

Multi-dimensional Invasion on Israel: Implications and Way Ahead

In what can easily be termed as one of the worst days, in military terms, in the history of Israel, on 07 Oct 2023, exactly fifty years after the Yom Kippur War, the Hamas attack stunned the world.

The multi-dimensional invasion took place at over twenty-two locations from the Gaza Strip including terrorists on para gliders targeting communities up to fifteen miles from the Gaza Strip border taking hostages back across a border that was supposed to be virtually impenetrable, with the most sophisticated electronic surveillance measures routinely patrolled and backed by quick reaction teams. It was undoubtedly a well-coordinated, sophisticated and complex operation which has shaken the ground beneath the feet of Israel in multiple ways.

This was undoubtedly a monumental crash of all systems. There is no doubt that the current political gridlock resulted in damaging Israel's security. It has to introspect and place national security above its internal political bickering. The impact on a country where its internal issues have been all consuming as far as its people and polity are concerned has resulted in their inability to prepare adequately against external challenges.[1]

War has been a perpetual concern in Israel, but it has been decades since Israelis have had to wonder whether this would be the day that their borders would be overrun and they would be subjected to acts of barbarism revealing humanity at its worst. Though the fog of war is thick, but it is already clear that the Hamas's attack came as a shocking surprise. From a military point of view, it is inexcusable.[2]

Dealing With the Gaza Strip

Home to about two million people, Gaza which is approximately 41 km long and 10 km wide, is an enclave bounded by the Mediterranean Sea, Israel and Egypt. Since the Hamas seized power in this Palestinian exclave in 2007, Israel has avoided large-scale, sustained ground operations there. In fact, in 2018, Israel's then Defense Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, had resigned in protest when Israel negotiated a truce with Hamas. At that time, he had warned that, "We are buying quiet for the short term at the price of serious damage to national security in the long term".[3]

Before the latest round of fighting, Israeli leaders could argue that airstrikes and economic pressure kept Hamas off-balance, unable to pose a major threat to Israel. That argument will now hold little weight. Israel could continue to rain down fire on the Gaza Strip, but that would do little to shake Hamas's hold on power. Entering Gaza which is an urban maze may seem inevitable but it has its own set of challenges and fighting house to house to clear the terrorists will not be easy.[4]

Operation Protective Edge in 2014 which lasted 51 days resulted in the deaths of over 60 Israeli soldiers, 6 Israeli civilians, and well over 2,000 Palestinians (mostly civilians), despite the fact that Israeli forces penetrated only a few miles into the Gaza Strip. It was the third major Gaza operation by the Israeli Defence Forces in seven years, and by far the most lethal and destructive. As per reports, thousands of Palestinians were wounded; over 18,000 of their homes were destroyed; some 470,000 were displaced; and large areas of Gaza were essentially razed.[5]

This time the outcomes point to greater severity but Hamas also has tunnels in much of the territory, and it could use these to orchestrate sudden attacks or take hostages. Collateral damage can swing public opinion hence a ground incursion in dense urban terrain poses a significant obstacle and operations will be painstakingly slow.

The attacks have aimed to draw attention to the fact that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has not been resolved and from the Palestinian perspective, their situation is getting worse.

Difficult Choices

The priority for Israel is to recapture the areas overrun by the Hamas and rescue their hostages. They will need to eliminate militants, prevent more infiltrators, and silence the rockets and mortars bombarding its population. Given the scale of Hamas's attacks and Israel's surprise, none of these tasks will be easy. Even if Israel succeeds, it faces difficult choices on what to do next to ensure that Hamas is weakened and that such an attack does not recur.

In the long run it faces greater challenges ranging from reestablishing the credibility of its security apparatus to include both the Israeli Armed Forces and its Intelligence Agencies Shin Bet and Mossad. The famed electronic means and technological superiority in gathering intelligence seems to have lost out on the basic human intelligence of sensing the sentiments as far as their willingness and ability to carry out such a savage attack is concerned.[\[6\]](#)

But the questions that needs to be answered is: can the Hamas be replaced in Gaza strip as far as administrating is concerned and will the Palestinian Authority under the President who is presently confined to the West Bank, be willing to step in and shoulder this responsibility or will the Palestinian Authority feel that their Palestinian nationalist base will be eroded by aligning with Israel and rendering such support? Can other power centres in West Asia such as Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia throw their weight behind ensuring some sort of lasting solution?

Need to Contain Conflict

The earlier wars were fought in a larger context described as Arab- Israeli Wars with conventional forces dominating. The 'Intifada' saw the Israeli troops in Lebanon though they finally had to withdraw but Lebanon continues to remain at the precipice bitterly divided with its economy in dire straits. Will the Hezbollah now risk retribution by opening up the northern front and directly supporting the Hamas?

The main issue of concern is being able to localise the conflict to the Gaza Strip. Israel will also seek to ensure that the West Bank remains relatively calm, especially if it mounts a ground incursion into Gaza. Previous Israeli military operations in the strip prompted large demonstrations in the West Bank. The West Bank is already in turmoil, with talk of a Third Intifada erupting. In both 2021 and 2022, the territory experienced high levels of violence, and 2023 is on track to be even worse, with nearly 200 Palestinians deaths this year.

The Hamas's success has shown the path to Palestinians and exposed a weakness in Israel. The inevitable Israeli response will lead a large number of Palestinian deaths, injuries and displacements which will inflame Palestinian sentiment, even though Hamas started the conflict.

The principal challenge for President Abbas of the Palestinian led authority is, how to insulate the West Bank from this bloody onslaught by the jihadis. Sucking the West Bank into the conflict will lead to more ordinary people suffering from the untold consequences of conflict.

The immediate concerns for the Israeli security establishment are almost certainly two-fold: to protect Israeli citizens under siege by Hamas terrorists who have infiltrated the country and to try to prevent Hezbollah from joining the conflict. They need to prevent expansion of the conflict.

Geo Political Fallout

The Arab world was coming to terms with Israel. Saudi Arabia was talking about normalising relations with Israel. The Abraham Accords are viewed as bringing stability in one of the most volatile regions. The US was pressing Israel to make concessions to the Palestinian Authority. Hence, this was an opportunity for Hamas and its backers to disrupt the whole process that was threatening them. There are analysts who say that while, "Hamas doesn't follow dictation from Iran, but they act in coordination, and they had a common interest in disrupting the progress that was underway and that was gaining a lot of support among Arab populations. The idea was to embarrass those Arab leaders who have made peace with Israel".^[7]

The Arab powers have also been pivoting towards China recently due to a perceived decline in the US military presence and willingness to use their capability which was reinforced by their chaotic pull-out from Afghanistan in Aug 2021. China is investing in areas such as infrastructure and helping countries with military hardware and technology. More so, their foreign policy tends to be friendlier to authoritarian regimes. Russia still remains relevant and has been the principal backer of the Syrians. A China-Iran-Russia axis supporting the Hamas can be divisive.

Conclusion

Israel may have been 'out thought' but it does not have the luxury of being 'out fought'. Facing an existential threat, it has developed as a hard power and, hence, it will respond with vengeance as it sends out a message to its enemies including the Hezbollah and its backers regarding their capability and ability to use force. This is their deterrence.

Israel's response may be disproportionate in a bid to divert attention away from their failure to gauge such an attack. But an uncalibrated retaliation also has its pitfalls. While they do hold the moral high ground this time, given the brutality of attacks including those on the attendees of a musical festival and the display of disturbing visuals which have the potential of driving a wedge in society. For a terrorist group there are no rules of war as they are not governed by any conventions. Hence, more performative the images, the greater is their visibility.

Resolving a centuries old issue is challenging but this escalation in violence will have far reaching regional and global implications. While the immediate priority is to counter the attack but, Israel will have to answer its citizens as to how, in the modern era, it has suffered a massive security setback. Finding the answer is essential to its future security.

From a military perspective there is no comparison between the power capabilities of Hamas and Israel. Mohamed Dief must be well aware of military wisdom of the Prussian Field Marshal Moltke the Elder which still rings true; "No plan survives contact". Due to its overwhelming superiority, the military outcome is hardly in doubt. But wars are not won or lost on military factors alone. The US learned this timeless lesson both in Iraq and in Afghanistan. To quote

General Petraeus in 2003, who in the opening weeks of the US invasion of Iraq famously asked a journalist, “Tell me how this ends”.

Endnotes

[1] Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh (Retd), Israel has been out thought but it can't afford to out fought, Financial Times, <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-israel-has-been-out-thought-but-it-cant-afford-to-out-fought-3273415/>

[2] Graeme Wood, A Historic Cataclysm in the Middle East, The Atlantic, 07 October 2003, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/war-israel-hamas-gaza-middle-east/675577/>

[3] Israel Defence Minister Lieberman resigns over Gaza ceasefire, BBC, 14 November 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46207094>

[4] Daniel Byman and Alexander Palmer, What the Hamas Attack Means for Israel, Foreign Affairs, 07 October 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/what-hamas-attack-means-israel-daniel-byman-alexander-palmer>

[5] Idib

[6] Mossad, Aman, Shin Bet: How Israel's intelligence agencies failed to prevent Hamas attack, Firstpost, 09 October, <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/mossad-aman-shin-bet-how-israels-intelligence-agencies-failed-to-prevent-hamas-attack-13224902.html>

[7] Martin Indyk, Why Hamas Attacked—and Why Israel Was Taken by Surprise, Foreign Affairs, 07 October 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/martin-indyk-why-hamas-attacked-and-why-israel-was-taken-surprise>

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