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Motives behind Israel's Decision to Launch a War on Gaza

Unit for Political Studies

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On 10 May, Israel launched its fourth war on the Gaza Strip, already suffocating under a siege in place since 2007. This paper looks at the decision-making process for the Israeli attack, the role of the military establishment in it, the reasons Netanyahu took this decision and the responses of Israeli political parties and forces.

The Israeli Decision-Making Process

The Basic Law of the Israeli government states that it is the only body authorized to decide whether to go to war, or to carry out large-scale military operations that may lead to a war. The “Basic Law of Government,” which was amended in 2018, gives the government the right to authorize a committee of ministers to make the decision to go to war. Since 2018, the Israeli government has authorized the State Security Cabinet to make the decision for war.⁽¹⁾ The State Security Cabinet consists of the prime minister, the ministers of defense, foreign affairs, finance, internal security, and justice, and other ministers appointed by the prime minister, provided that the number of the Security Cabinet does not exceed half the number of ministers in the government, as well as the attorney general. The current State Security Cabinet consists of 12 ministers, and six observers, half of whom are affiliated with the Likud party and its allies and the other half are affiliated with the Blue and White alliance and its allies.⁽²⁾ In addition to the members, the leaders of the military and security establishment, the Chief of Staff, navy, air and ground forces commanders, front commanders, the head of the military operations room, the head of military intelligence (AMAN), the head of internal (security) intelligence, the head of the Foreign Intelligence (Mossad) and the head of the National Security Agency participate in cabinet meetings that discuss war issues. The number of participants in the political and security cabinet meeting in times of war is about 35. After making decisions about the war, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Security, and the Chief of Staff follow the path set out by the Chief of Staff to achieve the goals set by the political and security cabinet.

Meanwhile, the prime minister enjoys wide ranging powers and responsibility, leading the government, presiding over its parliamentary sessions, setting its agenda, and retaining the right to dismiss any minister. With the prime minister's resignation, the government dissolves. He appoints the heads of the Shin Bet and the Mossad and he presides over the political and security cabinet, determining when to meet and what to discuss. The National Security Agency, which provides him with analyses, recommendations and options for national security issues, is under his direct responsibility.

¹ The Basic Law of Government was amended on 30/4/2018. This amendment also granted the prime minister and the security minister the power to declare war on their own under special circumstances. However, in the wake of widespread protests in Israel, a new amendment to the Basic Law of Government was made on 17/7/2018 revoking the authority of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Security alone to make the war decision, and so the authority to go to war remained in hand of the security cabinet. See: Mahmoud Muhareb, “The Decision-Making Process for War in Israel: The Conflict of Powers, Roles and Powers,” Case Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 11/6/2018, accessed on 24/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3uofeBj>. For the Basic Law of Government, see the Knesset website, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/Activity/Legislation/Documents/yesod6.pdf>

² - The members of the security cabinet are: Benjamin Netanyahu, Benny Gantz, Amir Ohana, Gabi Ashkenazi, Yisrael Katz, Avi Nissenkorn, Yuli Edelstein, Michael Biton, Aryeh Deri, Amir Peretz, Orit Farkash-Hacohen, Alon Schuster, Yoaz Hendel and Yoav Galant, who alternates with Miri Regev (when one is a member the other becomes an observer).



The Basic Law of the Israeli Army states that the army is the army of the state, subject to the authority of the government, that the minister of security is appointed by the government as minister of the army, and that the Chief of Staff is the highest commanding official within the army apparatus. The position of Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces does not exist, and the Chief of Staff of the Army is subject to the government authority or the political and security cabinet collectively, effectively giving the government the status of Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces collectively. This means that the Chief of Staff can reject an order from the Minister of Security or the Prime Minister, or both, to carry out a major military operation or a qualitative operation, or to wage war, if the decision is not taken in the State Security cabinet. The extent of the security minister's influence, specifically in the war decision-making process depends on several variables, including his experience in national security affairs, and the extent of his political power within the government. He is not an army commander, and he does not have the right to direct orders. The Chief of Staff plays an important, and in some cases decisive, role in the decision-making process related to war, whether in the decision process or in the planning and cessation. The military establishment under the leadership of the Chief of Staff is still the primary institution that interprets the strategic reality through the security apparatus, assessing the situation and the various proposals of the security cabinet. The Chief of Staff also plays an important role in the agenda of the formal and informal meetings and consultations that are held with the prime minister and the minister of security.

Preparations for War on Gaza

In recent years, Israel has attached great importance to the process of uncovering and disrupting tunnels in the Gaza Strip. In 2017, it began building a wall of reinforced concrete several metres deep in the ground along its border with the Gaza Strip, extending 65 kilometres, and equipped it with warning systems, with construction completed in 2019. In 2018, Israel erected a sea wall along its border with Gaza strip. In recent years, it has developed advanced technology to detect tunnels, especially those that reach the border with Israel.⁽³⁾

In addition, over the last decade, the Israeli army has prioritised developing its cyber intelligence, especially in the asymmetric war between Israel and the resistance factions.⁽⁴⁾ In 2009, the Israeli army established Unit 8200, its cyber spy agency, the development of which was greatly accelerated under Aviv Kochavi's leadership from 2010 - 2014. Since assuming the position of Chief of Staff at the beginning of 2019, Kochavi has strengthened the role of Unit 8200 in collecting information for the "target bank" for bombing the Gaza Strip in the event of a war, such as tunnels, resistance infrastructure and the homes of its leaders and cadres, in addition to its work in collecting information during battles, and increasing coordination with the Shin Bet security service, in order to provide aircraft with information on targets during battles.

3 Amos Harel, "Destroying Tunnels in the South: The Israeli Army is Gradually Eliminating Hamas's Strategic Asset," Haaretz, 10/12/2017 (Hebrew).

4 Aviv Kochavi and Eran Ortal "Change and Transformation – On Military Flexibility in an Emerging Reality," Bein Haktavim, Volume 2 (July 2014), pp. 9-57, accessed on 24/5/2014, at: <https://bit.ly/3fJOzt6> (Hebrew).



Netanyahu's Motives for Waging War on Gaza

Rockets fired by Hamas towards Jerusalem, in support of Al-Aqsa and the people of Sheikh Jarrah, came as a great surprise to the Israeli army, as the prevailing assumption in the Israeli security services was that Hamas and the other resistance factions in Gaza would not initiate an exchange of missiles with Israel for a cause that is not directly related to the siege imposed upon the strip. Although the rockets fired by Hamas towards Jerusalem did not cause significant damage, and Israel could have absorbed them or responded proportionally, Netanyahu seized the opportunity to launch a war on the Gaza Strip for purely political ends. The war hands him an important pressure card on the right-wing parties in the camp opposing him to thwart their efforts to form an alternative government.

The war has also contributed to an increase of racist hate crimes committed against Arabs within the Green Line, which reached a new peak. In the three days prior to the war on the Gaza Strip, Netanyahu openly inflamed racist sentiments towards Palestinians by allowing extremist right-wing Jews to demonstrate in Jerusalem, encouraging them to attack Arabs in Jerusalem, and allowing Israeli police to storm the Al-Aqsa Mosque. In this atmosphere, Netanyahu's political interest in waging the war coincided with the increase in anti-Arab sentiment and racist practices in Israeli society, as well as with the desire of the Israeli military leadership to inflict great damage on the infrastructure of the resistance factions in Gaza without paying a large price. Accordingly, the State Security Cabinet identified the objectives of the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip as:

1. To strike a blow to the resistance's combat capabilities, especially missiles.
2. To prevent the resistance from being able to rebuild its military capabilities.
3. To restore Israeli deterrence tactics impeding the resistance in Gaza.⁽⁵⁾

If Hamas' goal in firing rockets at Jerusalem is to expand its resistance efforts to include issues that are not limited to defending Gaza and tie itself to Jerusalem, then the Israeli army seek to deter this expansion at any cost.

Israeli Political Responses

The Israeli parties, whether in the government coalition or in the camp opposed to Netanyahu, were unanimous in their support of the aggression on Gaza. A racist, anti-Arab atmosphere prevailed in Israeli society in the lead up to the war, and the Israeli media were openly inciting attacks on Arabs inside the Green Line, calling on the Israeli police to suppress their movements, and justifying right-wing Jewish fascist movements and parties' activity. In this atmosphere, Naftali Bennett — who sought on the eve of the war to form an alternative government in cooperation with Yair Lapid — announced, on the third day of the Gaza invasion that forming an alternative government was no longer a possibility, and that he renewed his contacts with the Likud party to establish a broad right-wing coalition government.⁽⁶⁾

⁵ Ron Ben-Yishai, "This time the army knows what it wants to achieve," Ynet, 11/5/2021, accessed on 24/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2T9DCcJ> (in Hebrew).

⁶ Michael Hauser Tov, "Bennett: The government of change has fallen out of favor; Lapid is wrong, I'll keep turning every stone", Haaretz, 13/5/2021, accessed on 24/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2TcDOrQ> (Hebrew)



Reactions to the security cabinet's acceptance of the ceasefire in Gaza varied according to political party. While the government coalition parties supported the ceasefire, the opposition parties criticized the Netanyahu government for accepting it, despite demonstrating keen support for the Israeli military aggression against Gaza. Although Lapid supported the ceasefire, claiming that the Israeli army had succeeded in achieving its goals, he strongly criticized the Netanyahu government, which he said had failed "in all areas," such as fortifying homes, the media battle won by Hamas, and in returning prisoners and the bodies of soldiers. He claimed the government had failed to deliver a devastating blow to Hamas, because it "preferred to preserve the authority of Hamas in order to weaken the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah."⁽⁷⁾

Avigdor Lieberman, head of Yisrael Beiteinu, and Gideon Sa'ar, head of New Hope, also criticized the ceasefire. Sa'ar declared that the ceasefire "severely harms Israeli deterrence" towards Hamas and the Palestinian factions in Gaza and does not restrict Hamas from consolidating its strength and militarisation. He stressed that this agreement is a political failure for the Netanyahu government, and that Israel will pay the price for that in the future.⁽⁸⁾ While the far-right bloc called for the war to continue, Netanyahu sought to demonstrate that the ceasefire is not unconditional by continuing the repression in Jerusalem and al-Aqsa in particular, in addition to launching a systematic punitive campaign targeting Arab activists who led or called for the demonstrations inside the Green Line.

Conclusion

Israel fought the war on the Gaza Strip with the same strategy it always uses. Its strategy was mainly based on the superiority of its air force, which it used with an unprecedented intensity and destructive force against targets, most of them civilian, located in the heart of cities and camps in the Gaza Strip. Israel failed, however, to prevent the resistance from firing rockets into the Israeli interior, failing also to deter the resistance or break its will. Although Israel did not accept conditions for the ceasefire, it also failed to impose any conditions on the resistance, or to stop Palestinian demonstrations and protests in the West Bank and within the Green Line during the war on Gaza.

The Palestinian achievement in the recent popular uprising has been documented here. Added to this is the change in the equation in Gaza regarding Israeli-Arab international coordination seeking to contain the resistance factions by intensifying international and Arab joint action (by the countries that have pursued normalization) in the Gaza Strip by exploiting Hamas's desire to politically invest the abilities it demonstrated in battle.

⁷ Moran Azoulay, "Lapid: The Army Succeeded and the Government Failed," Ynet, 20/5/2021, accessed on 24/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3vhHdDV> (in Hebrew).

⁸ Michal Hauser Tov [Et Al], "Sa'ar on the ceasefire decision: an embarrassing political failure that we will pay for in the future," Haaretz, 20/5/2021, accessed on 24/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/34fCkiw> (Hebrew).