**“Offsetting the Offset” Strategy: Analyzing Israel’s Strategy towards Hamas during the May 2021 Crisis in the Gaza Strip**

**Netanel Flamer**

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“We inflicted maximum harm on Hamas, with a minimum of casualties in Israel…. At the outset of the operation I said that Hamas would absorb blows it could not imagine, and this is exactly what happened…. First, we stripped Hamas of its weapon of attack tunnels…. Second, we destroyed a substantial portion of Hamas’s ‘metro’ – its underground city in Gaza where they thought they could hide out and conduct their war…. We did all this with minimal harm to non-combatant civilians, with advance warning for civilians, in a manner that no other country or army in the world does.” (Remarks by Prime Minister Netanyahu upon the conclusion of Operation Guardian of the Walls, 21 May 2021)[[1]](#footnote-1)

A central aspect of any military conflict between two actors is the effort to offset the capabilities of the other side and prevent it from actualizing them. Sometimes this effort is at the basis of the actors’ strategy. The best-known example of such a strategy is probably the one adopted by the United States in the 1950s as part of its Offset Strategy, the third version of which was announced by American defense officials in 2014. This strategy seeks to avoid an asymmetric response to threats to the United States from enemies or rivals such as Russia and China, both because of the vast resources that developing such a response requires and in light of the argument that a democracy cannot become an armed state, investing all its resources in its military components. In the words of Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work, “‘Offset’ means that we will never try to match our opponents or our competitors tank for tank, plane for plane, person for person…. So what we do is we seek ways in which to offset our potential adversary’s advantages.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In asymmetric warfare, particularly when the weaker actor is a non-state actor, that weaker actor, being unable to compete on equal footing with the stronger actor, will adopt a strategy based on exploiting the weaknesses of the stronger actor so as to offset the latter’s ability to exert its power.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the words of Mao Tse-tung, renowned theorist of guerrilla warfare: “In guerrilla strategy, the enemy’s rear, flanks, and other vulnerable spots are his vital points, and there he must be harassed, attacked, dispersed, exhausted, and annihilated.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Throughout its existence, Hamas has operated precisely in this manner. It gradually developed a comprehensive strategy aimed at exploiting Israel’s weaknesses and thereby preventing it from deciding the battle on the basis of its being immeasurably stronger than Hamas. Since Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip (in the summer of 2005), there has been constant tension at some level between Israel and the factions in the Gaza Strip, and foremost among them Hamas. On a number of occasions this tension has escalated into intense rounds of hostilities – in December 2008, November 2012, and the summer of 2014. The fourth round of warfighting, which erupted in May 2021, differed from the preceding rounds. On this occasion Israel operated differently, having consolidated various approaches and capabilities into a strategy that translated into an operational plan, which it put into practice in the course of the crisis. The quote at the outset of this article, in which former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu summarizes the achievements of the military operation that Israel launched in May 2021 in the Gaza Strip, expresses the main points of the strategic approach that Israel put into action during this crisis.

According to the Strategic Interaction Thesis, every strategy has a number of counterstrategies, only one of which is ideal. Even in asymmetric warfare, the stronger actor’s selection of the right strategy vis-à-vis the weaker actor is the key to the former’s ability to prevail in spite of the weaker actor’s efforts to offset its advantage.[[5]](#footnote-5) This article aims to examine a model counterstrategy to an offset strategy adopted by an adversary, using as a case study Israel’s strategy vis-à-vis Hamas during the crisis of May 2021,[[6]](#footnote-6) which the article defines as “Offsetting the Offset Strategy” (OTOS).[[7]](#footnote-7) The article will describe Israel’s decision to employ an offset strategy in face of Hamas’s four-pronged effort to offset its advantages and exploit its weaknesses. Next it will analyze the characteristics and implications of this strategy in light of the selected case study, using it as a model to assess how stronger actors might cope with an offset strategy on the part of the weaker side in asymmetric warfare.

**Damage to Hamas’s Underground Network**

One of Israel’s major advantages over Hamas is intelligence. Thanks to its advanced technologies, sophisticated high-tech industry, and large, experienced intelligence agencies, Israel has a tremendous advantage over Hamas, which over the years has allowed it to uncover many of the organization’s secrets. Among its key capabilities in this regard are SIGINT – the ability to eavesdrop on tactical communications and cellular telephones and identify their location; GEOINT – advanced ground and air surveillance equipment; and HUMINT – the use of agents and collaborators within the Gaza Strip. In conjunction with its advanced and accurate attack capabilities, Israel inflicted significant damage on Hamas members’ assets.

One of the main ways Hamas sought to address Israel’s supremacy in this regard, after drawing from the lessons of Operation Protective Edge, was by developing an “underground city” – which came to be known as the “Gaza metro” – beneath residential houses in the Gaza Strip. After years of concerted effort and the investment of many resources, Hamas was able to establish an underground network spanning tens of kilometers that remained hidden from view. The network contained an array of branching tunnels that housed command centers, depots, and rocket launchers, among other features. The tunnel’s cost is estimated at $500,000 per kilometer, meaning that the entire network cost several tens of millions of dollars.[[8]](#footnote-8) Hamas’s investment in this network was not in vain. Israel could not conduct air surveillance of activities in the tunnels, nor could it eavesdrop on conversations or locate cellular telephones given the lack of reception and the organization’s extensive use of land lines. Moreover activities in the tunnels were far less exposed to civilians recruited by Israel for the purpose of information gathering.[[9]](#footnote-9)

At the same time, Hamas worked on developing attack tunnels into Israeli territory. The excavated tunnels began in the Gaza Strip, crossed the perimeter fence between the Strip and Israel, and exited into Israeli territory. Hamas had successfully operated such tunnels during Operation Protective Edge (summer of 2014), and Israel obliterated a significant portion of them in the second half of the operation. After 2014, however, Hamas continued trying to dig such tunnels so as to cross over to the Israeli side, surprise Israel’s security forces, and strike at civilian communities in what it regards as a high-value” action.

Israel opted to address the underground network in a manner that Hamas did not foresee. Beginning on the night between May 13 and 14, Israel systematically conducted underground attacks on the network every night, each time focusing on a different sector of the Gaza Strip, in order to render several tens of kilometers of tunnels unusable. The attack launched on the first night also included an ingenious ruse. During the 24 hours preceding the attack, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) deployed large numbers of forces along the northern border of the Gaza Strip. The winds of war, alongside an act of deception explained below, led to large-scale evacuation of the local population and drove many Hamas members into the underground network. At this point the signal was given: a massive and unprecedented artillery barrage delivered hundreds of bombs, leading to the collapse of a significant portion of the underground network in the area and striking at the Hamas operatives stationed in those facilities.

Moreover, during the years preceding the operation, Israel had created an underground barrier with advanced technologies along the border fence with the Gaza Strip, in order to prevent possible infiltration into Israel by Hamas members. After Operation Protective Edge, in line with the lessons learned on this matter in the State Comptroller’s report, and with the cooperation of actors relevant to the project, orderly construction of the barrier was begun.[[10]](#footnote-10) In June 2016 a final decision was reached about the appropriate contours of the barrier, which was to be allocated close to 3 billion New Israeli Shekels (NIS). The planned barrier would reach a depth of tens of meters underground and stand about six meters above ground, stretching more than 60 km along the border.[[11]](#footnote-11) Over the course of approximately three years, dozens of engineers and laborers worked day and night, bringing the project to its full completion in October 2020.[[12]](#footnote-12)

During the confrontation the barrier proved itself. At no time during the course of the entire operation was Hamas able to infiltrate Israeli territory through an underground tunnel, in contrast to several occasions in the past, such as the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit, a soldier, and high-quality actions during Operation Protective Edge. According to IDF data, during the operation dozens of raids were thwarted and attack tunnel routes blocked.[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus Hamas was denied one of its most effective and acclaimed axes for infiltrating Israeli territory. As Prime Minister Netanyahu summarized:

Hamas knew that if it tried to infiltrate our territory above ground, it would absorb lethal fire, and therefore it tried to build terrorist tunnels underground to infiltrate our territory…. They discovered that they were blocked, thanks to the steel wall we had built…. It is not just a wall; it is a smart wall, with sensors, with detection and warning capabilities. Every time they tried to approach, they were destroyed underground…. The vast resources and years of work that Hamas had invested in the attack tunnels went down the drain.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Offsetting the Rocket Threat to the Home Front**

In recent decades the civilian home front in the State of Israel has been recognized as a major vulnerability. In the memorable and infamous words of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, Israel is no more than a spider’s web, meaning that the Israeli home front has a particularly low resilience threshold and would not withstand long-term devastation because Israeli society is characteristically hedonistic, with a low breaking point and lack of fighting spirit.

To exploit this weakness and offset Israel’s power, terrorist organizations in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip began stockpiling rockets for the purpose of extensively targeting Israel’s home front. Hamas began launching rockets in 2001, and for the next decade Qassam rockets caused physical damage and made a psychological impact on cities and towns in southern Israel.[[15]](#footnote-15) Since then these capabilities have gradually improved along a number of dimensions. First, their range has steadily increased, to the point that by the eve of the May 2021 crisis, Hamas had rockets with ranges reaching hundreds of kilometers. Second, the stockpiles have grown to more than 10,000 rockets of various ranges as well as thousands of short-range mortar shells of a few kilometers’ range. Third, Hamas has developed the capability to oversee heavy barrages involving dozens of rockets launched simultaneously. Fourth, it has developed underground launch capabilities, thus reducing the exposure of rocket operators and enhancing their likelihood of survival.

To offset the threat, Israel has adopted a threefold approach. The first and central aspect of its approach is in the area of air defense, the crowning glory of which is the Iron Dome system. Since 2006 Israeli technological teams have been engaged in developing a rocket interception system. Despite strong criticism and assertions by experts that the system is unnecessary, overly expensive, and bound to be an effective, the prevailing decision was to continue its development, and it became operational in 2012. Since then it has continuously improved, as new operating units have been formed and its precision as well as its capability to handle large barrages have been enhanced.[[16]](#footnote-16) In practice, according to IDF data, a total of 4,360 rockets and mortar shells launched towards Israel were intercepted during the course of the operation: 3,400 of these had crossed into Israeli territory, 680 fell within the Gaza Strip, and 280 fell into the sea. The Iron Dome system successfully intercepted rockets targeted at populated areas in Israeli territory with an accuracy of 90%.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The second aspect of Israel’s approach involved working to improve its warning system, protection (shelters), and information for the home front. In June 2019 the new Home Front Command missile warning system was instituted. The main innovation of this system is its division of Israel into 1,700 alert zones, in contrast to the 255 that existed previously.[[18]](#footnote-18) This means that the sirens warning of rocket fire have become much more focused, making routine daily life more feasible for zones that do not need to be warned. Thus, for example, if a warning has been sounded in Tel Aviv, residents of adjacent towns such as Herzliya can go about their lives, with no need to seek shelter or disrupt their daily routines.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In parallel, Israel continued to enhance protection (by providing shelters) in the area surrounding Gaza. Throughout the 2010s, efforts to provide full protection for cities and towns within 7 km of the Gaza Strip were completed, and protection was enhanced for residents within 40 km (reducing the gaps relative to full protection standards). Although there remain significant gaps in the level of protection (including in the city of Ashkelon), evidently 80% of the residents within range of most of the rocket fire from Gaza have adequate protection.[[20]](#footnote-20) Notably, the remaining gap applies only to old apartments because since 1992 – as one of the lessons learned from the First Gulf War, which marked the first time missiles were launched into the Israeli territory – the law in Israel requires that every new apartment contain an in-home shelter, which provides the ideal protection.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The third aspect entails developing a sophisticated capability to locate and destroy launchers in real time. In recent years Israeli intelligence has been continuously transferring a significant portion of its intelligence work to be carried out by mechanized processes rather than people. For example, the Center for Information Processing and Analysis in the IDF’s SIGINT unit, known as Unit 8200, has been involved in advanced mechanization processes, including developing the capabilities to handle big data and extensive use of artificial intelligence. Consequently, the efficiency of production and processing at the Center has improved, making it possible to derive more intelligence more quickly.[[22]](#footnote-22) In March 2021 the Gaza Division inaugurated a new team, Hamaniyat HaDarom (“Sunflower of the South”), whose mandate is to facilitate more accurate and lethal intelligence gathering and research at the line of contact. The team includes soldiers from all the intelligence professions – wireless operators, decoders, and researchers, among others – so as to facilitate the production of real-time integrative intelligence that can be relayed immediately to operational units.[[23]](#footnote-23)

During the May 2021 crisis, Israel’s intelligence units acted to locate and thwart launchers, rockets, and operators involved in firing rockets into the Israeli territory, sometimes using preliminary intelligence and sometimes drawing on real-time intelligence. In all, according to its own estimates, the IDF was able to locate and strike a total of 800 rockets and launchers, mostly on the basis of preliminary intelligence.[[24]](#footnote-24) These included about 570 launch sites and 70 multi-barrel launchers.[[25]](#footnote-25) For example, on May 18 the IDF attacked a Hamas rocket launch pad in the northern Gaza Strip immediately after rockets had been launched at the city of Be’er Sheva from this position. Later that day it attacked a Hamas multi-barrel rocket launcher in Khan Yunis that was targeting the city of Ashdod.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Another focus of Israeli efforts in this area was the sabotaging of rockets in the Gaza Strip, so that at the moment of truth, when Hamas sought to launch them, it would fail. Accordingly, approximately one-fifth of the rockets fired at Israel, a total of about 700, failed to cross the perimeter fence as a result of such sabotage by Israeli intelligence actors. Reportedly, the Israeli Mossad sabotaged rockets that had reached the Gaza Strip from Iran.[[27]](#footnote-27) In another illustration of an intelligence operation aimed at undermining Hamas’s rocket capabilities, Israeli intelligence recruited a Gaza resident as an agent in 2016 and ran him as an operative until 2018. His assignments included reporting on the locations of Hamas rockets, and he was provided with equipment and instructions for sabotaging the organization’s rockets. It should be noted that in this case, Hamas learned of his role and turned him into a double agent, but the operation nevertheless serves to illustrate Israel’s efforts to sabotage Hamas’s rockets during those years.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In all, it appears that Israel’s efforts to offset Hamas’s rocket activities largely bore fruit. In relation to the thousands of rockets fired at Israel, only a very small proportion resulted in successful hits that caused damage to people or property, and this in turn gave Israel’s political leadership freedom of action in deciding the course of the operation. Notwithstanding the relative success in preventing damage, however, Hamas still managed to launch large numbers of rockets at Israel on a daily basis throughout the operation, without Israel being able to significantly neutralize its capability. In light of this, Israeli security officials have voiced criticism, arguing that intelligence on the rocket stockpiles of terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, and foremost among them Hamas, must be improved in advance of the next military campaign.[[29]](#footnote-29) Chief of Staff Kochavi, addressing this point, stated, “We are aware that alongside the many achievements, including the interception of more than 90% of Hamas fire, we must continue providing solutions to the challenge posed by rockets.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

**Thwarting Hamas’s Efforts to Attack and Abduct Soldiers**

Israel as a country is extremely sensitive not only to civilian casualties but also to the loss of life or abduction of soldiers by its enemies. Over the years of its confrontation with terrorist organizations, this fact has resulted in Israel agreeing to pay a disproportionate price for the return of prisoners, and even for the bodies of dead soldiers. Among the largest such exchanges were the 1985 Jibril deal, in which three IDF soldiers being held in Lebanon by Ahmed Jibril’s Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were released in exchange for 1,150 security prisoners; a 2004 deal in which Hezbollah released an Israeli civilian and three IDF soldiers’ bodies in exchange for 450 security prisoners; and a 2008 deal in which the bodies of two IDF soldiers held by Hezbollah were returned in exchange for a number of Hezbollah members and about 200 bodies of Palestinians.[[31]](#footnote-31)

In relation to Hamas, Israeli society’s sensitivity to harm to its soldiers is illustrated by the prisoner exchange involving the soldier Gilad Shalit, abducted by Hamas in June 2006. Then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, in a speech, addressed the Israeli sensitivity to loss and Hamas’s effort to exploit this for its own ends. According to Olmert, this sensitivity was “exploited by kidnapping our soldiers, negotiating for information regarding their condition, and the release of recorded statements which are dictated.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Although Olmert, during his tenure, refused to release hundreds of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for a single soldier, Prime Minister Netanyahu did agree to a deal in the context of which, in October 2011, Gilad Shalit was released by Hamas and transported to Israel, in exchange for Israel’s release of 1,024 Palestinian prisoners. The deal was preceded by a campaign of many years for the release of Gilad Shalit, which drew widespread popular support as well as the backing of Israel’s main media outlets.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Alongside its sensitivity to abductees and prisoners, Israel is also highly sensitive to casualties among its soldiers. They are often described as “all of our soldiers,” whose death affects the national morale. In the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, the Winograd Commission, tasked with investigating the events of the war, sharply highlighted this phenomenon:

With a great deal of pain and caution, we further note that the IDF conducted this war as one for whom fear of casualties among its soldiers was a core element of planning and operational considerations. With all due sensitivity for the lives of soldiers, and the need to make this one of the guiding considerations, it is difficult to accept the extraordinary influence this consideration had on the decisions of senior commanders (and political decision-makers).[[34]](#footnote-34)

Terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, and Hamas in particular, have identified this fact. Israel’s enemies have become quite attuned to the special sensitivity of the Israeli public and its political and security leadership in the face of such a scenario. Hence their repeated attempts to actualize it, as a powerful lever for striking at Israel and achieving strategic gains through just a single action on the one hand, and in order to acquire valuable assets for the purpose of dealing and bargaining with it on the other hand. A “successful” abduction also enhances local and regional status and recognition.[[35]](#footnote-35) Furthermore, it expresses Hamas’s deep commitment to Palestinian prisoners in Israel, a salient issue that preoccupies Palestinian public opinion.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In preparation for its next major confrontation with Israel, Hamas is also training for a scenario involving the abduction of soldiers, an action it frames as one of the most important tactics developed by the organization.[[37]](#footnote-37) An exercise carried out by Hamas’s military arm in March 2018 illustrates this point: a Hamas operative who infiltrated Israel in June 2020 revealed, in his interrogation, that in 2018 he was assigned to Hamas’s air defense system and equipped with shoulder-fired missiles intended to bring down helicopters for the purpose of attacking or abducting soldiers.[[38]](#footnote-38) In another large exercise, in December 2020, Hamas practiced a maneuver in which its fighters attacked and seized an IDF tank, abducting the soldiers in it.[[39]](#footnote-39) Hamas has carried out numerous trainings for such flagship actions, such as raiding an IDF post and abducting an IDF soldier.[[40]](#footnote-40) In the years before the May 2021 operation, Hamas tried to carry out abductions in Judea and Samaria. In 2020 a member of the cyber unit of Hamas’s military arm made contact with two young men from Beit Ummar, recruiting them to work for the organization and assigning them the task of planning strikes and gathering information towards this end. One of the plans involved abducting a civilian from a nearby Israeli community.[[41]](#footnote-41) In the course of the May 2021 operation a Hamas spokesman said that “any ground invasion anywhere in Gaza will be an opportunity to increase the number of casualties and prisoners we hold. We are prepared to teach the enemy harsh lessons.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

Another area in which Hamas has tried to offset the IDF’s advantage and inflict casualties is that of anti-tank weapons. Over the past decade, having drawn lessons from Operation Cast Lead, Hamas has been smuggling various types of anti-tank missiles, including the advanced Kornet missile, into the Gaza Strip. Some of these missiles arrived from Iran and Hezbollah for use by organizations in the Strip. Hamas made use of anti-tank missiles to attack military and civilian vehicles during the Pillar of Defense and Protective Edge operations, and later as well. In November 2018, for example, Hamas launched a Kornet missile at a bus transiting near the border. The bus had been full of soldiers just moments before the rocket fire, but they had disembarked. One soldier, who remained to guard the bus, was severely injured.[[43]](#footnote-43) Prior to the May 2021 operation, Hamas continued to provide anti-tank training for its members, using a simulator and operatives from the organization’s Nahba unit. In addition, it stationed anti-tank units and anti-tank missile launch pads along the perimeter fence, with the aim of locating and striking IDF as well as civilian vehicles.[[44]](#footnote-44)

During the May 2021 crisis Israel did everything in its power to prevent Hamas from achieving gains in this area. The first and most important measure was its persistence in refraining from the deployment of ground troops into the Gaza Strip and its adherence, to the extent possible, to air, sea, and cross-border land attacks. Towards this end, in the years prior to the operation, under the leadership of Chief of Staff Kochavi, Israel developed concepts and modes of operation aimed at significantly increasing the lethality of its firepower so as to achieve substantive gains even without a ground invasion.[[45]](#footnote-45) Although the IDF did station large forces in the Gaza Strip area during the operation, it did so with a view to deterrence and preparation for any scenario, rather than mobilization for action. As Prime Minister Netanyahu summarized it, “I can say that we did bold and innovative things, without being dragged into unnecessary adventures. Had it been necessary to conduct ground operations in Gaza, we would have done so. But I thought that this time, in light of the goal we had set, we could achieve better results in other, safer ways.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

To address the threat of anti-tank missiles striking IDF tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs), Israel developed the Trophy (*Me’il Ru’ach*, literally “Windbreaker”) system, an active protection system installed on the vehicles to identify and neutralize incoming firepower threats. The system, introduced into the IDF in 2009, achieved its first successful interception in 2011 along the Gaza Strip border. However, while it operated successfully and helped thwart attacks during Operation Protective Edge, the need to mobilize large numbers of vehicles meant that some of them lacked the protection of this system. By the time of the most recent operation all Merkava Mark IV tanks and Tiger APCs were equipped with the system, and the process of equipping Merkava Mark III tanks had begun.[[47]](#footnote-47)

The most significant addition in the years preceding the May 2021 crisis was the ability to identify and locate launch sites and to strike anti-tank squads immediately after the launch.[[48]](#footnote-48) This capability has existed for several years, but in early 2021 work was completed on an advanced detector that can immediately and with great accuracy identify the launch site and guide the crew in returning fire and destroying it.[[49]](#footnote-49) At the same time, special forces from the IDF’s Maglan unit were stationed around the Gaza Strip, camouflaged in the field for days and equipped with observation devices to locate, identify, and destroy Hamas anti-tank forces and strike at high-ranking personnel.[[50]](#footnote-50) In terms of defense, in recent years the area surrounding the Gaza Strip has seen the introduction of protective measures, such as rows of trees that provide concealment and protective walls aimed at preventing Hamas lookouts from observing vehicular traffic on the Israeli side and at reducing the organization’s field of vision. During the operation itself, all non-concealed roads within 5 km from the perimeter fence were closed.[[51]](#footnote-51)

In sum, it is safe to say that Israel has achieved maximal success in offsetting the threat of abductions and attacks against soldiers by Hamas. The non-entry of ground forces rendered much of Hamas’s preparatory work ineffective, and attempts to strike IDF forces across the border, for the most part, failed. During the entire operation there were only two successful anti-tank launches, both of which resulted from lack of full compliance with the policy and transit in areas visible to Hamas, resulting in the death of one IDF soldier. The remaining attempts by Hamas, however, were unsuccessful, and Israel managed to locate and strike many anti-tank squads.[[52]](#footnote-52)

**Reducing Hamas’s Opportunities to Delegitimize Israel in the International Arena**

One of Hamas’s effective means of offsetting the Israeli advantage is through assimilation into the civilian population, situating the organization’s command centers and offices, as well as munition depots and launch sites, amidst the civilian population. This practice entails a twofold offset: on the one hand, Israel, because it accepts moral and legal restrictions when facing the prospect of extensive harm to innocent people, will be reluctant to strike these Hamas assets; on the other hand, if Israel decides to strike them anyway, it will suffer a serious blow in the international arena, as for example occurred after Operation Cast Lead and the publication of the Goldstone Report criticizing Israel’s attacks in the Gaza Strip.[[53]](#footnote-53)

A reporter for the *France24* network provided a concrete illustration of such assimilation practices. In the midst of a live broadcast during Operation Protective Edge (2014), a rocket was launched towards Israel right behind him. The following morning he visited the launch site and discovered that the launcher was stationed in the midst of a civilian population, 50 m from a hotel, 100 m from a building flying the UN flag, and adjacent to many civilian homes.[[54]](#footnote-54) After the May 2021 crisis Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar stated that despite Hamas’s desire to reduce the phenomenon, which he claimed had been more widespread in previous crises, it had been unable to relocate all of its command centers and therefore some remained within the civilian population.[[55]](#footnote-55) During the operation Hamas issued instructions prohibiting civilians and reporters from photographing rockets being launched atop roofs of the homes, so as to create the impression that it was only launching rockets from open spaces and locations far from civilians.[[56]](#footnote-56) The instructions attest to the fact that it was launching from populated areas and seeking to conceal these launchers. Another example of Hamas using civilian cover for its activities emerges from a statement by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA), announcing that Israel’s attacks in the Strip exposed a tunnel beneath a school the Agency was operating in Gaza City.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Notably, there are those who argue that such practices do not always reflect Hamas’s policy, and that sometimes the constraints arising from Gaza’s population density necessitate military action within a civilian environment, as civilians have nowhere else to go.[[58]](#footnote-58) Moreover, there is a debate about the line dividing those involved in fighting and those not involved in cases of asymmetric warfare, in which fighters often tend to “disappear” by assimilating into civilian disguise.[[59]](#footnote-59) In any event, during the May 2021 crisis Israel had to deal with the challenge of striking at Hamas positions in the midst of civilian populations, and it took a number of measures to minimize harm to non-combatants.

Another way Israel offset Hamas’s activities in this area was by developing advanced intelligence capabilities to facilitate surgical strikes that would, to the extent possible, hit only those targets identified as involved in the fighting. In the years before the operation, Israel developed its intelligence capabilities in the field of targeting, including through extensive use of artificial intelligence (AI). Its air force makes use of the same highly accurate intelligence to select the most suitable weapon for an attack, with the aim of hitting its target while significantly minimizing collateral damage among non-combatants. During the May 2021 crisis Israel made extensive use of such intelligence to carry out strikes that were as “surgical” as possible.[[60]](#footnote-60) Even in attacking buildings, as discussed below, it would selectively choose a weapon to target a specific building without damaging adjacent buildings.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Another means of avoiding harm to innocents was the prevalent practice of “roof knocking.” In the 2000s Israeli security forces began using this technique, which includes firing a warning shot At an intended target in order to allow non-combatants to vacate the premises. The warning shot is supplemented by measures such as phone calls and notices to residents or building employees. During the May 2021 crisis Israel evacuated large numbers of multi-story buildings in this manner before destroying them. In one instance a recording was made of the conversation between Israeli security personnel and a guard who was asked to ensure the building’s evacuation prior to attack. The guard was informed of the timetable for the attack and told that warning shots would be fired before the final assault leading to the building’s destruction.[[62]](#footnote-62)

At the same time, there were instances in which Israel refrained from attacking high-value targets because of concerns about hitting non-combatants. The Head of the IDF Operations Directorate, Major General Aharon Haliva, provided firsthand testimony of such an incident in remarks delivered shortly after the crisis, upon the completion of his tenure. He described how, after launching five sophisticated and expensive missiles at a particular target in the Gaza Strip, Israeli forces received new intelligence indicating that the attack might result in non-combat casualties. It was therefore decided to halt the attack and absorb the loss of diverting valuable armaments towards the sea.[[63]](#footnote-63)

These measures were complemented by a public relations effort that included the disclosure of intelligence information, in order to explain the nature of targets attacked by Israel and maintain legitimacy for attacks in the Gaza Strip. A salient example involved the attack on the Al-Jalaa Building in Gaza City, which had housed the offices of media outlets such as the Al Jazeera network and AP news agency, among others. Even though the building had been evacuated prior to the attack, in line with Israel’s “roof knocking” policy, its action drew fierce condemnation as an assault on freedom of the press. In response, Israel provided a detailed explanation of the reasons for its attack. While the operation was still ongoing, Israel provided the Biden administration with information about the presence in the building of a technological unit of Hamas’s military intelligence that engaged in GPS disruption, among other measures.[[64]](#footnote-64) After the operation these facts were made public, alongside additional details about the presence in the building of a Hamas military intelligence facility with signal intelligence and electronic warfare capabilities aimed at disrupting the Iron Dome system, among other objectives. Israel also highlighted the concerted effort it had made to vacate all civilians from the building and its surroundings, and the need to bring the entire building down to ensure the complete destruction of Hamas’s assets therein.[[65]](#footnote-65) In addition, Israel’s ambassador to the UN, Gilad Erdan, personally met with AP’s director general to convey this information.[[66]](#footnote-66)

In summarizing the operation, senior Israeli officials, foremost among them the prime minister and defense minister, underscored the supreme importance the IDF placed on preventing any harm to non-combatants to the extent possible.[[67]](#footnote-67) This assertion was validated by a neutral party, UNRWA’s Gaza director, Matthias Schmale. In an interview immediately following the ceasefire, he was asked whether the declarations by senior IDF officials, claiming that the attacks during the operation had been extremely precise, were correct in his view, as someone charged with addressing the humanitarian situation in Gaza who had personally experienced the attacks in the Strip. He responded, “I also have the impression that there is a huge sophistication in the way that the Israeli military strikes struck over the last 11 days.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

Overall, it appears that Israel managed to maintain relatively low rates of non-combatant injuries or casualties. For example, an investigation into the names of casualties resulting from the first two days of fighting found that of the 74 deaths reported by Palestinian sources, 16 were killed in failed attempts by organizations in Gaza to launch rockets towards Israel. Of the remaining 58 casualties, at least 42 were known operatives in various organizations. Thus, more than two-thirds of the reported deaths were combatants.[[69]](#footnote-69) This relative success, alongside diplomatic efforts, helped prevent severe crises of the sort that occurred during previous operations, such as the return of an ambassador or severing of diplomatic ties, and relations with the “Abraham Accords” countries remained intact.[[70]](#footnote-70) Moreover, in contrast to the past, a number of European foreign ministers, including Germany’s, visited Israel during the operation to express solidarity.[[71]](#footnote-71)

**Analysis of the “Offsetting the Offset” Strategy**

As this article contends, the measures discussed above indicate that during the May 2021 crisis Israel implemented a strategy of “Offsetting the Offset.” The strategy is defined as one that is adopted by side A in a conflict in order to offset the offset efforts that side B has adopted to prevent side A from actualizing its power. OTOS reflects systemic planning and management of the state’s efforts to build and exert power in order to prevent, or at least minimize, the possibility of the enemy exploiting the state’s weaknesses to offset its advantages. Asymmetric warfare is characterized by the weaker party, which cannot compete as an equal with the stronger party, being at least able to exploit the weaknesses of the stronger party in order to offset the latter’s power and prevent it from actualizing its advantages. Accordingly, OTOS in asymmetric warfare is defined as a strategy adopted by the stronger party to a conflict in order to offset the offset efforts that the weaker party adopted for the purpose of preventing the stronger party from actualizing its power.

Drawing on the analysis of Israel’s strategy during the 2021 crisis, one may identify four key components that characterize OTOS: decision-making, analysis, formulation of an action plan, and military buildup. First of all, the state must make a decision because in implementing this strategy it is in effect relinquishing other alternatives, such as a different decision or avoidance of action. As discussed below, implementation of the strategy has significant implications at a number of levels and requires many resources, and therefore is no trivial matter: decision-makers at the highest level must make the decision because their commitment is necessary for operationalization.

Second, in-depth analysis of the confrontation with the enemy is necessary. A state that wishes to implement the “Offsetting the Offset” strategy must first analyze how the other side is planning and implementing its offset efforts. There are three stages to this analysis: First, the state adopting this approach must analyze how the enemy perceives this state’s strengths and weaknesses. Second, it must analyze how the enemy is formulating its plan of operation to exploit the state’s weaknesses so as to offset the latter’s ability to realize its power. Third, it must analyze the enemy’s necessary gains and objectives for each of the offset efforts it has adopted.

Accordingly, any country that adopts OTOS must formulate its own operational approach. In doing so it must choose the mode of operation that will be most effective in offsetting the enemy’s efforts. The process of selection should address each type of effort, thus making possible a holistic response that reflects the strategic approach. In this context it is necessary to abandon modes of operation that “play into” the enemy’s offset efforts, and instead to develop new modes of operation that will facilitate implementation of OTOS.

In light of the above, the fourth component of OTOS is the buildup of supportive power to facilitate implementation of the strategy and selected modes of operation.

The following table illustrates the four above-mentioned components.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Component** | **How it was reflected in Israeli strategy during the May 2021 crisis** | | | |
| **Decision-making** | Israel’s political leadership decided that in the next month of hostilities with Gaza its response would be strong and powerful, reestablishing deterrence while neutralizing the logic of engagement for Hamas, but with no intention of occupying the Gaza Strip and toppling its leadership | | | |
| **Analysis** | Israel conducted an in-depth analysis of Hamas’s four main offset efforts: | | | |
| Disappearing underground to offset Israel’s intelligence and technology advantages | Large-scale rocket buildup in order to strike Israel’s home front and undermine Israeli civilian resilience | Killing and abducting soldiers in order to exact a steep price from Israel’s “underbelly” | Launching actions from amidst the civilian population so as to prevent Israel from attacking and to undermine its international legitimacy |
| **Mode of operation to offset the offset** | - Defensive preparations along the Gaza Strip border  - Massive air assault on the metro | - An approach based on warning and interception  - Striking at rockets and launch squads  - Public relations and awareness among the Israeli home front | - Refraining from ground invasion  - Identifying and destroying anti-tank rocket launchers | - Avoiding harm to non-combatants to the extent possible (accurate intelligence, precision munitions)  - “Roof knocking”  - International public relations |
| **Military buildup to offset the offset** | - Constructing an underground barrier at the Gaza Strip border  - Heavy bombardment of the metro using advanced weapons | - Iron Dome  - Sophisticated warning system  - Intelligence and attack technologies | - Trophy system  - advanced capability to detect anti-tank rocket launchers | - Precision munitions for surgical strikes |

It should be noted that the four components of the strategy are not necessarily linear, as the Israeli case demonstrates. For example, the technologies of Iron Dome and the Trophy system for intercepting anti-tank missiles took many years to develop and were incorporated into the IDF to address a particular type of threat, not necessarily on the part of Hamas but in other arenas as well, such as potential hostilities involving Hezbollah in Lebanon. Similarly, the intelligence capabilities of identifying targets and immediately striking them were developed gradually and for a variety of needs. Nevertheless, the 2021 crisis illustrates how all these elements ripened into components that made it possible to implement an overall strategy for offsetting Hamas’s main offset efforts.

An analysis of Israel’s implementation of OTOS finds that this strategy offers a number of key advantages for the actor that adopts it. The main advantage is maximal neutralization of the enemy’s efforts in a manner that “pulls the rug out from under them” and renders a significant portion of their investments worthless. During nearly seven years Hamas invested considerable resources in building up the offset efforts described above, fully expecting that they would bear substantial fruit in the moment of truth. In practice, a significant portion of Hamas’s efforts to achieve sufficiently substantive gains to project an “image of victory” failed, in the face of Israel’s strategy.

Thus, the second advantage of OTOS for the state that adopts this strategy is the breathing space to implement its policy. As the past demonstrates, a mass-casualty event in Israel, or large numbers of non-combatant casualties in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israeli action, would result in tremendous pressure, whether domestic or foreign, on Israel. The minimization of these events thanks to OTOS enabled Israel to pursue its aims extensively and purposefully during the operation. It use of OTOS also allowed Israel to operate systematically and proactively. As soon as it began offsetting Hamas’s offset efforts, it was able to implement its own plan of operation without having to be reactive in the face of successfully actualized outset efforts by Hamas.

At the same time, OTOS also has a number of drawbacks. Its main and somewhat paradoxical disadvantage, of which decision-makers must be fully aware when adopting OTOS, is that its very adoption in effect amounts to a victory for the other side in determining the framework of the conflict. Although in practice the measures taken by the second actor are offset, as the state adopting the strategy is able to exploit its own advantages, nonetheless the overall concept – that the conflict will not be decided but rather a matter of offset and relinquishment – is in fact fully accepted. The party that adopts OTOS, particularly when this is the stronger actor in asymmetric warfare, is effectively agreeing to the rules of the game set by the weaker party and using its power only to achieve a more successful draw, rather than a decisive victory that would express its full power. From a purely military perspective, Israel undoubtedly emerged victorious from the May 2021 crisis, significantly more so than from the three previous large-scale clashes in the Gaza Strip. However, its use of OTOS preserved the status quo, even if Hamas emerged weakened and deterred, and even though Israel clearly has the capability to achieve a decisive victory. At the same time, given that Israel is not interested, at least not now, in deciding the conflict with Hamas, OTOS is evidently the best option.

There are two other major disadvantages to OTOS. The first is the need to invest extensive resources in order to offset the enemy’s offset efforts. A salient example is the interception of rockets by the Iron Dome system: while every rocket in the Gaza Strip costs a few hundred dollars to produce, every Iron Dome interceptor costs about $70,000.[[72]](#footnote-72) Although Israel’s smart warning system means that it does not have to intercept every rocket – because calculating the trajectory in advance allows it to limit the interceptions to rockets heading towards populated areas – nonetheless the expense is substantial. This fact necessitates evaluating the appropriateness of the strategy for each particular arena. Another disadvantage is the fragility of this strategy, that is, the great importance of its holistic nature in providing an optimal response to all the offset efforts. To illustrate this point, consider a situation in which Israel fully adopted the strategy but its implementation was less than optimal, such that one of its attacks resulted in a multi-casualty event in the Gaza Strip and the deaths of many non-combatants; in that case its vast investment in other offset measures would have been for naught because that attack would have been a game changer, granting Hamas the gains it had hoped to achieve through its offset efforts. Another example, which nearly materialized in Operation Pillar of Defense (2012), is a situation in which Israel runs out of Iron Dome interceptors following particularly massive bombardment, which changes the entire equation.[[73]](#footnote-73)

**Conclusion**

During the May 2021 crisis, many concepts and capabilities that Israel had been developing were consolidated into an orderly military strategy vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip, thus combining these concepts and strategies into a single action plan. The plans for this strategy, analyzed in the present article as the “Offsetting the Offset Strategy,” had long been underway in Israel, and it was transformed from a potential to an actual strategy in a systematic and orderly manner during the crisis, supported by a number of Israel’s strengths and its security forces. The strategy, which made it possible to offset the main pillars of the action plan Hamas had formulated for its campaign against Israel, did largely neutralize the organization’s ability to achieve gains, but at the same time it incorporated Hamas’s preference for an offset-driven armed conflict with no decisive outcome.

This article raises a number of questions about the difficulty states face in exerting their power against a weaker adversary that a priori dismisses decisive victory and instead seeks to perpetuate the existing deadlock. The strategy adopted by Israel has indeed shifted the balance in its favor: Hamas’s assets were extensively and intensively damaged, while the Israeli side managed to avoid significant damage – the fact that has the potential to hurt Hamas at the practical level and determine for certain period. Yet the very fact that Israel decided to conduct the campaign in a way that offsets the other side’s efforts, without yielding a decisive outcome, does amount to a victory for Hamas’s approach.

The analysis proposed in this article is a preliminary one, aimed at shedding light on an innovative strategy that emerges from the case study. In effect it offers another model for decision-makers seeking an appropriate strategy in states facing an adversary that uses offset measures. The advantages and disadvantages presented in the analysis here can serve such decision-makers in discussing whether OTOS is the right strategy given the constraints and circumstances in a particular arena. Moreover, the model analyzed here reflects an asymmetric conflict between a state and a non-state organizational actor, whereas in a conflict between states or in a symmetric conflict, the considerations might differ in accordance with the characteristics of the conflict.

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