Israel's Strategic Border Challenge – The Growth of the Tunnel Threat under the Cover of Rockets

By Eran Ortal

Gaza is a small, overpopulated and poor Palestinian territory, transferred to the control of the Palestinian Authority as part of the Oslo Agreements in 1994. The political dead-end between Israel and the Palestinians gave birth to the Israeli strategy of a complete and one-sided disengagement from Gaza, completed in the summer of 2005. This article, written from a military perspective, will argue that the lack of well-suited military concepts and capabilities made the Israeli government's political strategy unsustainable. It does so by examining the development of the tunnel threat from Gaza to Israel.

Israeli residents in the border region and the Israel Defence Force (IDF) have been facing the challenge of cross-border tunnels in the Gaza Strip since the 1980s. But it was in the 1990s, and even more so in the following decade, that the IDF began to perceive this threat as significant. However, only after the disengagement from the Gaza Strip was completed, particularly after the 2006 attack during which Corporal Gilad Shalit was captured, and after Operation Cast Lead (an extensive ground manoeuvre into the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009), were the tunnels recognized as a major threat to Israel's ability to defend its borders.

In an internal study carried out at the IDF's Dado Centre for Interdisciplinary Military Studies,[1] several paradigm leaps were identified in Hamas' use of tunnels. Through this research, Eran Ortal and Dvir Peleg identified the enemy's shift from primarily illegal smuggling to a military build-up in the 1990s. Late into that decade and at the beginning of the 2000s, Hamas reached two significant conclusions : the potential of explosive-laden tunnels as a method of attacking IDF outposts, and to counter Israel's advantage and superiority in technology, firepower and intelligence, by using underground transportation of entire combat arrays into Israeli territory.

The Gaza Strip disengagement opened the door for tunnelling to become a means of bypassing the border fence to reach Israeli territory. One of these tunnels was used for the 2006 Shalit kidnapping. The disengagement also led to the development of Hamas' offensive rocket array,[2] which is partly based in the underground domain. A significant step was taken in 2007 ; after winning the Palestinian parliamentary elections and then violently taking control of the Gaza Strip, Hamas turned tunnelling into a "national" strategic effort.

Another paradigm shift, which in hindsight had a decisive role, came during another ground operation into the Gaza Strip, Operation Protective Edge in 2014. During

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[1] Ortal & Peleg, 2016.

[2] Which, even then, was partially based on the first underground element – launch pits.

this conflict it was apparent that Israel had underestimated the offensive threat posed by the tunnels. Even though the attack tunnels had served Hamas well before this period, they had nonetheless worked hard to advance their capabilities. It was then that Hamas created a designated military unit, the *Nukhba* Force, whose goal was to transfer the fight into Israeli territory through a series of special operations based on a complex array of cross-border tunnels.

This article will focus on an apparent revolution in the Hamas paradigm from 2012-2014. It argues that this development was made possible because of Israel's restraint in employing military force during this period. The Israeli restraint developed gradually prior to Operation Pillar of Defence in 2012, but had become glaringly apparent following it. Without diminishing the importance of Pillar of Defence – an eight-day conflict between Israel and Hamas –, the concept of attack tunnels had already existed. The Israeli restraint allowed Hamas to maintain its tunnelling project unhindered, while the IDF's efforts to discover the digging focused only on the Israeli side of the border. Thus, Israel's defensive activity did not serve as a critical constraint for Hamas' subterranean progress. In its most critical years, the attack tunnel project proceeded with almost no interruption.

The Israeli restraint policy in force employment during these years was not coincidental. It did not come about because of an error in decision-making or a specific failure in policy. It is in line with the "post-heroic" Israeli condition.[3] Israeli avoidance, then and now, to strike Hamas' developing offensive capabilities stems from a distinct Israeli strategy that seeks to reduce the enemy's influence on everyday life in Israel, even at the cost of exacerbating the military threat. This observation is not meant to be a criticism of a reasonable strategic policy. Indeed, all of Israel's eight million citizens are living within rocket range of some border, and a prosperous country cannot manage its daily life in a constant state of emergency. Israel's policy is cornered between the need to prevent the terrorist build-up on the one hand, and the need to maintain normality on the other. The worsening conflicts between Israel and terror organizations in Gaza are evidence that the restraint policy enables terrorist build-ups.

The practical implications of this conclusion could be immediate and hold great importance. The IDF is currently building its formidable subterranean obstacle designed to negate Hamas' ability to attack Israel through tunnels. But will this obstacle deeply change the one-sided relationship between offensive digging and fixed border defence ?

This article's main claim is that as long as the enemy maintains deterrent firepower against Israel, it will enjoy freedom of action, which includes the freedom to dig tunnels and strengthen itself militarily. This claim has two supporting arguments. First, the Iron Dome has not materially changed the balance of deterrence between Israel and its enemies. Second, any concept of border defence that does not actively disrupt tunnelling suffers from an inherent weakness.

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[3] Ben-Shalom, 2018.

Hamas' and Hezbollah's Disruption Strategy

Much has been written on the nature of asymmetric warfare between a strong modern military and a weak adversary. Some of these studies discuss the methods adopted by the weaker side to offset the advantages of the stronger actor. Avoiding armoured combat offsets the advantages of a conventional military. Beyond preventing the armoured force from taking advantage of its strengths, anti-tank ambushes conducted by the weaker side also exact a heavy price. Of course, these types of limitations are also valid for other tactical examples – the decision by the weaker side not to build a traditional air force and navy, and at the same time the full exploitation of anti-platforms capabilities like anti-aircraft missiles, anti-ship missiles in a coastal region, etc., are cases in point.[4]

Discovery of a Hamas attack tunnel in the area surrounding the Gaza Strip
(Jack Guez/Pool via AP).

Asymmetric warfare covers most relationships between a subversive force and a conventional military on the tactical and operational levels. However, the relationship Israel and Hamas have developed over the years has facilitated the development of an especially disruptive strategic equilibrium.

Since the 1990s, three critical elements have defined the Israeli strategy regarding Gaza and Lebanon. The same is true for the West Bank, but less consistently so. The strategic trend is clear, and includes specific operational lines of effort. Israel seeks to geographically separate itself from the hostile population, if possible, under the auspices of an agreement recognized by the international community.

The withdrawal from Lebanon (2000), the disengagement from the Gaza Strip (2005) and the construction of the separation fence along the West Bank (2002-2017) all present unique aspects. Yet the common thread between these developments is the Israeli

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[4] Milstein, 2009, p.44.

desire to avoid combat and friction with the terror organizations on the other side as much as possible. The two lines of operational effort completing this strategy are the ground obstacle on the one hand, and the intelligence and stand-off fire approach on the other. Israel left Lebanon in 2000, received UN recognition for its international borders, built a new ground obstacle along the border and boldly declared its policy. "*If one hair on the head of one of our soldiers is harmed, Lebanese soil will burn*", promised Prime Minister Ehud Barak following the withdrawal from Lebanon.[5]

In the West Bank, construction of the security fence began shortly after Operation Defensive Shield (2002), but the circumstances across the Green Line did not allow for the total withdrawal of military forces.

The Gaza Strip, on the other hand, appeared to be very similar to Lebanon. In 2005, Israel carried out the disengagement plan based on the exact same idea : avoiding military and political friction with the Gaza Strip by physical disengagement – building an obstacle and employing IDF fires to deter the threat behind it.[6]

The removal of Israeli presence was intended to pull the rug out from under Hezbollah's and Hamas' legitimacy claims for acts of "resistance", which had expanded into shelling Israeli communities inside the Gaza Strip and in Israel itself. Reality proved otherwise. Hezbollah continued to attack Israel from 2000 to 2006, the peak of which was the kidnapping attack in July 2006. Hamas, which violently took control of the Gaza Strip less than two years after Israel's withdrawal, drastically increased its rocket attacks on neighbouring communities inside Israel. The organization also initiated its own kidnapping attack in June 2006, and turned the Gaza Strip into a fortified fire base aimed at the Israeli home front, just like Hezbollah's in south Lebanon.

This analysis is empirical. It is not intended to criticize the essence of Israeli strategy regarding separation and deterrence, which again, is legitimate. Nevertheless, this article does intend to point out a significant failure in the way in which the Israeli strategy was implemented. This flaw is expressed through the scope of immunity awarded to Israel's enemies, which allow them to learn IDF behaviour and prepare for war undisturbed. As time went by, Hamas' and Hezbollah's fire capabilities became formidable, up to the point where it seemed that Israel had no choice but to refrain from directly and overtly interfering militarily with their force design efforts.

Hamas' and Hezbollah's disruption strategy did not only evolve as a reaction to the Israeli military advantage, but also as a response to the Israeli strategy of separation that threatened to undermine the legitimacy of their struggle. Their answer was simple. On the political level, causes for continued struggle were identified, such as marginal border disputes like the Sheba'a Farms on the Lebanon border. In the Gazan case, the claim is that Israel's control over most of Gaza's borders constitutes a "continued occupation".

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[5] The quote is taken from "Managing the Conflict is Like Consulting a Terminal Patient – an Interview with Uri Sagi", *Haaretz*, December 18, 2014.

[6] Atila Shumpelby, "Document : This is the Disengagement Plan", *Ynet*, April 15, 2004.

If Israel's strategic goal was a complete termination of the violent conflict between the sides, two ideas developed by Hamas were meant to undermine these efforts. The first was turning its high-trajectory missiles into a strategic threat. The second was the conceptual development of raids into Israel as an underlying logic meant to cripple Israeli attempts to deprive the violent conflict of oxygen via separation of forces. This is also what Hezbollah tried to achieve in the kidnapping incidents on the northern border, which led to the Second Lebanon War in July 2006. Parallel Hamas attempts reached their zenith in the Shalit kidnapping.[7]

It is important to understand that Hezbollah and Hamas' operational system of disruption was not designed around the high-trajectory fire and raids into Israel as two separate elements. Rather, their operational concept was designed as a system in which these two elements complement one another. The fire element was intended to be massive and sufficiently resilient in the face of Israeli attacks to exact a significant price from Israel if war broke out. In other words, deterrence. Under the umbrella of this deterrence, Hezbollah and Hamas were supposed to continue their resistance activities against the IDF by carrying out raids into Israel, across its international borders. The nature of Gaza's terrain dictated that tunnelling would be the main element of their offensive efforts. In sum, Hezbollah and Hamas simultaneously developed a strategy to counter Israel's strategy – disruption. If Israel was interested in legitimacy, they would find reasons for war; if Israel was interested in separation of forces, they would strike back in Israeli territory by overcoming the ground obstacle ; if Israel threatened them with its immense firepower, they would balance this threat with their own. They would maintain their fire arrays against Israeli attacks by redundancy, integration into civilian population and underground concealment facilities.[8]

High-Trajectory Fire Is What Enables the Tunnelling Project

There is a Gordian knot that intractably connects Hamas' ability to promote the tunnelling project and its other attack element – high-trajectory fire. I will first clarify why the idea of offensive tunnels as part of a war plan was actually developed in 2012-2014. I will then present two explanations and look into the reasons behind Israel's choice of policy during those years.

Up until Operation Pillar of Defence (November 2012), it appeared that the main attack capability developed by Hamas against Israel was based on a broad and complex rocket array constructed inside the Gaza Strip. The tunnelling element was not generally seen as a central component of Hamas' system. It was considered a complementary element whose main role was to support Hamas fire. The tunnel infrastructure that was widely used for smuggling from the Sinai slowly developed in the Gaza Strip as a way to

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[7] Erlich, 2007, p.11 ; Hirsch, 2009, p.210 ; Rappaport, 2013, p.96.

[8] Avi Issacharoff, "Gaza Prepares for War," *The Times of Israel,* January 26, 2016 ; Jeffrey White, "The Combat Performance of Hamas in the Gaza War of 2014", *The Washington Institute*, vol.7, issue 9, 2014, pp.9-13.

reinforce Hamas' ability to protect its fire arrays. It is important to emphasize that since the disengagement, the subject of cross-border tunnels has become a key issue in IDF discourse on border security. However, it was just one of a long list of threats along the border, demonstrated by the series of border incidents leading up to Operation Pillar of Defence. While one of the incidents included an explosive-laden tunnel detonated under Israeli territory, others included an explosion along the border fence (November 8) which began the downward spiral into war, and an anti-tank missile fired at IDF forces from within the Gaza Strip (November 10).[9]

It was between November 2012 and July 2014 that the underground domain in general, and tunnelling in particular, became the main effort in Hamas' operational concept. There is no arguing that the project of simultaneously digging several tunnels that penetrate into Israeli territory, and the staffing of these tunnels with a designated and specialized military force (*Nukhba*), made significant progress during these years. However, a closer look requires an explanation for these phenomena. What did Hamas understand in November 2012 about the tunnels' potential that it had failed to realize up to that point ? Did Operation Pillar of Defence dramatically accelerate Hamas' learning ? There are two separate and complementary answers to this question.

Explanation I: Tunnels as a Replacement for High-Trajectory Rockets

This explanation, the more popular of the two, is that attack tunnels are one of the lessons learned by Hamas following Pillar of Defence. According to this perspective, Hamas realized that the Iron Dome could protect the Israeli home front on a broad scale. This led to the understanding that it required additional capabilities to enable it to bring the combat to Israeli soil. Under critical examination, this explanation is certainly justified, but struggles to stand by itself. Had Hamas failed to notice anything during the development of the Iron Dome, from 2006 onwards ? Did it not understand the essence of this capability when it first appeared in 2011?

Moreover, Hamas never gave up on the continued improvement and construction of missile arrays, as proven over the summer of 2014 during Operation Protective Edge. The development of improved fire capabilities was carried out under Hamas' understanding that it must outsmart the IDF 's new defence capabilities. For example, ranges were extended (which made it possible to hit unprotected areas), large salvos were launched (intended to push the Iron Dome to its limits) and an array of mortars and short-range fires was established to strike areas adjacent to the borders that are less protected by Israel's missile defence system. Hamas did not build capabilities to replace the rocket array – it built additional capabilities. The first explanation is therefore insufficient.

Explanation II: "The Freedom to Dig"

This explanation is more related to circumstantial changes than to Hamas' learning capabilities. Between the winter of 2012 and the summer of 2014, Hamas enjoyed

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[9] Zeev Ziton & Elior Levy, "Four Soldiers Wounded from Anti-Tank Missile Fired From Gaza Strip", *Ynet*, 10.11.12 ; Ahikam Moshe David, "The Chief of the General Staff's Diversion Tactics : How Gantz Prepared for Pillar of Defense", *NRG*, November 16, 2012.

complete freedom to advance its tunnelling infrastructure, organize its designated tunnel force and excavate more than 30 cross-border attack tunnels. If one were to look at the IDF operations during 2005-2012, one would find a long list of ground and air raids against Hamas tunnels. To be more precise, between 2007 and 2009 the IDF carried out 78 cross-border operations, at least six of which were ground raids aimed at cross-border digging sites of tunnels into Israel (the rest were operations against tunnels on the Egyptian border). In 2009, IDF raids into the Gaza Strip began to decrease, while the number of precision aerial attacks carried out by the IAF against infrastructure and tunnelling targets began to gradually increase. 15 such attacks took place in 2010, 25 in 2011, and 31 strikes were conducted against tunnelling targets until the beginning of Operation Pillar of Defence in November 2012 – the highest number of attacks ever.

Another sharp change in Israeli policy regarded targeted killings of Hamas leaders. In fact, this most common IDF course of action was brought to an almost complete halt. Between 2006 and November 2012, Israeli media reported no less than eight IDF targeted killings of terrorists in the Gaza Strip.[10] On the other hand, between Pillar of Defence and Protective Edge, only two operations of this kind were reported, and only one of them was directed against Hamas, Israel's main enemy in the Gaza Strip.

A salvo of rockets launched from the Gaza Strip – under the auspices of rockets, Hamas created immunity for tunneling (Flickr collection).

What can be learned from these numbers ? First, tunnelling efforts, especially those reaching Israeli territory, were already substantial and ongoing from 2009-2012. Second,

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[10] See for example : Barak Ravid & Amir Bochbut, "IDF Kills Jamal Abu Samhadana", *NRG*, June 9, 2006 ; Amir Buchbot, "The IDF Admits: the Air Force Killed a Senior Member of the Islamic Army", *NRG*, November 3, 2010 ; Elior Levy & Hannan Greenberg, "Israel's Response: a Senior Member of the Resistance Committee Was Killed", *Ynet*, August 19, 2011 ; "The IDF Attacks Team That Planned to Kidnap Israelis to the Gaza Strip ; Hamas : The Enemy Will Bear the Results", *Haaretz*, April 2, 2011.

Israel was obviously aware of these efforts[11] and took measures to disrupt them, as previously mentioned.[12] Finally, despite the three years that had passed between Operation Cast Lead and Operation Pillar of Defence, the threat of tunnels had not become a dominant aspect of the IDF campaign. The tunnels would only evolve and become an imminent threat during Operation Protective Edge, which would take place a year and eight months later. The main variable between the period before Pillar of Defence and the 20 months until Protective Edge was the immunity Hamas enjoyed. No disruptive steps were taken by the IDF during those months, and no targeted killings were conducted.

To summarize this point, Hamas' freedom of action – the freedom to dig – is at-least an equally important explanation for the appearance of attack tunnels during Operation Protective Edge.

As for the second question, why did Israel drastically change its policy regarding the Gaza Strip ? What moved Israel to suspend its disruptive actions against the tunnels, even though it was aware of their existence ? The Southern Command and other officials who were aware of the intelligence reports at the time warned of the severe ramifications posed by the tunnelling project long before Operation Protective Edge. How did these warnings affect Israel's actual policies ?

Ostensibly, it would seem that the answer is in the Pillar of Defence understandings. Even though they were never made official, media reports of understandings reached in Cairo that served as the basis for the ceasefire reached in November 2012 claimed that Israel agreed to expand the Palestinian fishing zone in the Mediterranean Sea, cease its initiated operations along the Gaza Strip's security perimeter (a 300-meter wide strip inside Gaza within which the IDF operated to neutralize threats), and stop its targeted killings in Gaza.[13]

However, this answer is insufficient. Throughout this period Israel had plenty of reasons to withdraw from these understandings if it so desired. Starting in December 2012, mortar fire and rockets from the Gaza Strip again became the daily routine of Israeli border towns. In March and April 2013, the shooting from Gaza became even more severe. Already in October 2013, escalation and tactical friction broke out along the border fence – an escalation that included buried IEDs against IDF forces, sabotage of the border fence and rocket fire into Israel. During that same month, IDF forces uncovered a large and sophisticated attack tunnel near Kibbutz Ein Hashlosha, of a kind never seen before in Israeli territory. A week later, a booby-trapped explosive tunnel was also discovered. IDF actions to destroy these tunnels caused further deterioration, resulting in a small round of

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[11] "Mickey Edelstein, then Commander of the Gaza Division, identified the developing threat in 2013. The author was struck by the calibre of the threat and the lack of Israel's capability to respond, and thus its ability to protect its citizens": Maj.Gen. (Res.) Turjeman Sami (commander of IDF Southern Command), "The Road to Protective Edge : Israel-Hamas Confrontation in Gaza" – Policy Notes for the Trump Administration Near East Policy (2018, PN47), p.9.

[12] ISA, "Hamas Actions of Empowerment since Pillar of Defense", July 8, 2014. Available online at : https://www.shabak.gov.il/publications/Pages/study/Skira090714.aspx.

[13] Eiland, 2012, pp.12-13.

escalation during which several IDF soldiers were wounded and several Hamas fighters were killed. In March-April 2014, following Islamic Jihad provocations, another significant round of violence began, during which more than 80 rockets and mortars were shot into Israel and another terror tunnel leading into Israel was discovered.[14]

These events presented Israel with the opportunity to legitimately withdraw from the Pillar of Defence understandings, if it had only wanted to. Israel could have easily returned to executing offensive operations in the Gaza Strip and disrupting Hamas' tunnelling project and stockpiling of rockets. It is important to emphasize that these two efforts did not escape the attention of the Israeli intelligence, as proven by the discovery of tunnels along the border as well as through various statements made by IDF intelligence officials. For example, in June 2014 the Head of the Israeli J2 Research Division, Brig.Gen. Itai Brun, proclaimed that "*the number of rockets in the hands of terror organizations in the Gaza Strip has doubled since Pillar of Defense*".[15] If so, why did Israel refrain from taking action ?

The answer is clear. The Pillar of Defence understandings were reached in order to bring the combat to an end. During the operation, the Iron Dome was used in large-scale operational situations for the first time, but at the same time, an impressive expansion of Hamas' and other terror organizations' range of fire was witnessed. This was the first time sirens were heard in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem since the Yom Kippur War (1973). For eight days, schools within a 40 km radius of the Gaza Strip were closed – an area home to hundreds of thousands of Israelis. In other words, even after Iron Dome had made its appearance, Israel still found it difficult to withstand continued and significant disruption of daily life on the home front.

Based on this clear priority, it can now be understood why Israel did not renounce the understandings of Pillar of Defence, even after the many rounds of escalation between November 2012 and July 2014. Despite the ongoing development of Israeli defensive capabilities, especially the accelerated procurement of Iron Dome batteries, and despite the clear and present threat posed by the Gaza Strip, Israel's decision-makers preferred to avoid any policy that would mean returning much of the country to a reality of sirens and disrupted daily routines. In other words, the war of arms between the developers of Israel's rocket defence systems and Hamas' rocket array was given first priority, at the expense of the competition between the tunnel-diggers and the IDF raids to disrupt them.

The bottom line is that the Iron Dome did not essentially change the strategic situation. The more fire capabilities developed in the Gaza Strip, the more the terror organizations were able to hold the daily lives of Israelis hostage and restrain Israel's retaliatory operations against it. Israel's active defence during that time, as important as it was, still did not allow Israel to initiate a change in the status quo. Hamas managed to deter

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[14] ISA ,"Summary of High-Trajectory Shooting from the Gaza Strip into Israel from 2005 until Today", July 15, 2014 : https://www.shabak.gov.il/publications/Pages/study/Skira160714.aspx.
[15] "Situation Picture – The Threat of Rockets from the Gaza Strip on Israel", Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre, July 8, 2014.

Israel by means of its improved fire capabilities. Thus, during the period of time leading up to the summer of 2014**,** Hamas was able to maintain its massive tunnelling project and create designated raid units unimpeded.

Why wasn't the substantial operational achievement of Iron Dome translated into a strategic achievement? The answer to this question is related to several variables. First, just like all other operational systems, the Iron Dome is not perfect. The enemy is learning it and developing its own methods to challenge it, while Israeli decision-makers recognize that Israel is not hermetically protected. Second, the enormous cost of deploying and operating the Iron Dome batteries around Israel substantially hinders Israel's ability in an extended cycle of violence. The third and apparently most important variable is that as long as rockets are intercepted over Israel and not over the Gaza Strip, the Israeli home front must continue to suffer through sirens, hunker down in its safe rooms and bomb shelters and have its daily routine interrupted. This means that even with Iron Dome's perfect success in intercepting incoming rockets, the daily lives of Israelis continues to be held hostage by the terror organizations in the Gaza Strip.

The development of the underground infiltration threat had a detrimental effect on the Israeli citizenry. Nevertheless, as severe as it was, it was a future threat yet to be realized. Rocket fire, on the other hand, was an immediate and sure response by Hamas to any possible Israeli attempt to disrupt its hostile activities in Gaza, including tunnelling into Israel. Israel's will to disrupt a potential threat to a minority of its citizens within the immediate vicinity of the border remained low, in light of the immediate threat of large-scale rocket fire. Thus, while the residents on the border experience a continued state of war, the majority of the Israeli civilian population can continue with their daily routines.[16] This strategic calculus decreases the desire to undertake a large-scale ground operation. The tunnelling project, considered by the Israeli public as a huge surprise in the summer of 2014, was not made possible because the enemy suddenly formulated it near the end of 2012, but because of Israel's own policy of restraint. The most important explanation behind this policy is the deterrent effect of the rocket array, despite Iron Dome's significant defensive capabilities. Deterred by Hamas' rocket capabilities in the air, Israel essentially granted the movement the freedom to dig under the ground.

What Has Changed Since?

Throughout the years, Israel has invested much effort in developing technologies to discover cross-border tunnels. Technological projects, engineering efforts, excavation, drilling along the border and intelligence efforts have been an integral part of the ongoing conflict on the Gaza border since before the 2005 disengagement. In 2016 Israel decided to establish an underground obstacle along the border, equipped with sophisticated sensors against tunnels. Will the obstacle along the Gaza Strip, dozens of meters deep and six meters high,[17] be sufficient to neutralize the underground component in Hamas' offensive array against Israel?

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[16] Ben-Atar, 2018.

[17] Nahum Barnea, "The Tunnel Solution : A Cement Wall Above and Below Ground", *Ynet*, June 6, 2016.

The question that needs to be asked is whether the decision to build the obstacle marks a change in Israeli policy. The obstacle currently being built on the Gaza border is the third border project Israel has embarked on since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1993. In the 1990s, Israel built its first border obstacle around the Gaza Strip. In 2005, as part of the disengagement, Israel again invested significant resources in making the obstacle more sophisticated and in building outposts and observation points around the Gaza Strip. The obstacle currently being constructed is Israel's third over the past three decades, and the largest one yet.

If we recall Israel's basic strategy regarding borders – *total separation and removal of friction* –, it appears that the current obstacle is an inherent part of this concept. It is an addition to two other components of border protection : deterrence and missile defence.

Deterrence – this component is mainly based on Israel's intelligence and fire superiority. Some identify this concept with the informal post-heroic concept.[18] History shows that Israeli operations over recent decades were mostly based on stand-off fire.[19] Ground manoeuvre was minimal if at all, and took place only in later stages of the campaign, after the option of stand-off fire has been exhausted. In these operations, even if ground attacks into enemy territory occur, they are not intended to achieve decisive victory. Rather, they are meant to maintain military pressure as part of the "renewal of deterrence" concept (exercised in the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead), or to obtain a limited concrete military achievement (such as the removal of the tunnel threat in 2014). Over the years, the IDF's choice to use deterrence operations as its main operational method has been heavily criticized.[20]

Missile Defence – following the Second Lebanon War, the Iron Dome development efforts were substantially increased. When the anti-missile system made its inaugural appearance in 2011, it was one of a kind. The Iron Dome showed impressive results in intercepting rockets ; when eight Iron Dome batteries were deployed during Operation Protective Edge,[22] the component that had been missing to protect the Israeli home front against the rocket threat had been completed.[23] This was a mixed blessing, however. The appearance of the Iron Dome and the implementation of the Israeli strategy's military aspects initiated the development of the most serious threat posed so far from the Gaza Strip (see above).

These three operational elements of Israeli strategy regarding the threat on the southern border have been with us for some time. If so, why do we believe that a new defensive obstacle – sophisticated though it might be – will fundamentally change the ever-expanding threat from the Gaza Strip ? The conclusion could be that despite the

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[18] Ben-Shalom, 2018.

[19] Brun, 2008, pp.420-421.

[20] Yadai & Ortal, 2013.

[22] Yoav Ziton, "90% Success Rate for Iron Dome, Ten Mortars Intercepted Over the Gaza Strip", *Ynet*, August 13, 2017.

[23] "In wars characterized by standoff fires, an important advantage can be achieved not only from offensive capabilities but also from the ability to neutralize the effectiveness of the adversary's attack", Turjeman, p.9.

enormous investment in the new obstacle and those preceding it, fundamentally not enough has changed. Israel is still strategically seeking complete geographical separation to extend the periods of quiet for as long as possible, and to entirely separate periods of peace and of war. This strategy, which aspires to bring the friction between the sides to a minimum, leaves the enemy free to plan, arm and learn Israel's newest defence capabilities. An enemy that engages Israeli forces along the border and that is freely able to study and learn the IDF methods will eventually find a way to circumvent them. Understanding that its lines of engagement will eventually be breached has taught the IDF to enhance and sophisticate its methods and technologies every few decades. Even so, Israel finds its most advanced capabilities being overcome again and again. Every round of conflict is usually longer and more violent than the one that preceded it, and leads towards greater suffering for the residents of the border region.[24] Is it possible that in retrospect we will discover that the current obstacle being constructed around the Gaza Strip is nothing more than a new "line of engagement" that will eventually be breached ?

Is There Potential for Something Else?

It is important to understand the character and scale of the problem. Digging a tunnel into Israeli territory is actually a kind of tactical advance or infiltration meant to bring the enemy's main force to its destination (into Israel's vital areas) with minimum delay and attrition. The tactical advance can be identified by a commander searching for the point of minimum friction with opposing defending forces. A capable commander leading the advance will occasionally assess its enemy's defensive array and observation points, and will modify his efforts accordingly. Tactical advance, like most things, is a continuous learning process.

A defender – strong and sophisticated though he may be – whose defensive actions are exposed and routine, who does not force the enemy to deal with constraints and surprises and does not resort to disruptive actions, counter-attacks and pre-emptive attacks, will eventually be flanked and penetrated. This is the lesson learned from the 32 tunnels dug into Israeli territory between November 2012 and July 2014. This simple doctrinal insight, based on centuries of war, will be hard to disprove.

Tunnelling, a quiet tactical advance into Israel, should not be understood as standing alone. It is given a quiet but significant cover by Hamas' advanced rocket capabilities. The Iron Dome did not nullify this cover. As long as Hamas can disrupt the lives of millions of Israelis, Israel will continue to choose non-friction over the reduction of the tunnel threat by means of war. This Israeli strategy, however, is not predestined. Israel seeks separation and reduced friction as long as it perceives that its enemies have veto power over the normalcy of its citizens' lives. In other cases, such as the Syrian sector in recent years, Israel takes action through creativity and flexibility, overtly and covertly, to prevent serious threats from developing across the border.

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[24] Ben-Atar, 2018.

So what does the IDF need to do in order to retrieve its freedom of action in the Gaza Strip? "From Iron Dome to Glass Ceiling", a *Dado Centre Journal* article by IDF Air Defence Major Shlomit Rudnitzky, suggests a possible answer.[25] In the article, Rudnitzky develops the idea of Ascent Phase Interception (API) systems as a capability that holds the potential to stop the rockets over enemy territory before alarms sound in Israel. Developing an efficient system capable of intercepting rockets over enemy territory may sound like another technical solution. But after reviewing the strategic situation at length, the argument can be made for a different approach. Employment of API systems may prevent most of the rockets from disrupting everyday Israeli life on the home front. In addition, an efficient counter-fire system capable of locating and accurately striking launching points in Gaza within seconds, can serve as a suppressive element to large-scale salvos and short-range effective mortar and AT fire. Employing such systems around Gaza has the potential to systematically hinder the effectiveness of Hamas' deterrence.

The point is that sometimes the right military capabilities can be influential on the strategic level, when understood in the proper context. Currently, missile defence systems express our best interpretation of the technological opportunities regarding missile interception. An overhaul system of fire-suppression including API, rapid-strike and protection is a solution of an entirely different conceptual frame. The strategic framework of the Gaza-Israel relationship is defined by the threat of fire. Therefore, perhaps a completely new anti-fire system could be the necessary game changer.

Conclusion

Israeli strategy over the last two decades in general, and specifically regarding Gaza, suffers from significant internal contradictions. From a military standpoint, the IDF did not come up with operational concepts and capabilities that are coherent with its strategy, thus failing to back it up. Israel's strategy of disengagement and geographic separation from its enemies provided military immunity to Hamas. The terror organization has utilized this to undermine Israel's strategy in more ways than one. The frequent operations in the Gaza Strip prove that the strategy of separation, backed by deterrence, is too sensitive to Hamas' initiatives. In the face of the terror organizations' ability to disrupt everyday life in Israel, deterrence proved to be a double-edged sword, resulting in a massive tunnelling project into Israeli territory. Israel has established tremendous arrays of obstacles along its borders and made these systems more sophisticated over time. It would be incorrect to assume that the obstacle that is currently being built around the Gaza Strip will prove to be significantly more sustainable than those preceding it. Every obstacle needs to be controlled by the defender through observation and fire. In the case of the tunnelling challenge, control by observation and fire means that the IDF needs the ability to disrupt digging activities and prevent the establishment of enabling infrastructure ahead of time.

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[25] Rudnitzky, 2018.

The restriction that has constrained Israel's force employment policy in the Gaza Strip stems from the desire not to expose the Israeli home front to additional rounds of escalation. As long as we do not sever the direct relationship between Hamas' rockets and the threat posed to Israeli territory, by means of tunnelling or other border-crossing methods, we are destined to be bystanders observing Hamas' continuous military build-up.

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