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Al-Aqsa Flood Offensive: Israeli Strategic Failures in Gaza

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Last Saturday, on 7 October, Hamas launched a surprise offensive on military targets surrounding the Gaza strip. The resistance movement managed to occupy several large military bases and observation posts along the Gaza border. Hamas affiliated Commando units also took control of about 20 Israeli settlements. The operation, according to the most recent Israeli data, has resulted in more than 1,200 Israeli deaths and 3,000 casualties, including many senior army officers, with more than 130 Israelis taken hostage by Hamas and other factions.

Background of the Hamas Operation

The Al-Aqsa Flood took place in the context of the most right-wing government in Israeli history, which includes illegal settlers, and has been steadily escalating violence against Palestinian civilians in the occupied West Bank. According to the UN, 2023 was the deadliest year in the occupied territories since it began counting in 2006, with 227 Palestinians killed between January and February 2023. The current Israeli administration is engaged in an ongoing process of land grabs and Judaization, facilitating repeated settler incursions of the Al-Aqsa Mosque under military and security service protection.

In recent weeks, the Israeli government had mobilized about thirty battalions in the West Bank to deter any Palestinian reaction to settler activity, preparing to storm Palestinian refugee camps, towns, and cities as they resist the occupation forces and settlers. Meanwhile in Gaza, Israel continues to impose its 17-year blockade, denying Palestinian prisoners of rights and subjecting them to inhumane treatment, while refusing to conduct a prisoner exchange agreement. Israel takes advantage of the weakness of the Arab position and the willingness of many Arab countries to pursue normalization, regardless of Palestinian rights, far removed from the land-for-peace principle.

A Chain of Israeli Failures

The Al-Aqsa Flood operation is of huge strategic importance given its impact on the reality Israel has sought to establish in the Gaza Strip since the Occupation's unilateral withdrawal from in 2005. This sudden offensive revealed the breakdown of Israeli strategy in Gaza, in addition to revealing the abject failure of the various components of the military and security system. Israel subsequently incurred unprecedented human losses, with twice the number of Israeli deaths that occurred in the 1967 war, the majority of whom were killed on the first day of the operation. The security and military failures of 7 October go far beyond those Israeli made in the October War of 1973 (often called the Yom Kippur war), which are considered to have been due to negligence.

Whatever the outcome of the war on Gaza, this will have major repercussions within the state apparatus and within Israeli society. Not only will the events fuel controversy over who bears responsibility for this unprecedented failure, but it will shake the Israeli public's confidence in the ability of the military and security system to protect them. The Military Intelligence Directorate (Aman) and the Israeli Security Agency (Shin Bet) failed to anticipate or even obtain any intelligence about the operation.



Furthermore, in a country that has built its global reputation based on boasting of its security might and its espionage capacity in terms of both technology and manpower, that the attack came from Gaza, which is under 24-hour physical and virtual surveillance, only added to its humiliation.

The second major failure is represented in the wall that Israel built around Gaza. Since its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, Israel built a reinforced concrete wall of about 65 kilometres around Gaza, 7 metres deep, and 7 metres high. The wall is equipped with state-of-the-art sensors and monitored by watchtowers along the perimeter. The Israelis had comfortably assumed it would be enough to prevent Palestinian fighters from penetrating the occupied land, but they were able to cross through it in large numbers and reach more than 20 locations.

The third failure was the Israeli army's inability to secure its military base located near the northern border of the Gaza Strip, and the numerous military points and watchtowers extending along the border, in addition to its failure to protect more than 20 settlements located around Gaza's perimeter. Hamas military units were able to seize the base and overpower the Israeli forces stationed there.

It seems that this sudden offensive, the bold performance, organizational capabilities, and military experience of the Palestinian fighters paralyzed the Israeli military and political leadership. The Israeli army has long bragged of its readiness to face any challenge head on and to mobilize to confront any attack within hours, but it failed not only to protect its military bases, but also to intervene quickly to restore control of its military sites and settlements. Palestinian fighters maintained a presence for no less than two days, while settlers who were hiding in parts of it were crying out for help.

The fourth failure was to secure the defence of a music festival hosting several thousand Israeli and foreign partygoers. The event was held in an open field mere kilometres from the Gaza border, near a military base, and had required the organizers to acquire security permits. Moreover, the operation stunned the Israeli military establishment, leaving it unable to make decisions and respond to the security and military situation. The confusion extended to other state institutions that were frozen by the shock of the attack and thus slow to respond. Emergency services were late to attend to the dead and wounded, and the families of the dead, wounded and missing were left without answers as late as several days after the start of the operation.

The Israeli Retaliation and Calculations

Once informed of the scale of the military operation carried out by Hamas, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced, after consultations with military commanders and members of the security cabinet, that Israel was now in a state of war, and called for an end to Israeli societal division. The Minister of Security summoned more than 300,000 reserve forces in preparation for waging war on Gaza and the mobilization of forces on the northern front in anticipation border clashes with Lebanon and to deter Hezbollah from engaging in the war. On the same day, the Israeli government convened the political and security cabinet, consisting of 11 ministers, delegating to them the decision to launch a major



military operation. The political-security cabinet is expected to determine its military objectives and inform the Knesset therein in the coming days.

Given the blow to Israeli confidence in its government and army, demands have emerged for the formation of a national unity government, which only grew louder as the scale of the Israeli losses became clear. Desire is growing to heal rifts and overcome differences that have afflicted Israeli society in the past year, with recognition of the need to include experienced leaders in the decision-making circle, especially military personnel, such as Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, who have previously served as Chief of Staff of the Army. Indeed, on 11 October, Netanyahu announced the agreement to form a “national emergency government” with opposition leader Gantz, whose party has 14 members in the Knesset. A war cabinet was also formed that included Netanyahu, Gantz, and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, supervised by former Chief of Staff Eisenkot and Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer. Gideon Sa’ar also joined the government, as one of three opposition ministers with positions.

The new cabinet will face challenges, foremost of which is defining the precise goal of the war. The near consensus is that unlike previous wars launched on Gaza, this time, the Israeli army should aim to end Hamas’ rule. However, this requires the occupation of Gaza, at least in part. Because Israel will not be able to resolve the war from the air, no matter how many facilities and buildings it destroys, and no matter how many massacres it commits. If Israel goes ahead with a ground invasion, it will entail heavy casualties in an urban war with Hamas, which is adept at this kind of warfare. In addition, the Israeli infantry are not prepared enough to fight a ground war. There is a big difference between what they do in the West Bank, where they play a policing role facing groups that are not militarily trained and rely on old weapons, and what they may face in Gaza. The military units affiliated with Hamas and other factions are experienced in urban combat and have access to more sophisticated weapons than those available to Palestinians in the West Bank. It seems that Israel has replaced the development of its ground forces in recent years with investment in the air force, cyber, and intelligence technologies. Therefore, it is likely to delay a large-scale ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, even as it amasses troops on its borders in huge numbers.

Accordingly, there have been repeated calls in recent days from prominent former military commanders, such as Amos Yadlin, former head of military intelligence, and Israel Ziv, former commander of the Gaza Division, to use the Israeli Air Force for as long as possible to strike Hamas infrastructure. This campaign would destroy the neighbourhoods that allegedly host Hamas, targeting its leaders and members without exception, in preparation for a ground attack without necessarily aiming to occupy the entire Strip.

Israel wants to see large Palestinian losses in Gaza and is actively seeking to commit further massacres. This may change the tone of the conflict for the major global powers that are currently displaying strong support for Israel. Through the intense aerial bombardment campaign, it appears to be trying to displace the population and to turn them against a leadership that is, according to Israel, responsible for the blockade, invasions, and disasters the Gazans have suffered, so that the people welcome an alternative leadership.



If the war ends without ending Hamas's rule of Gaza, no matter how heavy the losses, the Israeli leadership will add another catastrophic failure to its current catalogue. The survival of Hamas in government will be a step backwards in that regard. There is a fear in Israel that the war on Gaza, which is likely to be difficult and long, will lead to expanded confrontations with Lebanon, where tension with Hezbollah is increasing. This could force Israel to engage in a confrontation on two or more fronts, with major losses and destruction to Israeli infrastructure as a result.

The Israeli leadership assumes that Hezbollah will not intervene as it is preoccupied with defending its own project in Lebanon, mainly the Iranian nuclear venture, and wants to deter Israel from attacking it. But it also believes that Hezbollah will not prevent Palestinian factions present in Lebanon from carrying out limited military operations across the border. Israel also worries that any miscalculation in its estimations or even in the reactions between the two parties could lead to a comprehensive confrontation that they do not want. Therefore, Israel will keep its forces on the northern front on alert to deter Hezbollah, and to respond to the operations carried out by some Palestinian groups in southern Lebanon.

Finally, the fate of Israeli civilian and military captives held hostage by Hamas represents an important knot in the calculations of the military operation that Israel intends to carry out in Gaza. It is estimated that Hamas is keeping at least 130 prisoners, the largest number ever to fall into the hands of the Palestinian resistance in its history. Israeli public opinion attaches utmost importance to their fate, which weakens the Israeli government's mandate to take action against Gaza. nevertheless, the Israeli government moved towards restoring its prestige and its status, even if that meant sacrificing the hostages, once it realized it would not be able to bring them back without concluding a deal with Hamas, which would require the release of all Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons – a deal it is unwilling to make, for now at least.

Conclusion

The Al-Aqsa Flood offensive destroyed the myth of Israel's security, military and intelligence supremacy, and exposed the fragility of the fortifications it had built to protect itself and isolate it from the besieged Palestinian Other. There is a basic Israeli assumption that it is possible to continue occupying Palestinian land without paying the price and that it can force the Palestinian people to accept this reality. Israel has time and time again failed to recognize that its barbaric actions and systematic ethnic cleansing will not subjugate the Palestinians of Gaza, the West Bank, or anywhere else, nor break their will. The Palestinians will continue to struggle to overthrow the occupation, whether or not Israel succeeds in ending Hamas' rule in Gaza, which now seems more unlikely than ever.