

Operation Guardian of the Walls: Grey zone responses to conventional airpower

Jacob Davies



ZONE

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The Freeman Air and Space Institute is an inter-disciplinary initiative of the School of Security Studies, King's College London. The Freeman Institute is dedicated to generating original knowledge and understanding of air and space issues. The Freeman Institute seeks to inform scholarly, policy and doctrinal debates in a rapidly evolving strategic environment characterised by transformative technological change which is increasing the complexity of the air and space domains.

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The Institute is named after Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman (1888–1953), who was crucially influential in British air capability development in the late 1930s and during the Second World War, making an important contribution to the Allied victory. He played a central role in the development of successful aircraft including the Spitfire, Lancaster and Mosquito, and in planning the wartime aircraft economy – the largest state-sponsored industrial venture in British history.

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Flight Lieutenant Jacob Davies joined the RAF as a pilot in 2016, and is currently on the Operational Conversion Unit for the Atlas A400M. This article develops on previous research undertaken over a full-time Chief of the Air Staff Fellowship at the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, the results of which were published at the time in a Durham Middle East Paper. This previous article explores insurgent adaptation to undermine airpower in Gaza in more depth, and can be found at the following address:

Jacob Davies, 'How the Weak Deter the Strong: Airpower, Technological Regression and the Coercion Balance in the Gaza Strip', Durham Middle East Paper No. 101, IMEIS, 2020. <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/imeis/DMEP101-HowtheWeakDetertheStrong.pdf>

Abstract

Due to geopolitical constraints and the strengths of its air force, Israel relies on airpower to influence hostile sub-state actors outside its borders. Hamas recognises this reliance and has innovated to accentuate the existing difficulties of using air-led strategies against an urban insurgency.

The events of May 2021 are indicative of its moves into the 'sub-lethal' realm, whereby it has incorporated tactics below the threshold of war within its mantra of violent resistance. Its use of incendiary kites and its weaponisation of popular protest are formulated to bypass Israel's strategy of aerial deterrence. Exploiting the 'grey zone' between war and peace, it is challenging the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) to find a response that is proportionate but that also addresses its legitimate security concerns. Armed responses to sub-lethal terror are inevitably perceived as disproportionate by elements of the international community, producing pressure that can have a strategic impact on IDF action. Hamas' self-projections exploit these difficulties. By reframing the parameters of the conflict, it has redefined victory as endurance in the face of conventional strength, allowing it to claim success in the absence of a breakthrough on the battlefield.

The example of Hamas in Gaza is instructive of how insurgents will continue to seek battle on their own terms and adapt to bypass the conventional strengths of modern airpower.

Introduction

To observers of the Gaza Strip, the events of May 2021 bear a tragic familiarity. Tensions in the region steadily escalated over a period of weeks until they were finally punctured on 10 May, when Hamas directed a barrage of rockets towards Jerusalem. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) responded in kind and initiated an intense campaign against targets in Gaza, using air and ground-based munitions to strike 1,500 targets over the next 11 days. During this period Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) directed almost 4,400 projectiles towards Israel before a fragile Egyptian brokered ceasefire came into effect on 21 May. As with previous campaigns in the Gaza Strip, the only incontestable outcome was widespread destruction on both sides of the border. The UN reported that Israeli attacks killed 260 people in Gaza, levelling 450 buildings in the process,¹ whilst Hamas' campaign caused extensive damage, killing 12 Israelis and injuring 710 more.²

Since Hamas established its control over the Gaza Strip in 2007 continuous exchanges of fire from both sides have not altered the strategic realities of the region. Operation Guardian of the Walls, as the IDF termed their May 2021 campaign, was the fourth time in 15 years that these underlying tensions erupted into intense conflict. Throughout this period airpower has provided the backbone of Israel's response to threats emanating from the enclave. Air campaigns were an integral element of Op Cast Lead (2008-9) and Op Protective Edge (2014), and during Op Pillar of Defense (2012) and Op Guardian of the Walls (2021) the IDF relied on airpower in isolation.³

Yet despite superficial continuity and patterns of violence, neither side are static in their thinking or practices, and the presence of near constant conflict in the region has provided the drive for continuous tactical and strategic development. Rather than a series of successive campaigns, the situation can be more usefully considered as ongoing process of mutual learning between the warring parties. This close interaction between both actors means that neither's actions can be meaningfully analysed without reference to the other's. For example, the IDF's use of Precision Guided Missiles (PGMs) can only be considered in the context of Hamas' extensive tunnel network, or the way that it embeds military objectives within protected civilian sites.⁴

The persistence of conflict in the region, alongside Israel's modern air force and reliance on airpower, makes the Gaza Strip a unique case study of the realities and limitations of air-led strategies against sub-state actors in an urban environment. Perhaps more than any other example, it provides instructive lessons on how insurgents recognise the strengths of airpower and adapt to nullify the conventional strengths of the state.

Whilst few countries have such practical experience of modern airpower in action, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is clearly unique in other ways, and strategists are rightly wary of drawing straight-line comparisons between the IDF and Western air forces. The Gaza Strip is one of the most highly politicised regions in the world, and the actions of both sides are the subject of intense scrutiny at home and overseas. The 'media campaign' has become an integral part of the action on the ground, and a public relations failure can easily produce strategic consequences.

Although some aspects are unique to Gaza, the IDF's experience is instructive of the inherent difficulties in using airpower in isolation against an urban insurgency. Hamas recognises the limitations of airstrikes in an urban environment and has tailored its tactics and strategy to accentuate extant difficulties. Defensively, it utilises typical insurgent tactics to protect its assets and personnel from IDF strikes, embedding military objectives within civilian sites and presenting Israeli leaders and operatives with intractable moral dilemmas to solve in real time.⁵ Such typical insurgent tactics are not new or uniquely innovative, and subsequently they will not be examined in detail here.

The focus of this article will be Hamas' more novel innovations in the 'grey-zone', and way it weaponises symbols in order to reframe the parameters of success. Strategically, in the absence of a breakthrough on the battlefield Hamas has mobilised symbols and rhetoric to its cause, redefining victory to mean endurance in the face of overwhelming conventional strength. On a tactical level it has constructed methods of resistance in the 'sub-lethal' realm, incorporating airborne incendiary devices and ostensibly peaceful border marches within its existing violent methods. Such tactics fall below the threshold of war, and consequently pose challenges to a strategy based on reciprocal airstrikes designed to degrade capability and reestablish deterrence. As such, they represent a strategic challenge for the IDF that remains unsolved.

WHY AIRPOWER?

Few nations rely so heavily on airpower as Israel. Faced with multiple threats, Israel is pragmatic in its strategic objectives, aiming not to destroy its opponents but to keep the threat on its borders to tolerable levels. These threats are broad and conflicting, and include informal terrorist groups, sub-state actors, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and hostile states in the region, particularly Iran.⁶ Despite the IDF's overwhelming superiority, and Israel's strength and growth in the face of adversity, its position as a small, Jewish democracy in a hostile region engenders a justified sense of vulnerability in Israeli planners. These geopolitical constraints ensure that the preferred option is to avoid inter-state conflict by maintaining deterrence, and that the preferred guarantor of this deterrence is airpower.

In the asymmetric setting this deterrence policy translates into what has been termed as 'mowing the lawn.' During routine periods acts of aggression are responded to with airstrikes, designed to degrade Hamas' capabilities and restore deterrence. In Gaza, this 'Campaign Between Wars' has been punctuated by four campaigns, designed to undermine Hamas' will and ability to strike Israel, to reduce the threat on Israel's border to manageable levels and 'to create deterrence' whilst 'underlin[ing] the limits of Israel's restraint.'⁷ From the Israeli perspective, Op Guardian of the Walls is just the latest iteration of this ongoing process of keeping the threats to Israel at a manageable level and reiterating deterrence.⁸

This strategy is founded on airpower, and airstrikes in particular. Israel is seeking to use the unique characteristics of airpower – its height, reach and striking power – to influence the decision-making processes of hostile actors outside of its borders. Airstrikes provide the backbone of Israel's offensive strategy in Gaza because they represent a lower risk military option than the alternatives, increasing the credibility of the state's threats and allowing the IDF to project force into areas where it cannot maintain a physical presence.

The importance of minimising their own casualties, both military and civilian, is the most important constraint on Israeli planners. The significance of protecting Israeli life in the public psyche is demonstrated by the value politicians place on the return of hostages or kidnapped soldiers' remains, with the 2011 exchange of one Israeli soldier for over 1,000 Palestinian prisoners providing a case in point.⁹ Most recently, Defense Minister Benny Gantz indicated that the reconstruction of Gaza following Op Guardian of the Walls was dependent, 'not only on a calm, but also on the return of soldiers' bodies and civilians held hostage.'¹⁰ Hamas is all too aware of the value Israel places on the lives of its citizens; it is this same strategic vulnerability that Hamas seeks to exploit through its indiscriminate projectile fire on Israel's cities.

This desire to avoid casualties in modern democracies is so prevalent that some have alleged it amounts to a 'casualty phobia', whereby planners are unable to risk significant loss of life in any circumstances.¹¹ This is not appropriate in the Israeli case; such is the severity of the threats facing Israel that the public will tolerate risks to IDF personnel if they are justified by results. Nevertheless, Israel is influenced by the same factors that ensure airpower is the first tool of choice for most NATO nations. Successful asymmetric ground campaigns require manpower, patience and a degree of cooperation from the civilian population, none of which are available in Gaza. Airpower offers the opportunity to affect action on the ground in an area that is outside of the control of Israel, without a formal footprint that would become a constant focus of insurgent attack. This is the strategic context Israel operates in: it must demonstrate that its threats are credible, whilst also minimising the risk to its operatives. Airpower is the obvious solution.¹²

These geopolitical constraints are unchanging and have dictated a strategy of aerial deterrence that has remained fundamentally intact over the past 15 years. Hamas has identified Israel's reliance on airpower and adapted its practices to nullify the effects of Israeli airstrikes, or to make them more difficult to prosecute in the first place. Israel's deterrence strategy demands consistency in order to establish a causal link between enemy action and IDF reaction, crafting "rules of the game" favorable to Israel.¹³ Yet this consistency is recognised by the insurgent, and they have deftly innovated on a tactical level to undermine the strategic logic of reciprocal airstrikes.

Exploiting the Grey Zone

Policies of airstrike enforced deterrence are, by necessity, predictable. Successful deterrence requires linking one action with an automatic reaction. Through reciprocal violence Israel is attempting to ensure that Hamas' projectile fire is met by an Israeli response, invariably an airstrike or multiple strikes on targets in the Gaza Strip. In doing so it is attempting to establish a link between cause and effect in the mind of their potential adversaries, increase the costs of Hamas' policy of resistance and undermine their motivation for continued violence. In this strategic logic, Israel's response to projectile fire must be predictable in order to ensure that its threats are credible.

Hamas recognises this strategic rigidity and has constructed methods of 'sub-lethal' resistance that fall outside the scope of a deterrence policy based on reciprocal airstrikes. Exploiting ambiguities in the murky realm between war and peace, it has incorporated sub-lethal tactics, such as incendiary kites and border marches, within its broader campaign of resistance. Such 'grey zone' methods pose a strategic dilemma to Israeli planners. Causing significant damage and even threatening loss of life, they represent an intolerable security threat to Israeli border communities and service personnel. However, by falling below the threshold of acts of war they challenge the IDF to find a response that addresses legitimate security concerns but that is still proportionate to the threat.

Airborne Incendiary Devices

Alongside projectile fire, since 2018 Hamas has resorted to cross-border incendiary terror. Operatives in Gaza release bundles of balloons or kites that carry burning material into Israel with the intention of destroying Israeli crops and damaging woodland. Clearly such rudimentary methods are weather and season dependent, but these small strikes collectively comprise a significant threat for Israel's border communities. They are not used in isolation, but are incorporated within Hamas' other methods of resistance. For example, on 9 May 21, the day before Op Guardian of the Walls, fires had broken out in the Israeli interior for three consecutive days.¹⁴ In this instance, as in many before, airborne incendiary devices accompanied rather than replaced rocket fire.

Israel's response has been to incorporate this threat within its current model of operations, responding with reciprocal airstrikes in order to undermine the insurgents' will and ability to continue such attacks. However, such tactics are utilised precisely because they are difficult to disrupt from the air. The launching sites are little more than open land in proximity to the border, and unlike missiles they require no hard infrastructure for their production. The IDF may strike Hamas targets in Gaza in response to such attacks, but it is difficult to correlate these airstrikes with the original threat. Moreover, responding to such primitive, sub-lethal methods with airstrikes raises questions of proportionality which can undermine the legitimacy of IDF campaigns.

How successful these reciprocal airstrikes have been at eliminating this low-tech threat can be gauged by the prevalence of such arson attacks. Whilst the ceasefire agreed on 21 May has largely held regarding rocket fire, the same is not true for incendiary terror. Balloons sparked 10 fires on 15 June, with more balloon strikes on 2 August.¹⁵ The situation continues to develop at time of writing, with Israeli Fire and Rescue marshals reporting ten further fires burning on 23 August.¹⁶ Each of these incidents was responded to with Israeli Air Force (IAF) strikes on Hamas terrorist targets.

Weaponising Popular Protest

Similarly to incendiary terror, the way Hamas has incorporated border protests within other forms of resistance has posed a strategic challenge for the IDF's model of aerial deterrence. The protests of 21 August were unusually severe, with rioters throwing rocks and IEDs over the fence, burning tyres and directing small arms fire at Israeli personnel at point blank range. Riot control measures and sniper fire were directed at protestors, and medical sources in Gaza reported that 41 Palestinians were injured, two of them critically.¹⁷ Hamas denied any connection to this violence, but the IDF's response was consistent with its responses to Gaza in general, with the IAF striking at least four sites in Gaza.¹⁸ Even if such airstrikes do reestablish deterrence in the long term, they cannot address the threat at the time of the protests. Such a security challenge falls outside of the scope of offensive airpower.

Hamas denied all connections to the violence, but whether these claims are true or false the marches pose a dilemma for Israeli planners regardless. If Hamas does indeed have no connection to the violence, it demonstrates that resistance activities occur outside the control of the group, and that Israel's policy of holding Hamas accountable for all violence emanating from Gaza is inconsistent. If Hamas is responsible for violence at the border riots, then it wields a powerful coercive tool that falls outside of the IDF's capabilities. As with all coercive tools the value of the force lies not in the violence itself, but in the capacity to escalate. Such marches confer Hamas with significant 'force in reserve', providing a tool of resistance that cannot be effectively addressed within the IDF's model of aerial deterrence.¹⁹

A final word on such methods. Hamas alleged that the most recent protests were held to commemorate the anniversary of an extremist arson attack on the al-Aqsa mosque in 1969. To some extent this is little more than an excuse to violence; previous anniversaries of this event have passed with no such commemoration. What such a connection does indicate, however, is how Hamas, in the face of immense conventional strength, attempts to redefine the issues at stake by mobilising symbology and weaponising it for its own ends.²⁰

Mobilising Symbology

These moves into the sub-lethal realm are just one of the many ways in which Hamas seeks to avert the conventional strength of the IDF and bypass a strategy based on airstrike enforced deterrence. Importantly, Hamas also seeks to undermine the achievements of Israeli airpower by reframing the debate surrounding its use and by redefining what qualifies as success in the Gaza Strip.

In this respect, the self-projections of both parties following Op Guardian of the Walls are indicative of their different strategic priorities. When attempting to explain the successes of the operation, IDF spokespeople speak in terms of missions completed, of strikes made and targets hit. Well aware of its immense technological inferiority, Hamas instead seeks to mobilise symbology in order to garner support for its cause, both inside and outside the Gaza Strip.

This difference in focus is partly due to the relative strengths of each party. The well-drilled, technologically competent IAF excels at striking targets accurately and with precision. Synchronising 160 aircraft in crowded airspace, over a densely populated region, as the IAF did on 21 May 21, is an impressive operational feat regardless of the airstrike's strategic impact.²¹ During Op Guardian of the Walls the effective integration of multiple airborne sensors built on previous successes to produce unprecedentedly short 'sensor-to-shooter' cycles, enabling the IAF to carry out 340 attacks on high trajectory rocket launchers, 230 attacks on surface-to-surface rocket launchers and 35 on mortar shell launchers.^{22 23 24}

Moreover, technical excellence and tactical innovation means that Op Guardian of the Walls might represent an IDF breakthrough in the subterranean realm. If initial reports are suggestive of the reality, coordinated strikes of ground penetrating bunker-busting missiles destroyed over 60 miles of Hamas' tunnel network within Gaza and eliminated a further 15 cross-border terror tunnels.²⁵ It is too soon to assess the full impact of these strikes, but such success could undermine the strategic logic behind these labour and capital heavy assets, effectively neutralising a significant security concern.

A comparison of the projectiles employed by both sides is a good indicator of the drastic technological asymmetry. The IAF's ability to target individual rooms within a house stands in stark contrast to Hamas' unguided, indiscriminate projectiles. According to IDF data, during Op Guardian of the Walls Hamas fired in the region of 4,400 rockets towards Israel, with approximately 680 missiles falling short and landing within Gaza, causing Palestinian civilian casualties. During the 11 days of fighting 12 civilians and one soldier were killed in Israel, a comparatively low casualty rate that can be attributed to the successes of the Iron Dome. Perhaps the best illustration of the divergence in technical capabilities, the Iron Dome missile defence system intercepted some 1,100 missiles headed for populated areas, a claimed 90% success rate.²⁶

Clearly these reports of Israeli success from the IDF should be approached carefully. However, what matters in this context is not the validity of their claims, but that the achievements that they choose to publicise are firmly within the operational realm. With such divergent capabilities, it is hardly surprising that IDF dispatches tend to focus on tactical and technical competence, whereas Hamas' do not. Yet the difference between the two groups' focus goes deeper than capabilities. These self-projections are indicative of the priorities of each actor. Whereas the IDF is necessarily focused on tangibles – practical tactical and operational achievements – Hamas looks more to symbols to show its strength.

Even if Hamas' projections are the outcome of necessity, it does not detract from their importance. The most recent operation in Gaza demonstrates how insurgents try to counter the immense capabilities of modern airpower by innovating in the symbolic realm in the absence of demonstrable progress on the battlefield. In this war of symbols past and present grievances provide the firepower. The history of the conflict, the anniversaries of significant milestones or atrocities, landmark decisions and their portrayal to the media can have a decisive influence in modern campaigns. All these symbols matter, particularly in Israeli-Palestinian relations, particularly to Islamist groups.

In this respect Hamas' actions and rhetoric during Op Guardian of the Walls represented a strategic innovation in this symbolic realm. The campaign in Gaza was triggered by protests in East Jerusalem that anticipated a court ordered eviction of Palestinian families to make way for Jewish settlers. Demonstrations in Jerusalem culminated with Israeli forces storming the al-Aqsa mosque following night prayers held there on the last Friday of Ramadan, injuring over 200 Palestinians.²⁷ All this unrest occurred in the background of significant celebrations and anniversaries, with some Muslims celebrating Qadr Night on 8 May, whilst Jewish Israelis marked 'Jerusalem Day' on 9-10 May

In this highly charged atmosphere, it is significant that sirens were active and rocket impacts were heard in Jerusalem within hours of clashes at the Al-Aqsa mosque.²⁸ Such an immediate, far-reaching response serves Hamas' self-depictions as leaders of the Palestinian struggle against Israel, wherever it may be. Although evidently propagandist in nature, Yusuf Rizqah's bluster in the Hamas-run, Gaza-based Filastin online is indicative of the stock Islamist propagandists place in symbology.

Nothing can anger the Palestinians like Jerusalem and nothing can unite those who are rising up to defend their religion and mosque like the al-Aqsa mosque. When the occupation state coordinates with the religious [Jews] and settlers on the al-Aqsa mosque it plays with fire. It increases the feelings of revenge not only in Jerusalem but in all places in occupied Palestine.²⁹

For the first time Hamas managed to effectively connect its violent resistance in Gaza to the broader Palestinian struggle within Israel and the occupied territories, undermining a key element of Israel's strategy to drive a wedge between Hamas and other claimants to leadership of the Palestinian cause, notably Fatah. Hamas enjoyed statements of support from groups and nations within the Palestinian movement that would not typically side with their violent resistance. There were incidences of rocket fire from Syria and Lebanon during the conflict, and the ceasefire was accompanied by spontaneous celebrations in Judea, Samaria and East Jerusalem, with Palestinians waving Hamas flags.³⁰

This is the essence of Hamas' 'rocket doctrine' and mantra of resistance. Like many sub-state actors, faced with immense conventional strength it has redefined victory as endurance, allowing it to claim success in the absence of victory on the battlefield. It is notable that in all of the four major campaigns in Gaza IDF activity was unable to inhibit Hamas' ability to direct projectiles towards Israel during the conflicts.³¹ Although airstrikes are clearly more effective at striking specific targets than Hamas' rockets, the damage done by such projectiles is not a measure of their success. For Hamas, success is endurance in the face of strength, continuing to fire until the very last moment of the campaign and forcing the Israelis to respond. Even if the costs of projectiles in Israel are measured in the construction of shelters, missile defence or damaged buildings rather than lives lost, this still satisfies Hamas' narrative of resistance.

Conclusions

The IDF's experience in Gaza Strip provides an instructive demonstration of the boundaries of airpower when it is relied on in isolation against sub-state actors. The IAF's immense capabilities have been indispensable in Israel's fight against Hamas, but, although airpower offers many strengths, its potential is not limitless. Delivering proportionate force to an urban insurgency is challenging, and these difficulties are accentuated by tactical decisions on the part of the insurgent. With Israel, the problem is that no military force will be proportionate to protests and burning kites, but it doesn't have any other response.

Alongside highlighting the limitations of airstrikes against an urban insurgency, Hamas' adaptations demonstrate how insurgents will innovate to undermine air-led strategies. On a tactical level, operatives will counter complex conventional strength with simplicity, as demonstrated by Hamas' moves into the sub-lethal realm. By occupying the space between war and peace, Hamas is challenging Israel to find a response that is proportionate but also addresses its security concerns. In the absence of firm success on the battlefield Hamas also innovates in the ideological realm, redefining victory as endurance in the face of strength. The stock that it places in symbols and rhetoric is indicative of its attempts to reframe the conflict and capitalise on its self-projections as leaders of Palestinian resistance.

Each of these innovations serve to remind how sub-state actors will attempt to undermine the military strengths of a state by seeking battle on their own terms. In Gaza, Israel's reliance on airpower has encouraged Hamas to innovate and construct methods of resistance that are difficult to disrupt from the air. Although there are unique elements to Israeli-Palestinian relations, airpower presents such advantages that many Western states are also likely to rely on it in asymmetric settings in the future. When they do, they should expect their opponents to adapt accordingly.

Endnotes

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- 3 Clearly in modern operations force elements are so tightly integrated that it is debatable whether airpower could ever be used 'in isolation'; the importance of space power in the IAF's Revolution in Military Affairs inspired operations provides a case in point. Similarly, the IDF employs ground-based guided munitions alongside airstrikes. In this context, airpower has been termed to have been used 'in isolation' if it provided the overwhelming majority of offensive force during an operation. This was the case in 2012 and 2021, where the IDF did not undertake a formal ground offensive.
- 4 It must be noted that Hamas is far from the only actor seeking to undermine Israel from within the Gaza Strip, and it faces constant competition from other groups, notably the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Examining the internal pressures that act on Islamist groups in governance is a different research area in itself, and in the interests of brevity only Hamas will be considered in this article.
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- 13 Allison, *Deterring Terror*, 24.
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