

Restoring Israeli deterrence

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Israel owes its survival to effective and continuous deterrence. Confronted with uniquely narrow borders and destructive threats from all directions, the threat of large-scale response has been Israel's most effective insurance policy. When the IDF has acted effectively to deter the threats of conventional attacks from large armies, mass terror campaigns and missiles aimed at cities, Israeli citizens have been protected.

This deterrence did not come easily, but was gradually built in the wars from 1948 through 1973. Although the Yom Kippur war resulted in unprecedented Israeli casualties, largely due to the surprise attack and failure to pre-empt due to American pressure, the successful counterattacks that reached the outskirts of both Cairo and Damascus also created an unprecedented level of deterrence. Egyptian and Syrian leaders realized that any further full scale wars against Israel would be disastrous. As a result, the era of conventional warfare that began in the 1948 invasion reached an end, and Egypt's military government began the negotiations that led to the 1979 peace treaty. Without deterrence, Sadat and Begin would not have signed that agreement, which has been essential for both countries during more than three decades.

But when the deterrence image has faded, and Israel was seen as unable to use its military force, partly due to international political restraints, attacks resumed. In Lebanon, which became the launching ground for PLO terror after 1973, Israel was perceived as unable to effectively counterattack against guerrillas hidden in civilian neighborhoods. In 1982, a large Israeli operation in Lebanon and including Beirut sought to create deterrence against terrorism, but failed in this central objective. Operational failures, political incompetence, and damage caused by images of Israel air attacks on civilians led to immense pressure from Europe and also the US to halt operations before the military objectives were accomplished.

After 1982, Israel's ability to project deterrence against terror in different forms continued to decline. Unilateral military withdrawals in 2000 from the buffer zone in Lebanon, and from Gaza in 2005, gave further impetus to Palestinian, Hezbollah and other groups to view Israel as a fading power. They increased and expanded the scope of attacks against Israel. The effort to restore deterrence in the 2006 Lebanon war also ended without clear military accomplishments and a premature cease-fire forced by international pressure.

In December 2008, a major round of rocket attacks from Gaza triggered a large scale counterattack against Hamas. This operation was more successful, in terms of military successes, but at the cost of greater political isolation, resulting from a campaign using alleged "human rights violations" led by powerful political NGOs, magnified in the media, and repeated in

the infamous Goldstone report. Overall, Israel's deterrence image was only marginally restored, and the rocket attacks and assaults on Israeli soldiers near the Gaza border resumed steadily and became more deadly.

This is the essential background to the current Israeli operation targeting Hamas terror leaders and their deadly missile infrastructure. If the IDF has learned the lessons of the previous efforts, including 2006 and 2008/9, this operation may lead to a significant restoration of deterrence. On the political front of this war, the briefing for foreign ambassadors, held by Prime Minister Netanyahu in Ashkelon, was an effort to prevent repetition of the premature intervention, particularly from Europe, that was very damaging in the previous Israeli responses. In the long term, strategic deterrence remains essential for stability and perhaps, eventually, for peace.