

FLASHPOINT GAZA: THE ISRAELI DEFENSE FORCES (IDF) LAUNCHES “OPERATION CAST LEAD”

**ANALYSIS OF THE MOST CURRENT COMBAT SITUATIONS
BY COLONEL JOHN ANTAL (US ARMY, RETIRED) As of Jan 7, 2009.**



Israeli Defense Force (IDF) Merkava Tanks lined up prior to the assault into Gaza. "We want to create a situation where the civilian population in southern Israel is no longer on the receiving end of those deadly Hamas rockets," Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev. (IDF Photo)

LATEST INTEL UPDATE: On Saturday, January 3, 2009, IDF forces executed the ground attack phase of “Operation Cast Lead” by sending Ground forces into the Gaza Strip. This latest IDF action against Hamas includes a large number of IDF forces, including infantry, tanks, engineers, artillery, intelligence units, air force, navy, and special security agencies. On January 4, 2009 *Al Jazeera* reported that Israeli troops had reached the towns of Beit Lahiya and Beit Hanoun in northern Gaza, that heavy fighting between Israeli forces and Hamas fighters was occurring in areas such as Zaytoun, near Gaza City, and that Israeli forces had cut the Gaza Strip in half and were ringing Gaza City itself.

HAMAS IN 2008: In 2008 Hamas has launched 3000 rocket attacks against Israel. Regardless of the June 2008 Egyptian-brokered cease-fire, Hamas prepared for

an eventual war with Israel, largely because Hamas requires conflict with Israel to retain political power in the Gaza Strip. Accordingly, on December 18, 2008, Hamas declared the end of the cease fire and increased rocket launches against Israel. In response to the cancellation of the cease fire, Israel threatened action if Hamas did not stop shooting rockets over the border. Hamas' response to the Israeli threat was belligerent. Hamas stated that it would resist "the occupation" and would not stop the rocket attacks.



Map 1: The current fighting is in the Hamas controlled Gaza Strip at the right bottom of this map. The West Bank (right side of the map) is controlled by the more moderate Fatah Palestinian party and is not directly involved in the fighting. (CIA Map)

After absorbing rocket attacks for years, the poor showing by Israeli Forces in the 2006 Lebanon War and an internal crisis within Israeli national leadership, the Israelis fueled a perception of weakness that emboldened Hamas.

When Hamas would not relent in the rocket attacks, the Israelis had no choice but to react. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak declared the current mood of Israel succinctly: "There is a time for calm and there is a time for fighting, and now is the time for fighting."

Israel began bombing select terrorist targets in Gaza on December 27, 2008.

On January 3, 2009, the IDF followed up the air attack with a ground assault. As IDF ground forces entered the Gaza Strip Ehud Barak declared that Israel is engaged in a "war to the bitter end" against Hamas in Gaza and that the Israeli goal is to dismantle Hamas' military capabilities.



An IDF "Yahalom" Engineering Corps Special Forces Soldier trains in urban warfare at the Adam facilities in Israel. Yahalom is IDF's elite unit responsible for special engineering operations. Special engineering operations are vital in the kind of urban combat the IDF is fighting in Gaza. Since the end of the 2006 Lebanon War, the IDF has been honing its urban combat skills. (IDF photo)

IDF PLAN: The Israeli air strikes that initiated "Operation Cast Lead" followed months of planning and years of training and preparation. This preparation was generated by the IDF's failure to decisively defeat Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon War.

In the 2006 Lebanon War, Israel launched a determined air blitz that was as impressive as it was indecisive. In the end, Hezbollah fighters retained the ground and claimed victory. Israel's failure in the 2006 Lebanon War had a dramatic effect on the IDF. Israel is used to winning wars and must win quickly and decisively if it is to survive in a sea of enemies. The 2006 fight against Hezbollah did not fit this mold.

The Israeli Defense Ministry, therefore, conducted intense After Action Reviews (AARs) of what went wrong during the 2006 Lebanon War. Called the "Winograd Commission," these AARs focused on the performance of decision-makers, the preparations of plans,

and the performance of military units during the 2006 War. The IDF "fully internalized" these lessons and conducted a massive retraining effort.

The Israelis relearned important lessons that apply to modern war:

- Airpower alone is not decisive.
- Precision fires without dominant maneuver are indecisive.
- Decisive operations are enhanced when precision airpower is coupled with combined arms ground maneuver.

From lessons learned from the 2006 Lebanon War, the IDF recognized the enemy's technique to hide behind the civilian population – termed “war amongst the people.” To this aim, Israeli air strikes in Gaza have often been preceded by leaflet drops telling the local populace to take shelter or get out of the target area. An IDF spokesperson reiterated this on January 4, 2009 and stated “that the residents of Gaza are not the target of the operation. Those who use civilians, the elderly, women and children as human shields are responsible for any and all injuries to the civilian population. Anyone who hides a terrorist or weapons in his house is considered a terrorist.”

From this period of introspection, IDF leaders swore that they would learn these lessons and that the next time the IDF was called to battle, the IDF would be ready and would win.



Nizar Rayyan (center with AK-47 rifle), the spiritual mentor of Iz A-Din Al Qassam Rocket Brigades, on a night visit to Hamas fighters. Rayyan was killed on January 1, 2009 in an Israeli air strike prior to the IDF ground assault. With their leaders dead or fleeing can Hamas stand against a combined IDF air and ground assault? (photo from International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) web site)

That call came on December 27, 2008 when the Israeli Air Force began the Air Phase of “Operation Cast Lead.” Excellent intelligence preparation of the battlefield allowed the

initial Israeli ground attack to gain surprise over Hamas and get off to a good start. The initial Israeli attacks decapitated much of the leadership of Hamas. On January 1, 2009, the Israeli Air Force successfully targeted and killed Nizar Rayyan the spiritual mentor of Iz A-Din Al Qassam Rocket Brigades. Another Israeli attack on Saturday, January 3, 2009, killed Azkariah al-Jamal, the commander of Gaza City's rocket-launching squads. You can bet that as Israeli Commando teams maneuver through the Gaza Strip, supported by IDF soldiers who are entering in tanks and armored vehicles and are supported by helicopters and aircraft, they will kill or capture more Hamas leaders.

The Ground Phase kicked off in the dark, early hours of January 3, 2009. Many days of hard fighting lie ahead if the IDF is to truly succeed. The IDF plan appears to involve a powerful, all-arms, **strategic raid** into Gaza to take out key Hamas leaders, destroy Hamas' rocket firing capability, find and destroy the tunnels across the border, and reshuffle the deck of the Palestinian government that controls the Gaza Strip.

IDF tactics in "Operation Cast Lead" consist of five major elements:

- Precision Targeting of Hamas Leadership (air and rocket Forces)
- Precision Targeting of Hamas Infrastructure (air, rocket and artillery forces)
- Ground Assault by Overwhelming Combined Arms Forces to secure battle zones and fracture Hamas fighting organizations (tank, infantry, engineer and artillery forces)
- Special Operations attacks within the battle zones (supported by Conventional Forces) to kill or capture Hamas leaders (special operations forces)



An Israeli F-16 loaded with bombs heads for the Gaza Strip. (IDF photo)

THE HAMAS PLAN: Hamas believes in fighting an asymmetrical “**war amongst the people.**” This tactic involves blending fighters with the local populace to the point that the people and the fighters become indistinguishable to the enemy. Rocket launchers are

secured in mosques and pulled out from storage just before firing. Fighters are housed in schools and hospitals. Kill zones are set up with no regard for the consequences for non-combatants. In short, use innocents to counter a modern armies overwhelming and precise firepower.

The tactics that Hezbollah employed in 2006 – fight a war amongst the people and use rockets to kill and harass the enemy's non-combatants -- have become a model that show how an inferior military force can frustrate a more modern and powerful military force. With this in mind, Hamas has prepared for the Israeli incursion into the Gaza Strip by digging tunnels, and stockpiling weapons and ammunition. Most importantly, Hamas has secretly prepared key engagement areas with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to create kill zones for the advancing Israeli forces.

In a broadcast TV message, Hamas warned Israeli forces that "Gaza will not be paved with flowers for you, it will be paved with fire and hell." Hamas is counting on the casualty-averse Israelis to show restraint and employ ground forces slowly and reluctantly. "We will not abandon the battlefield, and we will stay on the thorny course, and we will fight until the last breath," Hamas chief spokesman Ismail Radwan said in a statement on Palestinian network Al-Aqsa.

Discipline, training, improved weaponry and skill, however, are much more difficult to produce than fiery rhetoric. To address these shortcomings, Hamas received help from Hezbollah and Iran to train fighters and smuggle weapons, antitank rockets and missiles in to the Gaza Strip.

Hamas' military plan is to fight a war amongst the people in the urban areas of Gaza and cause as many IDF casualties as possible. If Hamas has the determination of its rhetoric, it can fight a battle of attrition, house-to-house in the urban canyons of the major towns in Gaza (Rafah, Khan Ynis, Dayr al Balah, and Gaza). The Gaza Strip is a small area but totals nearly 140 square miles of territory. Hamas can use this urban landscape to channel IDF forces into predesignated killing zones in the hope to inflict mass casualties on IDF troops.

The resolve of Hamas should not be underestimated as they are fighting on their home turf on an urban battlefield that they have had time to prepare. There are many dedicated fanatics in the ranks of Hamas who have sworn to fight to the death. Some will don suicide vests and do their best to wreck havoc on their IDF attackers. Others will plant IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) and lure Israelis into preplanned kill sacks.

Some Hamas fighters, however, are probably a bit less determined and may be looking over their shoulders for a way out. It remains to be seen how much determination the rank and file Hamas fighters have and how long Hamas will stand and fight. Since this article was written on the first day of the IDF ground offensive, the level of determination that Hamas is able to muster will become clearer in the days ahead.

If the battle cannot be sustained long enough to force a ceasefire, Hamas fighters will fight long enough for the leadership to flee across the southern border to Egypt. Since Hamas is confident that Israel will not permanently occupy the Gaza Strip, the surviving Hamas leadership can return and fight another day.

If the Hamas leadership attempts to escape -- and some key leaders probably have already left the battle area -- Hamas will lose a majority of its fighting force. The Israelis have the coast of the Gaza Strip in a tight naval blockade and will most likely kill or capture those who attempt to flee by sea.

The land escape route, to the south, is harder for the IDF to secure. Egypt has already opened the southern border to ambulances carrying wounded from the fighting. The IDF has observation of the Gaza Strip-Egyptian border and is using precision fires to destroy tunnels across the border. The IDF should be able to act to stop many high-value targets from fleeing to Egypt (See Map 2 Gaza's major population centers and border crossing points), but no matter how diligent the IDF is, some Hamas operatives will escape across the border to fight another day.



MAP 2: Gaza's major population centers and border crossing points.

THE LIKELY OUTCOME OF “OPERATION CAST LEAD”

The great 19th Century German strategist Helmuth von Moltke poignantly said that “No battle plan survives contact with the enemy and War is a matter of expedients.” It is clear now that Moltke’s statement was true of the US invasion of Iraq, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and will also be true of the IDF’s “Operation Cast Lead.”

The crucial calculus of the war in Gaza is this: To decisively defeat Israel, Hamas must mire the IDF in a bitter urban battle at the *tactical* level while the main *strategic* effort of the war is waged in the world media public relations arena. For Israel to win a decisive victory, the IDF must capture or kill the leadership of Hamas, before a ceasefire is imposed, and then capitalize on the Hamas-Fatah schism to have Fatah emerge as the governing body of the Gaza Strip.

Bearing the great Moltke in mind, in this case I believe that it is Hamas who has miscalculated. Hamas needed this war to keep control in Gaza and hoped to entice the IDF into a premature and ill-prepared attack. It is clear from a close study of the opening moves that the Israelis have planned “Operation Cast Lead” very well and that the plan included a preparatory Air Phase (Precision Fires) and a longer Ground Phase (Dominant Maneuver). Contrary to what the pundits may be saying on TV, Hamas’ threats to turn Gaza into the graveyard of the IDF will probably fall short of the target for several reasons.

First, the Israelis are working hard to deny Hamas the ability to effectively wage a war of attrition ‘amongst the people.’ IDF preparation, careful tactics and overwhelming force are denying Hamas the ability to fight the way Hamas has trained. The Israelis have trained extensively since 2006, fixed many of their problems, learned their lessons and are applying them on the battlefield. They are advancing deliberately, with excellent battlefield preparation in both fires and intelligence and attacking with combined arms. Knowing that “Operation Cast Lead” will involve intense close-combat urban fighting, the Israelis are ready and willing to conduct the deliberate battle that is needed to achieve their objectives on an urban battlefield.

Second, Hamas is learning the hard way that the IDF advancing into the Gaza Strip today has a resolve that was not displayed by Israel in the 2006 Lebanon War. Hamas leaders are just now starting to realize that the Israeli attack is “all out” and is not restrained and that the Israelis will not stop their attacks until their objectives are achieved. Any result short of victory, that allows a damaged Hamas to remain in control of the Gaza Strip, only sets the seeds for a future conflict. The Israelis know that if they give into international pressure before they achieve the aims of “Operation Cast Lead,” that Hamas will win an extraordinary victory. If a truce is forced on Israel before the IDF achieves its objectives, then such an outcome would give Hamas important political legitimacy that Israel could not afford and Israel’s days as an independent nation will be numbered.

The wild card is Hezbollah. An attack by Hezbollah in northern Israel while the IDF is fighting in Gaza would force Israel to fight on multiple fronts at the same time – always a dangerous situation. Hamas hopes to recreate this possibility and is pleading with Hezbollah to join the fight. The Israelis have anticipated this move and have planned accordingly by placing strong fighting formations on alert along the Lebanon border. The Israelis have also prepared against Hezbollah politically. Haaretz.com newsman Yoav Stern reported on January 4, 2009 that “leading Lebanese political commentators said Hezbollah would not open a military front with Israel even if it invades Gaza. The commentators further explained that Hezbollah was not interested in a destructive round of violence months before the Lebanese election.” If Hezbollah enters the war, Israel will have to react swiftly with airpower, finish operations in Gaza first and then turn its full power against Hezbollah.

These are dangerous times for Israel and, as always, time is not on Israel’s side. The consequences, however, are clear. Israel must fight and win. There is no other option.

If the IDF has the courage of its convictions and is willing to engage Hamas in close combat and root them out of their defenses, then the IDF ground attack will deal a direct, hard blow to Hamas that will change the political setting in Israel’s favor.

The side that quits first will lose. In the end, determination may be the most important part of the calculus of this war.

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NOTE: The origin of the Israeli codename, “Operation Cast Lead,” is reported to be taken from a Hanukkah poem by Israeli poet Haim Nachman Bialik. In the poem, one of the lines mentions a “dreidel cast from solid lead.” For those of you unfamiliar with the game of dreidel, it is a game that uses a four-sided spinning top (called a dreidel) and is usually played during the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. Unlike the 2006 Lebanon War, it seems that this time Israel is playing dreidel to win.
