

TIP Arab Press tour of Erez Crossing – 2/11/2009

On 2 November 2009, TIP organized a visit by Arab Journalist to the Erez Crossing for a security briefing and press conference on the humanitarian and civilian situation in Gaza.

Intelligence Briefing by Colonel E. (attribution: Military Sources)

Since operation 'Cast Lead' in January 2009, the situation in Gaza can be characterized by four trends:

1. Rearmament and reassessment by Hamas

Hamas did not regard the campaign as a success. Over 700 of its activists were killed, while the IDF was able to achieve all its objectives. There is popular resentment in Gaza towards Hamas over what was seen as a needless war that brought the population only suffering without any improvement to their condition.

Consequently, Hamas has used the months since the operation to rebuild its force by recruiting and training new fighters to replenish their ranks, rebuilding and rearming as well as conducting a reassessment of their methods.

Before the operation, Hamas accepted only minor support from Iran and Hizbullah, most notably money. Following 'Cast Lead', Hamas has deepened its ties with Iran and Hizbullah and now accepts direct support such as arms shipments and training by Hizbullah and Iranians. The overwhelming majority of arms in Gaza are smuggled in from Egypt through tunnels. The tunnels are situated along a 14 km strip that now has hundreds of operating tunnels. Although nearly a hundred tunnels were destroyed during the operation, they are easy to rebuild and hundreds remain open. Hundreds of people in Rafah now subsist on the transfer of goods through the tunnels. The tunnels also serve the demand for civilian goods and products, such as cement and medication. A black market of these goods thrives thanks to the tunnels.

Egypt has changed its attitude towards the tunnels and arms smuggling into Gaza. Before the operation, Egypt took no action against the smuggling into Gaza from its territory. Following the operation, Egypt has come to realize the threat that the tunnels pose to its own security through the possibility of radical Islamist terrorists coming out of Gaza and attacking tourist sites in Sinai and Egypt. The Egyptians have blasted some of the tunnels.

2. Hamas' use of civilian infrastructure.

Although Hamas has used civilian sites such as apartment buildings and mosques before and during operation 'Cast Lead' as sniper posts, storage facilities, launch sites etc. they have now increased their presence within civilian locations as their main method. This even includes facilities belonging to UNRWA, the Red Cross, and more. Hamas now diffusely disperses most of its command locations, meeting places, storage facilities, launch sites etc. among the civilian population.

3. The current relative quiet

The current security situation in the Gaza vicinity is the quietest it has been in eight years. But there is no ceasefire. Hamas is preparing for the next round of fighting and there are daily attempts by Hamas and other organizations to carry out attacks against Israel. The various organizations in Gaza are making repeated attempts to target soldiers patrolling the border using snipers, anti-tank missiles and roadside explosive charges. The IDF responds to such attacks and

protect its soldiers while trying to avoid harm to the Palestinians civilians who live and work close to the border.

Mortar and Rocket launches into Israel have decreased, but still remain a constant hazard. Over a hundred poor-quality rockets have been launched against Israel since operation 'Cast Lead' and some have landed within the Gaza Strip itself.

There are also attempts to carry out attacks against "high-value targets" such as attempts to attack the Erez, Kerem Shalom and Karni border crossings. One such attempt was to dig a tunnel under the Nahal Oz crossing and explode it, this led to the relocation of the gasoline depot to Kerem Shalom. Such attempts hinder the humanitarian efforts to transport goods into Gaza.

4. Emergence of extremist Islamic groups in Gaza

The past year has seen an increase of activity of extremist Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, and others in the Gaza strip. These groups attempt to attack Israel while at the same time undermine Hamas' rule in Gaza. These groups gain supporters by capitalizing on the popular resentment towards Hamas and portraying it as weak and ineffective for failing to attack Israel, while it clamps down on those who are willing to do so.

A few months ago, Hamas destroyed an Islamic Jihad-affiliated mosque in Rafah, killing 30 of its members including its sheikh who preached against Hamas, and carried out mass arrests.

Q & A session. [Questions by the participating journalists, Answers by Colonel E.]

Q: What are the causes of the current lull in violence?

A: First, it is the result of the Israeli operation. Adding to that is Hamas's need to build up its forces and maintain order in Gaza, Egyptian pressure and the forces in the international arena, and the internal pressure and criticism it faces, including the prospect of upcoming elections.

Q: Is Hamas worried that rival organizations will seize power in Gaza?

A: Hamas is not afraid of a coup, but worried about these groups gaining power and popular support at their expense. They are not worried about losing their power through elections, but want to maintain the population's support.

Q: Does Hamas have more weapons than it had before operation 'Cast Lead'?

A: It has enough weapons to carry out its current operations, but for a group like Hamas preparing for future rounds of conflict, there is never enough weapons.

Q: Does Hamas have new weapons they didn't have before?

A: They are trying to smuggle in better arms.

Q: Will new international Jihadi organizations from Lebanon influence the situation in Gaza?

A: The existence of Palestinian in Lebanon isn't new. Nor do these groups pose a greater threat than Hizbullah. Also, both Hamas and Islamic Jihad have their headquarters in Lebanon and Syria. What is new are extremist organizations being operated from Afghanistan.

[Slides were shown, depicting the type of weapons used by Hamas and the evidence (such as types and serial numbers on the weapons and rockets) that trace them to Iran and Syria. Other slides showed Hamas' use of civilian buildings, yards, schools and mosques, in order to attack soldiers during operation 'Cast Lead' and as launch sites for rockets.]

Briefing by Colonel Moshe Levi, head of the IDF Coordination and Liaison Administration for the Gaza Strip

Col. Levi explained the functions of the Coordination and Liaison Administration, and the counterparts it engages with:

Palestinian officials in Gaza belonging to the Abu Mazen government, through the Joint Coordination Committee. There are weekly meetings and daily phone calls with Amin Al-Siam, the head of the Palestinian Coordination Committee.

International NGO's and Diplomatic missions.

Israeli Government ministries that coordinate with the Palestinians, such as the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Health Ministry.

The Israeli and Palestinian Border-Crossing Administrations.

IDF Units operations in the Gaza area.

Palestinian businessmen and traders.

The Coordination and Liaison Administration has no contact with the Hamas government in Gaza. All official coordination is done with the Coordination Committee whose members are part of the Abbas' government in Ramallah.

According to Col. Levi, the trend in Gaza is towards Islamic radicalization. There is increased activity by Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Jaish Al-Islam, Jaljalat, and others. Hamas is striving to establish Islamic religious rule in Gaza, and this is demonstrated by such actions as establishing banking and insurance along Islamic principles, creating government bureaus for religious affairs, expanding religious education in all schools and institutes of higher education, the so-call 'modesty committees', segregating the beaches, and closing the markets on Fridays.

Since operation 'Cast Lead' there has been an increase in the number of supply trucks entering Gaza. Israel is trying to ensure that no humanitarian disaster occurs. Furthermore, some 7000 heads of cattle and other special supplies were allowed into Gaza in preparation for *Id Al-Adha*. Besides food and other necessary supplies, the shipments entering Gaza also include such items as veterinary medication, as an example of the continuing humanitarian coordination. The list of items permitted into Gaza is negotiated between the Palestinian and Israeli Coordination Committees. The items generally not allowed into Gaza are raw construction materials that end up in Hamas' hands and are used for military activities and do serve the population, but most food items are allowed. Israel is committed to maintaining the daily life of the Palestinian population. Israel is not at war with the Palestinian population and does not wish for them to be hostages in the hands of Hamas.

The gasoline depot in Nahal Oz was move to Kerem Shalom following the discovery of an explosive tunnel that was dug underneath it. There have also been other attacks on the border crossings such as a mortar shell that was fired while a wounded Palestinian was being transferred to Israel for treatment. Hamas is interested in closing the border crossings in order to increase the population's dependence on it.

Since operation 'Cast Lead' there have also been dozens of infrastructure projects carried out, such as a large sewage treatment facility that was funded by the World Bank.

Thousands of people crossed into Israel from Gaza during 2009, an increase of 35% compared to 2008. Hundreds of sick and wounded are allowed into Israel along with accompanying family members, and there are numerous other humanitarian permits given on an individual basis as well. In all, there has been a 14% increase in the number of permits being issued to Palestinians to enter Israel. requests for permits to enter Israel go through the Coordination Committees. This arrangement was suspended only briefly while the Palestinian Health Ministry in Gaza was in the hands of the Hamas government; at that time Israel handled Palestinian requests for permits directly. But cooperation with the Palestinian Coordination Committee resumed after the Health Ministry was handed back to the Fatah government.

Each person entering Israel undergoes a security interrogation, as there have been cases of terrorist organizations who have tried to carry out bombings in Israeli hospitals using Palestinians who are entering Israel for treatment. There are also daily attempt to forge medical documents in order to obtain a permit to enter Israel or cross over to the West Bank. There are hundreds of cases of Palestinians who overstay the period given in their permit, and the Army tries to encourage them to return by calling them on their phones, with little success. The recent easing of restrictions is meant to stave off a humanitarian disaster and ensure civil stability, but there is no change of policy regarding Gaza.

There is ongoing contact with international organizations and diplomatic missions, who have an important role in maintaining stability. Among these are UN organizations such as UNRWA, WFP, WHO, UNICEF and UNDP, the embassies of the USA, UK, Germany, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands, and NGO's such as the ICRC, CARE and others. These organizations all report now that the humanitarian situation on the ground now is stable.

During operation 'Cast Lead', 120 liaison officers coordinated between the IDF and international aid organizations. Over 1000 supply trucks entered Gaza during the operation itself. Some 1200 people were evacuated from the Gaza strip during the fighting, and hundreds of wounded were taken to Israel for treatment. Examples of such coordination are the evacuation of 5 handicapped people in wheelchairs who were evacuated by medical teams, and a pregnant women who was caught in the midst of a battle and was evacuated thanks to the liaison officers.