a larger Palestinian state. By confronting Israel the Hamas has demonstrated that it has constantly preferred putting at risk the population, the infrastructure and its rule in the Gaza Strip just to prove its intransigent stand against Israel.

The Hamas provides “some social services, but the number of Palestinians who benefit from those services is small, and it’s dwarfed by those who get assistance from the Palestinian government, international aid bodies and nongovernmental organizations.”<sup>3</sup> The Hamas built its reputation as an organization that takes care of the community and therefore has some experience in handling domestic demands, similar to the way a government has. However, the Hamas chose to allocate a large part of its resources to war. This policy not only prevented improvement of social services and creation of an infrastructure for the Palestinian population but jeopardized the ones that had already existed, due to Israeli retributions. The Hamas might have also been aware that if the economy in the Gaza Strip had prospered, its people would have not wanted to risk losing that by clashing with Israel.

The Rafah crossing, which connects the Gaza Strip and Sinai, “is Gaza’s oxygen tube. Without a steady, assured supply of food, raw materials and energy, there is no way it can hold.”<sup>4</sup> In July 2014 the Hamas was eager to reopen this passage, particularly after Egypt blocked many of the tunnels that led from Sinai to

the Gaza Strip, which were a kind of alternative to the Rafah crossing. This was a major goal for Hamas, but there were others too. Hamas's other goals in July 2014 were to get funds to pay its members in the Gaza Strip their salaries and to release all its members who were arrested by Israel in the West Bank in the month before.<sup>5</sup> Obviously the Hamas wished to return to the situation existing in early June, before the murder of the three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank, which led to the arrest of some Hamas men. It is clear that Hamas was not concerned with its main base in the Gaza Strip but with its presence in the West Bank, an area under control of the PA and Israel, where Hamas men were caught.

Israel wanted to crush the Hamas in the West Bank but at the same time tolerated the rule of the Hamas in the Gaza Strip, for lack of a better option.

Israel had to convince Egypt to open the gates from the Gaza Strip to Sinai, with tight supervision by the international community, Egypt, the PA and if possible Israel as well, aiming to prevent smuggling of weapons. Israel might have also agreed to gradually release Hamas prisoners, arrested in the West Bank in June, if the Hamas kept the quiet in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In a way Israel provoked the Hamas, intentionally or not, by arresting its men in the West Bank. Israel should have taken into consideration that this step would add to the pressure on Hamas in the Gaza Strip, already having plenty on its plate. The massive arrests were a gamble because Israel wanted to weaken the Hamas in the West Bank without pushing it to attack from the Gaza Strip. Unfortunately, this is precisely what eventually happened.

The Hamas felt itself imprisoned by both Israel and Egypt and having no friendly neighbors. This is why the Hamas desperately needed access to where Egypt and Israel did not have sovereignty, that is, the Mediterranean Sea and/or the airspace. The harbor in the Gaza Strip is small and undeveloped, and the Israeli blockade prevented the Hamas from importing large quantities of supplies, including military ones. The airport in the Gaza Strip was destroyed in the 2000–2005 confrontation. The Hamas could have rebuilt it, but Israel might have bombed the site or had planes forbidden to land there.

On 30 July 2014 Denis Ross claimed that the Hamas sought to win “sympathy because of large Palestinian civilian casualties,”<sup>6</sup> which meant that the Hamas wished its people to absorb heavy casualties. For the Hamas its civilians, the ones who were supposed to be protected by Hamas, were not just a kind of cannon fodder but also a means to empower the Hamas. This approach, however, was a double-edged sword, exposing the Hamas to blame by the indignant population. Although in previous confrontations the people of the Gaza Strip played the same horrible role; in 2014 there were higher chances they might eventually turn against the Hamas. That, along with the accumulation of severe economic troubles in the Gaza Strip, might have been enough to create a critical mass to undermine the brutal rule of the Hamas.

Prior to the 2014 confrontation, Israel, having found out that an armed group in the Gaza Strip, not belonging to the Hamas, was about to fire at Israel, transferred that information to Egyptian intelligence. The latter passed it on to the Hamas, which prevented the shooting. If that did not happen, Israel might have punished

Hamas, attacking a facility inside a Hamas training base or headquarters but only after it was evacuated.<sup>7</sup> Daniel Byman mentioned in July 2014 that in the Gaza Strip, Hamas faced outfits more radical than itself. This was another reason for Hamas to confront Israel. “Having gained power in part by criticizing Fatah for being passive and negotiating with Israel, Hamas seeks to ensure it is always the standard-bearer of resistance among Gazans in order to diminish the appeal of these die-hards.”<sup>8</sup> The catch was that if the Hamas had annoyed Israel too much, the latter might have toppled it, enabling its rivals to take its place.

Some emphasized that the Palestinians have the right to defend themselves,<sup>9</sup> which applies to the Gaza Strip, it being Palestinian territory. However, it belongs to the PA, not to Hamas. In spite of Hamas’s deep roots within the Palestinian population, the PA has been their official representative, not Hamas. The unity government, weak as it was, should have made that clear as well as the PA’s opposition to confront Israel. As a result of this weakness, the Hamas defied the government’s official policy. In comparison, outfits in the Gaza Strip that had disputes with the Hamas all agreed on the strategy toward Israel: an armed conflict.

There was a concept in which the Hamas would fight until it gained an achievement impressive enough to show the people of the Gaza Strip that it deserved their sacrifice. This would reduce the criticism there against the Hamas. But it was not clear what kind of success would get the required results. Hitting Tel Aviv? Causing Israel dozens of casualties? Furthermore a major achievement by the Hamas might have humiliated Israel and brought it, against its will, to topple the Hamas. It seems that a success by one party would encourage it to strive for a cease fire before the situation changed for the worst, but on the other hand achievements could create confidence and encourage it to continue gaining even more at the expense of its foe.

## **The goals of Israel**

In October 2015 Lt. Col. Alon Paz, who served as a strategist in the IDF’s Strategic Planning Division, argued that

from an organizational perspective, the IDF is by far the most influential body in Israel’s security decisionmaking process. . . . The Israeli security bureaucracy and decisionmaking processes, correspondingly, marginalize the nonmilitary aspects of planning, preparation, and execution, focusing instead on military intelligence briefings and designing contingency plans for political approval. The political decisionmaking process is almost completely driven by these military inputs.<sup>10</sup>

Brig. Gen. (Res.) Moni Chorev argued in March 2016, in regard also to the war of 2014 that for more than thirty years, Israel did not develop a

coherent theory . . . to combine the various national efforts into a consistent strategic approach. The lack of such an approach, and of suitable mechanisms

for operationalizing it, leads to a continued reliance on military force as the main tool in this war, in spite of its severe limitations.<sup>11</sup>

This shows how Israel decided its goals.

In Israel “the new reality have been the belief that decisive victory against nonstate players would be impossible to achieve.”<sup>12</sup> Israel’s goals in the 2014 war were limited as part of its war of attrition against the Hamas. Those goals were to completely stop the firing from the Gaza Strip, restore its deterrence so it could last for as long as possible, weaken the Hamas politically, reduce the number of its rockets, particularly the long-range ones, and damage their infrastructure. All that should have been achieved without losing international legitimacy. Some of those goals were difficult to define and achieve, such as weakening the Hamas politically. Even if Israel was successful, this outcome could change very fast considering the fragile condition of the PA and the fluid situation in the region. The same could be said about deterring the Hamas because a sudden crisis like one inside the PA might have emboldened the Hamas. There was also a certain paradox in Israel’s goal to deter the Hamas as the latter launched its rockets to a large extent because of reasons that were not connected directly to Israel but to Egypt, such as opening the gates to Sinai.

Hamas, instead of clashing with Israel, could have theoretically turned against Egypt, which already saw the Hamas as an enemy. Battles among Arabs are quite common, particularly in recent years. Qatar, Turkey and Iran might have supported Hamas, but politically and militarily an open war with Egypt might have almost been a suicide for the Hamas. The Egyptian military, which already showed its heavy handed approach against other radical groups in Sinai, would have probably bashed the Hamas even harder than the IDF did. Israel would have been pleased to avoid paying the cost in blood and treasure while watching how Egypt crushed the Hamas. The latter might have tried to entangle Israel in the fight to make it a war between Arabs and Israel, so Egypt would be forced to stop its attack on the Gaza Strip. Iraq tried this trick when Western and Arab states confronted it in 1991 and failed. Assad, during the Syrian civil war, might have repeated this strategy but he preferred not to because Israeli involvement against him would have toppled him, and the same would have happened to Hamas if it had confronted both Israel and Egypt.

As to another Israeli goal, removing the threat of the rockets, Israel strove to return to a status quo it could tolerate. Preventing fire from the Gaza Strip was a main objective in previous Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip. Yet sooner or later the shooting from the Gaza Strip would resume, and even if it was on a small scale and without causing many casualties for Israel, it would still be an ongoing problem. Life is not normal if at any time a rocket or a mortar shell might fall on one’s home, working place, during walking or driving outside and so on. Israel might not have been able to completely stop the firing at it, but it wanted to reduce it to the minimum.

Throughout its history Israel has absorbed guerrilla and terror attacks. Those came out of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in the early 1950s, from Jordan and

Syria in the 1960s and from Lebanon since the 1970s. Israel developed a series of offensive and defensive measures to handle those assaults with various degrees of success. The 1956 war put an end to incursions from the Gaza Strip (although the pace of those attacks slowed down before that confrontation). In 1967–1970 a mostly defensive campaign blocked many PLO infiltrations from Jordan. During the 1970s and until the 1982 war, Israel conducted raids inside Lebanon as part of the struggle against Palestinian assaults that came from there. In the 1990s, when Israel was entangled in the quagmire in Lebanon, the Hezbollah launched rockets at the north of Israel. Therefore since the 1950s Israel has had to adjust to ongoing, low-intensity warfare on one or more fronts. For Israel the challenge the Hamas presented in the Gaza Strip was just another stage in a very long war.

Israel wanted to cripple Hamas's military wing, but only up to a point, because of the cost of striving for total annihilation of that outfit and the Hamas need, after the confrontation, of having its men enforce law and order and overcome possible resistance by other radical groups that might have tried to undermine its rule in the Gaza Strip. Israel did not want any area in the Gaza Strip turning into a base and a springboard to attack Israel in case the Hamas was too weak to control that space. To guard that interest, Israel might have allowed the Hamas to demonstrate some strength as part of keeping Hamas's image as the dominant force in the Gaza Strip. Yet when the Hamas went too far, as in the 2014 confrontation, Israel had to respond with a show of force.

During the confrontation Israel hoped its military actions in the Gaza Strip would bring the population there to put pressure on Hamas to stop firing. However, the Hamas increased its efforts to attack Israel, including land assaults. The Hamas assumed that firing on the Israeli rear would push the Israeli population to urge their government to reach a cease fire, accepting terms benefitting Hamas. Yet many Israelis, wanting to put an end once and for all to the threat of rockets, demanded their leaders to expand the military operation, which meant a ground offensive inside the Gaza Strip.

### **Conquering the Gaza Strip?**

Natan Sachs explained that Israel had “three very bad options:” conquering the Gaza Strip, “let Hamas rearm, lift all the restrictions, and hope for the best” or “accept a very grim, unsatisfactory status quo.”<sup>13</sup> During the confrontation some members of the Israeli government favored an aggressive approach toward the Hamas. The foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, called for land operations in the Gaza Strip.<sup>14</sup> The strategic affairs minister, Yuval Steinitz, supported seizing the Gaza Strip for several weeks to disarm it while toppling the Hamas.<sup>15</sup> The economy minister, Naftali Bennett, demanded to defeat the Hamas.<sup>16</sup> The minister of the interior, Gideon Sa'ar, thought there was a necessity to break the Hamas military wing.<sup>17</sup> Michael OrEn, Israel's former US ambassador, called “to crush Hamas in the Gaza Strip” so it could not rearm as after previous rounds.<sup>18</sup> Those voices revealed Israel's frustration that a non-state organization, much weaker than Israel, could fire rockets and mortar shells, terrorizing the Israeli population

for so many years. Although this ongoing attack from the Gaza Strip did not cause heavy casualties, it traumatized civilians, including women and children, and humiliated Israel. The latter could have sought, like in previous clashes, to gain another cease fire, but for many in Israel it was insufficient. They wished to create a new status quo that would resolve the problem in the Gaza Strip once and for all. Others, such as Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Amos Yadlin, former head of IDF intelligence directorate, opposed conquering the Gaza Strip.<sup>19</sup> He represented many in Israel who wanted to go back to rule the Gaza Strip as the same as the United States seeking to return to fight in Iraq in 2014.

In the 2014 confrontation, after almost ten days in which the Israeli attack relied almost solely on air strikes, land units penetrated the Gaza Strip. But as in the 2008–2009 confrontation the Israeli incursion was a very limited one. Seizing a part, let alone the entire Gaza Strip, would have helped Israel end the launching of rockets and mortar shells. In 2001–2005, when the IDF was deployed in quite a large part of the Gaza Strip, the shooting of rockets into Israel went on but on a minor scale. At that time both the range and the warheads of the rockets were very small. In 2014 if Israel had seized part and even all of the Gaza Strip, occupying it for a lengthy period, armed groups there might have managed to shoot sporadic rockets of a better quality than the ones during 2001–2005. If the Gaza Strip was controlled by Israel, the production, hiding and firing of rockets would have been a serious challenge.

The IDF might have been able to conquer the entire Gaza Strip in five days.<sup>20</sup> According to Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Yaakov Amidror, Israel's former national security adviser, the IDF could have captured the Gaza Strip and deployed there for up to a year, aiming to destroy Hamas's military infrastructure. Israel might have had to stay longer, and run the Gaza Strip, in spite of the political and economic cost.<sup>21</sup> Others assumed that seizing the Gaza Strip would have taken ten days, but disarming it might have required more than five years.<sup>22</sup>

On 7 March 2015 Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon claimed that if Israel had conquered the Gaza Strip in the 2014 confrontation, it would have cost Israel up to 10 billion shekels a year, and the fight would have continued.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore outside the Gaza Strip the Israelis were behind a fence, waiting to foil assaults that came from inside the Gaza Strip. While deploying inside the Gaza Strip, the Israelis would have been exposed to attacks from all over, particularly when they would have patrolled around to search for weapons, enforce law and order and so on. Israeli troops would have been attacked by IEDs, snipers, suicide bombers and so on. In the Gaza Strip there would have been a certain amount of Israeli civilians helping run the administration, take care of infrastructure and so on but probably without reestablishing the settlements there.

In July 2014 the IDF did not prepare a military rule and civilian administration for the Gaza Strip.<sup>24</sup> If the Gaza Strip had been taken, this lack of readiness would have caused Israel difficulties considering the huge economic and other problems existing there. Israel would have also had to absorb international criticism for ruling over the Gaza Strip, a step that might have caused tension with Arab states. Growing public protest against the government's policy in the Gaza Strip and/or the actual deployment there would have gradually become strong within Israel too.

Before starting the land offensive, the Israeli government assumed that no one wants or can be in charge of the Gaza Strip like the PA, Egypt or an international force.<sup>25</sup> In 2014 there were about “30,000 Fatah-affiliated security personnel who remained in Gaza after the 2007 coup.” Yet in 2014 some of them might have supported Hamas, and they required training anyway.<sup>26</sup> There were other major reasons why the PA would probably not have been able or willing to assist Israel. The PA would have refused to be seen by Arabs and particularly Palestinians as collaborating with Israel. Although this was exactly what the PA has been doing in the West Bank, repeating it in the Gaza Strip, a former territory of the PA, seemed a different story. Allegedly the Palestinian unity government has already brought the Gaza Strip back to the PA, but it was clear that the Hamas still called the shots in the Gaza Strip, literally too. As long as the Hamas controlled its military wing, PA did not rule the Gaza Strip. This suggests that if the IDF had crushed the Hamas militarily, the PA could have taken over or at least helped run the Gaza Strip.

Hillel Frisch supported a massive offensive in the Gaza Strip because it would have reduced the ability of the Hamas to destabilize and cause problems in the West Bank. Also after such an attack the Hamas “might be willing to be a more pliant strategic address just as was the PA” after Israel’s major operation in the West Bank in 2002.<sup>27</sup> This would have been part of an attempt of repeating the successes Israel had in maintaining security in the West Bank, that is, suppressing the Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The conclusion is that Israel would have needed the PA in the Gaza Strip to avoid doing all the work there by itself. Moreover, if the Hamas in the Gaza Strip was left with very few options to harm Israel from there, it might have concentrated its efforts in the West Bank.

Israel could have seized the entire Gaza Strip if only for a few months or less, aiming at destroying rockets and their “factories,” but the Hamas could have rebuilt them. The knowledge and the vast experience that was gained in this field by the Hamas might not have vanished. The same could be said if Israel had bombed Iran’s nuclear sites. However, in the case of the Hamas, after a blow to its rocket industry, if Israel and Egypt had isolated the Gaza Strip, it would have created greater difficulty for Hamas to gain raw materials to produce high-quality missiles, particularly in large amounts.

If the Hamas had collapsed and Israel would have left the Gaza Strip, that area would have sunk into chaos, where rival factions would clash with each other. Yet Egypt and Israel could have contained the Gaza Strip in such a way that minimum weapons or ammunition would have been delivered there. Armed groups there could have produced rockets from civilian supply that would have been allowed in, but the quantity and quality of that arsenal might have been quite limited. The fact that non-Hamas outfits in the Gaza Strip might not possess the skills and knowledge the Hamas has in this field would reduce the threat to Israel. Also the military weakness of the armed groups in the Gaza Strip would have made it easier for Israel to launch raids there and maybe even for the PA to gain back control of the Gaza Strip, if only gradually. This would have been particularly possible in areas where the PA had local support, which might have grown if

people had assumed that the PA was their best hope and preferable to the anarchy they suffered from.

There was a certain similarity between the clash in the Gaza Strip in 2014 and the battle in Beirut in the 1982 war. In those two cases Israel faced a non-state Palestinian organization, the PLO in 1982 and Hamas in 2014, that bombed and infiltrated into Israel. Those groups hid behind their own populations. Israel hesitated in 1982 and 2014 to storm into huge urban areas, fearing heavy casualties among both its troops and Palestinian civilians. In 1982 Israel had an Arab ally, the Christians of Lebanon, who helped it encircle the Palestinians in Beirut. In 2014 Egypt sealed almost totally its border with the Gaza Strip, that is, with Hamas.

There were also major differences between 1982 and 2014. In 1982 the state within a state the PLO had created in Lebanon eventually collapsed, and more than 10,000 of its men were forced out of Lebanon to Arab countries such as Tunisia. In 2014 Israel did not seek a similar result, that is, to defeat and kick out the Hamas to other countries like Turkey and Qatar. Even if Israel had sought that, the Hamas would have probably refused to leave, whatever happened. Furthermore, in Lebanon in the 1980s the PLO was replaced by the Hezbollah, which turned out to be more capable than the PLO. In the Gaza Strip, if the Hamas was removed, Israel might have had to deal with a more radical but not necessarily more dangerous enemy.

### **The rockets**

In 2012 1,632 rockets hit Israel, and in 2013 the number went down to thirty-six.<sup>28</sup> The shelling from the Gaza Strip increased in mid-2014, which for Israel was the main reason for the confrontation in July that year.

Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and other groups in the Gaza Strip had about 11,000 rockets in the beginning of July 2014. The rockets carried warheads from ten to up to 140 kilograms of explosive material,<sup>29</sup> and their range went from several to seventy kilometers. A small percent of them reached even further. Israel's Iron Dome system was very effective against rockets but not against those with a range of a few kilometers.

The Iron Dome that became operational in March 2011<sup>30</sup> launched the missile Tamir against each rocket. "In cases where the rockets were aimed at more densely populated areas, two interceptors were allocated, each with a cost of \$50,000."<sup>31</sup> Some claimed the Iron Dome was useless<sup>32</sup> or that only "10 percent of Iron Dome's intercepts are successful."<sup>33</sup> Others warned about the overall cost of depending on the Iron Dome.<sup>34</sup> The United States financed the Iron Dome but did not buy the system because of its cost and its failure to intercept mortar shells.

Nevertheless without the Iron Dome, Israel would have absorbed more casualties and damage that might have brought a fast escalation, against the will of both sides. The Iron Dome, by intercepting rockets, gave the Israeli government breathing room to decide what to do, which at the time was considered by some to be a drawback as, meanwhile, Israel did not launch an offensive. Yet the delay of the ground attack allowed Israeli land units, mostly the reserves, much needed

time to get organized, train and so on. Furthermore from the start of the confrontation the Israeli air force (IAF) bashed the Gaza Strip. Therefore the Iron Dome did not restrain Israel that much. It was part of Israel's desperate attempt to return to the status quo, that is, to end the confrontation without further deterioration, which did not happen.

Because Hamas's rockets were not that accurate, they were launched at large objectives, but still many fell in open areas. The Hamas could have struck huge sites like major military bases, but it preferred to target cities. Some Israeli cities that were hit had military installations, like the harbor in the city of Ashdod, the headquarters of the general staff in Tel Aviv and so on, yet it seemed that the Hamas was aiming at civilians there, not at troops. It made more military sense for the Hamas to shoot its rockets at military airfields, from which the IAF launched thousands of sorties against the Gaza Strip. Another reasonable objective was concentrations of Israeli ground units near the Gaza Strip, especially after the land offensive started.

The Gaza Strip, which is about 365 square kilometers, has been heavily monitored by Israel using surveillance measures like planes, unmanned air vehicles (UAVs) and so on.<sup>35</sup> Yet Israeli intelligence had difficulties in finding how many, which kinds and where the Hamas stored its rockets due to Israel's other priorities like data collection on Iran and radical Islamic organizations in Sinai and Syria. The Hamas also hid many of its launchers, and some of them were operated with remote control, which secured their crews.<sup>36</sup> Rockets and launchers also were placed where annihilating them might have caused collateral damage.

Most of the shelters in Israel were not properly maintained and prepared for emergency.<sup>37</sup> Some Israelis did not have shelter at all, and/or they received a very short alarm, as low as a few seconds, which was not always enough to find proper cover. Yet Israel learned vital lessons from previous confrontations when its rear was attacked, mostly from the 2006 war in Lebanon. The home front command together with civilian authorities organized and helped the population in implementing passive defense. Because the clash occurred in July–August, during the summer vacation, schools, kindergartens and so on were empty. If the Hamas had managed to strike such a place when it was full with kids, and cause heavy casualties, Israel's retribution would have been severe, maybe even conquering the Gaza Strip and toppling the Hamas. In the 2014 confrontation seven Israeli civilians were killed from rockets and mortar shells, which might be seen as light casualties considering that about 4,500 rockets and mortar shells were launched.

Since 2001 fire from the Gaza Strip has jeopardized a tiny percent of the Israeli population, namely tens of thousands who live near the Gaza Strip. The 2014 clash made the shooting of rockets from the Gaza Strip a national problem for most of the 6 million Jews in Israel.

## **The tunnels**

In the early 1970s underground shelters were used by Palestinians to fight the IDF in the Gaza Strip.<sup>38</sup> During the 2000–2005 confrontation Palestinians in the

Gaza Strip dug tunnels to attack the IDF.<sup>39</sup> In 2014 about 200 kilometers were dug under the Gaza Strip.<sup>40</sup> There were three kinds of tunnels. The first one connected the Gaza Strip and Sinai for the purpose of transferring people and various supplies, including military ones. The second was designed to hide, protect and allow movement of both weapons and the leadership of Hamas and their families. The third was aimed at penetrating into Israel<sup>41</sup> to attack it by loading the tunnel with explosives or by sending Hamas men to infiltrate and then harm and/or kidnap Israelis.

Through 2013–2014, until and during the confrontation, there were meetings, discussions and directives from the Israeli prime minister to the IDF about dealing with tunnels.<sup>42</sup> Yet in early March 2017 Israel's state comptroller published a report about the 2014 confrontation in which the government, mostly Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, were criticized for not properly preparing the IDF to handle the tunnels.<sup>43</sup>

In the 2014 confrontation thirty-two tunnels were destroyed by the IDF.<sup>44</sup> Its troops trained for this task before the battles but not enough, and they lacked experience, combat doctrine, proper equipment and training facilities in this field. Therefore they had to improvise tactics and techniques during combat.<sup>45</sup> Although the IDF is known for its ability to adjust quickly to the demands of the battlefield, steps should have been taken in advance, for example, creating a combat doctrine. Although the IDF has many missions, establishing procedures requires relatively modest budgets and a small amount of manpower. Apparently other priorities that seemed more important and more urgent caused the lack of readiness of the IDF that was revealed in the 2014 confrontation.

The skirmishes that had to do with the tunnels were mostly inside the Gaza Strip. Israeli soldiers had to be on alert in case Hamas fighters pop up suddenly from some shaft, aiming at harming and/or capturing Israelis. The IDF directed its observations on the border with the Gaza Strip to look also to their rear, which helped expose Hamas men when they got out of their tunnels inside Israeli territory.<sup>46</sup> Some tunnels led to Israeli villages, whereby the Hamas could have committed a massacre and/or kidnaped Israelis. During the 2014 confrontation Hamas launched several attacks through the tunnels into Israel. Some were foiled, but on other occasions Israeli troops were killed. It demonstrated what could have happened if the tunnels were not discovered and destroyed.

A senior Israeli officer claimed that the Hamas did not use the tunnels to attack civilians, only troops, to avoid legitimization problems.<sup>47</sup> Yet the Hamas, not only in 2014, knowingly fired rockets and mortar shells on civilian objectives, and in the past Hamas deliberately attacked Israeli civilians with suicide bombers. Why did Hamas men act differently, that is, attack troops, when they came out of tunnels in the 2014 confrontation? It's possible they just did not have enough time to reach civilians, and assuming that any minute they might be exposed and attacked by the IDF, they preferred to take the initiative and confront their foe on their own terms. Because Israeli troops were all around, they were the ones who got hit.

The IDF operated inside the Gaza Strip, near the border, to prepare that area for the period after the confrontation as a zone where there are no tunnels.<sup>48</sup> It took

the Hamas up to two to three years to dig a tunnel that was on average twenty-five meters deep and two to three kilometers long.<sup>49</sup> By destroying the existing tunnels, Israel hoped to delay this threat for a few years. Finding and destroying the tunnels were not a major Israeli goal at the beginning of the clash, but it became one after Israel discovered the scale and length of those tunnels and had to assure the destruction of at least most of the tunnels, not just a small part of them. Israel was determined to return to the former status quo, when the Hamas did not have several underground attack routes leading inside the south of Israel. The IDF might have had an interest to keep some of the tunnels or dig its own tunnels to pave its way into the Gaza Strip, but the idea of sending Israeli troops through such a path could have been considered by Israel as being too dangerous. Moreover, Hamas's infantry advance was by foot, so narrow tunnels were suitable for it, whereas its Israeli counterpart had armored vehicles. Creating tunnels for them would have been too much work and not really necessary.

Some argued the Hamas only wanted to strike from one of the tunnels, then wait for the Israeli response and according to that decide how to use the tunnels.<sup>50</sup> Others claimed that the Hamas had a plan to send hundreds of men through the tunnels to kill and kidnap Israelis.<sup>51</sup> The Hamas might have done it in a relatively peaceful period. IDF units were deployed around the Gaza Strip all year long, but not on the same scale as in July–August 2014, which made it easier for Hamas to strike before the IDF gathered enough troops to stop all the attackers in time. Apart from that, before the 2014 confrontation Israeli troops near the fence focused on attackers coming above ground, not on infiltrators below the fence.

Nevertheless, if the Hamas had been successful, it might have ended up being a Pyrrhus victory. Killing of tens let alone hundreds of Israeli civilians would have brought a full-scale Israeli offensive into the Gaza Strip. If Hamas had grabbed Israeli hostages and taken them back to the Gaza Strip, they would have been in danger. Yet it might not have stopped the IDF from conquering the Gaza Strip, toppling the Hamas and inflicting great harm and many casualties to Hamas and its supporters.

Similar scenarios have been examined since the 1990s with regard to the PA, like an invasion of thousands of armed Palestinians from the West Bank who would have stormed Israeli civilian and military objectives before the IDF could stop them. Another option, for the Hamas in the Gaza Strip, would be to concentrate its men above ground. When the order is given, an outfit of several hundred men would suddenly charge at a certain point at the fence, blow a huge hole there and then have their fighters spread inside Israel. Below ground Hamas men had to step one after another; above ground they could have invaded Israel in quite a mass and move faster, particularly if they had all kinds of vehicles. In the tunnels they could use only small motorcycles at best.

As long as the IDF did not find all the tunnels that led into Israel, there was a possibility of Hamas infiltrating into Israel. Around the Gaza Strip on the Israeli side, there are several small villages, and one city, Sderot. During the 2014 confrontation Israel did not order the population there to leave their homes. Instead, the IDF deployed many troops, including elite units, to protect the people.

However, there was a risk that a Hamas assault would cause civilian casualties before the IDF managed to kill or capture all the attackers.

A preventive war is meant to stop a threat that might be realized within several years. In 1956 Israel launched such a war against Egypt, aiming to disrupt Egypt's military buildup. A preemptive strike is aimed against a possible attack, which might occur in a matter of weeks, days and even hours. Israel adopted that approach in 1967 against Egypt after the latter concentrated its forces in Sinai. In 2014 Israel carried out a campaign against Hamas that could have been considered as a preventive war or a preemptive strike, depending on when the Hamas might have used its tunnels to invade Israel. If there had been no clash in 2014, the Hamas might have improved its tunnels and added more, providing Israel with additional incentive to destroy them.

The IDF did not possess a system to discover tunnels<sup>52</sup> due to various considerations, the existence of other problems being one of them. In Lebanon the Hezbollah in 2014 had more than 100,000 rockets. In the Golan Heights, at least until recent years, the Syrian military could have opened fire from hundreds of artillery pieces and launched a barrage of rockets and missiles. Israel's strategy toward those challenges was to keep the status quo by deterring its foes, which meant preparing to fight them. Israel has tolerated those threats, along with many others throughout the years, and could have done the same with the tunnels that stretched into Israel from the Gaza Strip.

Israel's effort to find a solution to the tunnels goes back to the 1990s. In 2006 Israel's Ministry of Defense received more than a hundred ideas and suggestions about how to deal with tunnels.<sup>53</sup> Between 2007 and 2014 about 700 projects and thousands of experiments were carried out in this field.<sup>54</sup> Over the years Israel had to be cautious about private companies seeking to sell their products, although some, particularly the Israeli ones, truly wished to assist Israel in handling the tunnels. Personal contacts and competition among the different companies might have played a role, not necessarily a positive one, in deciding which product would be chosen.

A system to discover tunnels might function well in the Gaza Strip but not in the border with Lebanon, which has another type of soil. The system should find real functioning tunnels and not what could be a tunnel but is not. It would need to perform in harsh weather, to be easy to maintain and so on. Yet, perfect is the enemy of good. Seeking flawlessness might have been one of the key reasons for the delay in producing a system to discover tunnels. Obviously no one in the Israeli Ministry of Defense wanted to be blamed for investing a huge budget in a system that would become obsolete too soon as new and more successful ones would appear.

Just before the end of the 2014 confrontation, Israel figured out how to effectively destroy tunnels. This method was actually familiar to Israel since 2002, but it was forgotten until it was rediscovered during the battles in 2014. It allowed obliterating a tunnel from its end, even if most of its route was not known.<sup>55</sup> This is useful when Israel finds only the end of the tunnel. In the future if this current

method does not work, Israel will not be able to destroy a tunnel from the Israeli side of the border, assuming that the end of the tunnel would be there. If the IAF could not bomb the tunnel, a ground operation inside the Gaza Strip might be the only option left. No one else would do that for Israel. Either way Israel had to figure out a way to find the tunnels in time; otherwise in the future the Hamas could pave its way underground into Israel. The bottom line was that the IDF had to dig deeper, that is, to invest more in handling this challenge.

### **The Israeli offensive**

Israel decided to begin a ground campaign on 18 July 2014 because Hamas was not interested in returning “to the status quo ante.”<sup>56</sup> The Israeli ground offensive was the peak of the Israeli effort to put pressure on Hamas to stop firing at Israel. The Israeli attack was meant also to destroy tunnels that led into Israel.

Maj. Gen. Nimrod Shefer, IDF’s head of strategic operational planning, claimed in late September 2014 that

the fact that both sides were operationally prepared for battle – IDF Chief of General Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz instructed the army in advance to be ready for a July conflict in Gaza, he said – along with their mutual lack of understanding, spurred the armed confrontation.<sup>57</sup>

The combination of military readiness and wrong strategic calculation proved to be a recipe for war, not for the first time. When a military both feels ready to fight and thinks war is expected at a certain date, there is a higher probability that battles will occur. Both Hamas and Israel had been training for a war between them, and a collision was not unimaginable, considering that Israel’s last two confrontations (2008–2009 and 2012) were against Hamas, and for the latter Israel has always been its main foe. However, even if in July 2014 the IDF was not fully ready to clash with Hamas, due to Israel’s clear military superiority over Hamas, the IDF could have handled another round against this outfit. This was particularly true in the 2014 confrontation, when Israel had quite limited objectives. As to Hamas, a clash, when its military wing was not well prepared, was possible if it served a vital political interest.

In the year before the 2014 confrontation, the IDF conducted only three brigade-level exercises. The infantry brigades that carried the burden of the fight almost did not have time to properly train for combat because they were busy in day-to-day security activity such as patrolling and guarding the borders.<sup>58</sup> However the IDF prepared to attack the Hamas. Exercises were conducted from the division echelon all the way down to the platoon level. The IDF got ready to penetrate deep into the Gaza Strip, not only a few kilometers.<sup>59</sup> The depth of Gaza Strip is at most twelve kilometers, and storming all the way to the heart of Gaza city might have shocked the Hamas and disrupted its war efforts. But the IDF limited the ground operation to the outskirts of Gaza city, allowing the Hamas to organize its defense

and send reinforcements to the frontline. In addition Israeli air bombardments in the 2014 confrontation went on for ten days before the ground attack, similar to what happened in the 2008–2009 confrontation, which again gave the Hamas time to get ready for Israel's land offensive.

On 12 July 2014 an Israeli naval commando unit landed in the north of the Gaza Strip and attacked rocket launchers.<sup>60</sup> Some IDF officers thought that during the 2014 confrontation, there were not enough daring operations by special forces behind enemy lines.<sup>61</sup> Because the Gaza Strip is quite small and surrounded from almost all sides by the IDF, it seemed relatively easy to carry out raids there, assuming Israeli troops could reach their targets and pull out very fast. They could penetrate and retreat by land, air and sea. For example the IDF could have executed airborne assaults inside the Gaza Strip and by that to outflank areas full of bobby traps and mines. For that purpose the IDF had dozens of helicopters, like the CH-53 and UH-60 Blackhawk.

Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, hailed from one of the most famous elite units in the IDF, Sayeret Matkal. Israel's defense minister, Moshe Ya'alon, was the former chief of general staff, and along his career he commanded several crack units. IDF's chief of general staff, Binyamin Gantz, had a similar background too. Those three Israeli leaders, who called the shots on the Israeli side in the 2014 confrontation, could have initiated a series of raids, with top-quality units, all over the Gaza Strip, catching the Hamas off guard, taking it out of balance, undermining its sense of safety and disrupting its command and control. Israel avoided commando assaults, fearing complications like running into ambushes, which might have led to heavy casualties among its troops. Some of them might have also been captured. Instead Israel chose to attack the Gaza Strip in a traditional conventional way: sending massive columns of armor and infantry. They advanced slowly and carefully with strong air and artillery support. Israel strove to exploit its clear advantages in armor and firepower, although it could have combined land, air and sea raids.

Maj. Gen. Nimrod Shefer "dismissed the criticism of the IDF proclaiming its offensive moves appeared to lack creativity, and asserted that the inherent restraints of a strategy that seeks to maintain the status quo prescribed the army's largely defensive posture and limited usage of force." The IDF penetrated less than two kilometers into the Gaza Strip.<sup>62</sup> The objection of the Israeli government to overthrow the Hamas and Israel's fear of heavy casualties prevented the IDF from moving deep into the Gaza Strip. The IDF attacked all over the Gaza Strip but only by launching bombardments that could have been much more destructive. Israel's ground operations were confined to a narrow sector near the border. Under those constraints it was more difficult, although not impossible, to implement innovative ideas.

Israel's 1st Infantry Brigade was criticized for storming the neighborhood of Shejaiya directly and not from the flank, without implementing some kind of trick. Officers in that unit claimed their purpose was to strike with a massive force.<sup>63</sup> But this did not contradict the need to exploit any possible advantage, like appearing

from an unexpected direction and/or using other surprising tactics that the enemy did not foresee.

The IDF attacked the Gaza Strip with its Gaza division and two others, the 36th and the 162nd, which were supposed to be ready to fight on each of Israel's fronts.<sup>64</sup> Israel's 401st armor brigade commenced three brigade-level attacks after softening its foe in the following order: launching bombardments from land and sea artillery, conducting air strikes and then firing from tanks. The next stage saw infantry going in with D-9 bulldozers to clear paths from mines and IEDs. Every house suspected to be booby-trapped received a shell from a tank. Many of those places exploded when hit that way, which indicated they had stored explosives. The 401st Brigade was organized in brigade battle groups, an IDF standard fighting formation. Each one included one tank battalion, two infantry battalions and one battalion of combat engineers and artillery.<sup>65</sup> This buildup and the combat doctrine were meant to achieve maximum effect by exploiting the advantage of each corps.

The IDF's sophisticated command and communication systems were essential.<sup>66</sup> Tanks like those from the 401st Brigade were provided with up-to-date and actually real-time information. Each member of the tank crew monitored the enemy's movements and locations on his own personal screen. The process of finding and firing at targets was much faster than in the past. When using the cannon, there were more than a 90 percent chance of hitting the target within the first attempt. The data was shared by the entire brigade and came directly from its headquarters. Because so much was computerized, the new generation of Israel's armor troops was not familiar with reading maps, which worried their commanders and therefore insisted on soldiers keeping maps as a backup.<sup>67</sup> Overdependence on computerized systems might cause problems in a future war if those systems are disrupted by enemy activity like jamming.

Furthermore, in the Gaza Strip the battlefield was quite small and a few kilometers from the Israeli border, which made collecting information easier for the Israelis. A future fight might occur dozens of kilometers from the Israeli border, and under such circumstances military intelligence might not flow as expected. Israeli soldiers, who got accustomed to receiving the data without making any effort, might run into serious setbacks if they don't know how to gather it themselves.

During the 2014 confrontation Israel absorbed about 900,000 cyber attacks a day, most of them, according to Israel, from Iran. Most of the cyber attacks were against civilian objectives. However

hackers managed to plant a Twitter message in the IDF spokesman's account. The message said that two rockets had hit the Israeli nuclear reactor, causing a radioactive leak endangering the nearby city of Dimona. This was one of the isolated successes of that cyber attack. The vast majority of the attacks were repulsed.<sup>68</sup>

It showed how Israel faced cyber assaults from states, organizations and individuals from across the world; all of them wished to bash Israel and/or to assist

Hamas without exposing their real identities. That way they avoided taking responsibility, which would have exposed them to retribution. For Iran such a strategy worked well as part of its cold war with Israel. Iran, in spite of the rift between it and Hamas, contributed to the Palestinian outfit by launching a cyber bombardment against Israel. The potential of cyber warfare is clear, and in the future it could be a game changer, including in military operations and maybe up to the tactical level.

### **Israeli firepower**

For the IDF firepower, like from the air, was supposed to ensure low casualties among its troops.<sup>69</sup> In the 2014 confrontation the IAF used only 10 percent of its potential.<sup>70</sup> It launched strikes such as attacking 100 targets at the same time in the neighborhood of Shejaiya on 22 July, dropping bombs weighing up to one ton. The goal was to clear the way for ground units.<sup>71</sup> In spite of the impressive achievements of the IAF, it was not the ultimate solution in locating and annihilating the tunnels and the rockets, particularly as a large part of the rockets' infrastructures and bases was taken underground. A land maneuver was required to collect information and to destroy both rockets and tunnels with less collateral damage than air bombardments cause.

In the 2014 confrontation the IAF dropped about 100 ton of ammunition. Air support to ground units by F-16s "was provided within 30 minutes. In many cases, it took only 20 minutes for air power to arrive."<sup>72</sup> The presence of Israeli ground troops forced Hamas men to confront them, which exposed the Hamas to air strikes, mostly from AH-64 attack helicopters. Dozens were killed in this way,<sup>73</sup> which was used before by the IDF. Yet it required Israeli ground troops to be at risk too as kind of decoy.

In a certain moment in a battle in the neighborhood of Shejaiya, the Israeli artillery fired 600 shells around a force from the 1st Brigade, which ran into stiff Palestinian resistance. The Israeli troops stayed inside their heavily protected armored vehicles, which shielded them from artillery shells falling about 100 meters from them. Although the minimum distance for artillery fire in urban areas is 250 meters, none of the Israelis was harmed, whereas 37 armed Palestinians were killed.<sup>74</sup> The IAF also reduced the minimum distance between the targets and Israel's ground units as part of close air support.<sup>75</sup> IDF's assumption in occasions like those was that Israeli troops faced more danger from Palestinian fighters than from Israeli bombs and shells. In some cases Israeli troops might have been able to withdraw, if only temporarily, that is, get away from the targets that were about to be bashed. This would have increased the safety of the Israeli force, but apparently the IDF was confident enough that its aircrews and artillery gunners would not hit their brothers in arms in the infantry and armor.

During the 2014 campaign the IDF fired about 34,000 artillery shells into the Gaza Strip; half of them were smoke rounds. Hundreds of camera-guided Tamuz missiles were launched as well. The IDF did not fire "widely destructive

cluster munitions or Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) into Gaza, given the dense Palestinian population there.<sup>76</sup> The IDF used artillery in the Gaza Strip in the past, with deadly results.<sup>77</sup> The lack of accuracy of the artillery increased the probability of hitting civilians by mistake. In some cases civilians were called to evacuate their homes before artillery was used there.

During the 2014 confrontation Israeli tanks fired 14,500 shells, mostly those that were effective more against armored vehicles than against targets in urban warfare.<sup>78</sup> Only 500 of the tank shells that were fired were from a new type, with a longer range and a capability to explode inside a facility and, by that, harm those who were inside.<sup>79</sup> This ammunition was required because the Hamas relied on houses for cover.

The IDF absorbed criticism inside Israel for using too much guided munition. Besides its high cost it might have been needed had there been another front. IDF's chief of general staff, Binyamin Gantz, claimed the IDF assumed there would be no second front in Lebanon, and by using guided munition in the Gaza Strip, the IDF achieved more and protected its troops. He also implied that conquering the Gaza Strip would have demanded resources. This kind of talk could have been understood as saying that conquering the Gaza Strip would be at the expense of IDF's readiness for a possible clash in Lebanon.<sup>80</sup> Either way Hezbollah did not fire at Israel because Iran, Hezbollah's patron, did not want that happening at that particular time. Israel too would not have initiated an offensive against the Hezbollah while fighting the Hamas.

In past wars such as the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel started an offensive on one front, against Egypt, and within several hours Israel was involved on another front, against Jordan. Israel's foes were then much stronger than Hamas and Hezbollah now, so the risk Israel took in 2014, that is, allocating guided weapons against Hamas, was quite low, even if there was a clash with the Hezbollah as well. In 1967, although the IDF was focused on Egypt, there was no guarantee of a win, and losing the war might have put Israel's survival in danger. In 2014 Israel did not face such a threat because Israel enjoyed military superiority over Hamas. Accurate guided fire was needed to protect not only Israeli soldiers but the Palestinian population as well. Another factor was that in contrast to 1967 in 2014, Israel had much closer ties with the United States, which would have increased the odds of resupply of guided munitions in case of a war with Hezbollah.

At any given time during the 50-day campaign [the IAF] had an average of 40 air platforms of different types operating in the same congested airspace over Gaza. . . . Those aircraft had to operate in constant coordination and deconfliction with Iron Dome interceptors, artillery and tactical ground-launched UAVs flying through the same airspace.<sup>81</sup>

It demonstrated the complexity of using various weapon systems in a very small area.

Col. Nati Cohen, head of the Planning Department at the C4i Teleprocessing Branch, said that during the 2014 war,

fighter jet pilots received data on a digital map showing location of enemy targets from tank commanders and live images of the target. The same image was available to artillery gunners and navy ship missile station operators. All of them could coordinate their firepower to hit the same targets.<sup>82</sup>

It was another example of the capabilities of Israeli firepower.

### **Hamas' military performance**

The IDF had Hamas outnumbered three to one.<sup>83</sup> The Hamas had about 15,000 men in July 2014, half of whom were skilled in firing antitank missiles, mortars and sniping.<sup>84</sup> The Hamas, which had several kinds of antitank missiles and rockets, managed to coordinate the fire of three or four of them at the same time.<sup>85</sup> IDF's chief of general staff, Binyamin Gantz, admitted the Hamas conducted some courageous actions.<sup>86</sup> The Hamas "showed a higher-than-expected level of adaptability and flexibility under fire."<sup>87</sup> Its leaders communicated with each other by dispatching messengers and making calls from land phones that were not as easy to intercept as conversations on cell phones. The Hamas also provided a well-organized plan to its six territorial brigades, which saved communicating orders during the fight and also reduced the chances of exposing the location of Hamas's leaders.<sup>88</sup> However, this method has known downsides. It was impossible to anticipate and plan every step in advance because a battlefield is fluid. When there is loose contact with field units they get more freedom of action, but this puts more pressure on their commanders, who have to act according to their understanding of the events without seeing the full picture of the entire front. The top brass of the Hamas might have had a similar problem if reports from the frontline did not arrive steadily due to lack of communication. Another challenge was to coordinate among the different units.

Because the Gaza Strip is quite narrow, it gives the defender almost no depth. The IDF could have cut this area to separate parts in a matter of hours and to isolate cities in the Gaza Strip. The IDF could have stormed the Gaza Strip from almost all sides with ground, air and sea units. The Hamas could not have stopped the Israeli ground advance only to try to inflict maximum casualties upon Israeli troops. Israeli aircraft did not face a solid air defense in the Gaza Strip – at most some anti-aircraft missiles like SA-7. The Hamas might have held antiship missiles, with a range of up to thirty-five kilometers,<sup>89</sup> that could have put at risk Israeli vessels that participated in the offensive by both firing on targets and providing information. The Hamas also had trained with powered paragliding,<sup>90</sup> but their low speed, relatively loud noise and lack of any armor would have helped the IDF expose and intercept them even with light arms.

"Israel reduced Hamas's military capabilities by less than 7%," claimed Abu Marzouk, a senior figure in the Hamas.<sup>91</sup> In Israel the estimation was that "at least

15 percent of Hamas's military personnel were killed or wounded."<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless the outfit managed to hold on, which showed its strength and survival capabilities.

### **Protecting the population**

Avoiding a ground offensive deep into the Gaza Strip prevented Israel from destroying Hamas command and control centers. Air strikes had to be used with caution owing to the proximity of Hamas headquarters to civilian sites.<sup>93</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman claimed that the 2014 confrontation in the Gaza Strip was an example of using "the population as shields, and manipulation of popular support, acts as a critical limiting factor on the ability of high-technology forces to actually use their military capabilities."<sup>94</sup> Some military analysts in Israel preferred to inflict a "heavy blow," but such an approach could have caused "accidents, greater civilian casualties, and a loss of international support," which would have damaged Israel.<sup>95</sup> Uzi Rabi and Harel Chorev explained that Hamas exploited Israel's weakness in regard to its own casualties and those of Palestinian civilians. Hamas used that to gain points in public opinion among Arabs and Western states as well.<sup>96</sup>

Israel's constraints led it to call and warn about 120,000 Palestinians living in the north of the Gaza Strip to evacuate their homes because the IDF was about to attack there. Before the battles began the IDF assumed the Palestinians would obey such an instruction, as Lebanese populations did in the 2006 war. But in 2014 only 20,000 Palestinians left. The rest stayed because they either assumed Israel would not conduct a massive bombardment if its targets are civilian ones, or they simply feared more the threats expressed by the Hamas to settle the score with those who retreated from a battlefield.<sup>97</sup> It could be argued that Hamas believes the overall conflict is for the sake of the Palestinian people, so their civilians sometimes have to be some kind of troops, that is, to be on the frontline. Either way during the confrontation, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had to leave their homes, up to half a million. About 250,000 of them found cover in the schools and facilities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).<sup>98</sup> IDF claimed Hamas men exploited those places as bases by emerging out of them to fire and then returning back there.<sup>99</sup> No wonder why there were incidents in which noncombatants were killed, including in those places, because they stayed in urban areas where the Hamas had its infrastructure, command and control centers, bunkers and so on.

Hamas could have implemented several measures to protect its people. A total evacuation of population outside urban areas would have been the best. The Gaza Strip is very crowded, but it has open and empty areas big enough to hold hundreds of thousands of people. Israel and the international community could have organized camps similar to the ones built for Syrian refugees in Jordan. Those in the Gaza Strip would have been much more temporary, for several weeks, until the confrontation was over, before the winter. The location of the camps, due to their distance from Hamas strongholds, would have made those sites not only safer but also easier to provide with basic needs such as water, food, medical services and so on. Those camps would have had tents, which give no protection

to Hamas men, compared with houses and buildings in urban areas, which are made out of concrete. Hamas also prepared in advance to fight inside Gaza city by laying down IEDs and bobby traps along with digging tunnels. In open and empty areas near Gaza city the Hamas would not have enjoyed buildings with underground shelters and/or full with explosives. However, forcing hundreds of thousands to leave their homes, even temporarily and while staying within their own territory in the Gaza Strip, is not a step to be taken lightly.

There was criticism inside Israel that the IDF gave the Hamas too much time to regroup when the IDF warned certain neighborhoods in the Gaza Strip they might be attacked, urging the people there to evacuate. The IDF sometimes waited days before storming them, which allowed Hamas men to improve their positions there, to lay down IED and bobby traps and so on.

During the 2014 confrontation 4,000 alarms were raised inside Israel, although near the Gaza Strip Israelis had only fifteen seconds to find cover.<sup>100</sup> Israelis also had shelters and/or protected space inside their homes. Those are two examples how in comparison with Palestinians, Israelis had better defense, with all its drawbacks. Furthermore the IDF could have ended the fire from the Gaza Strip by conquering it, whereas the Hamas could not have seized any part of Israeli soil, so the Hamas could not have stopped Israeli attacks.

During the 2006 war, the fire from Lebanon caused about 200,000 Israelis to flee from the north to the center of Israel,<sup>101</sup> which was much more secured. The Gaza Strip, about forty-one kilometers long, is like a wedge inside the south of Israel, which makes it a springboard for assaults mostly against several dozen Israeli villages and towns that are located a few kilometers from the Gaza Strip. One of them is the city of Sedrot, the population of which had grown in the years before 2014 in spite of bombardments from the Gaza Strip. During the 2014 confrontation Israel did not prevent its citizens from escaping to safer areas, but for many Israelis leaving their jobs and/or their homes for the duration of the confrontation was not a real option. On the other hand staying put was a problem, particularly for those with families living near the Gaza Strip because they were exposed to fire more than the rest of Israel. Barrages of mortars caused one small village, Nahal Oz, to be almost completely abandoned. Some supported evacuating other places in that area, at least the children, as long as the confrontation went on.<sup>102</sup>

The IDF was accused for attacking Palestinian populations without warning during the 2014 confrontation.<sup>103</sup> In November 2014 General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued that "I actually do think that Israel went to extraordinary lengths to limit collateral damage and civilian casualties."<sup>104</sup> In May 2015 some Israeli soldiers, including officers, claimed that during the 2014 war, there was excessive use of firepower against buildings and sometimes against Palestinians as well.<sup>105</sup>

There were also disputes about how many Palestinians were killed in the 2014 confrontation and how many of them were combatants.<sup>106</sup> Palestinian populations absorbed casualties due to human errors such as lack of or wrong information. In some situations, although there were high chances that Palestinian civilians might be harmed, the IDF still attacked because of the need to strike Hamas arsenals

and/or men near noncombatants. Israel tried to avoid as much as possible hitting Palestinian civilians but nevertheless killed hundreds of them, whereas the Hamas, which strove to kill Israeli civilians, failed almost completely in this task. This tragic gap between the intentions and the results played into the hands of the Hamas and to those who were eager to accuse Israel of war crimes.

The IDF has trained in recent years “population officers” who are supposed to balance between the demands of the IDF and the needs of Palestinian civilians during a confrontation.<sup>107</sup> In the 2014 confrontation those officers joined the combat units. The IDF implemented other steps as well as part of the effort to reduce collateral damage. One of them was hitting a building with a small bomb, which warned the people living there to leave their home immediately before a much more devastating bombardment would strike that place, aiming at a military target there. The IDF also took into consideration legal arguments before attacking an objective. Those kinds of actions sometimes caused the IDF casualties and extended the length of the campaign. A UN commission that investigated the 2014 war published a report on 22 June 2015. It blamed both sides for harming civilians, claiming it “was able to gather substantial information pointing to serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law by Israel and by Palestinian armed groups. In some cases, these violations may amount to war crimes.”<sup>108</sup> Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that “the report is biased.”<sup>109</sup> State Department Spokesman John Kirby said the United States rejects “the basis under which this particular commission of inquiry was established because of the very clear bias against Israel in it.”<sup>110</sup> The Hamas obviously supported the criticism against Israel while ignoring its responsibility for its own actions.<sup>111</sup>

### **Protecting Israeli troops**

Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Shalom Harari, former senior Israeli intelligence officer, claimed that penetrating deep into the Gaza Strip, and fighting in the tunnels there, might have cost the IDF up to 700 dead.<sup>112</sup> Even if the losses were much less, several hundred soldiers, it would have been for Israel a huge price to pay, considering its known sensitivity to casualties, including among its troops and civilians. Therefore strategically, by limiting the goals of its attack, that is, by striving to return to the status quo, Israel saved the lives of many of its combatants.

In the 2008–2009 and 2012 confrontations, the IDF moved its assembly areas away from the border with the Gaza Strip as a lesson from the 2006 war, when twelve of its troops who were on the border with Lebanon were killed by a bombardment.<sup>113</sup> In 2014 before the ground campaign, Israeli troops were kept out of areas that were targeted by short-range fire from the Gaza Strip. But as the fight went on, some units stayed very close to the border inside Israeli territory.<sup>114</sup> In one of those places on 28 July 2014, a mortar shell killed four Israeli soldiers.<sup>115</sup> Some of the troops were not briefed how to act under bombardments. There was fortification, but it was too far away and not big enough to hold all the troops.<sup>116</sup> Following that attack the IDF emphasized to its troops that they must wear their

body armor and be ready to enter their armored vehicles or a nearby fortification.<sup>117</sup> Yet a few days later another mortar attack killed five Israeli troops near the Gaza Strip. Israeli soldiers stationed there had to dig foxholes, which are an easy, fast, simple and effective solution. This would have provided an alternative shelter to an armored vehicle or a fortification if they were not close enough at the time of alert.

The IDF was wrong for keeping its troops too close to the border in the range of the mortars. Several kilometers back would have been enough for Israeli units to stay out of mortar fire. When necessary, those troops could have used their vehicles to pass the short distance that separated them and the border. They would have arrived in a matter of minutes and then enter the Gaza Strip. Waiting right on the border to exploit success in battles inside the Gaza Strip by joining them immediately and gaining momentum was not required militarily. The Hamas was not a conventional military that could have gathered strong reserves to stop a breakthrough. It means the IDF could have afforded to keep its troops further away from the border.

The IDF's most modern tank, the Merkava Mark 4, has the new armored shield protective-active, which defends against antitank missiles by destroying them in the air before they reach the tank. This was proved several times in the Gaza Strip during the 2014 confrontation.<sup>118</sup> The IDF maneuvered also with the M-113, an old armored personnel vehicle (APC) that has been in service in the IDF since 1971. Its vulnerability was showed already in the 1982 war in Lebanon and again in 2014 in the Gaza Strip.<sup>119</sup> The IDF also used the Achzarit and the Namer; both are APC that are much more protected than the M-113. Yet the IDF did not possess enough of them, so the M-113 was kept for tasks like logistical missions and because it was the only APC in the IDF that could carry mortars. Sometimes APCs were not needed when Israeli infantry marched to the battlefield that was a few kilometers from the border. Yet when the troops were under mortar attack, an APC, even the M-113, would have protected them, if only from shrapnel.

The IDF has several kinds of body armor: one against shrapnel and another more effective and heavier, which defends against certain bullets.<sup>120</sup> The latter was required for infantry and other soldiers, such as combat engineers, who were more exposed than those inside a tank. Falling on the ground, particularly a sandy one, which absorbs shrapnel, was another well-known way to shield troops.

The tiny penetration into the Gaza Strip allowed rapid evacuating of wounded back to Israel.<sup>121</sup> IAF helicopters conducted 120 sorties to evacuate 250 wounded troops. Medical candies, replacing morphine to ease the pain, helped hundreds of wounded troops. Protective glasses that were given to Israeli soldiers reduced injuries to the eyes by about 50 percent compared with the 2006 war in Lebanon.<sup>122</sup> Israeli troops also learned before the battles how to spot and offer basic mental help to their brothers in arms. Mental health officers were stationed where they could assist.<sup>123</sup> It was important especially to those who had never experienced intense combat before, and there were many of them, mostly in regular units.

Five Israeli troops were killed from friendly fire during the 2014 confrontation.<sup>124</sup> Those tragic cases occurred in spite of IDF advanced command, control

and intelligence capabilities, which helped Israeli forces know both their position and that of Hamas. Confusion and the fog of war were expected, considering the nature of urban warfare, particularly when the foe could emerge not only from each flank but from underground as well. Incidents of friendly fire might also have had to do with the fear of being captured by Hamas or other Palestinian outfit.

There was severe criticism inside Israel regarding the protocol of response to a snatched Israeli soldier. The procedure allowed massive use of firepower, aimed at preventing the enemy from dragging the abducted soldier to a hiding place in hostile territory. On 1 August 2014, after an Israeli second lieutenant was captured by Hamas, IDF aircraft and artillery, as part of the attempt to get him back, killed dozens and maybe up to 150 people, most of them civilians.<sup>125</sup> IDF officers were trained to take calculated risks trying to foil the fall of one of their troops into enemy hands but not to the extent of jeopardizing his life. Yet many in the IDF believed the idea was to stop the capture of an Israeli soldier at any cost.<sup>126</sup> Israel sought to avoid a situation in which the Hamas could pressurize Israel's public opinion until the latter accepted the release of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in return for one Israeli soldier as it was with Gilad Shalit in 2011. It was clear Israel was vulnerable on this issue, and indeed it created a fierce debate within the country. In the 2014 confrontation there were two incidents when Israeli troops seemed to be captured, but eventually they were declared dead.

About two dozen Hamas fighters were captured during the 2014 confrontation, and more than 5,000 Palestinians, including from the Hamas, were already present in Israeli jails.<sup>127</sup> This did not break the Hamas, which is a smaller entity compared with Israel, so the latter should have educated its people that one or even more Israeli prisoners in the hands of Hamas did not amount to a national disaster but was simply another part of the cost of the conflict.

Israel's Shin Bet security service and the directorate of IDF intelligence provided Israeli troops with high-quality information during the confrontation, which saved Israeli lives. The Shin Bet assumed before the confrontation that the Hamas planned to attack, whereas the directorate of IDF intelligence concluded the clash was a result of escalation. Later on the Shin Bet suspected the directorate of IDF intelligence was trying to minimize the fact that it had missed evaluating correctly Hamas's intentions. The directorate of IDF intelligence, on the other hand, thought the Shin Bet's account of their a priori warning was exaggerated and was not sufficiently backed by facts.<sup>128</sup> The difficulty of making the right strategic assessment was demonstrated in the disputes between those two major intelligence organizations, contrary to their joint effort and achievements in gaining accurate tactical data. It seems it was easier to produce tactical intelligence than to evaluate the enemy's strategic intentions.

A total of 82,201 Israelis were mobilized.<sup>129</sup> The deterioration into a confrontation came as a surprise, but because the air campaign lasted ten days, the IDF had time to organize its troops, including the reserves. Although rockets hit almost all over Israel, they did not disrupt the mobilizing of the reserves. Those bombardments made the necessity for the call to arms very clear for Israeli reserve soldiers.

Reserves were called to replace regulars in other sectors or to assist them. Only a few reserve battalions were actually involved in the fight, and even that was in a very limited way.<sup>130</sup> Usually reserves have more combat experience than regulars, and this was true also in 2014. Some of the reserves who were in their thirties participated in the last ground attack into the Gaza Strip in January 2009, in the 2006 war in Lebanon and in the 2000–2005 confrontation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In all those clashes there was urban warfare, as in 2014, so the knowledge from previous confrontations should have helped the IDF. However, there is also a downside to mobilizing reserves. Budget cuts reduced the amount of exercises in the year before the confrontation, and reserves were naturally less trained than the regulars. Mobilizing tens of thousands of reserves is also very costly. Reserves, even before they return to their civilian lives, might be less restrained and express more protest and criticism than regulars. Many of the reserves are married with children in contrast to almost all the regulars. That makes it easier to send the latter into combat. Those aspects explain why the regulars carried the main burden of the fight in 2014 and may have influenced the decision not to expand the land operation or conquer the Gaza Strip. Such an undertaking would have required throwing into battle many of the reserves.

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### 3 The 2014 confrontation

#### Outside intervention and outcome

The 2014 confrontation concerned several states, mostly those in the Middle East. Some opposed Hamas, like Egypt, whereas others supported it, such as Qatar and Turkey. The United States tried to act as a broker between the two sides. When the battles finally ended, there were disputes about which side won. Concerned parties put their heads together to come up with ideas about how to prevent the next clash.

#### **Egypt and Hamas**

Since 2007 Israel has been striving to contain the Hamas in the Gaza Strip by isolating it on the ground and from the air and sea. The Hamas was left with access to Sinai, that is, to Egypt. In the clash of 2008–2009, Egypt, supporting the PA, avoided expressing severe criticism against Israel, probably awaiting the Hamas to collapse. In the 2012 collision in the Gaza Strip, Egypt played a vital role as a mediator. For many years Egypt was also partly responsible for the clashes between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip because Egypt did not prevent weapons like rockets and military experts passing through the Sinai to the Gaza Strip. Egypt's attempts, such as they were, to reduce that smuggling were not enough. The need to limit as much as possible the military smuggling to the Gaza Strip has proven to be indispensable. Since late 2013 Egypt has made serious effort in this matter, resulting in the Hamas being forced to rely on self-producing rockets.

In 2014 Egypt had destroyed many tunnels that led from Sinai to the Gaza Strip. Some smaller ones have remained, yet they are big enough to transfer men, weapons and materials.<sup>1</sup> In May 2014, Israel's blockade on the Gaza Strip was with "full cooperation with Egypt."<sup>2</sup> Yet, after Egypt

closed nearly all of the tunnels along Egypt's border with Gaza but didn't compensate for the loss of those avenues by allowing the passage above ground of needed supplies, some Israeli officials said they had privately begun to raise alarm bells about the severity of Cairo's decisions.<sup>3</sup>

When Morsi was Egypt's president in 2012–2013, he did not want to receive the Gaza Strip given Egypt's grim experience from controlling that area in

1949–1967 “and the mounting issues of overpopulation, poverty, and terrorism in the Gaza Strip.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed “Egypt has traditionally sought to shift responsibility for Gaza to Israel,”<sup>75</sup> and that was another reason for Egypt to close the passages from Sinai to the Gaza Strip, for as a result Hamas would have to depend on Israel. The transfer of supply from Israel to the Gaza Strip prevented a total blockade on the Gaza Strip, that is, on the Hamas. However the latter ran into major economic trouble. It was a tragedy that Israel and the Hamas collided in 2014 to a large extent because Egypt cut off the Gaza Strip from Sinai.

Egypt accepted Israel’s pounding the Hamas because it did not fear any retribution from Hamas, which was barely holding on against Israel, and opening a second front against Egypt would have been impossible for Hamas. This means that although Egypt was seen as an ally of Israel, only Israel paid in blood and treasure, a fact that by itself did not bother Egypt that much, if at all.

Egypt saw Hamas as a threat. “A weakened, or even destroyed, Hamas is a notion Egypt would welcome with open arms.”<sup>76</sup> Egypt’s government wished not only to punish the Hamas for its assistance to its foes inside Egypt but also to prevent the Hamas from continuing its efforts. However, a collapse of Hamas might cause problems for Egypt. Chaos in the Gaza Strip might lead to a flow of refugees into Egypt and/or a possible rise of groups even more radical and hostile toward Egypt than Hamas. Moreover, a massive Israeli offensive deep inside the Gaza Strip would have been an escalation that might have increased public pressure on Egypt’s leadership to assist the Palestinians, which would have helped the Hamas as well.

During the confrontation Egyptian media “went out of its way in characterizing Hamas as reckless and irresponsible for putting the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian civilians in jeopardy.”<sup>77</sup> However Egypt’s government had to maneuver between its anti-Hamas approach and the sympathy the Egyptian population had for the Palestinians.<sup>8</sup> On 26 July, an Egyptian government news site, Aharam online, referred to Palestinian casualties as “terrorists,” which brought other Egyptian news sites to criticize it. In response Aharam online claimed they fully support the Palestinians and that their report was meant to show what they considered as Israeli lies about casualties.<sup>9</sup> This was an example of the conflict of interests in Egypt. Nevertheless, Egypt’s overall government hostility toward the Hamas made it more complicated to reach a cease fire, using Egypt as a broker, because the Hamas had no trust in Egypt.

“Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Jordan share the common goal of weakening Hamas.”<sup>10</sup> Palestinians in the Gaza Strip received less support from the Arab world than in the past.<sup>11</sup> “It is remarkable that the few pro-Hamas demonstrations in Europe during the war were far larger than anything seen in the Middle East during the fighting.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand some assumed that “Palestinian public opinion – as well as the mood across the Arab street – has significantly shifted in favor of Hamas.”<sup>13</sup> Another claim was that “although its geographic and strategic position means Egypt’s engagement in Palestinian affairs cannot be ignored, Egypt has lost whatever cards it had to win the confidence of regional and international powers.”<sup>14</sup> However lack of consensus about Hamas in the Arab world allowed Egypt to be tough on the Hamas.

Some in the Gaza Strip would have been happy to get rid of the Hamas.<sup>15</sup> In July 2013 the Egyptian military together with massive public support overthrew the Muslim brotherhood (MB). In the Gaza Strip a popular uprising against the Hamas would have no military backup. Israel could not endorse such an uprising, and the Palestinians would refuse to collaborate openly with the IDF against the Hamas. The only option was sending the Egyptian military to defeat Hamas and any other armed group in the Gaza Strip. Egypt was certainly strong enough to do that and also motivated as part of its fight against a similar enemy in Sinai. After all helping the Palestinians was always a known Egyptian aspiration. Egyptian troops who are Sunni Arabs like the Palestinians might be welcomed at least by some Palestinians as part of a joint move to start a new era in the Gaza Strip.

The Hamas enjoyed the backing of Turkey and Qatar, including in the 2014 confrontation when those two states angled “for a one-sided deal that would ignore Israel’s security concerns.”<sup>16</sup> Turkey is not an Arab state, but it is a regional power. Qatar is a tiny Arab state but influential due to its wealth and control of Al-Jazeera, and it strongly supported Hamas during the 2014 confrontation.

Between the years 1996–2009 Israel had a diplomatic delegation in Qatar that was sent back by Qatar owing to the 2008–2009 confrontation in the Gaza Strip.<sup>17</sup> Israel had also enjoyed fruitful relations with Turkey, including in military matters.<sup>18</sup> Alon Liel mentioned that “Israel has never demanded exclusivity regarding its special relations with Turkey, and Turkey, for its part, never intended to harm its relations with the Arab world as a consequence of its warm relations with the Jewish state.”<sup>19</sup> In 2008 Turkey served as a broker between Israel and Syria as part of peace talks. However, since then relations between Israel and Turkey have deteriorated, particularly between the Israeli government and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan,<sup>20</sup> although mutual trade has continued between the two states.<sup>21</sup> During the 2014 confrontation Erdogan expressed very harsh criticism against Israel.<sup>22</sup> The latter, by insisting that Egypt would be the broker and not Turkey and Qatar, allowed Egypt to regain a leadership position in the Arab world.<sup>23</sup> Egypt therefore benefited from the rift between Israel and Turkey.

## **The role of the United States**

In 2014 Khaled Elgindy

draw a distinction between conflict management and conflict resolution. While not mutually exclusive, he claimed that the George W. Bush administration focused too much on conflict management, while the Obama administration focuses on conflict resolution “to the total neglect of any conflict management sense. Any real viable peace process has to have both.”<sup>24</sup>

During the 2014 confrontation the United States sought to end it while managing it so it would not escalate and cause too much collateral damage.

In the 2014 confrontation the United States strove for a balanced approach to avoid annoying both sides and by that to keep its relevance in the region.<sup>25</sup> Aaron

David Miller claimed that “the United States is not really an honest broker. It’s much closer to Israel on security issues – always has been, always will be. But America can be an effective broker.”<sup>26</sup> Zaki Shalomis argued that in the 2014 confrontation, “the United States allowed Israel fairly large freedom of action.”<sup>27</sup> However the relations between the two states in recent years have been “extremely bumpy.”<sup>28</sup> According to Oded Eran during the 2014 confrontation, there was “one of the lowest points in relations” between the two states.<sup>29</sup> Robert Satloff said that “by the end of the conflict, the U.S.-Israel relationship was brought to the brink of real crisis.”<sup>30</sup> In the past there were severe crises between the two states due to the confrontations between Israel and the Arabs, as for example following the 1956 war and during the 1982 war in Lebanon.

For Saudi Arabia allowing Israel to bash the Hamas, with the help of Egypt, “may not be signs of a new strategic realignment in the Middle East but more of an emerging partnership that reflects some common interests and, in particular, the need to fill the strategic vacuum created by the inability of the United States to continue maintaining its role as a hegemonic power in the region.”<sup>31</sup> The bad blood between the United States and Saudi Arabia before the confrontation had affected their positions during the battles. The same happened with Israel and the United States. Yet both Israel and Saudi Arabia did not have any better option, and they remained very much dependent on the United States.

Egypt, Turkey and Qatar wanted to be brokers between Israel and Hamas. Due to the disputes between Egypt on the one side and Qatar and Turkey on the other, the United States, which had ties with Egypt, Qatar and Turkey, might have been able to serve as a mediator among them. Eventually Qatar and Turkey were left out, and Egypt became the broker between Israel and Hamas, which meant that the Hamas was forced to agree to Egypt’s terms. However, if Turkey and/or Qatar had been accepted as mediators too, if only in minor roles, Hamas might have felt more confident and able to agree to end the battles weeks before they actually stopped and by that to save hundreds of lives and severe damage. The shaky relations between the Obama administration and Egypt, following the toppling of Morsi in July 2013, reduced the American leverage on Egypt. As a result, the United States did not possess sufficient influence to convince Egypt to allow Qatar and/or Turkey join the talks, although those two states might have refused to share the mediation with Egypt, let alone to be in secondary roles. Turkey in particular, which sees itself as a major power in the region, would have turned down Egypt’s superior position. The United States would have also had a challenge convincing Israel to let Qatar and/or Turkey into the negotiations. The ongoing friction between the Obama administration and the Israeli government, which was expressed during the confrontation, was another obstacle in bringing together Qatar and/or Turkey to the table.

In spite of the importance of the fight in Gaza, the United States has been probably more concerned about Iraq. With all their disputes Israel is a close US ally, whereas Iraq became a partner of Iran, a strategic rival of the United States. Yet the latter intervened militarily in favor of Iraq, against ISIS that seemed a growing problem mostly to US allies: Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The Hamas, like ISIS,

is a radical Arab Sunni non-state organization. There were comparisons between them.<sup>32</sup> ISIS is a deadly and dangerous outfit like Al-Qaida, to which ISIS used to belong. The Hamas is part of the MB, yet the Obama administration did not see the MB as a threat. Furthermore ISIS has its own approach, which is more brutal and savage than Al-Qaida. The Hamas runs an independent policy too, which is more violent than other MB groups, albeit Hamas is much more contained than ISIS. Therefore the United States has attacked ISIS while trying to reach a cease fire in the Gaza Strip.

During the 2014 confrontation the Obama administration postponed the delivery of air-ground hellfire missiles to Israel.<sup>33</sup> Yet the United States also accepted Israel's request to take ammunition, such as mortar shells, from US warehouses in Israel, an arsenal that was supposed to serve Israel or the United States in an emergency.<sup>34</sup> This demonstrated US support of Israel's military effort. It also revealed that the IDF either did not have enough ammunition or wished to save its own at the expense of the United States. It also indicated the traditional understanding between Israel and its American patron, whereby the latter provides war material, whereas its Israeli protégé does the actual fighting. This was in contrast to other states, including some in the Middle East, like Iraq, which could not have handled terror and guerrilla groups and needed not only American weapons but troops as well.

### **Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas**

Hamas officially asked Hezbollah to join the 2014 confrontation,<sup>35</sup> but the latter was not involved<sup>36</sup> as it stayed out of the former rounds in the Gaza Strip in 2012 and 2008–2009. In 2014 the Hezbollah was busy in the Syrian civil war, a conflict that caused a rift between Iran, Hezbollah's patron, and Hamas. Both Israel and the Hezbollah were aware that a clash between them would be more destructive for them than the confrontation in the Gaza Strip. This realization has deterred them from excessive provocation, let alone attacking each other, unless there was no choice. Hezbollah's action would mostly depend on Israel's attacking Iran's nuclear sites, which could result in the Hezbollah striking Israel.

Some claimed that Hamas might have started the 2014 confrontation following a demand from Iran to do so in return for Iran's aid to Hamas.<sup>37</sup> But as stated the two were not close allies in 2014. Iran might have been pleased that Israel bashed Hamas after the latter ignored Iran's interests in Syria. Furthermore, for Iran a confrontation in the Gaza Strip might have distracted world opinion from Iran's nuclear program. A clash between Jews and Arab Sunnis, that is, two rivals of Iran, was for the latter a win-win situation, especially if Arab states like Egypt, another foe of Iran, would have been dragged in. Iran might have tried to increase the odds of that happening by sending, as in the past, weapons to the Gaza Strip through Sinai, Egyptian territory. This might have created friction between Israel and Egypt if the latter had failed to stop the weapons from reaching the Gaza Strip.

The IDF could have attacked Iran and at the same time deal with the Hamas in the Gaza Strip, where the skirmishes would have required mostly ground

units. The latter would have continued to receive air support, from F-16 C/D and AH-64 attack helicopters, while Israel's long-range fighters – bombers, the F-15I and F-16I – would have been available to strike Iran. Even if the Hezbollah had then clashed with Israel, the latter could have handled a war on three fronts: Lebanon, Iran and the Gaza Strip. The IDF is big enough to allocate units to all those battlefields, according to its priorities.

## **Outcome**

On 5 August 2014, the IDF withdrew from the Gaza Strip, under fire, which might have been seen as a victory for Hamas. A non-state organization, which was much weaker than the IDF, managed not only to stop the latter's offensive but also coerced the IDF to withdraw. The Hamas, and other similar outfits like Hezbollah, might have concluded that the Hamas defense concept worked; that is, stiff resistance not only killed sixty six Israeli troops but also caused the rest to retreat. The IDF did not even penetrate deep into Gaza city, only to its outskirts. Israel destroyed tunnels but possibly not all of them. Continuing to look for them might have cost the IDF dearly, a proof of its familiar sensitivity to casualties, a drawback its foes could rely on in future wars. Furthermore, the IDF, to begin with, penetrated the Gaza Strip not just to find and destroy tunnels but also to do the same with the rockets and their infrastructure, and definitely that goal was not achieved. The IDF did not reach Hamas command and control centers either. Israel paid the price, not only in human lives. The confrontation damaged its image as well due to the death and destruction in the Gaza Strip without achieving much for it. However, a comprehensive solution to both the rockets and to Hamas headquarters would have required a much longer campaign with all its negative ramifications, such as many casualties among Israeli troops and the Palestinian population too.

It is important to mention that the Israeli penetration into the Gaza Strip was less than two kilometers, so the withdrawal was not that significant to begin with, and it was not conducted in disarray or confusion. The Hamas did not pursue the Israeli troops; it just continued to fire its rockets and mortar shells all over. Israel could have resumed its ground attack and even expanded it. In addition the break in the battles allowed IDF soldiers to rest and regroup in a safe zone inside Israel after almost a month of combat. They had time to learn their lessons and upgrade their capabilities in comfortable conditions. Such preparations would help in another offensive in the Gaza Strip. The Hamas could have done the same, but it lacked supply because the Gaza Strip remained cut off, and it was difficult to smuggle weapons into it.

In early August 2014 the Israeli government could have ended its military operation unilaterally instead of reaching an agreement with Hamas or opting for escalation such as conquering the entire Gaza Strip.<sup>38</sup> The advantage of a unilateral ending was freedom of action, both politically and militarily. Israel could decide when and how the IDF responded to the Hamas. Further advantages consisted of ending the confrontation as the international community demanded, pleasing

Israel's right wing for not accepting the terms of the Hamas and reducing the vulnerability of the IDF to attacks by leaving the Gaza Strip. The main downsides were that the Hamas could have done as it wished, there was no solution to some of the reasons that caused the confrontation and military infrastructure in the Gaza Strip was kept intact.<sup>39</sup> It could be added that following former understandings between Israel and the Hamas, the situation in the Gaza Strip remained fluid, and it was only a matter of time until the next round occurred. This could be a possible future state of affairs after the 2014 confrontation. Each side could claim at any given moment that its rival violated the understanding between them, which permits retribution on a minor or major scale.

On 8 August, after seventy-two hours of cease fire, the Palestinians resumed their fire as a way to get their demands. Israeli intelligence assumed there were fifty-fifty chances that this would happen.<sup>40</sup> Israel's defense minister, Moshe Ya'alon, said that during the 2014 confrontation Israel agreed to several humanitarian cease fires. For Israel they did not include stopping its ongoing effort to destroy the tunnels, but Hamas considered those actions as aggressiveness. This dispute broke the cease fires again and again.<sup>41</sup> Israel's reluctance to topple the Hamas was also well-known due to declarations, open debates and leaks from government meetings. This helped Hamas decide to continue the fight.

Throughout August the two sides continued to shoot at each other while talking, indirectly, about ending the current round. The stalemate turned into a minor attrition war based on fire. Rockets and mortar shells were launched at Israel, while the IAF bombed the Gaza Strip. The Hamas threatened to infiltrate into Israel but did not. Israel warned it might start another land offensive but avoided that. Eventually the two sides agreed to end the confrontation. They assumed they would not benefit much from the ongoing exchange of punches. It should be noted that Hamas feared an escalation, that is, an Israeli offensive aiming to topple its rule, and Israel was concerned about losing the international support it had received during the confrontation.

From 8 July to 27 August, 4,564 rockets and mortar shells were launched at Israel. A total of 3,417 rockets landed in open areas, 224 hit urban zones and 735 were intercepted by the Iron Dome.<sup>42</sup> Therefore most of the rockets completely missed their objectives, that is, landed in open areas. It means that even without the Iron Dome, due to the poor accuracy of Hamas's rockets, most of them would not have hit their targets anyway. It is a small wonder all the rockets that have been launched at Israel since 2001 did not cause many casualties or damage. However, in the 2014 confrontation the Iron Dome did prevent Israel from paying a cost that might have been quite heavy.

By early August the IDF had attacked 4,762 objectives in the Gaza Strip: 1,678 sites that served to fire rockets and mortar shells, 977 command and control centers, 237 government buildings used by Hamas in the fight, 191 sites that produced war materials and weapons and 96 targets that had to do with maintaining Israel's naval and air superiority.<sup>43</sup> This activity showed that almost 1,000 attacks against command and control sites did not stop the firing of rockets or broke the willingness of Hamas leadership to continue with the campaign. The reason for this was

simple: Hamas top brass was underground and in proximity to the population and felt safe enough to order attacks. Israel could have bombed them, with bunker-buster bombs, for example, but that might have caused collateral damage, which Israel was trying to avoid. Reaching them with ground units would have probably inflicted casualties among both Palestinian populations and Israeli troops.

Some of Hamas command and control centers were above ground in buildings that were targeted by the IDF, which required distinguishing between apartments where Hamas headquarters were and those where civilians lived. Israel also attacked government facilities that were considered by Israel as part of Hamas's war effort because Israel regarded Hamas as the ruler of the Gaza Strip. The quite low number of targets that put at risk Israeli naval and air weapon systems demonstrated the relatively minor danger to the IDF in this field, compared with IEDs, which were quite a risk to Israel's ground forces.

The lessons of the 2014 war were not only for Israel. In spite of the vast experience US forces had gained "in Iraq as well as in Afghanistan, Hamas deployed a different and more dangerous concept of operations than the United States has encountered. . . . The U.S. military must prepare for similar conflicts." Furthermore it is "highly probable that US forces will have to deal with tunnels in future wars." Although US urban warfare doctrine – as expressed in Joint Publication 3–06, "Joint Urban Operations" – notes the potential utilization of sewers in urban operations, it does not contemplate the potential for an elaborate network of tunnels such as Hamas developed beneath the Gaza Strip.<sup>44</sup>

### **Who defeated whom?**

Some like Ephraim Inbar thought the Hamas was clearly defeated because those among its members who were arrested in the West Bank were not released, the blockade was not lifted, there was no permission to build an airport or/and harbor in the Gaza Strip and its population would continue to depend on both Egypt and Israel.<sup>45</sup> In this sense Israel kept the status quo, as it planned to.

There was criticism and a certain disappointment inside Israel with the results of the confrontation, but there was no public protest.<sup>46</sup> The 2014 confrontation lasted fifty days. Past wars between Israel and Arab states went on for several years like the war of attrition (1967–1970). Some lasted more than half a year (1948–1949), eighteen days (1973) or about a week (1956 and 1967). The wars in 1956 and 1967 reflected Israel's need for a rapid victory, according to Israeli military doctrine. Furthermore, in both 1956 and 1967 the IDF conquered vast areas such as Sinai (around 60,000 square kilometers) and destroyed several Arab divisions. In 2014 the IDF penetrated less than two kilometers into the Gaza Strip and managed to wipe out one Hamas battalion,<sup>47</sup> perhaps more. In 2014 the IDF lost sixty six troops, about a third of the casualties it had in 1956 and around 10 percent of the Israeli soldiers killed in 1967.

The comparison between the 2014 clash and the 1956 and 1967 wars reveals that in the latter, the IDF gained enormously bigger achievements than in 2014 but also paid a much heavier price. There are other points that differentiate among

those three confrontations that pertain to the era when those wars occurred, the nature of Israel's rivals, the influence of public opinion and so on. It is preferable to examine the 2014 clash based on former ones between Israel and Hamas, which were much shorter, about a week in 2012 and twenty-two days in 2008–2009. The 2006 war in Lebanon, which did not bring a clear Israeli victory, went on for thirty-four days, not as long as the one in 2014, but it was more costly to Israel (156 of its troops and civilians were killed). It could be claimed that the duration of the campaign was a key factor, but not necessarily the most important one, in deciding if a confrontation was successful or not.

The cease fire agreement was “just vague enough for Hamas to hold up as a ‘victory’ – a message it has reinforced constantly since the deal was signed, with jubilant public rallies and bellicose official statements.”<sup>48</sup> Ismail Haniyeh, the former prime minister of the Hamas, announced its organization won.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore in a poll that was made in late August 2014, 79 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip thought Hamas had won.<sup>50</sup> For the Hamas, feeling they held on against the might of the IDF for fifty days of combat and yet managed to keep their rule was a triumph.<sup>51</sup> The Hamas did have some achievements: launching rockets at many parts of Israel, defying Israel's effort to stop this fire, inflicting casualties, mostly to the IDF, undermining the sense of security among Israelis, disrupting international flights to and from Israel, cracking “Israel's image as a moral democratic country that acts according to international norms,” emphasizing to world opinion the message that the siege on the Gaza Strip was the cause of the battles and keeping Hamas's top military and political leadership intact.<sup>52</sup> However, a poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research from early June 2015 claimed that in the Gaza Strip, 63 percent of Palestinians expressed dissatisfaction with “achievements compared to human and material losses” in the 2014 war.<sup>53</sup> It was due to the slow pace of reconstruction of buildings and infrastructure.

Some believed the 2014 confrontation ended in a draw<sup>54</sup> because both sides did not achieve their goals.

Israel was unable to stop the rockets and may not have destroyed all the tunnels. Nor is there any guarantee that tunnel digging has not started anew. On the other hand, the Palestinians failed to gain any commitment, prior to the ceasefire, that the crippling seven-year-old siege on Gaza will be lifted.<sup>55</sup>

“The cease-fire agreement merely stipulated conditions that were very similar to the status quo prior to the beginning of the war.”<sup>56</sup>

Another approach was that “by any objective criterion, the outcome of the conflict was a draw. But for a small and poorly armed militia to stand its ground against one of the mightiest armies in the world is a remarkable achievement.”<sup>57</sup> Allegedly the Hamas followed the narrative of winning against the odds. But Israel did not invest a large part of its strength in this fight, that is, most of its reserves, because the Israeli government avoided toppling the Hamas to begin with, fearing the alternative would be worse. In a kind of irony Israel needed the Hamas to

declare victory, thus strengthening its grip in the Gaza Strip and thereby preventing other, more extreme elements replacing it.

For both sides terminating the confrontation was a victory by itself, particularly for Israel, which did not seek this clash in the first place. The Hamas would have also agreed to avoid a collision had it not been convinced that the only way to reach its goals was through some kind of clash with Israel. That explains why the Hamas was willing to continue the fight in spite of its losses. In a way it was true about Israel as well due to a certain atmosphere that urged Israelis to support their military and country without expressing too much and sometimes any criticism of its leadership, let alone the IDF. Many Israelis were certain the Hamas was guilty of starting the confrontation, and should therefore be punished. This blame also applies to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip who absorbed heavy casualties. They should have got rid of Hamas or at least made it stop firing rockets at Israel.

On both sides people avoided seeing the entire picture and tended to ignore the view of their foe as well as its constraints. This is a familiar and sad aspect of a confrontation. Unfortunately the zero-sum game, “you are with us or against us,” prevented Israelis and Palestinians who wished to end the fight from doing more in this matter.

### **Possible solutions to the Gaza Strip**

Following the 2014 confrontation President Barak Obama “said new efforts were needed to tackle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. ‘We have to find ways to change the status quo.’”<sup>58</sup> Daniel Kurtzer argued that “if nothing else, this war has made it abundantly clear that the status quo in the Israeli-Palestinian arena is not sustainable.”<sup>59</sup> Khaled Elgindy claimed that “a return to the status quo, without addressing any of the underlying issues of the current crisis, would only be setting up the next Gaza war another year or two or three down the road.”<sup>60</sup> Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Gadi Zohar, the head of the Council for Peace and Security, Association of National Security Experts in Israel, said that without a long-term agreement, another round would occur.<sup>61</sup> Yossi Beilin strove to renew the talks between Israel and the Palestinians lest the next confrontation would be only a matter of time.<sup>62</sup> Uri Savir suggested an “international peace conference at the beginning of 2015” that would deal with a “permanent status” to the conflict, rebuilding the Gaza Strip and possibly demilitarizing that area.<sup>63</sup> There were other calls to restart the talks between Israel and the PA.<sup>64</sup> Others emphasized that the confrontation happened because of lack of negotiations between Israel and the PA.<sup>65</sup> Yet

the opportunities for and likelihood of a renewed “peace process” are rather small. Israel is more or less satisfied with the status quo, at least in comparison with any serious alternative, which enables it to pursue its current policies without serious U.S. or international intervention.<sup>66</sup>

Vice President Joe Biden said on 18 April 2016 that there is no political will among Israelis and Palestinians “to move forward with serious negotiations.”<sup>67</sup>

Tamara Cofman Wittes said on 19 April 2016 that “the status quo in this conflict is deteriorating, not static, and reminds us that a negotiated resolution of the conflict remains Israel’s best option for long-term security.”<sup>68</sup> On 10 July 2016 Egypt’s foreign minister Sameh Shoukry visited Israel. He said, as part of the effort to restart the talks between Israel and Palestinians that “it is no longer acceptable to claim that the status quo is the most that we can achieve of the hopes and aspirations of the Palestinian and Israeli peoples.”<sup>69</sup> If there are talks, the goal would be dividing the territory between the river Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea between Israel and the Palestinians, which means mainly splitting the West Bank between them.

Abu Marzook indicated On 11 September 2014 that the Hamas would not veto direct negotiations with Israel.<sup>70</sup> Yet Hamas immediately claimed that “direct negotiation with the Zionist enemy is not the policy of the movement and it is not on its table of discussions.”<sup>71</sup> Talks between Israel and the PA solely could happen, but as in other attempts, they might fail again due to enormous obstacles the two parties face. Furthermore since September 2015 there has been unrest due to Palestinian assaults, mostly in the West Bank, that cause tension between the two sides.

Hamas vehemently denies the legitimacy of Israel but its leaders have stated repeatedly that if Fatah negotiates with Israel a two-state peace deal based on the 1967 borders, and if this outcome is approved in a national referendum, it would respect it as the choice of the Palestinian people.<sup>72</sup>

However Khalid Meshaal, Hamas’s political bureau chief, argued on 4 December 2014 that “for a quarter of a century, negotiations – Palestinian-Israeli and Arab-Israeli negotiations – have proven to be useless.” He called for a resistance to Israel, including an armed one.<sup>73</sup> The 2014 confrontation demonstrated the split inside the Hamas, between its leadership in the Gaza Strip and Khaled Mashal in Qatar, a hard-liner. If there is progress in talks between Israel and the PA, Hamas, if only a more radical part of it, might seek to sabotage the negotiations by striking Israel. Other Palestinian groups, such as the Islamic Jihad, might do that too. The reaction of the PA to a Palestinian attack on Israel might be to condemn it. Yet a severe Israeli retribution might force the PA to freeze the negotiations with Israel to express its solidarity with its people. In another scenario Israel, while negotiating with the PA, might strike Hamas before it acts. The aim would be to prevent and deter the Hamas from attacking Israel. In response, particularly if the Israeli strike causes heavy collateral damage, the PA might stop its talks with Israel.

Hamas and the PA, that is, the Fatah are “more defined by their differences than their similarities.”<sup>74</sup> The Fatah planned to exploit the 2014 confrontation in its favor and suspected Hamas for crippling the efforts to establish a Palestinian state.<sup>75</sup> There was a proposal that emphasized the role of the PA in the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip, so instead of the Hamas, the PA would increase its grip there.<sup>76</sup> On 25 September 2014 the PA and the Hamas signed another reconciliation agreement. “The new deal is just vague enough for both parties to move forward while

they continue to squabble over the details. . . the long-running Hamas-Fatah rivalry endures.”<sup>77</sup> The PA has 30,000 troops and police officers.<sup>78</sup> But as long as the Hamas keeps its military wing, they could oppose the PA gaining back part let alone all the Gaza Strip. The Hamas could also go on attacking Israeli targets. Even if the PA manages to rule the entire Gaza Strip, the Hamas or part of it might continue to operate against Israelis. After all the Hamas did it in 1994–2007 when the PA controlled part or all of the Gaza Strip. Until the Hamas makes the same strategic shift the Fatah did in the early 1990s, which was reflected in the Oslo accords, there is not much hope for peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

On 22 July 2014 the twenty-eight foreign ministers of the EU called to disarm groups in the Gaza Strip equipped with weapons, including the Hamas. Israel was pleased about that.<sup>79</sup> During the 2014 confrontation Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Shaul Mofaz, who served as IDF’s chief of general staff and later on as minister of defense, suggested an arrangement which was based on demilitarizing the Gaza Strip, disbanding its rockets and tunnels and so on. In return the Gaza Strip would receive dozens of billions of dollars to develop its infrastructure, education and so on. Israel, the United States and several Arab states would be involved in that initiative.<sup>80</sup> A similar offer proposed building an infrastructure for producing electricity, food, fresh water and so on in the Gaza Strip while assuring that the funds would be allocated to those projects and not to a military buildup. This plan was also conditioned upon the Hamas giving up its rockets and missiles. The concept was that the people of the Gaza Strip would prefer prosperity to war with Israel.<sup>81</sup> The Hamas would continue to challenge Israel because Hamas’s national aspirations are more important to this group than the well-being of its people. Nevertheless, the enormous damage and the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip demanded Hamas take care of it, which at least in the near future might be at the expense of getting organized for a new round.

Israel’s Ministry of Defense admitted that the blockade on the Gaza Strip brought together the Hamas and the population there, due to their common hardships, which explains why many of the people in the Gaza Strip supported a military action against Israel as retribution. Even before the 2014 confrontation, the IDF recommended that the government take steps, after the campaign, to ease the situation of Palestinians who are not involved in fighting Israel, as long as this does not strengthen Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.<sup>82</sup> “Gaza requires trading borders with Israel and the West Bank, and ideally also with Egypt, that are managed according to internationally acceptable security and operational standards.”<sup>83</sup> However, if the Gaza Strip is wide open to import, by land, sea and air, Hamas would indeed bring in civilian products but also and even mostly various weapons from Iran, Libya and so on. The Hamas would rush to do that before Israel resumes the blockade. This arsenal might include rockets much more powerful and accurate than the Hamas has ever had. Considering past experience, sooner or later the Hamas would start firing at Israel. Assimilating new and powerful rockets might tempt and urge Hamas to provoke Israel. It is important to remember that although Hamas rules the Gaza Strip; this non-state organization is not an actual state where the government is fully in charge of its armed forces. The

military wing of Hamas might oppose the directives of its political masters, or there could be a split inside the Hamas, one faction of which would choose to fire at Israel. The latter, however, considers the Hamas in the Gaza Strip as an entity that is responsible for any aggression toward Israel. This complicated situation is obviously volatile and might lead to another confrontation. It's possible that even if Israel strikes only those in the Hamas who launched rockets, the rest of the Hamas might join the fight. If the Hamas inflicts a major blow to Israel, the latter would retaliate and might conquer the Gaza Strip. In this sense preventing the rearming of the Hamas would serve the interests of Hamas and Israel too because it does not want to be forced into seizing the Gaza Strip.

Israel would watch and try to slow down Hamas's military buildup with the help of the United States and Egypt. The latter had to block "dozens of smuggling tunnels left open between the Gaza Strip and the Sinai. In addition, in the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip, Israel sought 'to establish an effective mechanism to prevent dual-use materials from falling into Hamas hands,'"84 which would serve it to dig tunnels.

In late November 2014 Ziad Nakhleh, deputy director of the Islamic Jihad, said that "the status quo is unacceptable, and Israel knows better than anyone else that its continued siege of the Gaza Strip cannot grant it even minimal security."<sup>85</sup> Israel seeks to keep the Hamas strong enough to stop more radical groups such as the Islamic Jihad from attacking Israel while denying Hamas the ability to strike deep inside Israel, particularly with rockets. Yet for the Hamas controlling the Gaza Strip is not sufficient because its goal is to destroy Israel and conquer its territory. The Hamas leaders are well aware that Israel is much more powerful but are determined to pursue their goal nevertheless. Their rocket arsenal is their main way of demonstrating the desire to challenge Israel. For the Hamas the rockets are its strategic arm, just as the IAF is for Israel.

In late November 2014 Egypt's president Sisi said that if there is a Palestinian state, Egypt is willing to send forces there to "help the local police and reassure the Israelis through our role as guarantor."<sup>86</sup> It could be part of a process of creating an alliance among Israel, the PA, Egypt and Saudi Arabia against Islamic extremists. Each one has their own radical group to focus on: Israel and the PA on Hamas, Egypt and Saudi Arabia on ISIS. There is a similarity in fighting all those radical outfits, but also differences, including the constraints and interests of their foes. In the 2014 confrontation there was an understanding between Israel and Egypt, due more to their common enemy than to the ties like between their leaders. The same, more or less, could be said about the leaders of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Netanyahu knows Abu Mazen, but the relations between them have never quite risen from a low point. Lack of contact or chemistry among the heads of the governments in Israel, the PA, Egypt and Saudi Arabia has been a serious obstacle in the struggle against Islamic extremists.

In the October 2014 Cairo Conference, about rebuilding the Gaza Strip, international donors like Qatar promised to deliver more than 5 billion dollars.<sup>87</sup> On 14 May 2015 the United States and Arab Gulf states recommitted "to continue to fulfill aggressively their pledges made for Gaza's reconstruction, to include

pledges made at the October 2014 Cairo Conference.”<sup>88</sup> But the lack of progress in this field continued due to all kinds of problems and disputes like those between Hamas and the PA.

According to the World Bank in May 2015,

Unemployment in Gaza is the highest in the world at 43 percent. . . . Gaza’s exports virtually disappeared and the manufacturing sector has shrunk by as much as 60 percent. The economy cannot survive without being connected to the outside world. The conclusion was that the status quo in Gaza is unsustainable.<sup>89</sup>

A report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) assistance to the Palestinian people, dated 2 September 2015 stated that the Gaza Strip “could become uninhabitable by 2020 if current economic trends persist.” The blockade and wars there “have shattered its ability to export and produce for the domestic market, ravaged its already debilitated infrastructure.” Other Gaza misfortunes include a huge water problem, a crisis involving lack of electricity and no progress in developing the offshore natural gas fields near the Gaza’s coast. Furthermore,

in 2014, unemployment in Gaza reached 44 per cent, the highest level on record. . . . The economic well-being of Palestinians living in Gaza is worse today than two decades ago. Per capita gross domestic product has shrunk by 30 per cent since 1994. Food insecurity affects 72 per cent of households, and the number of Palestinian refugees solely reliant on food distribution from United Nations agencies had increased from 72,000 in 2000 to 868,000 by May 2015.<sup>90</sup>

This grim social-economic reality was one of the severe ramifications of the political stalemate. However, negotiations and even an agreement between the PA and Israel that would not have included the Gaza Strip, because it is in the hands of Hamas, would not have solved the economic crisis in the Gaza Strip.

Since October 2015 there has been a wave of Palestinian assaults from the West Bank that took place mostly inside the West Bank. Until May 2016 about 200 Palestinians and 30 Israelis were killed during those clashes.<sup>91</sup> In mid-September 2016 the IDF ran a vast exercise that examined how an outburst in the West Bank could bring a confrontation between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>92</sup> On 1 October 2016 a survey that was carried out by the Project HaMidgam Institute showed that in Israel “64 percent of 646 (Jewish and non-Jewish) respondents questioned said a peace accord would never be reached.”<sup>93</sup> At the time there were also all kinds of diplomatic maneuvers, such as by France and the EU, to break the stalemate between Israel and the PA. Yet they did not break the stalemate. The UN Security Council approved on the 23 December 2016 Resolution 2334 on Israeli settlements in the West Bank. It stressed “that the status quo is not sustainable.”<sup>94</sup>

## **Israel's offensive and defensive options**

In 2016 the IDF's Gaza Division's first priority was to develop measures to detect and destroy tunnels.<sup>95</sup> On 1 February 2016 Netanyahu said that in case of an attack "from tunnels in the Gaza Strip, we will act very forcefully against Hamas, and with much more force" than in the war of 2014.<sup>96</sup> Avigdor Lieberman claimed in mid-March 2015 that in regard to another fight with Hamas "the fourth round will be the last."<sup>97</sup> In mid-June 2016, shortly after Avigdor Lieberman became minister of defense, a top official in that office claimed, "The next confrontation must be the last in terms of Hamas's regime."<sup>98</sup> Brig. Gen. (Res.) Moni Chorev argued in March 2016 that

Hamas may not be the central strategic threat facing Israel, but it is certainly the most immediate threat. Its ideology and military structure, alongside the operational experience it has gained in recent years, require Israel to respond to the challenge it poses.<sup>99</sup>

On 14 April 2016 a senior IDF officer said that Hamas fears an Israeli surprise attack.<sup>100</sup> Indeed Israel might launch a sudden offensive in the Gaza Strip, hoping this approach would reduce Israeli casualties and shorten the campaign. But the losses among Palestinian civilians might amount to thousands because they would receive no warning due to Israel's need to keep the element of surprise and would not be able to escape. As a result Israel would not have international legitimacy and would possibly have to stop its military actions in the Gaza Strip before being sanctioned. However, the IDF could still conduct surprise operations in the Gaza Strip by limiting their scale, as it was done there many times in the past. The strikes would be precise and focus directly at objectives to reduce the danger of collateral damage.

Israel could "capture or kill as many of the Hamas military leadership as possible, and take over or destroy a major part of Hamas headquarters."<sup>101</sup> In the future Israel might implement a strategy of decapitation of Hamas, that is, assassinating its top brass, something that had been done before. This might deter some of the Hamas leaders from confronting Israel, but others might still stick to their guns. There is also the ongoing risk that the leaders replacing their dead predecessors might turn out to be more dangerous to Israel than its previous adversaries. Another possible problem for Israel is that the Hamas, without a functional leadership, might disintegrate and be too weak to prevent other radical groups in the Gaza Strip from conducting an aggressive action against Israel. Hamas might also return a favor or even strike before Israel does. On 21 November 2014 a Hamas spokesman said that "Israeli leaders are legitimate targets for assassination."<sup>102</sup>

Among the ideas about preventing infiltration into Israel was building an underground fence around the Gaza Strip, dozens of meters deep, along with the installation of tunnel discovery sensors. However, the estimate cost, up to 2 billion dollars, created opposition among some in the Israeli southern command. Another option was to form a security belt inside the Gaza Strip, near the current fence,

to prevent the digging of tunnels. This concept was familiar before the 2014 confrontation but was directed against laying down IED at the fence, not to avoid penetrating it.<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, the Hamas was not expected to give up tunnels.

Israel's defense measures on the ground, the fence and deployment of troops around the Gaza Strip caused the Hamas to bypass it from above, with rockets, and from below, with tunnels. When the first rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip, they reached only a few kilometers into Israel, but gradually they hit deeper inside. In less than a decade, the range of those rockets went from few kilometers to several dozen kilometers. The tunnels did not make similar progress because it is much more difficult to dig a tunnel for tens of kilometers than to produce or smuggle a long-range rocket. The tunnels served for attacks near the Gaza Strip, whereas the rockets were used for long-range strikes. Israel intercepts rockets much better than it discovers tunnels.

Following the 2014 confrontation, Israel started to build smart fences around villages and towns near the Gaza Strip.<sup>104</sup> It might be worthwhile building another fence circling the entire Gaza Strip, several kilometers away from the current one. This would serve as a second line of defense. In 2014 Israel relied on forward defense in the Gaza Strip, that is, the current fence that the tunnels breached. As long as Israel does not have an effective way to detect tunnels, Palestinians will continue digging them to penetrate into Israel. If a second fence was erected, a Palestinian force emerging from below ground, after passing the first fence, would encounter another obstacle, while being exposed to the IDF, and be decimated before they threaten the rest of Israel.

On 22 March 2015 the IDF ran an exercise around the Gaza Strip, the biggest drill there since the war of 2014. Land, air and sea forces trained how to react to infiltrations from the Gaza Strip, kidnapping of Israelis and massive fire of rockets and mortar shells at Israeli targets. The drill took place one week after an IED was put about 100 meters from the fence that surrounds the Gaza Strip, yet in that period it was a rare event.<sup>105</sup> On 6 December 2016 the IDF's Gaza Division and other services, including from the police, conducted an exercise aimed against a possible attack from the Gaza Strip.<sup>106</sup>

Israel could adapt a defensive strategy in the next confrontation with Hamas. The Israeli population would stay in shelters, the Iron Dome would intercept rockets and Israeli troops would be deployed on the border to prevent incursions. In this case, Israel's casualties might be less than in former rounds.

Hamas is likely to face strong international pressure to stop launching rockets, which it would not be able to deflect as retaliation for Israel's action. Internally, as well, Hamas would not enjoy the same support it has received from the residents of Gaza if it cannot portray its action as defensive. In all likelihood, these pressures would result in a much speedier cessation of the firing from the Gaza Strip.<sup>107</sup>

However, this policy carries too many risks, and it would probably never be implemented by Israel. For one thing not all the Israelis have shelters, and the

Iron Dome might run out of missiles before the Hamas stops firing. The IDF, even in a massive deployment near the border, might not discover a tunnel in time, which would enable Palestinian fighters to penetrate into Israel and surprise their foe. Moreover, the Israeli public would not tolerate such an extreme defensive approach. For an Israeli government, either from the left or right, absorbing attacks for weeks without striking back would be political suicide. There would be a major opposition and huge frustration inside the IDF due to lack of permission to attack. This would create very high tension between IDF's top brass and its political masters, which might undermine the functioning of the state during a severe national security crisis.

Israelis have been watching the massacre of defenseless people in Syria, and an inevitable question has come up: because there was no serious international effort to stop the bloodshed in Syria, why would there be one to help the Israeli population if needs be? Ironically, just because Israel has better passive and active defense than Syrian civilians, world opinion may not have any sense of urgency about Israel. This is particularly true if at the time there was some major crisis elsewhere that would draw global attention, ignoring Israel's plight while Hamas continued to pound Israeli civilians. Either way most Israelis would not trust the international community to intervene or to have real impact if they do. Under unique circumstances in the past, such as during the 1991 Iraq war, Israel restrained itself when Saddam Hussein's missiles hit the country due to the fact that a powerful international coalition was assailing the Iraqi military at that time. If Hamas attacks Israel from the Gaza Strip, no one would do the fighting against it except the IDF. Apart from that, in 1991 the IDF could not have done much in Iraq, which is several hundred kilometers east of Israel, in sharp contrast to the Gaza Strip, which is Israel's backyard.

If Israel does not conduct any offensive operations and is content with defense measures only, its deterrence might crumble. The Palestinians would think Israel is a paper tiger, fearing to confront an enemy in spite of its military might. Hamas would continue to add tension, firing at Israel to pressurize, believing its nemesis is about to crack, and accept Hamas terms such as ending the blockade on the Gaza Strip.

Following this line of thought, Palestinians in the West Bank would be encouraged to start a Third Intifada. Other Arabs, foes of Israel and countries that had signed peace with the Jewish state might assume Israel is in decline. States like Egypt and Jordan might not confront Israel, but they might neglect their security cooperation with it, ignoring Islamic extremists who would use their territory to attack Israel. Furthermore if Egypt prevents access from the Gaza Strip to Sinai, the Hamas could fire at Israel to urge Egypt to open the gates to the peninsula. Nevertheless, Egypt might react with indifference to the situation and refuse to accommodate the Hamas in spite of its aggression toward Israel.

Following the 2014 confrontation there was a debate in Israel regarding the funding of the IDF and the Ministry of Defense. Their combined budget reached that year more than 72 billion dollars.<sup>108</sup> From time to time, particularly when there were fierce arguments between the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of

Finance, the media published reports and warnings about the threats Israel faces and the danger of cutting the defense budget. The cost of the 2014 confrontation was “bearable for the strong Israeli economy.”<sup>109</sup> There were disputes about how much money was exactly spent. The Ministry of Defense estimated it was less than 3 billion dollars.<sup>110</sup> This issue was a kind of a go-ahead signal for another round in the struggle over the defense budget. Any decision in this matter would influence Israel’s defensive and offensive options.

### **Israel’s relations with Jews worldwide in regard to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict**

Israel and the PA failed to reach an agreement about establishing a Palestinian state, and the outcome has been a stalemate. Unless there is a sharp shift, the talks will not be resumed.

Jews worldwide have been concerned about the lack of peace and Israeli control in the life of Palestinians in various aspects of life like economic ones. Furthermore, the daily friction between Israelis and Palestinians causes violence and hostility, particularly since October 2015, when a wave of attacks started. Some Jews around the world are also worried that the continuance of the conflict poses a threat to the future of Israel as a democratic state because of laws seen as being against Arab citizens, a lack of focus on civil rights, the probability that Arabs will become a majority in that country and so on. Therefore, Jewish communities worldwide should help Israel survive as both a democratic and Jewish state.

Israel must protect its population, so sometimes it takes harsh measures, including using deadly force. Israel also announced that it is willing to talk with the PA, yet some Jews worldwide have not been convinced. They believe that Israel relies too much on force and does not actually want to accept a historical compromise, that is, the establishment of a Palestinian state. This difference in approaches indicates a crisis also because Israelis see themselves as facing their foe and taking all the risks while other Jews are not. Nevertheless, Jews outside Israel are also exposed to some danger due to anti-Semitism, which has gotten worse as one of the ramifications of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel has a unique position among the Jews because it is the Jewish state located in the land of Israel with all its historical and religious importance and where there is the largest concentration of Jews in the world. However, there are other big and powerful Jewish communities, especially the one in the United States. Therefore, Israel is not necessarily the center of gravity for Jews but more of a first among equals. It means Israel will decide its own fate, yet Israel and Jews worldwide should share views and reach common ground in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This strategy should be based on Jewish values such as justice and taking into account the rights of the other side, that is, the Palestinians.

A model could be created that would have two major components. First, Israel has to know that Jews worldwide understand and express their strong support for Israel’s security needs. Second, Israel has to take into serious consideration the opinions and constructive criticism of Jews worldwide about its national security policy.

Because Israel's top priority is its security, the goal of the model should be to make Jews worldwide more engaged with Israel, so the latter will feel stronger. Obviously, Jews in the diaspora are Israel's natural allies, which is essential in demonstrating that the country does not stand alone. This partnership could encourage Israel to agree to painful concessions it would have to accept as part of an agreement with the Palestinians, such as removing settlements. This narrative would help maintain the relationship between the Jewish state and Jews in countries around the world. At the same time, it would assist in advancing the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians.

In fact, Israel and Jews worldwide should not view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an obstacle to their relationship but rather as an opportunity to improve it. In spite of their disputes, they could agree on several fundamental principles and form a united vision. In such circumstances it would be easier to receive the backup and aid of foreign governments such as the United States, the EU and even Arab states that support the Arab peace initiative to end the Arab-Israeli conflict.

There should be more programs that would teach Jews worldwide about Israel's aims and constraints in securing the life and safety of its people. Israel and Jews worldwide should develop those projects together because each country and community might require its own program according to the nature and approach of the Jews there. At the same time, in Israel the public must learn more about the Jews who reside around the world.

Educating Jewish communities around the world should be done by staff that would include those who now live or have in the past lived in Israel for a substantial period of time. Those kinds of representatives, due to their personal experience, could explain to the local Jews how Israelis got accustomed to living in a state like Israel. The same logic applies to Jews who would go to represent their communities in Israel because many Israelis are not aware of what it's like to be Jewish in the diaspora. Strong emphasis must be put on the youth. Thanks to modern technology like the social networks, young people have many ways to watch what is going on in the world. Nevertheless, the youth both inside and outside Israel seem not to be familiar enough with the challenges of other Jewish communities.

All in all, there has been growing tension between Israel and many Jews around the world regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This grim reality could be changed by a clear message that would be spread throughout the Jewish world. There has to be a joint effort by Israel, Jewish communities and all those who could contribute in this matter. This would assist both in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in strengthening the bond between Israel and Jews worldwide.

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## 4 The Syrian civil war

Bashar al Assad showed restraint after its nuclear reactor was destroyed by Israel in September 2007. The regime in Damascus also avoided hostilities during Israel's low-intensity wars, when Israel clashed with the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Syria also steered clear of the 2006 hybrid war between Hezbollah and Israel, even though Syria supports Hezbollah. Despite the list of various confrontations, the border between Israel and Syria has remained calm, even in the absence of an official peace, up until the Syrian civil war.

The turmoil in the Arab world brings to mind the 1618–1648 war,<sup>1</sup> when Christians, often from the same country, slaughtered each other because some of them were Catholics and others Protestants. In recent years Muslim Arabs have been killing each other because some of them are Shiites and others are Sunnis. This was emphasized particularly in Syria where there are relatively moderate rebels but also radical Islamic groups such as ISIS. Assad lost much of the land he had controlled in Syria, but he held large parts in the west near the shoreline, along with major cities including the capital, Damascus. The country's economy was in shambles.

In 2016, after five years of civil war, Syria's economy and society were in a very low point.<sup>2</sup> This showdown also changed the status quo between Assad and Israel due to the implications on their border in the Golan Heights. Israel was also concerned about the delivery of weapons from Assad to the Hezbollah.

### **A war in the Golan Heights**

Israel conquered the Golan Heights, an area of about 1,200 square kilometers, in June 1967 and annexed it in December 1981. In the 1982 war when Israel and Syria slugged it out (in Lebanon), the Golan Heights remained quiet. In September–October 1996 Israeli intelligence assessments warned that Syria might venture a limited military operation, but Hafez al Assad, who ruled then, did not attack. His son, Bashar al Assad did wish to repossess the Golan Heights, if necessary by force, but Syria's military strength has plunged since the early 1990s when its patron, the Soviet Union, came apart. This reduced dramatically the chance of a massive Syrian offensive in the Golan Heights. Furthermore in recent years the Syrian military was worn down due to the civil war. In September 2014 “the

Syrian military is in no condition to compete directly with any of the other regional militaries.”<sup>3</sup> This situation did not change much in 2015–2016.

The Syrian military could have put at risk the Israelis, particularly the 20,000 people who live in the Golan Heights. On the other hand, a fierce Israeli response could have compromised the Syrian regime directly. Iran and the Hezbollah could have assisted Assad against Israel, but they might not have saved him. In a matter of days the IAF could have annihilated Assad’s aircraft and elite units, paving the way for Syrian rebels to topple Assad. Such a move would not have necessarily served Israeli interest, but that’s a consideration Assad could not have counted on.

Since 1974 there has been complete calm in the Golan Heights, but since 2011, following the Syrian civil war, the area has suffered several violent incidents. Most of them occurred on the border between Israel and Syria. Only a few of those events, like the one in March 2014, took place in the north of the Golan Heights, where Israel has a border with Lebanon too. There are several players in the triangle Lebanon–the Golan Heights–Syria. The states that are involved directly – Israel, Syria and Lebanon – and the supporting states – Iran with Syria and the United States with Israel.

From March to October 2014 there were fifteen attacks from Syria against Israeli targets in the Golan Heights; most of them were carried out by proxies of Iran and Hezbollah.<sup>4</sup> There are other armed groups involved or could be part of a fight in the Golan Heights, namely Sunni extremists, including those who are affiliated with ISIS. Until now they have avoided confrontation with Israel, but they have men on the border in the Golan Heights who may be ordered to attack. In early August 2015 the IDF conducted an exercise in the Golan Heights that examined a scenario in which dozens of gunmen infiltrate from Syria into a settlement close to the border, while other settlements absorb mortar fire.

In Lebanon the Shiite Hezbollah is the dominant force, but radical Sunni outfits managed to conduct there some painful assaults against it. There are also other guerrilla and terror groups in that torn country, like those consisting of Palestinians. Hezbollah and his Sunni foes in Lebanon wish to harm Israel, but beating their Arab rivals comes first.

The Assad coalition has the biggest capability to hurt Israel due to their firepower. But the Assad regime, their allies like the Hezbollah and their Iranian patron do not seek a full-scale confrontation with Israel; at most they look for a limited border war. Because both Israel and the Assad’s coalition currently do not want any deterioration, they have to be prudent to avoid getting sucked into an unnecessary war.

Assad said on 8 December 2016 that Israel is still an enemy because it holds the Golan Heights.<sup>5</sup>

Assad wants the Golan Heights and also to regain control of most of Syria, which would continue to be a torn country. The various outfits in Syria would go on fighting each other, focusing on their domestic rival, not on their external foe, Israel. From Israel’s perspective with all the ramifications of the Syrian civil war – disrupting the quiet in the Golan Heights, for example – as long as those different forces avoid attacking Israel, this dicey situation can be tolerated.

In recent years mortar shells and rockets have landed on the Israeli side, by mistake or not. Following such shelling the IDF sometimes returned fire to clarify that Israel would not accept it. However, those incidents continued, adding to the ongoing tension in the Golan Heights, possibly resulting in a border war, that is, a low-intensity war where Israel's foes could fire mortars and rockets, lay IED on the border and infiltrate inside the Golan Heights for raids and ambushes.

On 22 June 2014 for the first time, an Israeli citizen, a teenager, was killed from an attack that came from the Syrian side.<sup>6</sup> Israel continued to hold the Syrian government responsible, as in previous assaults, even if Syrian rebels were the ones who opened fire on 22 June. Israel bombed nine targets inside Syria, all of them belonging to the Syrian military, including the headquarters of the Syrian 90th Brigade. It was the most severe Israeli response since the start of the Syrian civil war. The fact that the Israeli who was killed was an Israeli Arab might have influenced the scale of the Israeli strike, for its government might have sought to prove that an Israeli Arab is equal to an Israeli Jew, at least in this sense, and that a Jewish government tries to defend its Arab citizens more than Arab rulers do with their civilians.

Since late 2014 Syrian rebels have controlled most of the border in the Golan Heights, which is about eighty kilometers long. The rebels could strive to entangle Israel in a war against Assad and/or the Hezbollah. Israel should therefore be very cautious in blaming, let alone attacking, Assad and/or the Hezbollah for assaults they might not have committed. Israel should weigh carefully Assad's responsibility for attacks coming from areas under rebel control. The fact that Assad has almost no grip on the area near the border should reduce the tension between him and Israel and lessen the probability of a clash between them.

On 23 September 2014, for the first time since 1985, the IAF intercepted a Syrian plane, an SU-24 attack aircraft that penetrated 800 meters into the Golan Heights. One minute passed from the time the order was given until the actual interception with a patriot antiaircraft missile. A month before a Syrian UAV was shot down in the same way. Since the start of the Syrian civil war, there was a sharp rise in the scrambling of Israeli fighters when a Syrian plane came too close to the Israeli border. The IAF has been often drilling for such a scenario as it would take only a few minutes for an Arab plane to reach the heart of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Brig. Gen. (Res.) Ram Shmueli, former head of Israel's air force intelligence, said, "we are very much on alert to all types of drones, jets and airplanes, even civilian airlines like those used during 9/11."<sup>8</sup> The SU-24 "was potentially one minute from the Sea of Galilee and four minutes from Tel Aviv." In the incident on 23 September 2014 there was probably no intention to bomb an Israeli objective. Yet the SU-24 carried armaments and Israel did not want to take any risk.<sup>9</sup> Indeed the SU-24 in particular, due to its advanced capabilities, could have arrived to its objective faster than other planes and could drop there up to eight tons of bombs. Although Assad controls its air force, radical Islamists might manage to influence or coerce an air crew to conduct a strike inside Israel. In such a case the fights near the border between Assad and the rebels would help a Syrian plane approach that area, allegedly as part of the battles there, but then switch and suddenly penetrate

into Israel. If the latter absorbs substantial casualties and damage, a fierce retaliation would be expected, although Israel would have to make sure who was behind the air strike before hitting back.

Until the 1967 war, the Israeli population in the Jordan valley was often attacked from Syria, from the nearby Golan Heights, which was one of the reasons why this area was seized by the IDF. The establishing of new settlements in the Golan Heights since 1967 has created a similar challenge to Israel, by way of possible assaults from Syria. Since 1973 and until recent years the Syrian threat to Israel was an offensive, big or small, by Assad's military, which never came. In the future Israel's main foe in the Golan Heights would be all kinds of armed groups.

In recent years Israel built a new fence in the Golan Heights, fifteen feet high, with double obstacles, and added intelligence and observation systems. The IDF also executed a major organizational change by replacing the veteran 36th Division with the new 210th Division. The latter's goal is to focus on day-to-day security and be able to handle a low-intensity war, which is a new-old challenge in the Golan Heights. The last time such a confrontation occurred there was in the late 1960s.

Israel wishes to continue containing its Syrian front by implementing offensive steps if needs be. Israel has already fired into Syria, from both the air and the ground, but this might not be enough. Ground attacks might be required in spite of Israel's deep reservation of such action. It could cost casualties and international criticism, including from states that have been involved in Syria for years, some of which – like Iran – have boots on the ground there. Israel would not care what Iran says, but Western states could claim that Israel has made a bad situation worse. Israel therefore would rather rely on its massive and accurate firepower, from the ground and the air, without penetrating Syria. Eventually, however, Israel might have no choice but to launch land units to strike Syrian armed groups and to destroy infrastructure inside Syria, tunnels too perhaps, as it was done in the Gaza Strip in July 2014.

Israel might conduct raids into Syria that could last several days and even weeks until the task is completed. Israel might even consider capturing Syrian territory near the border to create a security zone for a long time. Syria is already divided, and large parts of it are in the hands of radical Islamists. Israel could limit the scale of its grip inside Syria, certainly compared with the huge areas Islamic extremists have taken there, and that might reduce the criticism against Israel at least in Western states. In the 1973 war Israel conquered about 500 square kilometers inside Syria but evacuated the area after several months as part of an agreement with Syria. In the future Israel might not agree to give back territory to the Assad regime, assuming the latter would not or could not prevent armed groups from attacking the Golan Heights.

### **How would a possible Israeli intervention in the civil war in Syria be executed?**

“Israel is an extreme case of a regional military powerhouse” that lacks political connections among Arabs.<sup>10</sup> Israel has been well aware that the Arabs have

been divided due to various disputes that sometimes have deteriorated into wars among Arabs, and in some of those confrontations Israel was involved. Egypt's intervention in the civil war in Yemen in the 1960s distracted Egypt, then Israel's main foe, from focusing on Israel. This is why the latter assisted Egypt's enemies in Yemen. In 1970, during the civil war in Jordan between the local government and the PLO, Israel intervened indirectly, without actually fighting, by deterring Syria, causing it to discontinue its invasion into Jordan. This enabled the Jordanian forces to beat the PLO. In 1982 Israel was heavily involved in the civil war in Lebanon, following Israel's struggle against both the PLO and Syria. That Israeli intervention entangled it in the Lebanese quagmire for eighteen years.

Israel could have been involved in the civil war in Syria in several scenarios.<sup>11</sup> There "has been a tension between the temptation for Israel to take advantage of the chaos wrought by the civil war to try to influence the outcome and the sobering realization that Israel's track record in such efforts has been dismal."<sup>12</sup> Israel would rather have its enemies there, Assad and his allies on the one side and radical Islamists on the other clash with each other instead of aiming for Israel, which might happen if the latter joins the fight.

On 3 March 2012 Israel's foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, called the international community to end the war in Syria.<sup>13</sup> Some 1,200 American government officials and experts assumed that one of the worrisome issues for the United States in 2014 is "intensification of the Syrian civil war including possible limited military intervention."<sup>14</sup> The United States and Israel want neither Assad nor Islamic extremists like ISIS or Al-Qaida to have the upper hand in Syria. This policy requires blocking and containing both Assad's coalition and Islamic extremists by turning them against each other and by helping their foes, the more moderate Syrian rebels. In 2014 from Western and Israeli perspectives there are "bad" rebels, radical Islamists including those who are affiliated with Al-Qaida and ISIS, and "good" rebels, all the rest.

In early June 2014 Brig. Gen. Itay Baron, head of the IDF military intelligence research section, estimated that out of about 120,000 Syrian rebels, only 20 percent are considered to be moderate and have no religious agenda. The achievements of both Assad and radical Islamists caused the United States to provide moderate rebels with antitank weapons in mid-2014. Until then the American aid to those fighters was limited to nonlethal measures. The American dilemma has been if and how much to trust and therefore to assist their Syrian protégés.<sup>15</sup> Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon called on 24 October 2014 to support the Free Syrian Army.<sup>16</sup> Yet money, equipment and weapons could find their way to the extremists and could be turned against Western targets. Israel is much more exposed than Western states as, in contrast to them, it has a border with Syria.

The Israelis are in a much better condition than other minorities in the Middle East, namely Syria. Syrian minorities such as Druze, Christians and Kurds who could not or would not trust the Assad regime to defend them, might collaborate with Israel. An unofficial alliance could be formed.

Until the end of 2016, Israel provided humanitarian aid by treating about 2,600 Syrians<sup>17</sup> and by sending supplies like food and medicines for Syrians who reside near the border. Some rebels talked with the IDF and received "modest amount of

weapons,” mostly rocket-propelled grenade launchers.<sup>18</sup> Mohammed Alloush, the political leader of Syria’s Army of Islam, which opposes ISIS, said in late September 2016 that Syrian rebels don’t seek a war with Israel.<sup>19</sup> Syrians could protect themselves while fighting the enemy they have in common with Israel, such as radical Islamists. Israel could deliver to its Syrian allies military and civilian supplies without actually participating in the battles. At most the IDF could assist by firing from the air and by evacuating wounded Syrians to Israel. The latter does remember a grim experience of helping one of the sides during a civil war in an Arab country, when Israel supported the Christians in Lebanon in the late 1970s and early 1980s. That alliance failed to bring the results Israel sought. Nevertheless Israel and some Syrian armed outfits could benefit from a mutual, secret and limited collaboration against a common enemy. As a lesson from Lebanon, Israel’s Syrian allies would do the actual fighting without Israeli “boots on the ground.”

Israel might focus on Assad if his military or allies, such as the Hezbollah, initiate assaults against Israel in the Golan Heights. In response, Assad, the Hezbollah and their Iranian patron might attack an Israeli or Jewish target somewhere around the world. Such a move would reduce the probability of deterioration with Israel, which would serve the interest of both sides.

In the 1991 war the United States and Arab states like Saudi Arabia joined forces against Iraq. The latter launched long-range missiles at Israel, aiming at dragging it into the war. Arab states and the United States feared that an Israeli retribution against Iraq would have presented Arab states as collaborating with Israel against an Arab state, which might have brought down the anti-Iraq coalition. Similarly, in 2014–2015 the Obama administration would not have wanted a confrontation between Israel and ISIS in Syria while American forces operate together with their Arab allies against ISIS. Yet in 2014–2015 the situation was different than the one in 1991. During the last decade, a common interest has developed between Israel and Arab states like Saudi Arabia in matters such as handling outfits like Hezbollah, Hamas and ISIS. The latter does not have the status Iraq had in 1991. Although Iraq was then an outcast, after conquering Kuwait, it was not considered a pariah like ISIS. However, the last thing the United States needs is Arabs assuming there is an American-Israeli conspiracy to exploit the struggle against ISIS in Syria as an excuse to act against Arabs.

Following the official Russian military involvement in Syria, since October 2015, Israel had to take that into consideration. Israel and Russia managed to coordinate between them and prevent misunderstandings let alone clashes. On 17 March 2016 Maj. Gen. Yair Golan, IDF deputy chief of staff, said that in this issue, “we immediately dealt with and resolved problems.”<sup>20</sup> However in July that year there were problems in communication between the Russians and the IAF. The Russians sometimes did not notify Israel before they conducted air attacks near Israel or where the IAF was operating.<sup>21</sup>

## **Weapons to Hezbollah**

In some cases during the 1973 war, the IAF disrupted the shipment of Soviet weapon systems and war material to Syria. Russia today is much weaker than the

Soviet Union. Yet obviously Israel, even in a time of war with Syria, would not try to prevent by force the delivery of Russian weapons to Syria, not even advanced ones like antiaircraft and antiship missiles. Israel tolerated the transfer of weapons from Assad to Hezbollah into nearby Lebanon too. Israel also accepted the military buildup of both Assad and Hezbollah as part of the status quo between them and Israel. Albeit, there were exceptions, and on those occasions Israel attacked inside Syria.

Following the destruction of the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007 by the IDF, Israel did not take responsibility. Both sides avoided an escalation and even had indirect peace talks that stopped in December 2008, when Israel confronted Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Having a nuclear option might have served Assad in gaining back the Golan Heights, assuming Israel would not want to risk a nuclear war for that. Having lost the reactor Assad tried to possess the Golan Heights through a peace process. It therefore seems that the Israeli raid on the reactor, which might have caused war between Israel and Syria, might have also helped in starting talks, which almost led to peace.

During 2013–2016 Israel carried out several air strikes deep inside Syria to stop advanced weapons like antiaircraft missiles from reaching the Hezbollah in Lebanon. It was a very minor battle theater inside Syria, between Israel and both Assad and the Hezbollah, and it was not part of the Syrian civil war. Israel denied its aircraft conducted those strikes until 11 April 2016, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu admitted that.<sup>22</sup> Israel's defense minister, Avigdor Liberman, said on 7 December 2016 that Israel tried to stop the delivery of weapons and military equipment from Syria to Hezbollah.<sup>23</sup> This announcement followed two Israeli air strikes.

Assad and the Hezbollah avoided retaliation because it could have escalated into a war with Israel that could devastate the Assad regime. Still, because Israel attacked at least six times, it proved Assad did not stop the delivery of sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah. The Hezbollah came to Assad's aid in the civil war, so he risked provoking Israel because of his alliance and debt to the Hezbollah.

If the Assad regime collapsed the Syrian military, like its air defense, it would crumble too. Israel would surely welcome the final meltdown of the Syrian military, which has shrunk in recent years. The risk of high-intensity war with Syria, reduced dramatically in the last years, would vanish completely and with it a major backup to the Hezbollah. Without Assad the Hezbollah would not only have to fear its Sunni foes in Syria but also the IAF, which could exploit the lack of a Syrian air defense to hunt down its foes inside Syria and put an end to the dispatch of weapons to Lebanon.

### **Assad's chemical weapons (CW)**

Iraq used CW during the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> Before the civil war Assad had immense quantities of CW.<sup>25</sup> In late September 2014 Israel assumed Assad "has retained caches of combat-ready chemical weapons after giving up raw materials used to produce such munitions under pressure from foreign powers." Assad had "kept some

missile warheads, air-dropped bombs and rocket-propelled grenades primed with toxins like Sarin.”<sup>26</sup> Assad’s CW has been a dangerous threat for Israel at least since the 1980s. The agreement from October 2013, to disarm Assad from his CW, was a success story. It showed that diplomacy, backed by force and a joint effort by world powers, could benefit Israel, which was quite skeptical about positive results of that process. Assad went on using CW, and because of that he became exposed to a Western attack after giving up his shield, that is, almost all his CW. Striking Assad would also be a blow to his Russian patron, as part of the mini cold war between Russia and Western states.

The United States, by signing the agreement about Assad’s CW, served a vital Israeli interest. Furthermore, without such an agreement an American attack in September 2013 might have toppled Assad, enabling Islamic radicals to replace him. Israel prefers a rational enemy instead of much more fanatic one like Islamic extremists.

On the negative side, from Israel’s point of view, the agreement could also generate pressure on Israel concerning nuclear weapons it possesses, according to non-Israeli sources. Israel does not want to go down that road. In contrast to Assad, Israel has never used its unconventional weapons against its adversaries. Israel does not even imply it might do that, not even against Iran, which often calls to destroy Israel. However in the future there might be an international demand to focus on Israel’s nuclear project and weapons. Arab states, particularly Egypt, known for its fierce opposition to Israel’s nuclear capabilities, could promote a campaign to that effect.

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# 5 The cold war between Israel and both Iran and Hezbollah

Israel and Iran have been opponents since the 1979 Iranian revolution. The conflict between them has been handled indirectly through clashes between Israel and Iranian proxies such as the Hezbollah.

## Israel and Iran

Charles Freilich claimed in June 2014 that “Iran faces a large, young and impoverished population, an opposition that has been suppressed (but is waiting to erupt again) and a deep economic crisis. Therefore, the long-term future of the regime is uncertain.”<sup>1</sup> The Iranian economy during “eight years of populist and misguided economic policies under former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have landed the Iranian economy in a very deep economic crisis.” The new government has been trying to reform and solve economic problems.<sup>2</sup> In August 2014, according to Suzanne Maloney, Iran’s president Hassan Rouhani

has lived up to his billing in his first year in office, on the domestic front as well as on foreign policy. He has returned Iran’s political dynamic to a steadier equilibrium and restored some confidence in the competence of the central government.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless Yossi Kuperwasser, former director general of Israel’s Ministry of Strategic Affairs, claimed in June 2015 that Israel’s perspective in regard to Iran “is that ideological dictatorships are eventually bound to fall, as a result of domestic pressures.”<sup>4</sup>

Iran is a major power in the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> Yet its “hegemonic aspirations and millennia-long conflict with the Sunni majority in the region’ make it ‘a source of great instability for years to come.’”<sup>6</sup>

“Iran’s foreign policy is a product of the ideology of Iran’s Islamic revolution, blended with longstanding national interests.”<sup>7</sup> It might be that

the radical anti-Semitism voiced by Iranian leaders is a worldview so delusional, so removed from actual realities, that those who advocate it will almost certainly not operate according to the customary norms of what constitutes reasonable behavior in international affairs.<sup>8</sup>

Many in the Iranian leadership did not recognize Israel's right to exist.<sup>9</sup> Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, called on 8 November 2014 for the annihilation of Israel.<sup>10</sup>

Posing as the sworn and most stalwart enemy of the common enemy – Israel – Iran strives to leapfrog over the Arab governments in order to curry favor with Arab public opinion. The oft-promised destruction of Israel is not Iran's real political goal, even though it would view such a development with genuine satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>

On 5 March 2015 Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, claimed that Iran was not against the Jews. He mentioned that in the Iranian parliament, while every 150,000 Muslims get a representative, less than 20,000 Iranian Jews have one too. He emphasized the "history of tolerance and cooperation" between Iranian Muslims and Jews who live in Iran and those who reside outside that country as well.<sup>12</sup> Iran might allow Israeli Jews to stay in the Middle East maybe even where there is now the state of Israel but not as rulers of their own independent country. Instead of an Israeli government, Iran wants in Israel an Arab, pro-Iranian government.

In July 2014 almost no one in Israel assumed there could be reconciliation with Iran.<sup>13</sup> "Both sides need to keep the vitriolic and threatening rhetoric under control in order to avoid an unintended escalation and even war."<sup>14</sup> Such a confrontation would be a tragedy because both sides do not have fundamental reasons for a conflict between them, like disputes about borders. No wonder they have never clashed with each other directly, and actually until the late 1970s, they were kind of allies.

Ray Takeyh, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, said in June 2016 that in the coming years, the Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is

likely to be a force in both Iranian as well as regional politics. The Guards and the hardline clerics have a relationship of mutual dependence. As deeply pious men, the Guards need the approbation of the priestly class. And as politicians seeking power and regional preeminence, the clerics need the reliable muscle of the Guards. The region's future may yet be defined by the compact between these two forces.<sup>15</sup>

This alliance would have a strong influence on Iran's approach toward Israel.

### **Iran's nuclear project**

"Israel is widely assumed to be the Middle East's only nuclear-armed power."<sup>16</sup> Israel would like to maintain this status quo, if necessary by force, as it did in destroying the Iraqi reactor in 1981 and the Syrian one in 2007. A *casus belli*

for Israel might be Iran approaching the production of a bomb, and then it might strike Iran.

In late February 2015 Mojtaba Zolnour, who represents Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei in the IRGC, claimed, "If the Zionists were certain that they could win a war against us, they'd have initiated one by now, but since they don't have the strength to do so, they do nothing but threaten."<sup>17</sup> Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Amos Yadlin is a former head of the IDF intelligence directorate. He argued in March 2015 that Israel has a military option against Iran.<sup>18</sup> On 14 July that year, following the agreement with Iran (the JCPOA),<sup>19</sup> former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said that Israel should keep the military option.<sup>20</sup> The IDF was better ready "than it ever has been to carry out a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities should it be instructed to do so," a senior Israeli security official said on 24 August 2015.<sup>21</sup> On 22 September 2016 the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Israel would not allow Iran to produce a nuclear weapon.<sup>22</sup> In that year the IAF continued to prepare for a possible raid in Iran such as by starting to assimilate the F-35A.

After the retreat from Lebanon in 2000 and from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Israel publicly warned that in case of hostilities from Lebanon or the Gaza Strip against Israel, the IDF would strike back hard. When assaults occurred from those territories, Israel hesitated, did nothing or acted quite moderately for a long period. Yet eventually, in Lebanon in July–August 2006 and in the Gaza Strip in December 2008–January 2009, Israel launched a major offensive. The production of an Iranian nuclear weapon is not equivalent to an actual attack on Israel, similar to those launched from Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. However, an Iranian nuclear bomb might be much more intimidating for Israel than any Arab assault against it since 1948. Therefore Israel might attack to prevent a possible existential threat.

In recent years Israel launched several air strikes inside Syria, aiming to destroy advanced weapons before they would have been transferred from Syria to the Hezbollah in Lebanon. An Israeli air raid in Iran would be immeasurably more important and much more complicated. Israel's targets in Syria were fewer and more exposed compared with Israel's objectives in Iran. The flight to Iran from Israel is much longer than in a strike in nearby Syria. Israel's fighters could reach Iran and overcome Iranian air defense and fighters. However Israeli planes might not be able to carry sufficient amounts of bombs and/or bombs that would be effective enough to crack the thick protection of some Iranian nuclear sites. Furthermore there are possible ramifications such as collateral damage and harsh international criticism Israel would absorb.

Gathering data for bombing Iran is a challenge for Israeli intelligence, like estimating for how long an attack could delay the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore if Israel does attack Iran, there could be an exchange of punches between them without any land maneuvers due to the distance between the two rivals, which is more than 1,000 kilometers. Israel would rely on the IAF, whereas Iran would bash Israel with long-range surface-to-surface missiles like the Shahab-3. But Iran has only several hundred of them, they are not that accurate and at least

some of them might be intercepted by Israel's Arrow antimissile system. Iran also does not have a powerful air force.<sup>24</sup>

In an attempt to deter Israel, Iran revealed all kinds of new weapon systems. Yet some of them were fake, like its stealth fighter,<sup>25</sup> and with the real ones their actual potential might have been exaggerated. However Iran assimilated the S-300, an advanced anti-aircraft system and upgraded its cyber capabilities.

### **Israel's allies**

Robert Kagan "argued that the United States has an enduring responsibility and capacity to shape the world order and must remain actively engaged abroad to prevent the international order from collapse." Berry Posen "warned against American overreach in foreign policy and urged Washington to embrace restraint, focusing on its own national security interests and limiting engagement – particularly military – abroad."<sup>26</sup> This dilemma has also to do with Iran.

"Israel sees itself as a strategically located, permanent ally for the United States. Resilient and friendly bilateral relations with the United States remain a major pillar of Israel's national security."<sup>27</sup> The resolution by the US Senate from 22 May 2013 strongly supported "the close military, intelligence, and security cooperation that President Obama has pursued with Israel and urges this cooperation to continue and deepen."<sup>28</sup>

On 11 September 2012, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta claimed that if Iran decides to produce nuclear weapons, the United States would have about a year to stop it.<sup>29</sup>

On 31 March 2015 US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter claimed that the US military option against Iran remains on the table.<sup>30</sup> The JCPOA, which was signed between Iran and world powers on 14 July 2015, allows Iran to proceed with its nuclear program yet with severe constraints. Within Israel there has been a strong reservation about such agreement due to an understanding that Israel cannot afford its ramifications. Many Israelis believe that the world, particularly the Obama administration, lacks the willingness to do whatever it takes – including a military attack – to prevent Iran from possessing nuclear weapons. A nuclear Iran would be a major challenge for the United States but not a mortal threat as it might be for Israel.

The tension between Israel and its American patron, regarding Iran's nuclear program, indicated Iran benefited from that dispute. Both Israel and the United States are regarded by Iran as enemies, obstructing its efforts to reach hegemony in the Middle East. Weakening the relations between the United States and Israel would enfeeble the United States and Israel's position in that region, thus paving the way for Iran to spread its influence. Subsequently, Iran had an ulterior motive lurking behind the negotiations and then the deal about its nuclear project. This additional goal, to undermine the Israeli-American alliance, might have been indirect but still very important.

Israel and the United States want to ensure Iran does not possess the bomb by watching closely its nuclear program. Only a satisfactory result of this surveillance

should secure Israel and other states as well, whereas a breach of the agreement should be met with action on the part of the United States and/or Israel. Neither rule out a military action. US Secretary of State John Kerry argued on 3 May 2015 that its country still has a military option to thwart Iran's nuclear program.<sup>31</sup> The Obama administration even claimed in August that year that the inspections of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, as part of the 14 July agreement, "will reveal important details that can be used for better targeting should the U.S. decide to attack Iran."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore on 3 April 3 2015 the United States revealed that its biggest bunker-buster bomb was improved, so it could destroy Iran's highly protected nuclear sites, such as Fordow. Israel was informed about that.<sup>33</sup> Demonstrating to Israel that the United States is the only one capable of destroying Iran's nuclear infrastructure is part of the American strategy.

Nevertheless President Barack Obama said on 2 May 2015 in regard to Iran's nuclear program that "a military solution will not fix it. Even if the United States participates, it would temporarily slow down an Iranian nuclear program but it will not eliminate it."<sup>34</sup> It appears that the US intelligence community also holds that a raid on Iran's nuclear infrastructure would be useless because it would only postpone the project by a few years as Iran's manpower would survive the attack and rebuild the nuclear program. One could question this approach based on recent history. The US military has fought for many years in Iraq and Afghanistan and is now waging a war against ISIS. This proves that past victories in those places have also been temporary as the enemy regrouped and returned to fight in spite of former defeats. Why would the principle of constant struggle against an obviously dangerous enemy be applied to the Taliban, Al-Qaida, tyrants and now ISIS, and not to Iran? If the US military prevents Iran's bomb now and the latter start over after several years, the United States could conduct another round of air bombardments on Iran's rebuilt plants.

Ray Takeyh and Roger Zakheim, a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, argued in June 2015 that the US military option against Iran "lacks credibility, fails to strengthen our diplomacy and possibly invites Tehran to develop a nuclear program while fearing little consequence."<sup>35</sup>

The July 2015 agreement about Iran's nuclear project proved that the Obama administration sought its legacy to avoid a confrontation with Iran, not initiate it. The main purpose of US announcements about a military option was to urge Iran to sign the agreement, along with an attempt to convince Israel to put its trust in its American patron and hold off its attack on Iran. There were periods when it seemed Israel was about to attack Iran, but that did not happen, and possibly Israel never actually intended to bomb Iran. However, because the US goal was to prevent such a move, it seems it was more successful than Israel, left to tolerate Iran's nuclear program proceeding, albeit under some serious constraints. However, although Israel seems to be the loser, one should bear in mind that there was a limit to what Israel could have gained. The United States obviously looks after its own interests first, not those of its allies, including close ones like Israel. Although the latter is a regional power in the Middle East, its American patron could stick to its guns, particularly when the cost

and risks of accepting Israel's demands are too high. Israel must concede to this reality.

The United States should understand Israel's security needs in regard to Iran. The United States gave Israel in the last two decades weapon systems such as the F-16I and F-15I. Since 2016 the IAF has been assimilating the F-35A. Those aircraft could reach and bomb Iran's nuclear sites. However it did not mean Israel was encouraged by its American patron to attack Iran. Those planes were supposed to keep the status quo, that is, make Israel feel secure so it will not conduct an attack on Iran, one that does not serve US interests. The F-16I, F-15I and the F-35A are fighter-bombers, not strategic bombers, due to their limited range and cargo. It seems that from the American perspective, the purpose of those planes is to allow Israel to retaliate but not to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapon capability. If the United States had wanted to give Israel the best chance to destroy Iran's nuclear sites, it would have delivered its Israeli ally heavy bombers like the B-52. The latter, in contrast to F-16I and F-15I and the F-35A, could carry huge bombs, powerful enough to destroy any Iranian nuclear site, that is, the Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP). This step might make Iran think twice before racing to produce the bomb.

In late May 2014 Prince Turki bin Faisal, former head of Saudi's General Intelligence, "highlighted Israel's own nuclear weapon arsenal and the desire of all Mideast countries to rid their region of weapons of mass destruction."<sup>36</sup> In early May 2014, at the UN, Saudi Arabia announced that "Israel's possession of nuclear weapons is 'a major obstacle' to Mideast security and stability."<sup>37</sup> Therefore Saudi Arabia and Iran band together against Israel in this matter. Yet whereas Saudi Arabia has tolerated Israel's possession of the bomb for several decades now, the desert kingdom strongly opposes Iran having a nuclear arsenal too. It is clear that Saudi Arabia's leaders fear Iran's malevolent intentions more than possible danger from Israel, but if preventing Iran from having the bomb involves disarming Israel from its nuclear capabilities, that kills two birds with one stone, as far as the Saudis are concerned.

The decline of the US position in the Middle East might encourage self-reliance in states in that area as well as collaboration with other states in the region. Both the United States and Saudi Arabia seek to block Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, for Saudi Arabia this matter has much more urgency due to its proximity to Iran. Saudi Arabia might not trust the United States to prevent Iran from having nuclear weapon capabilities. From the Saudi perspective its American partner has already failed by not toppling an enemy of Saudi Arabia, Assad, while encouraging the downfall of a Saudi ally, Mubarak. Saudi Arabia is waiting to see if the international effort to limit Iran's nuclear project works. If the results do not satisfy Saudi Arabia, it might allow the IAF to cross its skies to strike in Iran. Other Arab Gulf states might adopt the Saudi approach. If they calculate that Iran would only retaliate against Israel after a raid on Iranian nuclear sites, it would encourage them to urge Israel to attack.

The main problem for Israel, the United States and Arab Gulf states is actually the regime in Iran, not the state itself. Replacing it would be a game changer,

and destroying its nuclear sites would be a way to do that because such a blow might make Iranian leaders lose face and appear weak and vulnerable. Hitting the nuclear infrastructure hard would expose the Iranian leadership as unable to protect such a key asset. Israel bombing Iranian oil facilities, the revenues of which finance the nuclear project and other basic expenses, would further degrade the Iranian regime. Other strategies to undermine the Iranian government are to pave the way for the Iranian opposition to take action and even rise against the government. In case of an open revolt Western states could assist the rebels as in Libya in 2011.

### **Iran's allies**

Iran has several allies in the Middle East. Geographically, the closest is its former nemesis, Iraq, which has been under heavy Iranian influence. Iraq might become an Iranian province, particularly the Shiite part of Iraq, because that artificial state might be split following the sectarian violence there. It is doubtful whether Iraq's security units would be able to hold the country together and guard its borders. They certainly could not send an expeditionary force to fight Israel, as Iraq did in the past, mostly in the 1973 war. Iraq assists Iran in Syria but would not contribute much in the struggle against Israel.

The Hamas was supported by Iran, although it was not as vital for Iran as the Hezbollah has been. The latter disappointed its patron in 2006 when it got entangled in a war against Israel at the wrong time, but Hamas did the same in 2008–2009. However, whereas Hezbollah obeyed its Iranian master and assisted Assad in the Syrian civil war, the Hamas refused to do that. This caused a rift between Iran and Hamas, which reduced the chances of Hamas joining Iran in a fight against Israel.

Preventing as much as possible the smuggling of weapons into the Gaza Strip from Iran would delay the arming of Palestinian groups, which would help postpone the next confrontation with Israel. The Gaza Strip is like the West Bank, surrounded on most sides by Israel, including by air. The only access from the Gaza Strip to an Arab state, Egypt, might continue to be blocked as far as the delivery of weapons, like rockets. Therefore the Gaza Strip might not be the fire base Iran wants it to be, serving Iran in case of a war between Israel and Iran. In any case Hamas, which strives to keep its rockets for its own use rather than serving Iran, might well ignore Iran's demands to join it in the battlefield.

The Hamas has opposition inside the Gaza Strip, terror and guerrilla organizations like the pro-Iranian Islamic Jihad. The latter might be encouraged by its Iranian patron, particularly if Iran is at war with Israel, to launch rockets and mortar shells from the Gaza Strip, with or without approval or participation of the Hamas. This would ratchet up the likelihood that Hamas, against its will, might be dragged into the war not to look weak or, even worse, as supporting Israel.

Iran and Syria have a long relationship.<sup>38</sup> In Syria the IRGC particularly its Quds Force, "have been instrumental in training the pro-government militia and paramilitary forces that have been so indispensable in bolstering the Syrian

military's ability to fight back against a determined opposition."<sup>39</sup> Hezbollah was also heavily involved. Since September 2012 and until early 2016, more than 850 Hezbollah fighters were killed in Syria.<sup>40</sup> This contribution to the survival of Assad demonstrated both the importance of the alliance among Iran, Hezbollah and Assad and the value of Hezbollah to Iran.

Iran, Assad, Hezbollah and their allies in Syria all oppose Israel and could conduct assaults on the border with Israel in the Golan Heights and/or Lebanon, as they already did. This might create an escalation that might end in a war, like between Israel and the Hezbollah, against the will of both of them.<sup>41</sup> The 2006 war proved the Hezbollah did not anticipate Israeli steps. Hezbollah and Iran for that matter wish to avoid another miscalculation. This approach was tested during periods when there was tension on the border, like in late January 2015, following an Israeli strike inside Syria that killed a high-ranking commander of the Hezbollah.

If Israel attacks Iran's nuclear sites and the latter pressures Assad to assist Iran in its retaliation, Israel would warn Assad not to intervene. Since 2011 the latter sought not to open a second front, let alone against a powerful foe such as Israel. The question is whom Assad fears more, Israel's threats to bring him down or Iran. The latter could threaten to leave Assad to his fate, facing the rebels on his own if he does not join Iran against Israel. Yet since Israel and particularly Iran would not want to topple Assad, Assad might demonstrate a symbolic solidarity with Iran, such that Israel could tolerate and thus avoid his downfall.

IDF Chief of General Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot said on 18 January 2016 that "Hezbollah is funded, trained and even led by Iran."<sup>42</sup> Ideologically Hezbollah follows Islamic order, which calls for Jihad against "local and foreign oppressors and for the liberation of Jerusalem and the spread of social justice."<sup>43</sup> Yet in Syria the Hezbollah has been helping the oppressor, and as to Jerusalem, the Hezbollah has been focusing more on another capital city, the one in Lebanon, as part of its effort to tighten its grip on that country. The best chance the Hezbollah has to allow Muslims to get a hold on Jerusalem or any other territory Israel controls would be to support the PA in its talks with Israel, which might end in surrendering areas Israel possesses to the PA.

Following the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, a UN agreed-upon border officially separates Israel and Lebanon. The Hezbollah has border disputes with Israel, but they don't get much attention in the Arab world. The Hezbollah has been aware it could not conquer any part of Israel due to the latter's military superiority. Hezbollah has between 20,000 and 50,000 "part-time reserves."<sup>44</sup> The IDF has "well-trained reserves totaling some 465,000 troops, many of which have had extensive practical experience in asymmetric warfare since 2000."<sup>45</sup> Therefore Hezbollah had concentrated on preparations to strike Israel from Lebanon with 150,000 rockets.<sup>46</sup> In early December 2016 the IDF released a previously classified map that shows the location of Hezbollah positions in south Lebanon, including its rocket launchers; all of them were in or near civilian areas.<sup>47</sup>

The Hezbollah could instead divert its energy to strengthening its status inside Lebanon. Israel might accept this, for lack of better options, just as it has been

willing to allow the Hamas to rule the Gaza Strip. From Israel's perspective both Hamas and Hezbollah could be lightly armed, that is, without major weapons such as rockets that could hit Israel. It is possible of course that in such a case, those organizations could send armed details to infiltrate into Israel, but the latter has vast experience in dealing with such a problem, particularly with ground incursions. Assaults from the sea by robber boats and from the air with powered paragliding are much less common, but Israel could handle them with its navy and anti-aircraft batteries.

Iran relies on Hezbollah's rockets to hit Israel more efficiently than missiles fired from Iran as Hezbollah's arsenal is bigger and could inflict more casualties and damages. Iran seeks to control the decision when to throw Hezbollah into combat, the timing being when Israel attacks Iran's nuclear infrastructure. This explains Iran's opposition to the 2006 war, which started following a provocation by its Lebanese proxy, providing Israel with an excuse to endanger an Iranian base in Lebanon. The Hezbollah has been restraining itself since 2006, and this policy might continue even if Iran demands Hezbollah to fire at Israel. The Hezbollah might hesitate whether to assist Iran in a war against Israel, fearing the ramifications in Lebanon on both its position inside the Shiite community and its relations with the rest of the population. The cost of the war in Syria for Hezbollah might bring the latter to rethink going to another war, again because of Iranian interest, this time against Israel, which would be much more destructive for both Lebanon and Hezbollah than the Syrian civil war has ever been. Iran itself might not want to expose the Hezbollah to a possible defeat by Israel due to its value in keeping the Iranian grip not only in Lebanon but in Syria as well. Even if Assad falls, Iran would try to hold as much land as possible inside Syria by depending on groups like the Hezbollah.

If Israel bombs Iran the latter together with its allies might launch terror attacks worldwide. Israel might not know for sure which of them to blame: Iran, Assad or the Hezbollah, because each of them would have an interest to carry out such an operation. Israel would have to figure out which of them is the most responsible as they might all deny their involvement to prevent an escalation with Israel. A wrong estimation by Israel could lead it to retaliate against the one that played the smallest part, which might cause a deterioration neither side would want.

Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman visited the Israeli northern border on 7 June 2016 and said, '[W]e don't have any other plans other than maintaining the quiet and I hope that everyone understands that well, including our neighbors. But in any case, I don't recommend that anyone test us.'<sup>248</sup> This statement expressed Israel's desire to keep the status quo.

### **Another war in Lebanon**

After another war the Hezbollah might be more vulnerable politically. Its foes in Lebanon are already opposing its status and privileges, one of which is keeping weapons that were turned against other Lebanese and Syrian Sunnis, causing an increase in violence and instability in Lebanon. Hezbollah might be isolated in

Lebanon and also around the Arab world. From the perspective of Arab states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Israel was expected to do them a favor in 2006, either by annihilating the Hezbollah or at least making sure its influence in Lebanon dissipates. Israel failed to do so then but might get another chance in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's bases, including its rockets, are inside Shiite villages and towns in Lebanon. Those places would absorb massive Israeli fire in a future war. The IDF would no doubt try to hit only Hezbollah's objectives, but collateral damage might still be quite extensive. The Shiite civilians of those villages must be aware of that. They might accept this danger, not just being convinced Israel is their nemesis but also because they have no choice. They might also assume that following the war, similar to what happened after the 2006 war, their Iranian patron would compensate them. However, they might get more than they bargained for if the cost of the next war is much higher than they estimated and if Iran cannot allocate them the required funds due to its economic problems. Iran might also decide that investing in Lebanon is not worth it, following the outcome of the war. Israel might not suffer as much as Iran would hope. Actually if Israel attacks Iran's nuclear sites, it would prove that Hezbollah, with all its might, did not manage to deter Israel from bashing its Iranian patron.

Furthermore, even if Israel does not confront Iran, the Hezbollah might be entangled in another clash with Israel against Iran's will. Although since 2006 the Hezbollah has constrained itself, partially because of Iran, there could be reasons for Hezbollah to attack Israel, not necessarily related to Iran. The Syrian civil war spilled into Lebanon, raising criticism against the Hezbollah for dragging the country into the war in Syria. The Hezbollah, particularly if the Syrian fallout costs Lebanon dearly, might wish to divert attention by confronting Israel, showing that its main aim is to defend Lebanon. The Hezbollah might look only for a limited clash big enough to serve its purpose but not such that would bring Israel to inflict a major blow to Lebanon, which would embolden the opposition to Hezbollah in that country. Thus, instead of strengthening the position of the Hezbollah, a war against Israel might weaken it.

In another scenario even if Hezbollah avoids any clash with Israel, its enormous stockpile of rockets might urge Israel to strike it. In the 2014 confrontation in the Gaza Strip, Israel learned what might have happened if the tunnels had been used to launch a surprise attack inside Israel. As a lesson Israel might consider a preventive war or preemptive strike against the Hezbollah, aiming at wiping out its rockets.

There is a possibility that the next round between Hezbollah and Israel would occur as a result of a brawl at the border between Israel and Lebanon in spite of it being against the interest of both sides. Such an incident might happen because of a third party, like Sunni extremists who wish to ignite a war between their foes: the Israeli Jews and the Shiites from Hezbollah. Miscalculations and lack of restraint by Israel and/or the Hezbollah might indeed lead to war.

In the 2006 war Israel might have wished to shatter the Hezbollah once and for all.<sup>49</sup> The Hezbollah absorbed heavy punishments but managed to survive. There was no clear winner in the 2006 war. In the next war in Lebanon, Israel might limit

its goals in advance. Israel's main purpose would be to destroy as many rockets and launchers as possible, together with other military infrastructure and equipment. The IDF would have the Sisyphean task of locating and annihilating every post from which the Hezbollah fired or could fire rockets.

Hezbollah's rockets cover almost all of Israel. Hezbollah could fire 3,000 to 4,000 rockets every day.<sup>50</sup> The IDF has hundreds of thousands of soldiers, together with thousands of weapon systems like tanks and aircraft. In spite of Israel's overwhelming military superiority, it might not be easy for its troops to accomplish their missions due to the terrain in Lebanon and the resistance by the Hezbollah. The IDF has been training to find and destroy Hezbollah's rockets, including fighting underground in the tunnels and bunkers the Hezbollah built inside its bases.

In the next war Hezbollah might penetrate into Israel with up to 200 men. Their aim would be to seize a piece of land, maybe even part of a village near the border or a military post. The Hezbollah would exploit the rugged terrain to infiltrate. Heavy machineguns, antitank missiles and powerful short-range rockets would support the attack. This is why the IDF might evacuate villages close to the border in time of war.<sup>51</sup> In August 2014, following the fight against tunnels in the Gaza Strip, the IDF told the heads of kibbutz and villages located near the border with Lebanon, that the Hezbollah does not possess tunnels that lead into Israel.<sup>52</sup> However, Amir Rapaport claimed that the Hezbollah has many tunnels in south Lebanon that pose a threat to Israel, just the same as rockets. The tunnels would serve several aims: launching rockets, penetrating Israel and attacking Israeli forces trying to reach the rockets inside Lebanon. The IDF would bomb those tunnels from the air and with artillery that would use new projectiles with GPS.<sup>53</sup> As in the 2014 confrontation in the Gaza Strip, the battle on the surface and in the tunnels might be a major part of the war in Lebanon as well.

Like the Hamas the Hezbollah could not present "a serious direct threat to Israel's ability to maneuver."<sup>54</sup> In a future war against the Hezbollah, Israel would strive to repeat what it tried to do in the 1982 war: defeat a threatening non-state organization in Lebanon. The 1982 war proved that annihilating the threat of guerrilla and terror in Lebanon was extremely challenging, even by conducting an enormous offensive deep into Lebanon. Israel might conquer again part of Lebanon, but the Hezbollah would continue to fight, as it did in the 1990s. Israel is aware of that and would be very reluctant to deploy in Lebanon for a continuous period, let alone for years. After the 2006 war against the Hezbollah and the 2008–2009 and 2014 confrontations with the Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the IDF evacuated the areas its troops had seized inside Arab territory. It is possible this pattern could also be repeated in the future.

If the IAF attacks Iran's nuclear infrastructure, it would be done with about 100 planes, mostly F-15I and F-16I, Israel's long-range fighter-bombers. This would leave the IAF with about 250 F-15s and F-16s to protect the skies of Israel and participate in a possible war against the Hezbollah. Israel's F-15I and F-16I might be needed not only for the raid on Iran's nuclear sites. If the war with Iran goes on, those aircraft would bomb other Iranian targets, and that would reduce their contribution to the fight in Lebanon. However, the IAF might still be able to

focus on the Hezbollah, even if there are more sorties against Iran. Hezbollah's territory is close to Israel, contrary to Iran, and that would allow the IAF to maximize the number of sorties against the Hezbollah. The latter could strike back, including against military airfields, in an effort to slow down Israel's air bombardments. Yet many of Israel's military airfields are in the south of the country, out of reach of most of Hezbollah's rockets. The Hezbollah has anti-aircraft missiles, but they might not seriously disrupt air operations.

In a raid against Iran, which would be run in the air, the IDF would not need its reserves. They would be required on a large-scale offensive, which would include up to several divisions, against the Hezbollah. A massive mobilization of Israeli troops might alert the Hezbollah and also the Iranians, who could assume that an Israeli preparation for war against the Hezbollah could be part of a strike against Iran. Therefore tens of thousands of Israeli reserves would be called up only after the Israeli aircraft are over Iran.

Major-General Amir Eshel, the commander of the IAF, said on 23 April 2015 that "Lebanon will go through an experience whose dimensions it cannot imagine. I wouldn't trade places with a single Lebanese."<sup>55</sup> It was part of the Israeli attempt to deter Hezbollah from firing rockets at Israel. If this fails the IDF would rely on firepower to destroy Hezbollah's rockets and/or their launchers, and the same would be with wiping out Iranian long-range missiles during a war between Israel and Iran. While in Lebanon Israeli aircraft, artillery and ships would target their objectives; in Iran the IAF would run the show alone. In Iran the hunting of long-range missiles would be a challenge due to the distance from Israel and the size of Iran. In Lebanon the rockets are near Israel and in a much smaller country than Iran. Yet those objectives are often tiny, and there are much more of them compared with the number of long-range missiles in Iran. There is also a bigger risk of losing aircraft in Iran due to its fighters and air defense, which the Hezbollah does not really have.

In early June 2015 Israel conducted a major exercise, Turning Point 15, which examined how several services, military and civilian ones, deal with a full-scale attack of rockets and missiles.<sup>56</sup> However on 9 September 2015 the state comptroller and ombudsman of Israel severely criticized the Israeli government for the lack of readiness of the Israeli rear if there is another war,<sup>57</sup> such as with Hezbollah and/or Iran. In either scenario Israel's defensive approach would be similar against both Iranian missiles and Hezbollah's rockets: sending the population to shelters while trying to shoot down part of the enemy's projectiles. Israel does not have enough missiles to intercept all those projectiles, particularly Hezbollah's rockets, due to their huge number.

### **Sending supply from Iran to its proxies**

On 15 March 2011 IDF's elite naval commando seized in the Mediterranean Sea the ship *Victoria*, that carried weapons and ammunition for the Gaza Strip.<sup>58</sup> On 5 March 2014 Israel captured in the Red Sea the ship *Klos-C*, which carried dozens of long-range rockets, M-302s, mortar shells and so on. The weapons on the

*Klos-C* were on their way from Iran to the Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip,<sup>59</sup> the main rival of the Hamas there.

Iran, particularly following the rift between itself and Hamas, might not have trusted the Hamas to use its weapons when it best serves Iran's interest, like after an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear sites. Hamas might not have shot those projectiles to prevent an Israeli retribution against it. Hamas could have also fired the Iranian rockets before a possible Israeli raid on Iran, during one of its clashes with Israel. All that brought Iran to give its arsenal to the Islamic Jihad, trusting they would be more obedient to their Iranian patron. The Hamas probably did not want to allow the Islamic Jihad to become too strong by assimilating those rockets if they had reached the Gaza Strip. Therefore the Hamas could have grabbed them from the Islamic Jihad. Either way Israel wished that neither the Hamas nor the Islamic Jihad would hold the weapons from the *Klos-C*.

Capturing the *Klos-C* was quite a unique Israeli operation because it took place about 1,500 kilometers from Israel, not a simple task for the IDF, which basically has been built and trained to confront foes that are much closer to Israel. Still the IDF carried out in the past, including several decades ago, other complicated operations at much greater distances. In late December 1969 the IDF had five of its new missile boats in the French harbor of Cherbourg. France built them for Israel but refused to deliver the vessels due to a French embargo on the Jewish state at that time. In response the boats, with Israeli crews, sneaked out and sailed about 5,700 kilometers to Israel. In another case, on 4 July 1976, the IDF rescued more than 100 Jews kidnapped and taken to Entebbe in Uganda, about 3,800 kilometers from Israel.

## **The United States and Iran against ISIS**

During the American deployment in Iraq, "Iran's covert/overt effort to bleed the U.S. in Iraq was a massive, complex endeavor."<sup>60</sup> In 2014 the advance of ISIS in northern Iraq brought Iran and the United States to join forces against ISIS.<sup>61</sup> Yet there was a "genuine mistrust" between Iran and the United States,<sup>62</sup> which is quite clear not only because of the rivalry between them in Iraq but due to several other issues. Iran and the United States collaborated before against the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001. Later on during the American deployment there, Iran helped the insurgents. Iran therefore could fight against the United States, then collaborate with it and vice versa.

Iran sees the United States as an enemy that is much stronger than ISIS. For the United States Iran, particularly if it gets nuclear weapon capability, would be much more powerful than ISIS. Meanwhile the United States does not want Iran to increase its already significant hold on Iraq, which might happen if ISIS were out of the way. Yet if eventually ISIS was crushed and pushed back from northern Iraq, Iran would not be able to expand its grip in those areas as most of the population there is Sunni, Arabs or Kurds. The latter would want independence, whereas Arab Sunnis might prefer the government in Bagdad to Iran, which is non-Iraqi, non-Arab and Shiite. Furthermore if Iran is focused on the Iraqi conflict, which

is close to Iran, at the expense of Iranian involvement in more remote parts of the Middle East, American interests would be better served.

The United States and Iran acted together in Iraq “in pressuring former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to resign.”<sup>63</sup> This was essential in the attempt to improve both the government and the military in Iraq, a crucial step in fighting ISIS. The United States, which tolerated Iranian influence in Iraq, is opposing ISIS by force. Such a war can entangle the United States, again in a long and costly struggle, so it aims for local forces, that is, Iraqi ones, with Iranian support to bear the burden. It was more comfortable for the United States to go against ISIS in Iraq than it is in Syria. In the latter fighting ISIS actually helped the Assad regime, which many Arabs, including US allies and the United States itself, consider an enemy. Iran, a strong partner of Assad, wants to exploit US assistance against ISIS to save not only the pro-Iranian regime in Iraq but the one in Syria as well.

If eventually ISIS could not be destroyed, the alternative would be to contain them. The Iraqi government would have to cut its losses, that is, try to keep parts of the country that were easier to defend. After all Iraq is known to be divided to begin with. The Taliban used their strongholds in Waziristan, a territory inside Pakistan on the border with Afghanistan, as a springboard to assaults inside Afghanistan. ISIS presents a greater danger due to its strategic location and expansion ambitions. ISIS seizing more territory would increase its strength through exploiting the control over the population and resources. However, defending a growing area is also a considerable challenge for an outfit that is not a conventional military with an air force, armor corps and so on.

If ISIS had invaded Jordan, and Israel would have fought the group there, it would have made Israel a “de facto ally of Iran.”<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile Israel was more concerned that cooperation between Iran and the United States in Iraq might lead to an understanding at the expense of Israel, particularly with regard to Iran’s potential nuclear weapons capability.

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# 6 Egypt

## Risks and opportunities

The 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt has been tested since 2011 in a series of events that put at risk its survival, particularly following the unrest in Egypt. On the other hand there have been several opportunities to strengthen the relations between the two states, primarily by fighting together against guerrilla and terror.

### The overall picture

During the rule of Hosni Mubarak as president of Egypt (1981–2011) a “cold peace” was maintained. The peace did survive many situations of near crisis, including the most sensitive ones: violent clashes between Israel and the Arabs. Most of them occurred between Israel and the Palestinians, and they might have escalated much more if Egypt had intervened openly against Israel, preeminently militarily. Sometimes Egypt was involved but only as a broker. There has also been some cooperation between Israel and Egypt in economic, cultural, political and even security domains, owing to their common adversaries. The Egyptian–Israeli peace agreement paved the way for negotiations between Israel and other Arab countries and made it easier for Jordan to sign its own peace treaty with Israel in 1994.<sup>1</sup> There is a danger, though, that Jordan would also follow Egypt if the peace treaty between the latter and Israel falls through and would annul the Jordanian–Israeli treaty too.

There were low points in the relations between Israel and Egypt, for example, in mid-2002, when there was a lack of economic cooperation between the two states.<sup>2</sup> In 2014 “anti-Semitism is one of the pillars of socio-political life in Egypt.”<sup>3</sup> In late September 2015 according to a poll in Egypt, its population considers Israel to be their greatest enemy, much more than any other state.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore since the 2011 revolution in Egypt, there have been several disturbing events. On 9 September 2011 an Egyptian mob took over the Israeli embassy, almost harming the Israeli personnel.<sup>5</sup>

On February 2016 for the first time the peace treaty would be taught in Egyptian schools. In a new schoolbook a chapter describes the peace process with Israel “in a matter-of-fact way, without bias or any attempt to present Israel in a negative light.”<sup>6</sup> This might reduce the hostility in Egypt toward Israel.

As far as Israel was concerned, the Mubarak regime, with all its drawbacks, had major advantages as a familiar, stable and often reliable government. Contrary to that, the unrest in Egypt allowed the most organized political force there, the MB, to win elections, including the presidential ones in 2012. Mohamed Morsi was their man in the presidential palace. Israel was worried about the MB due to their known anti-Israeli ideology.<sup>7</sup> For example in August 2012 Morsi claimed “that a recent terrorist attack on Egyptian soldiers in Sinai was a ‘Zionist’ plot.” An incident on the border between Israel and Sinai or a clash between Israel and the Palestinians might have caused a crisis between Israel and Egypt. Morsi could have also resorted “to populist nationalism to sustain support” to distract the Egyptians from their economic hardships.<sup>8</sup> The signs of hostility toward Israel, and mostly the uncertainty in Egypt under the MB, might not have brought a post peace era but could have caused vague circumstances, where peace officially remains, but high tension clouds the atmosphere. It was quite obvious that Israel was relieved to see the toppling of Morsi along with the downfall of the MB in July 2013, which occurred due to Egypt’s internal reasons.<sup>9</sup> Following the rise of Abdel Fattah al Sisi, who was elected to be president in June 2014, it seems Egypt made an almost full circle and returned to have more or less the same regime existing before the revolution.

In September 2014 Egypt was “both calm and deferential to its new leadership.”<sup>10</sup> However by December 2015 al Sisi did not yet consolidated his power.<sup>11</sup> The Israeli intelligence community assumed that al Sisi “genuinely believed that he was on a ‘mission from God’ to save the Egyptian state.”<sup>12</sup> “Sisi’s Egypt is more nationalistic than the preceding government.”<sup>13</sup> There is also some resemblance between Gamal Abdel Nasser and al Sisi in their nationalistic approach.<sup>14</sup> Nasser was a well-known foe of Israel and in the 1956 war, when Nasser was the ruler of Egypt; Israel hoped that the Egyptian defeat would bring him down. However, although the IDF conquered almost all of Sinai, after several months Israel remained stuck with Nasser in power and was forced to give up the peninsula instead of the other way around.

Although Nasser prepared its military to fight Israel, in 1956 and 1967 Egypt did not actually attack its nemesis. Nasser did provoke Israel, particularly in 1967, by not only closing the Tiran Straits, as in 1955, but also by gathering most of its forces in Sinai.<sup>15</sup> Al Sisi would not take such risks because he might not want to confront Israel, and anyway he has many more severe and urgent issues to deal with inside Egypt.

“Mubarak-era economic policies increased the gulf between a struggling middle class and the elite.”<sup>16</sup> In April 2014 Steven A. Cook warned that Egypt’s huge economic problems might cause it to collapse.<sup>17</sup> In June that year Egypt’s economy was no longer contracting, some foreign investments returned and foreign currency reserves stopped from dwindling, amounting to some 17 billion dollars.<sup>18</sup> Yet “labor protests indicate a continued high level of dissatisfaction with and lack of confidence in the government’s capacity and/or willingness to address socio-economic problems.”<sup>19</sup> In November 2014 an International Monetary Fund official said “Egypt’s economy has begun to recover.”<sup>20</sup> In

March 2015 Egypt's economy showed "positive indicators," but it still faced challenges such as an energy crisis.<sup>21</sup> In 2015 Egypt also ranked 112th on the World Bank's ease-of-doing-business index.<sup>22</sup> Egypt's economy continued to be in a low point in early 2016.<sup>23</sup> In October that year food shortages were widespread, unemployment remained high and there was a currency problem. Some accused al Sisi "for grandiose projects that have sucked up billions in aid and taxpayers' money," like the expansion of the Suez Canal, which did not increase shipping revenue, and the building of a new capital city.<sup>24</sup> Even if al Sisi, or any other president for that matter, is successful in preventing an economic melt-down, Egypt would require many years to recover. This includes overcoming other problems such as the security and political ones.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on July 28 2016 that Israeli–Egyptian relations are "an anchor of stability and security in our region."<sup>25</sup> Al Sisi might even see Israel as a partner.<sup>26</sup> As a former general, he would be aware of Israel's power. Yet al Sisi and particular another leader who might replace him, especially someone hostile toward Israel to begin with, might seek to distract the attention of the Egyptians from their enormous troubles. Pointing at Israel would be an obvious and old trick, but it might still work, being the only consensus in the political arena in Egypt.

### **Egypt's wild East – the battle on Sinai**

Israeli intelligence services have expanded their activities in the Sinai Peninsula since the Hosni Mubarak regime fell in 2011. . . . Israeli interventions in the area came with Israel's growing concern about the movement of militant religious groups in the Egyptian peninsula, especially in the border areas adjacent to Israel.<sup>27</sup>

In late November 2014 al Sisi said his country would not allow turning Sinai into a base to attack Israel,<sup>28</sup> and by that he referred to the armed groups there.

The Sinai has been in recent years a lawless area due to the unrest in Egypt and the ongoing neglect of the population of Sinai.<sup>29</sup> Guerrilla and terror groups, composed of local and/or foreign fighters such as Islamic extremists, have gained a grip in the peninsula. They attacked Egyptian objectives such as the military and the police. One prominent assault was the killing of sixteen Egyptian border guards near the Egyptian–Israeli border on 5 August 2012. This amount of casualties and the humiliation of Egypt's security forces, which were caught by surprise, was a slap on the face for Egypt. The attack also targeted Muslims during the observance of Ramadan,<sup>30</sup> which shocked the Egyptians as well. More deadly attacks occurred latter such as in 1 July 2015.

By November 2015, in spite of declarations by the Egyptian military about upcoming victory in Sinai, it looked more like containing its rivals.<sup>31</sup> Sinai is an Egyptian sovereign space, but the government failed in enforcing its authority. Egypt, which in spite of its deep internal troubles sees itself as a major state in the

Middle East, has not been able to end the anarchy in its own country, a huge problem not just for national prestige but also for national security. The low-intensity war in Sinai put at risk almost half a million Egyptians, but this is a very small percent of the Egyptian population of more than 80 million. However, the skirmishes could spread to the rest of the country, and there have already been signs of that.

The Sinai served in the past as a springboard to attack west of the Suez Canal, as Israel did during the attrition war in 1967–1970 and in the 1973 war. The IDF used the Sinai to launch assaults with various weapon systems: fighter-bombers dropping bombs, helicopters conducting airborne operations and ships landing troops.<sup>32</sup>

In recent years armed groups of Islamic extremists exploited the Sinai, much the way the IDF did at the time, for raids inside the rest of Egypt. Those outfits did not possess weapon systems such as aircraft, but they managed to infiltrate into the heart of Egypt and there to lay down bombs, fire at security forces and so on. It might get much worse for Egypt if parts of the peninsula were lost, just like ISIS has been doing in areas in northern Iraq in 2014.

Following the 1979 peace treaty, most of the Sinai has been demilitarized. In west Sinai, in an area that stretches about fifty-five kilometers east of the Suez Canal; Egypt could deploy one division solely. Due to the chaos in Sinai since 2011, Israel allowed Egypt to send into the peninsula reinforcements, and in October 2014 Egypt had ten battalions in northeast Sinai.<sup>33</sup> Israel strongly opposes a massive Egyptian deployment in the peninsula, that is, of several divisions with hundreds of tanks. Such a huge force would be overkill as far as crushing armed groups and would be a potential threat to the south of Israel in spite of the might of the IAF, which could bomb Egyptian ground units if they tried to invade. Egypt would probably not attempt that, but it might send suddenly a large amount of forces into Sinai. At a certain point Egypt's leadership might strive to gain popular support by violating the demilitarization in Sinai. If Egypt refuses to withdraw its troops, it would bring on a major crisis with Israel.

“Egypt positions itself as a leading player in the fight against Islamic extremist groups – and uses that as a means of deflecting criticism of its human rights record.”<sup>34</sup> Egypt might exploit the same excuse to reinforce its units in Sinai, that is, allegedly against Islamic radicals, but actually the aim would be to end the demilitarization.

Radical Islamists that are located in Sinai seek to harm both Egypt and Israel and if possible to ignite a war between the two states. On 18 August 2011 a detail that belonged to those Islamists groups penetrated from Sinai and killed eight Israelis. During that fight, which took place near the border, five Egyptian troops were killed from Israeli fire. This increased for a while the tension between the two states. Since then Israel and Egypt have managed not only to avoid another similar friction between them but also to collaborate against outfits in the peninsula.

Jon Alterman mentioned in August 2016 that if border security “would deteriorate so much that it would precipitate a war between Israel and Egypt, albeit potentially accidentally. Currently, conflict with Israel is unthinkable to the

Egyptian military, but this mindset should not be seen as permanent.”<sup>35</sup> It also depends on Israel. If another assault from Sinai caused many casualties among Israelis, it could ignite a severe crisis between Israel and Egypt, particularly if the IDF retaliated in the peninsula, without Egyptian approval. Even an Israeli air bombardment without a ground incursion might deteriorate the relations between the two states.

Hillel Frisch mentioned that “the Egyptian army has never been indoctrinated to defend the home front. Under former presidents Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak it was the Central Security Forces (CSF), Egypt’s gendarmerie, which was allotted the task.”<sup>36</sup> This could explain why the Egyptian military has difficulties in overcoming armed groups in Sinai. In the 1990s there was another struggle inside Egypt between the government and Islamic extremists, without the involvement of the Egyptian military. The latter did not gain experience in this type of fight then, which could have helped in recent years.

In the decade before 2011 there were some clashes in the northeast corner of Sinai, near the Gaza Strip, between the IDF and Palestinians. Ironically, violent incidents occurred on the Egyptian–Israeli border but not on the Israeli–Syrian border in 1974–2011, where there was no peace. The porous Egyptian–Israeli border has also been the scene of illegal immigration, drug smuggling, and human trafficking from Sinai into Israel. Those growing concerns have been drastically reduced in recent years after Israel built a formidable fence across its border with Egypt, which was not willing and/or able to keep its border sealed and secured. The Israeli step helped prevent tension between itself and Egypt, particularly regarding the flow of multitudes of illegal immigrants from Africa into Israel through the peninsula.

In this case at least good fences made good neighbors.

### **The American perspective**

The United States was worried that an incident in Sinai could cause friction between Israel and Egypt that would jeopardize the peace treaty.<sup>37</sup> In 2012 US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton both raised their concerns about security in Sinai in their talks with President Morsi. Furthermore the peninsula might serve as a springboard not only against Israel but against another state located only several kilometers from Sinai, Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia has an “expensive friendship” with Egypt that cost the former billions of dollars, in the form of aid to Egypt. “But the Saudis gain some dividends, not least an ally with the Arab world’s most powerful military.”<sup>38</sup> The United States, Saudi Arabia and Egypt could cooperate together in Sinai in spite of the disputes between the two Arab states and the American administration. The United States could also serve as a broker between those two Arab states and Israel. The latter has its interests in the peninsula. Israel’s involvement might be indirect and informal in light of the obvious sensitivity in Arab countries to any open cooperation with Israel, especially in security matters. Saudi Arabia, which

has no official ties with Israel, would be particularly reluctant in this matter. As to actual cooperation, Saudi Arabia could invest funds in creating infrastructure and jobs in the peninsula, which should reduce the motivation of the local population there to confront the Egyptian government. Egypt would do the fighting because it rules over the place and would not want Israel to send troops there. The latter could assist by providing intelligence. The United States would coordinate among all the three states. This kind of collaboration could improve the overall relations among those four states, contributing to the war against guerrilla actions and terror in the Middle East.

Since 2015 Egypt has been part of a coalition led by Saudi Arabia in the war in Yemen. Egypt and Saudi Arabia were rivals the last time Egypt was involved in a low-intensity war in Yemen, in 1962–1967, where 70,000 Egyptian troops fought.<sup>39</sup> In Sinai Egypt needs fewer soldiers, and they won't have to be sent more than 600 kilometers away from their homeland, as it was in the war in Yemen. Therefore for them it would not be a foreign policy adventure but a fight for the future of their country. However, the differences between the current battle on Sinai and the war in Yemen in the 1960s require the Egyptian military to learn how to conduct a low-intensity war. In this sense the United States, following its vast experience from the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, could teach Egyptian officers, as it already did with some of them in the past, like with al Sisi in 2006.

For years the United States has been expecting the Egyptian military to adjust to handling current threats.<sup>40</sup> Egypt does not require more weapon systems such as tanks, but it needs platforms to face challenges such as low-intensity warfare. “A leaner, more agile military of this sort would be more capable of deployment in the region, to protect Egyptian and, not coincidentally, American interests.”<sup>41</sup> The United States and Egypt could stand together against radical outfits such as ISIS.<sup>42</sup> In mid-September 2014 Egypt implied it might not assist the United States in fighting ISIS because the Egyptian military is busy clashing with armed groups in both Sinai and on the border with Libya.<sup>43</sup> Yet a few days later al Sisi said he is willing to help the effort against ISIS.<sup>44</sup> The Egyptian military ran between 11 October and 6 November 2014, a vast exercise that was meant, among others, to examine Egypt's Rapid Deployment Force (RDF). This signaled “a move toward enhancing Egypt's more offensive, conventional, asymmetric and counterinsurgency capabilities both within and beyond the country's borders.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed Egypt might need the RDF as Gulf Arab states, which support Egypt economically and politically, might urge it to contribute to the war against radical Shiites and/or Sunnis who operate in other Arab countries. Either way, if only because of the chaos in Sinai, Egypt should improve its military capabilities in counterinsurgency, with major US assistance or not.

In mid-July 2015 Adm. Jon Greenert, chief of naval operations (CNO), visited Egypt and said in regard to the Suez Canal that Egypt put American ships “at the head of the line, or moving us more expeditiously through the canal. And they've cooperated at every security level we've asked for.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless the

lawlessness in Sinai poses a threat to the Suez Canal in spite of Egypt's attempts to secure this vital route.

Until there comes a time when the United States rethinks its commitments in Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, Africa, the Persian Gulf, South Asia and the Suez Canal will be an unrivaled asset for U.S. naval officers and policymakers.<sup>47</sup>

If Egypt fails in protecting the Suez Canal, it might ask or accept an offer from Western powers, including the United States, to intervene – possibly even by deploying Western forces – to protect the Suez Canal. There was a kind of precedent. During the war of attrition in 1969–1970, Egypt could not have defended key sites in its country against Israeli air bombardments and agreed to be aided by a massive Soviet military presence on Egyptian soil.

Before the 1956 war Israel signed a secret treaty with Britain and France, which wanted to gain control of the Suez Canal. If in the future there is a major crisis between Egypt and Western states, the former might threaten or actually delay and even block the Suez Canal for ships from Western states. In response the latter could warn Egypt they might impose crippling sanctions on it, and as a last resort consider military action if Egypt does not keep the canal open for all vessels. This kind of crisis might occur also between Israel and Egypt. The former would not be able to do much economically to convince Egypt to reopen the Suez Canal for Israel. This would leave Israel mostly with political and eventually military options.

“Over the course of the past thirty-five years, the United States has provided more than \$40 billion worth of defense aid to Egypt, second only to the amount for Israel.”<sup>48</sup> Following the toppling of Morsi in July 2013, the United States cut aid to Egypt. The latter's foreign minister, Nabil Fahmy, said on 16 October 2013 that there is “unrest in relations” between the United States and Egypt, but he added it is an opportunity for the two states to “better evaluate their relationship in the future.”<sup>49</sup> The peace between Israel and Egypt was not at risk, “but a prolonged U.S. aid cutoff would only encourage the anti-peace movement, not only in Egypt, but also in the Middle East as whole.”<sup>50</sup> Eric Trager claimed on 30 April 2014 that “using military aid to encourage a more progressive political atmosphere might make a difference.”<sup>51</sup> In June 2014 the United States restored large part of the aid to Egypt,<sup>52</sup> which ensured the American administration's ability to threaten or actually impose a weapon embargo, officially or not, partly or not. The crisis over the delay of aid in 2013–2014 delivered such a message, although eventually the United States basically gave up and agreed to send weapons to an Egyptian regime that came to power by a combination of force and vast popular uprising.

In September 2014 “Egyptians of all stripes have contempt for Washington.”<sup>53</sup> The latter on its part tolerates Egypt's crackdown on its population to keep the relations between the two states, but some argue this is a mistake.<sup>54</sup> In June 2016 Egypt continued not to trust the Obama administration in spite of “improved

military cooperation since last year's bilateral Strategic Dialogue."<sup>55</sup> In the future the United States would consider cutting aid again if there was another major crisis with Egypt. Much would depend on the circumstances and whether Egypt crosses what the United States sees as a red line. That could happen if, for example, Egypt breaches the peace treaty with Israel, which the United States signed too. If Egypt deploys several divisions in Sinai, its American sponsor would insist on their immediate retreat. The United States would probably freeze its aid to Egypt and impose severe sanctions on it as well. The purpose would be to punish Egypt and mostly to try to nip in the bud a very serious crisis and a possible war between Egypt and Israel because the latter would not accept a massive Egyptian military deployment in Sinai, let alone near Israel's border.

Iran strives for hegemony in the Middle East,<sup>56</sup> a longtime ambition of Egypt too. The latter wants to prevent Iran from exploiting Egypt's current weakness, particularly if Iran attains the bomb, and substantially upgrades its status in the region. Egypt does not possess the funds and infrastructure needed to build a bomb. If Iran acquired nuclear weapons, the United States could propose a nuclear umbrella to protect Arab states, but Egypt might not trust it.

Egypt has been seeking for many years to disarm Israel of its nuclear weapons or at least to coerce it to accept international supervision of its nuclear capabilities. Because Israel strongly refuses to consider that, Egypt could – as a temporary solution – exploit Israel's military might. In the 1980s during its war with Iran, and due to its location and strength, Iraq was for Egypt and many other Arab states the front guard in the struggle between the Arab world and Iran. In 2014 Iraq, due to its pro-Iranian government and the turmoil there, could obviously not play that role anymore. Jordan might be next to sink into chaos, and Iran could spread its influence there as part of its penetration into the Levant. However, Iran's advance would encounter a very high barrier, Israel, which would be a strong match for Iran, as Iraq was in the 1980s. Although Israel's main focus is on protecting its people, it could also become a kind of nuclear shield to Arab states such as Egypt. This approach could strengthen the ties between Israel and Egypt but would also add tension for several reasons: Egypt's basic wish to eliminate Israel's nuclear weapons, its dependence on Israel's protection against Iran and Egypt's suspicion that Israel and Iran as non-Arab states could make an unofficial deal at the expense of the Arabs.

### **Could Egypt become a failed state?**

Steven Cook has argued that Mubarak improved the life of his people, but in his last decade in power, he faced strong opposition, although "Egypt demonstrated impressive macroeconomic performance. In the end, rapid economic change and growth was actually destabilizing."<sup>57</sup> Charles Freilich assumed in June 2014 that Egypt "is likely to become a failed state."<sup>58</sup> Michele Dunne said in June 2015 that US officials were worried the Egyptian regime was leading its country toward possible "state failure, down the road."<sup>59</sup> Jon Alterman argued in August 2016

that Egypt might “simply becomes ungovernable.”<sup>60</sup> If it does, American aircraft already flying freely over Egypt could continue doing that because there would be no one to ask permission from. The Suez Canal, however, would not be safe, thereby jeopardizing international sailing there, including American ships. Armed groups might attack vessels, particularly defenseless ones, with rockets and anti-tank missiles.

Due to the importance of Egypt, its collapse might shake the entire region. Jon Alterman said that

when Egypt swung into a revolutionary mood the Middle East swung into a revolutionary mood. When Egypt seemed to be drifting toward Islamism, the region seemed to be drifting toward Islamism. Even a weakened Egypt has a profound effect on the Middle East.<sup>61</sup>

Al Sisi said in mid-March 2015 that if Egypt “fails, the whole region will slide into a cycle of anarchy that will represent a grave danger to all countries in this region, including Israel, and would extend to Europe.”<sup>62</sup>

From an American perspective al Sisi provides stability in return for American support, even if it means ignoring civil rights abuse in Egypt,<sup>63</sup> the same as it was in the times of Mubarak. The American assumption might be that currently, Egypt is so deep in troubles that its survival as a state might be at stake and with it all the American investment in that country. Saving Egypt is therefore the highest priority. Furthermore, insisting on criticizing the Egyptian regime might cause the latter to disregard the United States, and that could also influence US relations with another close Egyptian ally, Saudi Arabia. Egypt might also turn to Russia. All those possible ramifications force the US government to accept a kind of “new Mubarak” regime in Egypt.

As far as Israel goes, the collapse of Egypt would prevent Israel from sending its vessels through the Suez Canal to the Red Sea to disrupt smuggling to the Gaza Strip. It would also be easier for Islamic extremists to attack Israel from Sinai, yet then the IDF would strike back. Furthermore the Egyptian military would vanish. In spite of the peace with Egypt, its military, particularly following the drastic decline in the military strength of Syria, has remained the only Arab military that could potentially put Israel at risk.

If Egypt crumbles Israel would lose economic and other ties it has with Egypt, but there have not been many of them due to the “cold peace.” Israel has already learned it must be careful in depending on Egypt. In 2005 Egypt promised to sell natural gas to Israel in any situation, yet in 2011 Egypt canceled this agreement, which caused Israel a huge cost.<sup>64</sup> However, Israel might still consider doing business with Egypt if such a transaction could help both states not only economically but politically as well. This move could assist the Egyptian economy recovery, which would in turn increase the chances of survival of both Egypt and the peace treaty Israel has with it.

## **Military preparations**

In the last three decades the IDF's buildup, intelligence gathering and so on did not take into consideration the Egyptian military as a foe.<sup>65</sup> In the last decade in particular the focus of the IDF seemed to be on fighting terror and guerrilla organizations and preparing to strike Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Yet high-intensity warfare should still remain an important factor for Israel. Considering the unpredictable and unstable nature of the Middle East, the history of the Arab–Israeli conflict and the present turmoil in the Arab world, it is impossible to foresee what could happen there in the near future, and an outbreak of a high-intensity war is not to be dismissed. Israel should be ready for this challenge, which has mostly to do with Egypt.

Robert Springborg claimed in 2013 that

Mubarak had long feared that downsizing and professionalizing the military in this way would cause the officer corps to rebel, and that being seen to serve U.S. regional interests would undercut its fragile domestic legitimacy. The result was a massive military that became bloated and soft, preparing in Godot-like fashion for a war with Israel.<sup>66</sup>

Egypt's military is “more oriented to fight interstate rather than asymmetric warfare.”<sup>67</sup>

Yet some claimed that the United States should not try to change the Egyptian military because this will be

interpreted as a way of weakening the Egyptian military, feeding conspiracy theories about some nefarious U.S. plot hatched in conjunction with Israel. Although it may make sense to make the Egyptian military into a leaner, more mobile force to respond to terrorist plots and other contingencies, the political downsides of such a proposition are so great as to make the effort not worth pursuing.<sup>68</sup>

In February 2015 Egypt bought twenty-four French Rafale, which are advanced jets. Israel was speculating about Egypt's intentions.<sup>69</sup> Indeed Egypt continued to get ready to confront a military like the IDF, whereas the latter turned its attention to other countries and to non-state organizations.

The IDF has been focusing on urban warfare inside populated areas as part of its preparations to confront foes such as the Hezbollah.<sup>70</sup> Those kinds of skills would not be that essential in a future war against Egypt because Sinai is mostly an open desert. Furthermore the Egyptian military is much more powerful than any Arab non-state organization. The Egyptian military, which has been clashing in recent years with armed groups in Sinai, must also expect a much tougher fight against the IDF. Both the Israeli and the Egyptian militaries have been used to dealing with much weaker foes, a fact which could affect their performance in a future war between them.

Following the 1979 peace treaty, Egypt could not have created fortifications or deployed large forces in Sinai, its forward defense area facing Israel. Egypt compensated itself by upgrading its military. The price for Israel's demand to demilitarize the Sinai was therefore a stronger Egyptian military. Israel, as a replacement for the peninsula, which served it as a vital base in 1967–1982, invested in its armed forces as well.

Despite their cold peace, Israeli and Egyptian naval developments did not go unnoticed by either regional state. Israel remained uneasy with Egypt's efforts to acquire offensive naval systems. Egypt continued to view Israeli concerns surrounding its military edge as a persistent impediment to Egyptian military development efforts.<sup>71</sup>

The two states continued to consolidate their conventional military power, not only at sea. Each side possesses hundreds of combat aircraft such as F-16, dozens of gunships such as AH-64 and more than 1,000 high-quality tanks.

This arms race between them is a reason for ongoing tacit suspicion, mostly behind the scenes. The military buildup of Israel and Egypt has continued since the peace treaty in 1979, predominantly thanks to American aid to both countries. Ironically the peace, with all its advantages, allowed Israel and Egypt to upgrade their already impressive military power. Because each of those countries launched a surprise attack against the other, Israel in 1956 and 1967 and Egypt in 1973, if a crisis occurs, this precedent could escalate the situation.

### **The nature of the next war between Israel and Egypt**

In 2012 “major interstate war will arguably be the least likely source of instability in the Middle East in the next few decades.”<sup>72</sup> Yet high-intensity wars could happen,<sup>73</sup> including between Israel and Egypt.<sup>74</sup> Peace partners might once again collide in their old battlefields, as happened between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the case of Egypt and Israel, it would be in Sinai, and it might be costly due to the firepower of both sides.

There could be various war scenarios. The last major conventional war in the Middle East was in 1991 between an international coalition and Iraq. There might be again a giant collision in the desert between two powerful militaries, this time in Sinai. Contrary to past wars neither side currently has military infrastructure or strongholds in the entire peninsula. Egypt has camps mostly in west Sinai. This means that in the early stages of a future war, Israeli and Egyptian forces could quickly penetrate deep into Sinai because there would be no fortified defense line to stop them. Each side would strive to push the frontline as far as possible from its vital areas, thus increasing their strategic depth. Seizing land would occur also because of political reasons and national pride. Egypt in particular might not be able to tolerate any presence of Israeli troops in Sinai, which is an Egyptian territory.

If Egyptian forces reach the border with Israel, the main land battles could take place in quite a small part of Sinai, in the northeast, where many important battles were conducted in past wars. Yet the campaign could spread all over the peninsula. Sharam al Sheikh, in the far south end of Sinai, was known as the place where Israeli and Egyptian senior officials met during the last decades. It is also an important harbor. Capturing that port would help secure the naval routes to both the Suez Bay, the path to the Suez Canal, and the Tiran Straits, the gates to the Israeli harbor of Eilat. It would be much easier for Egypt to reinforce its units in Sharam al Sheikh due to the proximity of this objective to Egypt's bases. In contrast, the IDF would have to dispatch forces for a voyage of more than 200 kilometers to reach that key point. Airborne troops could get there faster.

Each side would try to gain air superiority, a critical factor in modern warfare, particularly in open terrain such as the Sinai. The side that would have air superiority, let alone air supremacy, would be able to bomb ground units, provide intelligence, deliver supplies and so on while preventing its rival from doing the same. The capacity and accuracy of weapon systems each side possesses, such as F-16s, would allow them to launch devastating strikes. A few of those aircraft could surprise and destroy a column on the ground in a matter of seconds.

Both militaries are founded on American weapons systems: F-16, AH-64, M-113 and so on. One of the results of this dependence, especially during a huge and confusing battle in the open desert, might be an increasing number of casualties as a result of friendly fire.

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# Conclusion

Israel has managed to stay out of the Arab turmoil since its beginning in late 2010.

In spite of incidents on the border with Syria and Egypt, the basic strategic status quo with those countries did not change. As to Iran and Hezbollah, the cold war between them and Israel continued. Due to the 2014 confrontation with the Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Israel's biggest challenge was to stabilize its relations with the Palestinians.

## Palestinians

Israel maintains the overall concept of the Oslo accord; that is, Palestinians would cooperate with Israelis in security matters. However, in April 2014 the peace talks between Israel and the PA collapsed. For them to be resumed, both sides would need the support of other states in the region, namely Egypt and Jordan. Meanwhile, the sword of Damocles, in the form of a Third Intifada similar to the one that occurred in 1987–1993 and/or 2000–2005, has been dangling above Israel's neck. One incident might be enough to ignite a confrontation, which might help the PA to establish a state, but could also destroy that chance. Israel opposes a Palestinian state forced upon it, and at the same time Israel needs the PA. Hence, the two sides have been left with a fragile status quo.

Following the kidnapping of three Israelis in June 2014 in the West Bank, Israel launched a major operation in that territory. Israel strove to weaken Hamas's influence in the West Bank, break the Palestinian unity government and deter Hamas and others from conducting more kidnappings in the future. As far as Israel was concerned, those goals were important enough to justify both the cost and the risks of the operation.

By confronting Israel in July–August 2014, Hamas sought the release of Hamas members arrested by Israel in June of that year. However, Hamas also had other, more important goals, not all of them directly connected to Israel. The Hamas wanted to end the blockade, force Egypt to open the gates from the Gaza Strip to Sinai and build a harbor and an airport. Challenging Israel was Hamas's way to survive economically and therefore also politically, and by proving it could hit the heart of Israel, that is, its main cities, Hamas increased its popularity within the Palestinian public.

Israel's main goal was to put a stop to the firing of rockets and mortar shells from the Gaza Strip and create a deterrence lasting as long as possible. Israel could have conquered the Gaza Strip again, in a matter of days, but the mopping up would have taken much longer, even years. It demonstrates the complexity of urban combat for a state like Israel, which tries to reduce collateral damage.

In the Gaza Strip the PA could not or would not have been able to regain control, which left Israel with two options: occupying Gaza or leaving it after a serious bashing of Hamas. Israel did not seek to take charge of the Gaza Strip on its own for various reasons and for possible unwanted ramifications. Those included the need to protect Israeli troops stationed in Gaza and taking care of about 1.8 million Palestinians, many of them extremely poor. Israel would also have had to face international criticism. All this and more caused Israel to withdraw in early August, leaving the narrow belt the IDF had seized in the Gaza Strip in July 2014. In the future, Israel might repeat this *modus operandi* for the same reasons.

Israel based its strategy in the Gaza Strip on containment. IDF's attacks, before the 2014 confrontation, were meant to prevent hostile actions against Israel and punish its foes, thereby deterring them from initiating more assaults. Israel accepted the Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip while suppressing it in the West Bank. This was another stage in the war of attrition between Israel and the Hamas, which started in the late 1980s. In the 2014 confrontation Israel might have – to a certain degree – tolerated tactical successes of the Hamas, hoping that would convince this group to stop the fight. Israel did not bring down Hamas rule, calculating it was less dangerous than the alternative, that is, non-state organizations more radical than the Hamas. Israel was aware it must limit its goals; otherwise, the confrontation might turn out to be too costly, possibly even counterproductive. It was part of Israel's desire to keep the status quo.

Fire from the Gaza Strip reached main cities such as Tel Aviv, but in fact they absorbed a lot less rockets than peripheral cities in the south, such as Ashkelon. Lack of accuracy of the rockets, the Iron Dome and civil defense reduced significantly the damages and casualties the rockets might have caused. Ironically those factors protected not only the Israelis but the Palestinians and the Hamas as well. Major harm to Israel would have led to a serious escalation, costing the Gaza Strip dearly.

The tunnels the Hamas had dug in the Gaza Strip were of all kinds. Israel's concern focused on tunnels penetrating into its territory, which were probably kept as a strategic weapon for a future confrontation. For many in Israel the magnitude of the tunnels rendered them as a national security threat to Israel and thus intolerable. Through those underground paths Hamas could have sent hundreds of well-armed fighters on attack missions all over Israel. Even a single assault from one tunnel, on an unsuspecting Israeli village, could have become a catastrophe for Israel and for the Gaza Strip as well. Many Israeli civilian casualties due to such an attack would have triggered a fierce retribution.

During the 2014 confrontation, Hamas's men popping out of shafts of tunnels succeeded several times to surprise Israeli troops with lethal results for both sides. Israel's efforts to annihilate the tunnels were hampered by Israel's lack of

experience, its inadequate combat doctrine and its missing knowledge and proper equipment to handle such a project. However, although the tunnels played a major role in the battlefield, they did not give Hamas a decisive edge.

The IDF avoided daring raids deep inside the Gaza Strip. Israel's top brass was concerned those actions would not have sufficient impact and might result in heavy casualties among both Israeli troops and Palestinian civilians. This approach denied the IDF the ability to appear suddenly from the air, land and sea, quickly storming its objectives all over the Gaza Strip. Instead, Israel relied on a massive ground offensive on the frontline, which temporarily captured a narrow belt, as in the 2008–2009 confrontation. This move stemmed from Israel's intention to find and blow up the tunnels that led into Israel, not to topple the Hamas or destroy all its rockets. Combat engineers headed the Israeli offensive to clear mines and IEDs so the Israeli infantry and armor could advance relatively safely. Artillery and aircraft supported the attack.

The Egyptian government was clearly against the Hamas but still wished to be a mediator for the prestige and influence this role awarded Egypt at the expense of its rivals: Turkey and Qatar. Egypt seemed in the 2014 confrontation to back Israel, more motivated by its hostility toward Hamas than by solidarity with Israel.

There was friction between Israel and its American patron in the 2014 confrontation, which had started long before that. The United States supported Israel while calling it to avoid collateral damage. The United States might have been able to serve as a broker between Egypt and Qatar and/or Turkey to ease Hamas's suspicion. The latter understood Egypt was against it, so having one of Hamas's allies, Qatar or Turkey, as part of the negotiation team, may have persuaded Hamas to agree to end the battles before it actually did so. However, the United States was probably more focused on the major crisis in Iraq at that time because ISIS was considered to be a greater threat than Hamas.

In early August 2014 the IDF left the area it had seized in the Gaza Strip, but the two sides continued to exchange punches during that month. Israel inflicted a great deal more casualties and damage than it absorbed. The international resentment against Israel on this issue, which was not that big during the confrontation, got stronger toward its end. The misery of the Gaza Strip became one of the most important assets of the Hamas and was well exploited by it.

Many claimed Israel could not have tolerated another fragile cease fire because it would be a matter of time before hostilities started again. Yet considering the alternative, it might have been the best Israel could hope for at the time. Israel was aware that if the fight continued, the IDF might be forced to conduct a massive offensive in one of the world's most crowded urban areas, the Gaza Strip. Israel considered ending the confrontation unilaterally, but eventually both sides realized – as in past clashes – they must compromise and reach a mutual understanding.

IDF firepower, which was much more superior to that of Hamas, did not seriously disrupt the latter's ability to function. Israel also lost seventy-two of its people, mostly troops. The Hamas claimed a disputed victory, which in any case came at the expense of the people of the Gaza Strip. The Hamas did not manage to destabilize Israel's economy or to severally demoralize its society. The Hamas

did spread fear among some of the Israelis and disrupted both tourism and flights to Israel. Those were relatively minor achievements for Hamas that failed to gain its most important goals, breaking the blockade on the Gaza Strip and getting permission to rebuild the airport and/or a harbor. Basically the status quo was kept, which could be considered as a certain triumph for Israel. Hamas survived because Israel allowed and actually wanted that for lack of better options.

Following the 2014 confrontation there were calls for negotiations between Israel and the PA and/or Hamas, but even talks just between Israel and the PA, judging by the past, do not have much of a chance to succeed. Moreover, a renewed peace process would be vulnerable to even one strike by one of the sides.

There have been all kinds of proposals regarding the rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip. Israel has been generally supportive, as long as the Hamas does not exploit the aid, to prepare for another round of aggression. In the past, materials destined for civilians, delivered from outside the Gaza Strip, were used to build tunnels and rockets. Free, unchecked import could include weapons and rockets, which might tempt Hamas to start firing at Israel sooner or later. If that happened, Israel's response might lead to the toppling of the Hamas. Israel might even not wait for an attack from the Gaza Strip and initiate a preventive war, as it did in a similar situation in Lebanon in 1982. Meanwhile, as long as Hamas's economic troubles remain unsolved, this organization has been left in a desperate position. This distress could push Hamas to provoke Israel by firing at it, hoping to put pressure on both Israel and Egypt to loosen their grip on the Gaza Strip.

## **Syria**

Bashar al Assad exhibited restraint after his nuclear reactor was destroyed by Israel in 2007. He also stayed out of the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, although the former has been a close ally. Bashar al Assad strove to gain back the Golan Heights, which his father, Hafez al Assad, lost in the 1967 war and failed to regain in the 1973 war. Bashar al Assad might have considered a military option against Israel, but since 2011 he has had a much more crucial war to win. In spite of Assad's ruthless measures, his rivals hold large parts of Syria.

Syria's military ability has diminished in the last decades, a process that has accelerated, following the civil war. Assad's long-range missiles that could have hit Israel's cities were fired against the rebels. Assad's military is no match to its Israeli counterpart. With all the combat experience Assad's men has acquired in recent years, confronting Israel would be very different. Instead of lightly armed rebels, Assad's military would face Israel's powerful air force and thousands of tanks, artillery pieces and so on. Assad knows that such a showdown would end quickly in his total defeat; that is, he would be left defenseless and therefore at the mercy of his rivals.

Israel and Assad's patron, Iran, do not want such a war, and that reduces its probability, in addition to the fact that since late 2014 almost all the border between Syria and Israel has been in the hands of armed groups, diminishing the friction between Israel and Assad even more. Nevertheless, another incident at the border,

or one more IAF strike inside Syria to stop the delivery of advanced weapons to the Hezbollah, might escalate the situation and lead to a clash between Israel and Assad and his allies.

Some of the armed groups that are near the border in the Golan Heights are affiliated with Al-Qaida and ISIS. There is a chance of a clash between them and Israel. Armed outfits in Syria could try to infiltrate and/or shoot rockets and mortar shells at Israel. The Golan Heights might become a frontline, and there are already signs of that. However, it would not be as bad as a major war between Israel and Syria, such as the one of 1973, which has fortunately not occurred since.

Israel might implement dual containment of both Assad and Syrian armed outfits while staying as much as possible out of the war in Syria. Western states do not seem to want Israel to intervene, let alone militarily, in the Syrian civil war. However, Israel might be dragged into that war against its will. In contrast to dealing with Assad's CW, Israel would not be able to rely on world powers to handle assaults on the Golan Heights.

## **Iran**

The Iranian–Israeli conflict started in 1979. Blunt statements were part of ongoing saber rattling between the two states, although they never fought each other directly. The biggest problem for Israel has been Iran's desire to possess the bomb. The July 2015 agreement between Iran and world powers delayed an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear sites. An efficient strategy to block Iran's nuclear ambitions would necessitate a combination of deterrence, sanctions, supporting Iranian opposition, disconnecting Iran from its allies, and so on. Such measures could enable the rise of a new, cooperating Iran. If this does not happen, Israel should prepare for a new era in which Iran might have nuclear weapon capability, with all its implications on Israel's national security, the balance of power in the Middle East and the position of the United States in this region.

Iran needs allies to fight Israel. Iraq is pro-Iranian but has very serious internal security problems to deal with. Assad would not be much help either owing to the civil war in Syria and his desperate efforts to keep the parts left of his country that are under his control. A war against Israel could be strategic suicide for Assad.

Iran's Lebanese protégée, the Hezbollah, which is the dominant power in Lebanon, could serve its patron by tackling Israel, but Iran would rather have its proxy fight to save Assad. Ironically therefore, Syrian rebels, who are Israel's enemies too, have been serving an Israeli interest by pinning down and wearing down both Assad and the Hezbollah. Yet, if Israel attacks Iran's nuclear infrastructure, Iran might order Hezbollah to target Israel. The latter is aware of this and might consider a preemptive strike against Hezbollah in conjunction with a surprise attack on Iran's nuclear sites.

A war between Hezbollah and Israel, which might be very costly for Lebanon, could expose the Hezbollah to harsh interior criticism, exceeding by far the current resentment against it. Israel, facing tens of thousands of rockets, covering almost every spot in the Jewish state, would do well to encourage

those inside Lebanon who oppose being dragged by the Hezbollah into a war with Israel.

In a war against the Hezbollah Israel would conduct a large-scale offensive on land, air and sea in Lebanon. Israel's grim memory from the endless fight in the 1980s and 1990s in Lebanon may lead to a total withdrawal from Lebanon at the end of the next war there. It is possible that the war runs into a stalemate.

## **Egypt**

Israel watches carefully the events in Egypt, considering the might of the Egyptian military and the importance of both Egypt and the peace treaty with it. Israel hopes the current Egyptian government rebuilds its struggling economy. Israel wants Egypt to survive in spite of the fact that it won't need to worry about the Egyptian military if Egypt becomes a failed state.

Egypt opposes the demilitarization of Sinai and would like to see it end. Israel agreed to a deployment of more Egyptian security units in Sinai to suppress its terror and guerrilla groups threatening both Israel and Egypt. This problem also creates an opportunity to strengthen the ties between Israel and Egypt. Fighting against the same enemy would serve the vital interests of both states, starting with Sinai and proceeding perhaps to handling Iran. The United States could play an important role in helping Egypt fight insurgents in Sinai and by participating in the coordination between Israel and Egypt with regard to Iran.

Since the late 1970s Israel accepted the delivery of thousands of weapon systems from the United States to Egypt, including F-16s and M1A1s, classic platforms for high-intensity war against Israel. The latter assumed that feeding the beast would hopefully convince it not to come after you; that is, allowing Egypt to upgrade its military may persuade it not to confront Israel. This gamble proved itself. Israel enjoyed more than thirty-five years free of war against Egypt. Such a long period of peace, even a cold one, with a powerful state like Egypt has been priceless, but if there is a major clash in the future, this era of peace with Egypt might be seen by many in Israel as dangerously deceptive, particularly if Israel absorbs severe casualties in such a war.

## **Libya and Syria**

Western states condemned the local Arab regime for killing their own citizens in Libya in 2011 and in Syria since 2011. In Libya those declarations were followed with sanctions and eventually an offensive. The same process happened in Syria up to a point, although no direct attack was carried out against Assad, including in September 2013, to obtain then the agreement to disarm Assad from his CW. Assad managed to exploit his CW better than Gaddafi, who gave up his CW before the 2011 war.

Arab states like Saudi Arabia supported more rebels in Syria than in Libya. Yet Assad received effective aid from Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, whereas Gaddafi

had no powerful allies. Therefore many states from the region and around the world were involved in the wars in Libya and Syria.

Western powers, having gained an easy victory in Libya, should not have had much more difficulty defeating the Syrian military, had there been a will to do so. Either way, as in Libya, air strikes alone were not enough to win the war in Syria. For that purpose the rebels in Syria had to provide the ground forces. If they had learned from the war in Libya, they would have organized as soon as possible, even with limited resources such as small arms and poorly trained fighters, to hold the initiative in the battlefield.

The Syrian rebels, the moderate ones, could have built their military with Western aid, aiming not just to overthrow the Assad regime but also to prevent the country from becoming a failed state. Yet there was much uncertainty about such a complicated process due to the incompetent, split and deep disputes among the rebels. The outcome was turning Libya and most of Syria into a base for terror and guerrilla activities. The status quo in both Syria and Libya was replaced with the reality of civil war. In Syria it has been going on for more than four years, and in Libya the internal fight began and ended in 2011 but then resumed again.

## **Conclusion**

Israel wishes the security problems in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to be contained and reduced to a bearable minimum without paying a high price for that. This is why Israel collaborates with the PA in the West Bank and tolerates the Hamas's presence in the West Bank and its rule in the Gaza Strip. This concept did not change during and after the 2014 confrontation. Israel struck the Hamas but at the same time avoided an offensive deep into the Gaza Strip, which would have put at risk Hamas's rule. In the future, Israel's losses in the 2014 confrontation would make its leaders think twice before implementing a drastic solution like conquering and running the Gaza Strip, even without including the negative ramifications of such a step. Other options, such as peace talks, were unlikely because the Hamas was unwilling to accept Israel, and there was no trust between Israel and the PA.

Militarily, the status quo between Israel and the Hamas stayed more or less the same. The tunnels, and other measures Hamas had prepared, did not block the IDF from penetrating and even conquering the Gaza Strip, if Israel had decided to do so. Israel, in spite of its military superiority, was not able to break or to coerce the Hamas to stop fighting. Eventually Hamas agreed to end the round, while keeping its cohesiveness, although it took some serious blows during the battles.

Israel kept staying outside the Syrian civil war, except for extending some humanitarian aid and launching several air strikes following friction in the Golan Heights. Israel hopes the skirmishes there do not escalate into a border war. In Sinai Israel guards its long border there while collaborating with Egypt in its common fight against ISIS.

All in all Israel wishes to protect itself from the Arab turmoil. Israel does it by conducting very limited military operations inside Syria, by collaborating with

Egypt and Jordan, and by conducting security, economic and political moves in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. As to Iran as long as Iran does not get too close to have nuclear weapon capabilities, Israel can live with it, literally. This affects also the ongoing tension between Israel and the Hezbollah.

In October 2015 Lt. Col. Alon Paz, who served as a strategist in the IDF's Strategic Planning Division, claimed that

for the foreseeable future, in a Middle East characterized by disruptive change, there is little status quo to preserve. Israel can no longer lean on the previous comfortable and stable regional reality and develop strategies with the hope of maintaining it. Despite the consistent defensive effort of recent years to prevent enemy infiltration by building technological and physical barriers, as well as the conceptual notion of Israel as an island in the storm, this strategy, while mitigating the effects of regional instability and terrorism against Israel, has not lessened the long-term security challenges.<sup>1</sup>

Israel should try to reach peace with the Palestinians, improve its relations with Arab partners, watch foes including potential ones, build up deterrence and use military action whenever necessary.

## **Note**

- 1 Alon Paz, "Transforming Israel's Security Establishment", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2015. [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/transforming-israels-security-establishment](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/transforming-israels-security-establishment)

# Appendix I

## Various aspects of Israel's status quo, 1948–1982

During the years 1948–1982, the status quo between Israel and the Arabs reflected various issues, mostly strategic, such as the asymmetry between the two as well as Israel's high-intensity wars and the IDF's combat doctrine and buildup.

### **The controversy over the land**

Israel expanded its territory during the 1948–1949 war but remained quite a small state, about 20,000 square kilometers. Israel acquired more land as a result of the wars of 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982, although not all of the territory that was seized in those wars was left in Israeli hands. Israel sometimes reconquered returned areas, such as capturing twice the Gaza Strip (in 1956 and 1967) or taking over three times the northeast of Sinai (in 1949, 1956 and 1967) or most of it (in 1956 and 1967).

Before the 1967 war IDF's plans included the seizing of Damascus.<sup>1</sup> In the war itself the IDF captured the Golan Heights but did not advance to the Syrian capital. The same was with Cairo on the Egyptian front after Sinai was taken. By refraining from doing so, the IDF might have given up a strategic opportunity, but it was very doubtful the IDF would actually reach those huge cities, let alone capture part of them. The military and political constraints were just too overwhelming, a fact that maintained the overall status quo between the two sides.

During the secret talks among Israel, France and Britain that led to the 1956 war, David Ben Gurion, Israel's prime minister, suggested to reshape the Middle East. One option was to divide Jordan between Israel and Iraq and annex part of south Lebanon to Israel. The two European powers ignored those thoughts.<sup>2</sup> In 1982 Israel again had a plan, a more limited one, to create in Lebanon a pro-Israeli government. This attempt to change the status quo in favor of Israel failed as well, and the latter paid heavily for trying that.

Over the years, under all kinds of circumstances, Israel retreated as a result of armistice agreements like the one with Lebanon after the 1948–1949 war, peace accords like the one with Egypt from 1979 and disengagements treaties such as the one with Syria from 1974. At times, Israel retreated without an official pact with the Arabs, as in the case when Israel conceded to international pressure after the 1956 war and withdrew from Sinai or when Israel abandoned in 2005 the areas

it had controlled in the Gaza Strip. Those were all different ways to restore the old status quo or create a new one regarding territory.

After the 1967 war Egypt and Syria sought to get back their territories and restore their national honor. In the early 1980s Egypt repossessed Sinai as a result of the peace agreement, and its territorial disputes with Israel turned to other areas that were sized by Israel in 1967, mostly the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. As to the Golan Heights, Israel was attacked by Egypt and Syria in 1973, but the latter failed to gain back the Golan Heights by force. In 1981 Israel annexed the Golan Heights. Egypt accepted it not to disrupt its reception of the entire Sinai. Nevertheless, since 1967, the bulk of the status quo was restored – at least in regard to the size of the territory both sides held before the war – due to the fact that the Sinai was much bigger than the Golan Heights, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip combined.

During 1948–1967 Arab states hoped to seize lands inside Israel through some kind of an agreement<sup>3</sup> or by force. Jews have lived under Muslim rule since the seventh century. Arab states were not necessarily against Jews living in Israel as long as the Jews there would be subject to an Arab government. Arabs opposed the new geostrategic status quo that was created in 1948, that is, the establishment of a Jewish state that had Arabs subordinated to it on land that Arabs considered Muslim soil.

However, Arabs did not want to destroy Israel only because of their anti-Zionist ideology. Israel is small, but it has strategic importance due to its location. Jordan looked for access to the Mediterranean Sea<sup>4</sup> through the north or the center of Israel. Egypt sought for a corridor through the south of Israel to reach Jordan and from there to approach other Arab countries. Israel does not possess natural resources like oil, yet Syria could have exploited the water of the Sea of the Galilee if it had full control of that big lake.

Arabs were not only after the land of Israel. They sought to take over parts of and even entire Arab countries. There were dreams of “Greater Syria,” a state that includes Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. Over the years, rulers in both Jordan and Syria desired to control such a huge state and by that to actually own the Levant. But the closest this vision came to be realized was when Syria invaded Lebanon in 1976 and kept their troops there until 2005. In the past, Iraq too aimed to call the shots in its region. A case in point is when it conquered Kuwait in 1991. Egypt, mostly in the times of Gamal Abdel Nasser, wished to gain hegemony in the Arab world and particularly to spread its influence in Arab states like Jordan, Syria and Yemen. The Arab–Israeli conflict was therefore sometimes almost a sideshow to disputes and collisions between the Arabs about territory, power, and so on.

### **Israel’s strategic constraints**

In the 1948–1949 war the IDF gradually achieved numerical superiority,<sup>5</sup> and in the following wars, there were fronts where the IDF had more troops than its counterpart. Yet the strategic status quo – as far as the balance of power – remained

always overwhelmingly in favor of the Arabs, not only in the size of their population but in land and natural resources as well. The inability of the Arabs to exploit their huge advantages was one of the main reasons why Israel survived. If the Arabs had managed to use only part of their potential strength, Israel would have been a passing episode. The creation of a vast, solid and deterring Arab coalition has always been Israel's nightmare, but only in the 1973 war did Syria and Egypt succeed in building an effective alliance, and even that was mostly at the beginning of the war.

According to Kenneth Pollack "throughout the modern era, Arab militaries have never achieved more than middling levels of military effectiveness and on most occasions, their performances were dreadful,"<sup>6</sup> which helped the IDF win. Yet if the Arabs, in spite of their military drawbacks, had managed to defeat Israel only one time in a high-intensity war, it might have been enough to bring the Jewish state down. Israel also understood it could not change by force a major aspect of the overall status quo, that is, reach a final victory. Israel hoped to buy time, hoping the Arabs would eventually accept its presence.

Apart from launching a war, Israel could not have done much to keep Arabs from getting organized for a war, training their troops, assimilating weapons, signing alliances and so on. Therefore Israel has been focusing on improving the IDF as much as possible. Israel also needed to balance between its military and economic needs, for too much investment in its military could have brought it to an economic and/or social breaking point.

Because national security has been for Israel such a dominant factor, it could have caused Israel to turn into a military state. Indeed, there has been in Israel a kind of general acceptance of the necessity of defense, which gave enormous strength to the military establishment. Nevertheless Israel built a growing economy while gaining impressive achievements in fields like science and agriculture. Israel also created a functional democracy and a pretty stable multiethnic society. Considering the odds, Israel sometimes has appeared as a strategic miracle.

One of Israel's major weak spots is its long borders and lack of strategic depth. This was particularly evident on the Jordanian border in 1949–1967. An Arab offensive there could have included not only Jordanian forces but other Arab militaries as well. Israel did not possess natural obstacles or the funds to build artificial barriers and strong fortifications. The ramifications of that might have been quite severe during a massive Arab offensive.

Often enough Israel could not stop infiltrations of Palestinians in time, as was the case in the early 1950s, which presented a danger, particularly when the penetration was aimed at harming Israelis. The Israeli population was therefore exposed to assaults on short notice or none. In the long run ongoing Palestinian infiltrations might have undermined the stability of Israel, whereas one full-scale Arab attack might have annihilated all of Israel in a matter of days. This was a status quo Israel tolerated and tried to adjust to it. Following the 1967 war this status quo changed for the better, for Israel, as the latter seized the West Bank. Its military deployment there reduced the chances of a major Arab attack reaching the heart of Israel.

The Arabs could have paralyzed Israel if they were able to conquer the Tel Aviv area, Israel's most vital strategic zone, because of its economic value and vast population. A siege on Tel Aviv, including a blockade from the sea, would have also prevented Israel from using the industries there to support the war effort through organizing food deliveries, ammunition and so on to other sectors. The biggest threat to the Tel Aviv area was from the Jordanian front.

Israel usually managed to keep the battles relatively far away from its population centers, except for the 1948–1949 war when about 2,000 Israeli civilians were killed. Arab populations suffered too, mostly the Palestinians in the 1948–1949 war and also Egyptians and Jordanians during the 1967–1970 war. Still, the high-intensity wars of 1948–1982 were basically between troops. This was another part of the strategic and unofficial status quo.

In June 1955 Lt. Gen. Moshe Dayan, IDF chief of general staff, defined the defense of Israel's water sources as a *casus belli*.<sup>7</sup> Israel was also very concerned about its sea routes. On 12 September 1955 Egypt closed the Tiran Straits for Israeli ships sailing toward or from the Red Sea.<sup>8</sup> This breach of the status quo was one of Israel's reasons for the 1956 war and also for the war in 1967 after Nasser blocked those straits once more. Nevertheless, the most crucial access to the sea from Israel's point of view was in the Mediterranean, which connected Israel to Europe and the United States. Furthermore, most of Israel's population and infrastructure was concentrated on the shores of that sea. If Arab navies had controlled the Mediterranean Sea, they could have not only cut Israel's sea routes but also shelled it and landed troops in the country's most vital areas.

In 1949–1967, before Israel seized the Sinai, it strongly opposed a massive Egyptian deployment in Sinai. In early 1960 Egypt surprised Israel by sending about three divisions into the peninsula. Israel rushed reinforcements to the border. The crisis ended peacefully because both sides did not seek war. Seven years later, when Egypt again broke the unofficial status quo in Sinai, and placed there seven divisions, it caused a major crisis that led to war.

Israel intended to rely on its own forces.<sup>9</sup> Yet in the 1956 war, Israel collaborated with France and Britain against Egypt. The latter's allies, Syria and Jordan, left Egypt to fight alone, which helped Israel focus on Egypt while relatively exposing its other fronts, that is, the ones facing Jordan and Syria. Israel's gamble paid off. France and Britain also destroyed the Egyptian air force, and by that they secured both Israeli cities and the IDF. Yet this war was a unique case that did not change the basic status quo, in which Israel needed to deal by itself with one or more Arab states.

The relationship between the United States and Israel was tested during the Cold War and in several crises and wars.<sup>10</sup> Before the 1967 war Lt. Gen. Yitzhak Rabin, IDF chief of general staff, warned that Israel would have to fight alone,<sup>11</sup> and he was right. The United States was not then Israel's patron in spite of the ties between them. The United States did not support Israel's attack but backed it afterward.<sup>12</sup> At the end of the 1973 war Henry Kissinger, as US secretary of state, said it was "total nonsense" that Israel suffered setbacks because the United States prevented Israel from launching a preemptive strike. According to him this

was because the superpower “didn’t believe that a war was coming.”<sup>13</sup> Kissinger also strove to increase American influence among the Arabs on the expense of the Soviet Union by stopping Israel or the Arabs from obtaining a decisive victory in 1973.<sup>14</sup> The American aspiration to leverage that war to its advantage was one of many cases when Israel and its American patron had different concepts about how the status quo between Israel and Arabs should look.

In 1948 Czechoslovakia, a protégé of the Soviet Union, sent Israel desperately needed weapons.<sup>15</sup> Eight years later, in the 1956 war, after Israel conquered most of Sinai, the Soviet Union threatened to fire nuclear weapons on Israel.<sup>16</sup> Maybe it was just a bluff, but after that crisis, because of the tight relations between the Soviet Union and Arab states, Israel had to take this factor into consideration in case of another war. However Israel was more concerned about the delivery of Soviet conventional weapons to Arab states – mostly to Egypt and Syria – before, during and after wars. Because the Arabs had enough manpower, as long as their Soviet patron provided them with weapons, the Arab militaries recovered after every war and grew stronger. This was a major constraint Israel had to accept and was another aspect of the status quo, which ended only with the fall of the Soviet Union.

### **The hope to bring down Nasser**

Egypt saw itself as the leading Arab state. The size of both its territory and population and its long and famous history,<sup>17</sup> sometimes as an empire, gave Egypt the legitimacy, at least from its point of view, to seek hegemony in the Arab world. Egypt strove for that position in particular after the rise of its charismatic leader, Nasser, who became the ruler of Egypt in 1954.

Ben Gurion, Israel’s prime minister, thought Nasser presented a threat to the existence of Israel.<sup>18</sup> Nasser wished to widen his influence as much as possible, in many ways, and he did not aim only at Israel. Yet he put it at risk, more than any other Arab figure, as potentially being able to unify the Arabs against it, if only in a temporary Arab military alliance, albeit sound enough to beat the IDF.

After Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in July 1956, Britain decided to bring him down.<sup>19</sup> Anthony Eden, the British prime minister, assumed Nasser tried to destabilize Western economy.<sup>20</sup> France joined Britain, and together with Israel they formulated an offensive against Egypt. Israel’s role was to invade Sinai, which for Nasser was a secondary front. He was much more concerned about his power center, west of the Suez Canal, and there he deployed most of his troops. France and Britain presented a much bigger danger to him. Whereas the IDF had to cross all of Sinai, more than 200 kilometers from the Suez Canal, France and Britain were able to dispatch forces directly to the west of the Suez Canal from the Mediterranean Sea, where their ships were stationed.

Nasser stayed in power in 1956 after he managed to turn his military failures into political and propagandist achievements.<sup>21</sup> He survived an offensive by three states, two of them formerly colonial empires. It might have encouraged him to confront Israel in the future, not only for revenge but also to prevent further

attempts by Israel to depose him. Indeed, in spite of its military successes against Nasser in the border wars in the early and mid-1950s and in the 1956 war, Israel had to continue dealing with Nasser. The border wars took place far away from Nasser's center of power, and in the 1956 war, when Israel got very close to the Suez Canal, Nasser was still safe. Therefore Israel could have only hoped that the shock of the Egyptian defeats, particularly in the 1956 war, might bring his downfall. In fact, they did not. Nasser's image as a threat to Israel remained and even increased in the 1960s.

In the 1967 war Nasser was the dominating leader in the Arab coalition against Israel. After his crashing defeat in that war Nasser resigned but quickly changed his mind due to a massive pressure from the Egyptian crowd, perhaps partly spontaneous.<sup>22</sup> In 1967 the Israeli victory was more convincing than in 1956 as the IDF stood alone and Egypt was focused on Israel, not on fighting Western powers. Yet it was not enough to topple Nasser, although his health deteriorated after the catastrophe he experienced in 1967.

In the war of attrition that raged between Egypt and Israel between 1967 and 1970, the latter hoped to get rid of Nasser.<sup>23</sup> The Egyptian leader was eager to erase the national and his own private humiliation from the 1967 war. The two sides exchanged punches. One of those strikes, a daring Israeli raid in the west bank of the Suez Bay, might have caused Nasser a heart attack.<sup>24</sup> He lived to see the end of the war of attrition but not much more because another heart attack killed him. As far as Egypt was concerned, the war of attrition did not end with a disaster like in 1967 but more in a kind of a draw. Nasser, who dreamed of uniting Arabs under his leadership, died when a large part of his country was in the hands of a state he wished to wipe out. He was the one who ceased to exist, not Israel. It took Israel two high-intensity wars, in 1956 and 1967, and two low-intensity ones, in the 1950s and in 1967–1970 until its longtime enemy weakened, including physically, and walked offstage.

In spite of Israel's attempts to change this type of status quo, having Nasser as the leader of Egypt in 1954–1970 and attempting to overthrow him was not a main component in Israeli strategy and certainly not a major reason for Israel to fight in any of its wars. Yet Israel hoped that wars against Egypt would lead to Nasser's demise, at least politically. With regard to other Arab nations, Israel preferred their heads of state stay in power, as it was with King Hussein of Jordan since the 1960s, long before the 1994 peace treaty between him and Israel and in spite of disputes and even military clashes with Jordan.

### **Limited war: 1973**

The goals of Egypt and Syria in the 1973 war suggested they gave up their old aspiration to destroy Israel. Instead, and since then, the unofficial status quo in this aspect was that Arab states strive for limited territorial gains when fighting wars against Israel. In 1973 Egypt adopted a modest approach by seizing a tiny part of Sinai, a step that ended in controlling the entire peninsula, a decade later,

as a result of a peace treaty. Syria, which wished in 1973 to regain by force all the Golan Heights, never got it.

When the 1973 war started, the Arab coalition was very narrow. It was a partnership between two Arab states: Egypt and Syria. However, in spite of their strength and successes at the beginning of the war, they needed assistance from other Arab states. Iraq in particular sent large forces to Syria.<sup>25</sup> Other Arab states assisted in a more limited way. The status quo about Arab solidarity dictated that Arab states join others in case of war with Israel.

The 1973 war saw battles on a vast scale, and various weapons were used. Yet Syria and Egypt did not use chemical weapons on Israeli targets, so the battlefield stayed a conventional one. The collisions were mostly contained to the Golan Heights and the two sides of the Suez Canal. The Arabs did not want to extend behind the umbrella of their anti-aircraft batteries, while the IDF contributed its share to shrinking the battlefield by sticking to forward defense. At the start of the war, Israeli troops had to hold their ground in the Golan Heights and Sinai and gain time until the reserves arrived. This approach cost the IDF dearly, and it almost caused it to lose the campaign instead of exchanging land for time by maintaining economy of force. One of the Israeli armor brigades in the Golan Heights was ripped to pieces, and the second barely survived. The Israeli armor division in Sinai also suffered heavy casualties.<sup>26</sup> In spite of that Israel continued with forward defense on both fronts until it went on the offensive in that area.

Israel's navy gained victory at sea in 1973 and pushed the Syrian and Egyptian fleets into their ports. The IDF could have also executed an amphibious operation in the Suez Bay,<sup>27</sup> a maneuver that was planned and drilled. That would have surprised Egypt in a new and remote sector, but the landing was not carried out, another example of confining the battles to limited sectors in the Suez Canal as part of the unofficial status quo.

In the 1973 war Israel bombed objectives inside Syria such as refineries and power stations, not population concentrations. It was a limited strategic bombardment, like the one Israel conducted against Egypt during the war of attrition in 1967–1970. In this sense Israel created then a new status quo because the rear of both sides was almost untouched in the former wars of 1956 and 1967.

### **Initiating wars: 1956 and 1982**

Israel attacked Arab states in 1967, but it was a preemptive strike following a clear provocation, mostly by Egypt. Nasser might not have sought war in May–June 1967, but eventually colliding with Israel was one of Nasser's official goals. Furthermore by deploying a massive force in Sinai, he did not leave Israel with many options. In contrast, in 1956 and 1982 Israel planned many months in advance to attack due to several reasons that had to do with adjusting and actually creating in a way a new status quo.

First of all Egypt's huge arms deal with the Soviet Union from late 1955 was one of the reasons for the 1956 war; Israel wanted to disrupt this process.<sup>28</sup> Syria

went through a substantial military buildup in the 1970s and the early 1980s, which Israel strove to slow down.<sup>29</sup> Israel assumed in both 1956 and 1982 that its foe's growing military power might jeopardize Israel sooner or later. The Egyptian military in 1956 absorbed a blow, and so did the Syrian military in 1982, but they have recovered. Furthermore in early 1960, four years after the 1956 war, Egypt was willing to risk another war when it sent forces to Sinai, a crisis that ended peacefully. Syria after the 1982 war deployed a large part of its army, several divisions, near the Israeli border in the Golan Heights, and Israel might have seen that as a cause for war.

Following years of Palestinian infiltrations into its land, including from the Gaza Strip,<sup>30</sup> Israel was under Egyptian control. In 1982 Israel was in the midst of a long struggle against the PLO in Lebanon, which in the years before the war often fired rockets and launched details to attack inside Israel. So destroying the Palestinian terror and guerrilla base in the Gaza Strip in 1956 and in Lebanon in 1982 were other Israeli goals. Although the danger of incursions from the Gaza Strip in 1956 and from Lebanon in 1982 was much less than in former years, it could resume unless Israel made sure it didn't by stopping it in time. The infrastructure of terror and guerrilla groups in the Gaza Strip was hit hard in 1956, as it was in Lebanon in 1982. But the IDF had to fight in Lebanon throughout the 1980s and 1990s, contrary to the relative calm on the border with the Gaza Strip after the 1956 war.

Israel managed to run a war in which the IDF avoided another tough and costly fight, as its last war had been. The IDF in the 1956 war, compared with the showdown in 1948–1949, absorbed many fewer casualties, and the same could be said about the 1982 war in reference to the 1973 war.

Initiating a war allowed Israel to look in advance for allies. Israel joined France and Britain in 1956 and the Christians of Lebanon in 1982. Israel's hopes to exploit its allies to reshape the map of the Middle East, according to its interests, failed in both wars. Furthermore Israel sought to hold the initiative in the strategic and operational dimensions by running the campaign under its own terms. But Israel learned, mostly in 1956, that fighting with allies brings with it all kinds of complicated constraints.

In 1982 Israel strove to establish a pro-Israeli regime in Lebanon<sup>31</sup> by collaborating with Bachir Gemayel, a powerful military-political leader of the Christians of Lebanon. Gemayel, who had been nurtured by Israel since 1976, was assassinated shortly after he was elected as president of Lebanon, on 14 September 1982, following the Israeli offensive. Whereas in the 1956 war Israel hoped to topple Nasser in Egypt, in 1982 Israel sought opposite results, namely exploiting a confrontation in Lebanon to have in office an Arab leader using his influence among the Arabs in favor of Israel and not against it. Those attempts to create a new status quo failed in both cases and were a bitter disappointment for Israel. Furthermore, in the 1956 war Israel managed to focus on Egypt because Arab states such as Jordan and Syria did not assist Egypt. In 1982 Israel also concentrated its forces on one front solely, this time against Syria and the PLO, which were left alone. Egypt kept its 1979 peace treaty with Israel, and the Jordanian king did not feel

obligated to save the PLO and Syria, which had threatened his regime in the past. Iraq, which in previous wars against Israel contributed expeditionary forces more than any other Arab state that did not have a border with Israel, was entangled since 1980 in a bitter fight with Iran.

In 1956 in Aum Cataf, and in 1982 in Ein Eilwa, the IDF had to deal with pockets of resistance that postponed its offensive, yet in 1956 the Egyptian military had no answer to the rapid Israeli offensive. In 1982 self-delays in IDF's movements and quite fast and effective Syrian response slowed down the IDF's advance.

Shimon Peres mentioned there was no guarantee that everything in the 1956 war would run as planned.<sup>32</sup> Indeed there were sometimes uncertainties and disagreements in the IDF about some missions, such as debates whether to dispatch the IAF to attack Egyptian airfields, on sending the 7th Armor Brigade deep into Sinai ahead of schedule, on the entanglement of the 202nd Paratroopers' Brigade in a costly clash and so on. In the 1982 war there was resentment in the IDF after the war started seemingly as a restricted operation that developed into a full-blown war. Destroying the Palestinians' military infrastructure in Lebanon, before it became more intimidating, seemed for many Israeli troops a worthy and legitimate reason for a war. Reaching Beirut, however, was a different story. Although this city was part of the Palestinians' base in Lebanon, many Israeli soldiers considered capturing it as going too far. Some troops felt that it was an overextended and unnecessary military adventure that changed the status quo in regard to what their mission during war should be. Israeli troops were also frustrated when, in the late stage of the war, they risked themselves to gain a few more kilometers without exploiting their full capability because of political restraints.

In 1956 David Ben Gurion, followed by Ariel Sharon in 1982, had made his mark by leading Israel into the war. They had the support of the chief of general staff. In 1956 Ben Gurion was both the prime minister and minister of defense. In 1982, although Sharon was just the minister of defense, he was a very dominant figure with enormous influence on the government and inside the IDF. He had in common with Ben Gurion the experience of wars between the Jews and Arabs, but Sharon saw them only as a soldier and not as a political leader. However, both sought a new status quo.

Israel had alternatives to initiating wars in 1956 and 1982, albeit purchasing more and better weapons to increase its deterrence was not considered one of them, and building a defense line was too expensive. Trying to rely on foreign powers, as part of a permanent alliance not just a temporary ad hoc one like in 1956, that is, creating together a new status quo in the region, was also turned down as an option due to its complexity and uncertainty.

## **Doctrine and buildup of the IDF**

The lessons of the 1948–1949 war molded the IDF's doctrine. Its overall purpose was to beat the enemy in every war and by that to secure Israel and deter its foes from challenging the Jewish state in the future. The IDF strove for a quick victory. As long as the battles continued, there were more chances of additional Arab

militaries joining the fight. Israel also hoped to avoid international pressure, be it only political, that would put an end to its combat operations before achieving their objectives. The IDF relied on attack because it enabled it to transfer the battle to Arab territory.

Two main operational goals of an Israeli offensive were decimating Arab forces and seizing lands for political, military and economic purposes.<sup>33</sup> The campaigns often took place in the same areas, such as the Sinai and the Golan Heights, where controlling key spots like crossroads was essential.

Since the establishment of Israel, Arabs have had more troops, weapon systems and so on. As a result the IDF has strived to gather as many units as possible in one sector, to gain a victory there and then to allocate its resources to other fronts and to repeat this success there. The Israeli attack was based on surprise, breaking or infiltrating through the defense lines, deep penetrations, flexibility during confusing circumstances and reducing the amount of Israeli casualties. Those concepts were part of the status quo as far as IDF's thinking about its doctrine.

As to IDF's buildup after the 1948–1949 war, the infantry corps, because of its achievements in the battlefield, remained the main corps of the IDF. The armor and the IAF were considered to be less important, and their task was to support the infantry. The 1956 war brought a sharp shift in this modus operandi of the Israeli military in favor of the armor and the IAF, and their position got even stronger following the 1967 war. The 1973 war demonstrated the shortcomings of the tank and the aircraft, albeit in the 1982 war the IDF continued to a large extent to depend on the armor and the IAF. During the battles in 1982, the IDF discovered that there was a clear necessity for more infantry involvement, and after the war more infantry units were created. The need to find the right balance between infantry and armor and between ground units and the IAF was an ongoing issue for the IDF over the years. In this aspect the status quo kept changing.

It was easier for the IDF to drill its regulars, who were on duty all year long, while the reserves usually exercised only a few weeks each year. Because the IDF relied on reserves, it was essential to receive warning about a coming war – let alone a major one – so there would be enough time to train the reserves properly. Another constraint was that a massive mobilization, like the one in May–June 1967, would have forced Israel after a few weeks to discharge many of its reserves because of economic reasons or to attack. This was part of the status quo in regard to IDF's military buildup.

## **Conclusion**

Israel's national security in 1948–1982 had diverse aspects of status quo. Some were strategic ones, like the balance of power between Israel and Arabs where the odds were clearly in favor of the latter. Others had to do with Israel's wars, like limiting them in 1973, when the battlefield was mostly contained to the frontline in the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights. In two other wars, in 1956 and 1982, Israel initiated the confrontation in an attempt to reshape the status quo. Another try to modify the status quo was regime change, which was however not a major

Israeli goal, and it was aimed particularly against Nasser, who nevertheless stayed in office in spite of his failures in wars against Israel in the 1950s and 1960s. As to IDF's combat doctrine and buildup, they had their status quo aspects too, such as depending on both the offensive approach and the reserves, although there were also changes in the status quo such as in infantry versus armor.

Summing this up it could be said that between the years 1948 and 1982, Israel retained some elements and changed others within the framework of strategy, combat doctrine and military buildup.

## Notes

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## Appendix II

### Differences and similarities between the wars in Libya in 2011 and Syria

The war in Libya in 2011 against the ruler there, Muammar al-Gaddafi ended in his total defeat, including killing him. In Syria since 2011 unrest turned into a civil war, yet the official leader of that country, Bashar al Assad, managed to stay in office. There is a similarity between those two wars, such as in the need to train the rebels and the superiority of Western militaries over the Syrian and Libyan militaries and so on. Yet there are also major differences between those two wars, such as in the scale, nature and impact of foreign intervention there.

#### **The response of the international community**

A foreign intervention aiming at removing a dictator has its risks as in possible Western involvement in Syria. The cost of the war in Libya was 1.1 billion dollars for the United States and “several billion dollars overall.”<sup>1</sup> The cost of war in Syria could have been much higher.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore even in the war in Libya, the position of the United States was to limit its military involvement for various reasons: the ongoing war in Afghanistan, financial considerations, the grim memory from the war in Iraq and so on. Due to those constraints the United States was reluctant to be entangled in another campaign in a Muslim country in the Middle East, that is, in Syria, let alone on a vast scale.

The 1973 UN resolution that included tacking “all necessary measures to protect” the civilians in Libya<sup>3</sup> was open to interpretations and created a controversy about the military steps Western powers took against Gaddafi, such as providing air support for the rebels, supplying weapons and so on.

The Western offensive in Libya might have saved a massacre in Libya. Since the end of the war there, that country has been in chaos, but the amount of casualties has been much less than in Syria in recent years. A Western intervention in Syria might have brought the same outcome as in Libya. The situation in Libya turned out to be quite miserable and frustrating, but at least it is not as dreadful and highly costly as in Syria. In this sense better a failed state than one in a civil war, although Libya could end up like Syria.

Russia and China agreed to resolution 1973, but as far as Syria, for example, in mid-October 2011 and again in early February 2012, they blocked in the UN a move against Syria to prevent a process leading to an attack on Syria’s leader, as

it was with Libya. Russia did not serve only as a buffer between Western powers and Assad but also assisted the latter directly, particularly following the Russian military intervention in Syria since October 2015.

In late August and early September 2013, following the use of CW by Assad, there was a possibility of a Western assault against Syria. Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, warned that he would help Syria in such a case.<sup>4</sup>

Eventually, with Russia as a major broker, an agreement was reached to disarm Assad from his CW. The risk of an American attack on Syria in 2013 caused Assad to get rid of his CW. Gaddafi agreed to a similar process after another demonstration of American military might in Iraq in 2003 and also because of the sanctions against him. Therefore in Libya a mix of sanctions, an invasion into another Arab dictatorship and in Syria and the threat of a much more limited strike yet a direct one on it in 2013 convinced Gaddafi and Assad to dispose of their CW. This process in Libya started in 2004. In 2011 some stockpiles of CW were still there.<sup>5</sup> This is why the disarming in Syria was meant to be much faster, and eventually it was. Also in the war in Libya, Gaddafi did not have the same CW capability as Assad had in 2013. However, Gaddafi lost an important card that could have helped him to deter his external foes and at least delay a Western offensive against him, which would have assisted him in handling the mutiny. Assad kept and exploited the CW as much as he could, which was another reason why he held on much longer than Gaddafi.

Both Assad and Gaddafi tried to get a much more dangerous unconventional weapon than CW, a nuclear one. But they had to run their wars without such a devastating arsenal, which would have alone ruled out a Western attack against them. Gaddafi gave up his nuclear program long before the war, as part of his overall disarming from unconventional weapons. Assad lost his nuclear project when Israel bombed his nuclear reactor in September 2007. Therefore, different kinds of foreign actions prevented two Arab tyrants from possessing the bomb.

### **The role of Arab states, Iran and Israel**

“The UN mandate and backing of the Arab League were critically important in obtaining political support for the air campaign and giving it legitimacy.”<sup>6</sup> The Arab League called for a no-fly zone in Libya, but almost none of its members, let alone the major ones like Egypt, joined the fight against Gaddafi. Assad has been absorbing criticism from Arab states, which called him to stop killing Syrian population and to implement political reforms, but those Arab states have not organized a military intervention. A few Arab states like Qatar participated in the battles in Libya, and even this was in a very limited way. In both the wars in Syria and Libya, Arab states expected Western powers to carry the burden. The main contribution of Arab states in the fight against Assad was when Saudi Arabia and Qatar assisted Syrian rebels, for example, in delivering funds.

Iran kept out of the fight in Libya because Gaddafi was not an Iranian ally like Assad. When the latter ran into distress after 2011, Iran came to help him, and this is a major reason why Assad survived. Gaddafi, who ruled Libya beginning

in 1969, did not have in 2011 a solid alliance with a world or regional power that could have assisted him in a time of a mutiny against him. Bashar al Assad, like his father before him, kept his pact with Iran that has been going on since the early 1980s,<sup>7</sup> which has paid off including since 2011.

Israel stayed out of the war in Libya as it did in another war between an international coalition and another Arab tyrant, Saddam Hussein, in the war in 1991. Then Iraq launched long-range surface-to-surface missiles toward Israel, aiming at dragging it to retaliate, which could have caused the Western–Arab alliance to collapse.<sup>8</sup> Arabs opposed fighting together with Israel against an Arab state, even an outcast one. It was annoying enough for them to confront Iraq while openly collaborating with Western states. During the Syrian civil war, Assad could have tried the same approach if he had faced a Western–Arab coalition. In 2011 Gaddafi might have wanted to do it too, although unlike Iraq in 1991 and Syria, Libya did not have surface-to-surface missiles that could have reached Israel. Gaddafi could have only tried to claim that Israel is part of the attack against him, aiming to turn the fight into an Arab–Israeli collision. Yet Gaddafi left Israel out of the picture. An anti-Israeli declaration by Gaddafi probably would not have been enough to bring Arab states to avoid actions against Gaddafi or to demand that Western powers do the same. Gaddafi’s weak position in the eyes of many Arabs and his image as a pariah could have allowed Arab states to basically ignore whatever he said. The same happened with Assad in recent years when his regime accused Israel of helping the rebels.

In the last decades Arab states did not intervene, certainly not by force, during collisions between Israel and the Palestinians, such as the 1987–1993 and 2000–2005 confrontations. There were much shorter collisions between those two sides, such as in December 2008–January 2009 in the Gaza Strip. Still, that clash was quite fierce as Israel bombed a series of targets and more than 1,000 Palestinians were killed. However, Arab states kept out of the war, and those that have a peace treaty with Israel, Jordan and Egypt, did not annul the accord. Therefore if Arabs were not willing to fight for the Palestinians in the name of Arab solidarity, then Gaddafi and Assad should not have expected Arab aid. Arabs stayed out in previous attacks on Gaddafi and Assad by Western or Israeli militaries.

In another clash between Israel and Arabs, in the 2006 war between Israel and the Hezbollah in Lebanon, some Arab states like Saudi Arabia actually wanted Israel to win. As in the war in Libya in 2011 and in Syria in recent years, Arab Gulf states wished in 2006 to see their Arab enemy, the Hezbollah in that case, defeated totally. Yet it did not happen, unlike the fate of Gaddafi. In Lebanon in 2006 Arab states were against the Hezbollah because this non-state organization has been a protégé of Iran, the nemesis of several Arab states, particularly of Saudi Arabia.

### **Facing the Syrian and Libyan militaries**

Compared with the Libyan military, the Syrian military was much stronger.<sup>9</sup> But the Syrian military was weakened due to the prolonged fighting in its country. The

Libyan military had partly disintegrated during the war in 2011 and was composed of mercenaries, soldiers that stayed loyal to Gaddafi, special units and militia. In Syria the backbone of the regime's military has been the remaining loyal military units, hired guns and foreign outfits, mostly the Hezbollah.

NATO gained several vital lessons from the war in Libya, for example, in command and control, the need to be familiar with local conditions and so on.<sup>10</sup> Also "Libya's air defenses were two or three decades old and concentrated on Libya's coast and major oil ports. US bombers, cruise missiles and strike fighters took them out and established control of the air within 72 hours."<sup>11</sup> Western forces that attacked Libya almost did not absorb any losses from enemy fire.

Syria was not able to strike back at the Armenian destroyers that were about to launch a barrage of cruise missiles in early September 2013. But cruise missiles might not have been enough to destroy Assad's air force. Either way Assad would have still possessed superior firepower over the rebels due to his heavy artillery and tanks. This edge would have allowed government units to inflict substantial casualties among the rebels, disrupt their offensive and defensive maneuvers and make the rebels feel completely vulnerable. In Libya Western aircraft also destroyed targets like tanks. In Syria, as long as a Western offensive would have relied on cruise missiles solely, there was not much of a chance to annihilate mobile weapon systems like artillery but mostly stationary objectives like headquarters, bunkers and so on.

In Libya it was sufficient that Western air power pounded Gaddafi's forces up to a point at which the rebels managed to gain a victory in spite of all their military disadvantages and hardships. In Syria if air bombardment had bashed Assad's units, it might have allowed the rebels, with all their difficulties and internal disputes, to overthrow Assad. The rebels were the boots and also shoes on the ground, as they often lacked standard uniforms and equipment.

Therefore the Western air offensive against Gaddafi was not enough to bring him down. Other campaigns in North Africa in World War II, in the Arab–Israeli wars and in the 1991 confrontation against Iraq proved that in spite of the contribution of air power, ground units were essential to achieve the final goal. It was true in Libya in 2011 and in Syria too. Air power is limited also in circumstances like poor weather or urban areas, yet planes and gunships with guided missiles could accurately hit ground targets, including enemy snipers and forward observers who direct the artillery inside cities and towns.

### **Training the Rebels**

In Libya and Syria the battles started against the leader, the elite class around him and the oppressive regime. In Libya the mutineers were a ragtag force, yet they managed to put enough focus on beating Gaddafi until this mission was accomplished. In Syria the fight that was first between the supporters of Assad and the opposition turned also into a fight inside the rebel camp. The time that passed allowed Assad to regroup and to hold on. This period was not used by the rebels

to unite against him. They were divided into various groups, and they lacked central command.<sup>12</sup> This meant that relatively moderate outfits among the rebels like the Free Syrian Army lost much of their strength, while those that were affiliated with Al-Qaida became more dominant. Western powers could have joined Syrian rebels in an early stage, as in Libya, and/or to sufficiently train and arm enough relatively moderate rebels so they could do the job, but this was not done.

There were former uprisings against Gaddafi,<sup>13</sup> like there was a rebellion against the Assad regime in 1982. They all failed, yet it did not discourage the people in Syria and Libya to such an extent that they were not willing to try again when they had the opportunity.

The opposition in Syria, despite all the international support and sympathy it received, has felt it has been to a large degree on its own. Yet even with foreign intervention, like that in Libya in Syria as well the main battles, that is land warfare, had to be done by the rebels because it was after all their country.

In Syria in the first year of the war, there were talks about creating a militia such as the one that was in Libya.<sup>14</sup> The rebels in both countries included deserters and mostly civilians who volunteered. It took months and bitter lessons from the battlefield until the rebels in Libya were able to defeat Gaddafi. The rebels in Syria have been experiencing a similar process of turning their men into troops. They have had to build some kind of a military that at least would be strong enough to push back their foe and buy time to be better organized and eventually to win.

Rebels in Libya and Syria gradually got access to weapon systems like armored vehicles, artillery such as rocket launchers and outdated anti-aircraft guns. The latter were used against troops on the ground, yet their most important task was to shoot down or at least deter planes and gunships from attacking. The rebels also had shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles for this task. Although learning to operate them was not that difficult, it was still a challenge for rebels, many of whom were after all civilians. Furthermore shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles could intercept aircraft at low altitudes. Planes could attack safely from higher altitudes, and although then their strikes are less accurate, a no-fly zone was essential in Syria, as it was in Libya. If Western militaries had helped the rebels in Syria, as in Libya, the rebels in Syria too would have had to be careful not to fire on Western aircraft. Once the rebels' fear of air bombardments was reduced, their willingness to shoot at every aircraft should have diminished. Although their capability in this field was not high, there was a danger for Western aircrafts flying at low altitude.

For Western powers it was unnecessary to supply relatively moderate rebels in Syria with sophisticated arsenals they did not possess. Lack of military expertise would have made it a challenge for the rebels to assimilate advanced weapons. More important would have been to teach them to use properly the weapons they already had. The rebels in Syria, as in Libya, should have received weapons and military gear only in the quality and quantity needed to win the war against both the Assad regime and Islamic extremists.

In the start of the war in Syria, there were talks about creating a "Syrian Benghazi," that is, a city that would serve as a stronghold for the opposition, as it was in

Benghazi in Libya.<sup>15</sup> The city of Tripoli in Lebanon saw clashes among supporters of both sides in Syria.<sup>16</sup> It was one of the signs that the struggle inside Syria spilled over into nearby Lebanon. Eventually the war in Syria could include large parts of Lebanon, and the Syrian humanitarian crisis would intensify. This would increase the pressure to establish an area to send supplies and evacuate wounded. It could also serve as a base for organizing, exercising and arming relatively moderate rebels.

Britain trained and advised rebels in Libya.<sup>17</sup> In 2012 the British military formed a plan to train 100,000 Syrians who would attack Damascus with air cover from Western and Arab Gulf states. But this idea was never carried out.<sup>18</sup> In 2013 while Assad's allies, Iran and Hezbollah, prepared more than 20,000 men for battle the CIA conducted exercises, in basic infantry combat, for less than 1,000 rebels.<sup>19</sup> In late June 2014 the Obama administration suggested a 500 million-dollar plan aiming at training and arming the Syrian rebels.<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Pollack suggested in September 2014 "building a new Syrian opposition army capable of defeating both President Bashar al Assad and the more militant Islamists."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore relatively moderate rebels also would have to be ready to secure the country or at least their areas by enforcing law and order that would prevent anarchy, as in Libya. The rebels should be capable of performing more like a conventional military and police and less like a guerilla organization. Another reason for this strategy is that guerrillas implements methods such as laying down IEDs, which might be used against Western states and their allies in the future by rebels who would turn against their former sponsors.

In March 2015 the Pentagon had a plan to train about 15,000 Syrians. Yet weapons that were sent to other rebels who were considered to be moderate fell in to the hands of the Al Nusra Front.<sup>22</sup> In May that year senior Pentagon officials said that "training a surrogate force was never the linchpin of U.S. strategy given the chaos and growing radicalization of Syria's four-year civil war."<sup>23</sup> In October 2015 the Obama administration basically gave up the training of Syrian rebels and instead focused on delivering them weapons.<sup>24</sup> The United States went on with this approach in 2016.

### **A base for guerilla and terror actions**

"The aftermath of NATO's Libya operation was not planned at all."<sup>25</sup> The results show this was a huge mistake. The confrontation there turned out to be quite easy for Western powers, but there is no wonder why they had serious doubts about a similar move in Syria, even after Assad's military lost much of its strength. The main problem was not the conventional combat and toppling the local Arab dictatorship but the unrest and clashes that would follow there.

In September 2014 both Libyan and Syrian armed groups demonstrated "their extreme proliferation and fragmentation."<sup>26</sup> The Council on Foreign Relations did its annual Preventive Priorities Survey for 2015. About 2,200 government officials, academics, and foreign policy experts ranked as "high" the likelihood of "an intensification of the Syrian civil war resulting from increased external

support for warring parties, including military intervention by outside powers.” The survey ranked as “moderate” the likelihood that “continued political fracture and growing militancy in Libya resulting in state failure, minimal governance, and further military intervention by Arab states.”<sup>27</sup> Liberated countries might be out of control, particularly after an era of dictatorship. Some there would be eager to express their new freedom by violence, particularly against vulnerable people, as it has been in Libya and in Syria, where the chaos would continue and even increase if Assad were toppled.

During the war in Libya, rebels raised the flag of Gaddafi’s predecessor, who was a king, as defiance against Gaddafi. Since then there has been no king in Libya, but some warlords there have acted like one. To begin with there was not much chance of building a constitutional monarchy, let alone some kind of democratic administration. This is because of disputes and conflicts of interest among Libyan tribes, clans and armed groups and the lack of political institutes, such as parties in the decades before the war.

In Syria ending the civil war would require dividing the country and actually officially recognizing this existing reality. Convincing the various sides to unite Syria again under the rule of one government seems impossible considering the huge differences, enormous suspicion and deep hate among them.

Libya could be a springboard for terror and guerrilla activities due to its strategic location in the center of the Mediterranean Sea, several hundred kilometers south of European countries like Italy and Greece. Libya also has a border with several African countries, including Egypt, an important state for Western powers among others because of the Suez Canal. The war against Gaddafi that originally was supposed to protect Libyans might turn out to cause more harm than good, not only to the people in Libya but to their neighbors as well.

The proximity of Syria to the heart of the Arab world means it poses a threat like undermining countries that have a border with Syria, as it happened with ISIS in Iraq. With or without a removal of Assad, guerrilla and terror activities could continue to spread from Syria.

Weapons from Libya found their way to Syria,<sup>28</sup> Egypt<sup>29</sup> and the Gaza Strip. In all those Arab countries and territories, the smuggling from Libya undermined even more the stability there, like in Egypt, following the struggle between the government and Islamic extremists.

The Syrian mutiny might not take down the government. Some of the Syrian rebels, including relatively moderate ones, might be convinced it was because of lack of sufficient support from Western states. Those insurgents might even suspect that from the start, Western states had no real intention to allow the rebels to prevail. As the case may be, there could be rebels who would decide to use their weapons and the combat experience they acquired against Western states and their allies. In Libya the frustration from the chaos there could bring similar ramifications.

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