



**CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES, NEW DELHI**

**TALK CUM DISCUSSION**

**ISRAEL'S MILITARY OPERATION IN GAZA**

**BY**

**LT COL TZVIPRAG, DEPUTY DEFENCE ATTACHÉ, ISRAEL**

**SEMINAR HALL, CLAWS**

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**REPORT**

## **Introduction**

The ongoing military offensive between Israel and Hamas at Gaza has been one of the deadliest killing over 1800 Palestinians and 68 Israelis. Operation Protective Edge was launched by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) on 08 July 2014 and was sparked after the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers. During the conflict, Israel conducted air operation targeting rockets launched by Hamas on Israel and led a ground invasion of Gaza to destroy Hamas's tunnel network which are used to infiltrate Israel and target its civilians.

The conflict has been controversial particularly due to the high rate of civilian casualties incurred amongst Palestinians, targeting of United Nations schools in Gaza which were used as shelters by those fleeing rockets, attack on Gaza's only power station and violations of ceasefire undertaken for providing humanitarian relief.

On 10 August, an Egyptian proposal for a 72-hour ceasefire was negotiated and agreed upon Israeli and Palestinian officials. The ceasefire will allow both sides to continue negotiations for a long-term solution to end the month-long fighting. Operation Protective Edge has not been declared over yet. The war on Gaza is still on.

The talk and discussion with Lt Col Tzvi Prag, Deputy Defence Attaché Israel, is focused on getting a firsthand account of events taking place on the ground during Israel's military operation in Gaza, understanding the current situation, the challenges faced by the IDF from the operational point of view.

## **Excerpts from Talk cum Discussion**

### **Background**

Israel is a small country about 500 km from north to south and with width varying from 70 km in the South to only 15 km from the West Bank to the Mediterranean Sea. Eight million people live in Israel and it's the only democracy in the West Asia region. Countries like Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, Turkey and Lebanon influence the region around Israel. For the last

three years, Israel is in the middle of the eye of the storm i.e. the Arab Spring, which is taking place all over the region like in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Syria.

In 1967, during the Six Day war Israel occupied Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt, Golan Heights in the north from Syria and West Bank from Jordan. In 1979, Israel withdrew from all the occupied places except Gaza strip.

From the early 90s Israel is negotiating with Fatah and Palestine Liberation Organisation and withdrew from parts of West Bank. In 2005, Israel withdrew from all over the Gaza strip.

Hamas is an extremist Sunni Islamic organisation which was founded in 1987 as an offshoot of the Egyptian Brotherhood. It is a part of complex matrix of Islamist organisations. Although they act locally in Gaza, due to the extensive networking of Islamist movements worldwide, Hamas is directly connected to the global Jihadist threat.

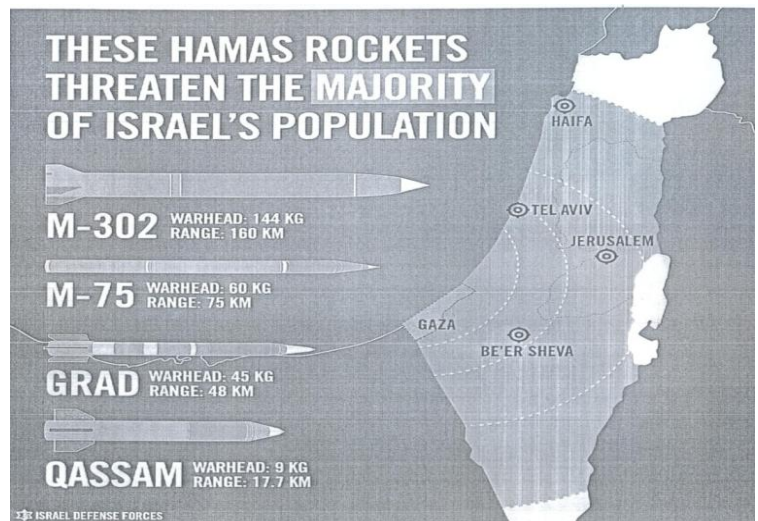
After two years Hamas took over the Gaza strip (\*Hamas was elected as a majority party in 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, in which it won 74 out of 132 total seats). Since 2007, the Gaza strip is controlled by terror organisation (\*Israel, the United States and the EU do not recognise Hamas as an elected body to govern the Palestinian Authority. Hamas is labelled as a terrorist organisation due to its associated military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades which launches attacks against Israeli civilians).

### **Why the Conflict Started in 2014?**

- The Arab world is dealing with its own set of problems and there is less attention to the Palestinians
- Hamas is in stress, mainly due to two reasons: tensions between Hamas and Palestinian Authority over control of Palestine and the other is funding, which is mainly from Qatar.
- After Abdel Fateh al Sisi became the President of Egypt, he declared Hamas as a terrorist organisation and closed borders from Gaza Strip to Egypt. Syria and Hezbollah have limited ability to support Hamas.
- Khaled Mashal is the leader of Hamas and lives outside Gaza strip. He is a Sunni and based in Damascus, Syria but due to the prevailing conflict there, between the Alawites and Sunni he moved out to Qatar. This also created tension between Hamas and Syria.
- There is a fight between Hamas and other groups like Islamic Jihad, Popular Resistance Committee, Al Aqsa Martyrs over the control in Gaza.
- One month before the conflict started, three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped by Hamas in West Bank, which is controlled by the Palestinian Authority. It took IDF two weeks to find them dead. During this search operation, Hamas fired rockets from Gaza Strip in Israel.
- Israeli Jewish extremist murdered an Arab boy in Jerusalem in revenge to the death of the teenagers.
- Between 14 June and 07 July before the start of Operation 'Protective Edge', 270 rockets were fired at Israel by Hamas from Gaza.
- During this time Israel did not have any intention to fight. It tried to restrain and de-escalate the situation but Hamas refused to keep the peace. But after the rockets firing increased, Operation 'Protective Edge' was launched.

## The Rockets used by Hamas

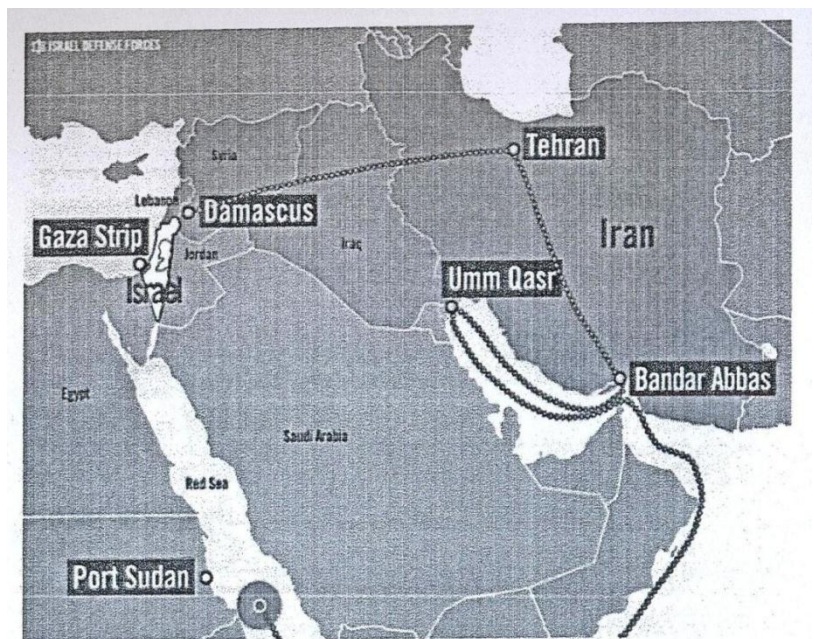
The rockets used by Hamas are M 302 (160 Km range) is supplied by Iran, M 75 (75 Km range) which is locally made in Gaza, GRAD (40Km range) and Qassam (17.7 Km range). The rocket attack virtually covers most part of Israel. As a protective measure each house in Israel has underground bunker. The reaction time for the civilian to move into these bunkers span from 10 to 19 seconds. To enable such drill an elaborate alarm system has been instituted.



## How the Weapons Reach Gaza ?

Israeli Navy on 5 March 2014 intercepted a ship in the red sea, which included 40 M-302 rockets, 181 Mortar shells and 400,000 rifles bullets. In the last four years, four such ships carrying ammunitions to be smuggled into Gaza were intercepted by the Israeli Navy.

- The weapons are smuggled mainly by the sea route from Iran: ports in Bandar Abbas, Umm Qasr to Tehran, and Damascus in Syria and sometimes even from Iraq.
- From Port Sudan, the arms are transported by ground in the trucks, they pass through deserts to reach Egypt from where inside the tunnels, and the weapons make way to Gaza strip.
- There are also routes from Syria, Libya and other countries of North Africa.
- Militants try to infiltrate Israel by sea as well.



## Execution of Military Operations

IDF operations has been launched in two phase. In the phase 1 Air operations were launched which commenced on 08 July 2014. It was directed against the rocket firing and manufacturing site and command and control infrastructure of Hamas. A week into the Air Operations, there was an Egyptian proposal for ceasefire, but Hamas did not accept it and continued firing. IDF then began ground operations from 17 July 2014. We are not fighting Palestinians but Hamas and other terror groups.

## Air Operation

Main challenges for Air Operations hinged on preventing civilian and collateral damage as Hamas has been firing rockets from the middle of urban areas (seven-eight meters from civilian buildings, less than 800 meters from UN buildings). Some of the challenges faced by IDF are:

- (a) Constant updating of intelligence on terrorists.
- (b) Prevent civilian casualties.
- (c) Minimise the collateral damage.
- (d) Careful target selection including legal vetting.
- (e) Directing precision guided munitions.
- (f) Careful mission execution by adopting measures such as dropping of **warning leaflets or sending of e-flets on mobile phones** in the area of impending operations along with the routes for evacuation or firing of warning shots.

## Ground Operations

The asymmetric urban warfare and underground war are the main challenges in the ground operations. Gaza is a flat territory with sandy soil, dunes and is densely populated. The main issue is its population which is more than 1.5 million who reside in the main areas like Jabaliya, Gaza city in the north and Dir El-Balah and Khan Yunus, Rafah in the southern part. There are large agricultural areas in the middle. Yet Hamas chooses to fire rockets and dig tunnels not in open areas but in built in areas.

The IDF's main goal is to bring safety to Israeli citizen by restoring peace in Gaza. The military operations are hinged on:

- (a) Minimising Surface to Surface Rockets (SSR) Fire from Gaza.
- (b) Neutralising and destroying offensive tunnel infrastructure.

There are two types of tunnels:

- (a) Strategic which are constructed to lead into Israeli territory.
- (b) Tactical tunnels which lead from point A to B within the conflict zone of Gaza strip is used for relocating terrorists and resupply.

Tunnels are 2-3 km long, 20-30 meters deep; they are usually constructed inside a building in the basement and surpass the Israeli Border fence to enter Israel territory. These tunnels have many shafts within Gaza area. The concrete tunnels are easy to dig in Gaza's sandy soil and can take as little as a day for the construction. Hamas uses these tunnels to supply and smuggle weapons and also to operate underground to infiltrate Israeli territories and kidnap, kill its civilians. To build one tunnel, it requires 350 trucks and 1800 tonnes of concrete.

IDF has a challenge to locate these concealed tunnels, enter inside to find its exact length and route. These tunnels have many shafts and branching and serve as booby traps. The tunnels have militants with IDs and explosives hiding inside, waiting to attack Israeli soldiers. IDF has to



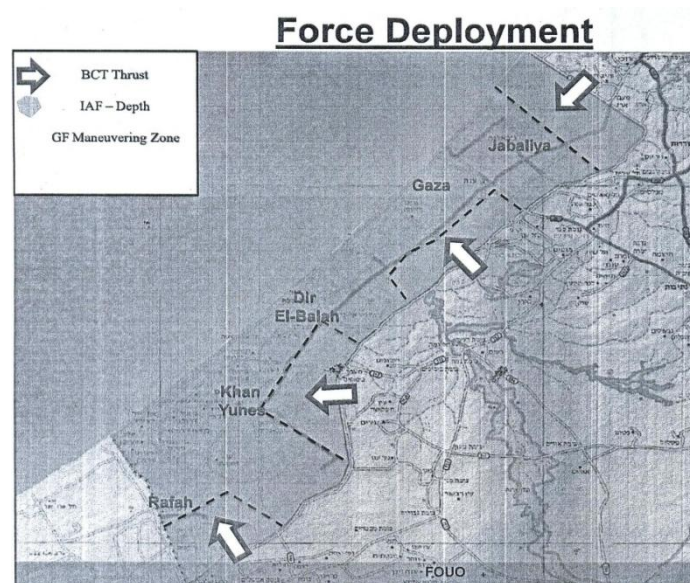
neutralise these tunnels and also destroy them, which becomes a tough engineering challenge, given its underground location in a populated urban space. In another one year, IDF should be able to procure technology to detect seismic underground movements and prevent any digging of tunnels.

**IDF has destroyed 32 strategic tunnels and secured 66 shafts during Operation Protective Edge.**

## **IDF ORBAT**

For ground operations IDF uses Brigade Combat teams (BCT) consisting of Mechanised Infantry, Armour, Engineers and Reconnaissance elements.

The BCT launched operations in Gaza in four thrusts: from the northern end in Jabaliya and Gaza city, Dir El-Balah in central and from Khan Yunus and Rafah in the southern end. The forces do not enter right inside the city, but are located on the outskirts around Gaza (\*Israel has unilaterally enforced 300 meters 'buffer zone' between Israel and the Gaza Strip. This acts as a military no-go area which prohibits access to Palestinians. It extends along the territory of entire Gaza strip adjacent to Israel, but is located inside Palestinian territory.)



## **Defence at Home Front**

Israel has evolved procedures and developed technology to prevent civilian casualty. Citizens are alerted through sirens in the specific zones on detection of rockets. Since 1991 it is compulsory to have bomb shelter inside every building in Israel. It has also developed Iron Dome Air Defence system to counter rocket/ missile attacks.

Iron Dome is able to detect missiles hitting open area. It intercepts rockets fired between 4 and 70 kms and is designed to perform in all weather conditions. The first Iron Dome was initially deployed on 27 March 2011 in southern Israel near Beersheba to combat fire from Gaza Strip. Military experts have noted that 13 Iron Domes will be needed to completely defend Israel from short range attacks.

Enemy artillery fire from within 70 km radius is detected by the Iron Dome through its long tracking radar. The missile track is identified, its path monitored and the data sent to control unit which analyses trajectory and estimates impact location: if the missile is headed in populated area, it is designed to be intercepted. The incoming targets are detonated mid-flight. According to the IDF, around 75 per cent to 90 per cent of interceptions are successful at an estimated cost of \$ 50,000 at a time.

**From the beginning of Operation Protective Edge, 3360 rockets were launched at Israel. On an average anywhere from 50-120 rockets are fired per day from Gaza.**

--60 per cent of the rockets are short range

--75 per cent rockets are not accurate

**Since Israel withdrew from Gaza strip in 2005, 13,000 rockets were fired at Israel**

### **Humanitarian and Civilian Assistance to Gaza**

The IDF provided humanitarian assistance to the population in Gaza by providing:

- (a) 6 Humanitarian Corridors.
- (b) IDF Field hospital for the Palestinians.
- (c) 100 tons of medical supplies from Israel.
- (d) 2000 trucks of food and humanitarian relief.
- (e) 5 million litre fuels from Israel (1 million litres from UN).
- (f) Evacuation from Gaza (including foreigners).

### **Economic Indicators between West Bank and Gaza**

*(\*In the year 2007, there was a split between the leadership between the Fatah led Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas, after Fatah lost the parliamentary elections of 2006 in Palestine Territories. To exert its control in Gaza, Hamas forces attacked Fatah supporters and in a short military conflict between June 10 and 15' 2007, Hamas established its full authority in Gaza strip. The Unity Government of Fatah and Hamas were dissolved and the conflict resulted in the division of the Palestinian territories into two entities, the West Bank governed by the Palestinian National Authority, and Gaza governed by Hamas.)*

Following the establishment of Prime Minister Salam Fayad's government in 2007, the West Bank witnessed rapid GDP growth, while Hamas's governance failed to improve the economic or social situations for the common Gazan. Both Palestine territories have also adopted different strategies to deal with the occupation by Israel.

West Bank and PA chooses the way of negotiation with Israel, while Hamas refuses to recognise the existence of Israel, launches terror attacks and continues to act as a proxy of Iran. The difference between the two groups, Fatah and PA in West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, can be gauged by the governance and economic indicators prevailing since 2007. The West Bank is doing economically better than Gaza on every indicator.

<b>Indicator</b>		<b>West Bank</b>	<b>Gaza</b>
Real GDP 2013		\$ 11,000 million	\$ 3000 million
Real GDP per capita 2013		\$ 4,200 thousand	\$ 1700 thousand
Unemployment		18 %	40 %
Average Daily Wage (1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter 2014)		\$ 26	\$ 18
Trade	Goods Crossings	7	1
	Average trucks per day	1,200	250
Palestinians entering Israel for work or trade		130,000	0
Population (as of mid 2014)		2.5 million	1.5 million

## The Way Forward

- Hamas is a terror organisation and holds significant abilities: Rockets, UAVs, Tunnels, Anti tank Missiles funded by states like Qatar and Iran. It is a part of the global Jihadist terror threat
- Hamas fires rockets against Israeli citizens from within the Gaza populated civilian areas and use the Palestinians as `human shield`
- The military operation is against Hamas and other terror groups inside Gaza and not against the Palestinian people
- IDF is sorry for any civilian loss of life. It takes and puts a lot of efforts to reduce the collateral damage and sees Hamas as responsible for the civilians' casualties
- The IDF will continue to ensuring the security of the state of Israel.

- **Despite the preventive measures, sophisticated technology and guided munitions used by IDF its military tactics have come under criticism for high civilian casualties in Gaza. Is there any need to bring a change in the military strategy to avoid civilian casualties?**
- Operation Protective Edge is not over yet (as of 12<sup>th</sup> August 2014) and only a ceasefire has been agreed upon. Israel is looking for **Regime Change, Demilitarisation of Gaza Strip and Rehabilitation of Gaza Strip**. If Israel succeeds in achieving both these objectives with the United Nations and the other members of the international community, then there is a good chance for peace.

**Note:** - \* Additional facts not part of presentation