

Israel's wake-up call

Yes, the Iron Dome system worked effectively this week, but a war of missiles with Iran or Hezbollah will look very different, and the quiet in the West Bank will not go on forever.

By Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff

The star of this week was undoubtedly the Iron Dome anti-missile system. However, amid the well-deserved praise for the engineers, and the collective - and exaggerated - mutual congratulations, two basic facts were overlooked. One is that Israel's system of anti-missile and rocket defense, however advanced, is still a long way behind the stage of development where it would have been, had decision makers acted promptly and allocated the required funds when the need first became obvious. The second fact is that this week's performance by the system, which in itself was successful, occurred in almost ideal conditions against limited attacks - by Islamic Jihad and the Popular Resistance Committees, but not by Hamas - and on one front. Such a performance will certainly not be adequate for a confrontation against Iran.

Next month, the Israel Defense Forces will take delivery of the fifth Iron Dome battery, more than five years after then-Defense Minister Amir Peretz first decided, in December 2006, to acquire the missile-interception system. While its development, by Rafael Advanced Defense Systems, was speedy, Iron Dome is still not an on-the-shelf product.

In the first stage, the IDF acquired two batteries. In 2010, U.S. President Barack Obama decided to give Israel a special grant of \$205 million to pay for an additional four. There was a delay in the transfer of the funds, and the Israeli defense establishment decided to wait until the money arrived. In the meantime, Rafael improvised an additional battery, but recently there has been another delay, following a disagreement between the finance and defense ministries, with the latter holding up additional funding beyond the seven batteries (three underwritten by Israel, four by the United States) whose development has been authorized.

The result was a year-long delay in the project, leaving the IDF with one less battery than it was supposed to have by now. Given that a battery can protect a medium-sized city, this is a serious gap, which will be further compounded if the Palestinians decide in the next round to launch Iranian-made Fajr rockets, whose range reaches metropolitan Tel Aviv.

The achievements of the Iron Dome system this week are attributed to improvements in programming and deployment. But geographical disparities are harder to bridge. The batteries are presently deployed across a wide area, in a manner that hampers defense. The latest rocket offensive from Gaza was a wake-up call for Israel, and came at a relatively low price in terms of casualties and economic damage. Plus, the successful performance holds another potential

advantage: Other countries might be induced to purchase Iron Dome, which will reduce the production costs and enable the IDF to acquire more missiles and batteries.

In another militant statement to the Knesset on Wednesday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu drew a direct connection between Tehran and the warfare in Gaza. He threatened "to uproot the Iranian base" in the Gaza Strip. But the major technological achievement of Iron Dome and the marked improvement in the deployment of the home front are not a sufficient response to the rockets and missiles that can be expected to hit Israel in the wake of an attack on Iran, including those that will be launched from Lebanon by Hezbollah and possibly also from Gaza by Hamas.

The Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee estimated last year that about 13 Iron Dome batteries would be needed to protect Israel, north and south alike. According to the manufacturers of Iron Dome, the system offers defense against rockets within a range of 70 kilometers. Protection against long-range missiles and rockets (of which Hezbollah possesses hundreds) requires integration between the Arrow and Magic Wand systems. Israel has only a limited number of Arrow missiles, and it will be two years before the IDF takes delivery of the first Magic Wand battery - provided no more budget cuts are made. In a war situation, the few intercept systems will likely be deployed to protect air force runways and sites of strategic infrastructure. The civilians will have to stay at home, listen to the instructions of the Home Front Command and hope for the best.

A realistic examination of the progress made by the different sides in this conflict will show that Israel has developed an impressive technological response but has not yet applied it on a convincing scale. The adversary - whether in Tehran, the Lebanese Bekaa or Gaza - is equipped with tens of thousands of missiles and rockets, which are intended to flood Israel's radar systems and thereby reduce the possibility of their being intercepted. This could produce a stalemate the next time, which is not a result Israel can afford.

In the backyard

What prompted Israel's assassination last Friday of Zuhair al-Qaissi, the secretary-general of the Popular Resistance Committees, despite the clear knowledge that this would spark a new round of violence in the south?

Qaissi and his aides were planning an attack along the Israeli-Egyptian border in Sinai, a reprise of the attack mounted by the Resistance Committees last August in the same area, in which eight Israelis were killed. Israel views such attacks from Sinai as a red line, which it must forcibly demarcate for the Palestinian organizations in the Gaza Strip. Sinai is a dead zone, which intelligence cannot easily monitor; the fence along the border is still under construction and cannot totally block infiltration attempts; and the currently sensitive relations with Cairo rule out IDF preemptive operations on Egyptian soil.

On the other hand, Egypt is no longer even pretending to exert control in Sinai. The peninsula's vast expanses offer considerable freedom of action, and the common interests with the Bedouin tribes (ideology plus money) make Sinai an ideal backyard for the Gaza-based organizations. When intelligence information comes in about a planned attack, Israel has to strike at the head of the pyramid in the hope of thwarting the attack. That is why Qaissi was assassinated, followed the next day by the killing of the Resistance Committees' operations officer, who was the liaison with the cell in Sinai.

But because this was apparently a case of "outsourcing" by the Resistance Committees to a Bedouin group, it remains unclear whether the attack was abandoned (a "preemption," in the

lingo of the Shin Bet security service) or only put aside temporarily (a "disruption"). Israel's decision not to attack in Sinai proved itself three days later, when mediation by Egyptian intelligence led to an indirect and informal agreement on a cease-fire in Gaza.

Egypt, even in the post-Mubarak era and under the growing control of the Muslim Brotherhood, continues to be an essential partner for Israel, at least until the presidential elections there, in May. At the moment, the commanders of Egyptian intelligence (the counterpart of Israel's Mossad) are the same people there were in the period of President Hosni Mubarak. Thus, the former Egyptian consul-general in Tel Aviv, Nadr al-Aaser, is now head of the Palestinian-Israeli desk in intelligence.

Commentators in Gaza insist that the fuel crisis there, which was created when Egypt halted the flow of gas from Sinai to the Strip, stemmed from a decision by Egyptian intelligence to press the Hamas leadership to sign a reconciliation agreement with Fatah.

The mediation success of Egyptian intelligence cannot offset the anarchy in Sinai - or in Egypt itself. On Tuesday, some 300 armed Bedouin surrounded the base of the international peace force in Sinai and threatened to kill those inside. They were protesting the arrest of five Bedouin, whom the Egyptian authorities intend to sentence to life imprisonment or execution for their involvement in terrorist actions. In another incident this week, a few hundred kilometers south of Cairo, dozens of thieves who were trying to uproot rail lines were surprised in the act by police. The thieves fled to a nearby village and, amid a gun duel, seized a few families as hostages. Some of these incidents are taking place very close to the southern border of Sinai, an area that was once the ultimate vacation spot for tens of thousands of Israelis.

Paradox of success

For the past few weeks, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) has been considering the wording of the letter he plans to send to Prime Minister Netanyahu about the future of peace negotiations and the coming moves by the Palestinians in the West Bank. Abbas is picking and choosing every word with care, with a view to the reactions of senior officials in the European Union and the U.S. administration.

"Concurrently," a senior Fatah official tells Haaretz, "Islamic Jihad is able to send one-third of Israel's population into bomb shelters. Do you understand how the Palestinian public now views Abbas? Islamic Jihad threw Israel into a panic without paying a very steep price. Did you assassinate its senior figures? Did you undermine the organization? Hardly. Islamic Jihad started to fire rockets after the secretary-general of the Resistance Committees was assassinated. And it also ended the campaign with its shooting."

According to the senior source, "Islamic Jihad caused Hamas even greater damage. They turned Hamas into a laughingstock. Those who always boasted of their combat capability against Israel, who declared themselves super-fighters, were perceived by the Gaza public as a bunch of cowards, interested only in the survival of their government. What did Hamas do in this latest crisis? Its leaders explained that unity of ranks is essential and that autonomous action is wrong. But Islamic Jihad came along and showed them that it will do what's appropriate for it and that it doesn't need authorization."

It seemed this week that Hamas had lost something of its passion in the struggle against Israel. The organization is suffering from a deep internal crisis. Its leaders in Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud a-Zahar, are refusing to accept the agreement that the head of the organization's political bureau, Khaled Meshal, reached with Egyptian mediation. The fuel

shortage, which has caused prolonged power stoppages in Gaza at the height of winter, gave the organization another setback. Meshal in particular is concerned about the frustration of the Gazan public, which is liable to boil over into a protest movement against his organization.

Islamic Jihad, notwithstanding the begrudging praise heaped on it by the senior Fatah man, knows the truth: Its major achievements amounted to embarrassing Fatah and demonstrating the ability to fire relatively powerful rocket volleys into Israel. There was no loss of life on the Israeli side, thanks mainly to the Iron Dome anti-missile system. On the offensive side, the IDF also applied a "fire canopy," an integrated system of intelligence and air power, that took out more than 10 rocket-launching squads during the fighting.

But there is a paradoxical side to Israel's success: Because there were barely any casualties, the response to the ongoing rocket fire was quite limited. Israel can boast as much as it likes that it has deterred Islamic Jihad, but the organization set its own price tag: The next time Israel decides to assassinate a senior figure in one of the terrorist organizations in Gaza, it will have to expect a rocket barrage in response. The GOC Southern Command, Tal Russo, was honest enough to admit on Wednesday that "there is no magic solution" to the rockets, and that he cannot predict how long the cease-fire will last before the next round.

Leaking roof

Two weeks from today, the Palestinians will mark Land Day. What started off 36 years ago mainly as a day of protest by Israel's Arab citizens, is this time supposed to provide the framework for a "march of a million," an anti-Israeli protest across the entire Arab and Muslim world. The Palestinian Authority in particular is helping to coordinate popular activity. The protest march against the settlements and the separation fence is being coordinated among dozens of local committees in West Bank towns and villages. IDF Central Command lists nine regular Friday sites of demonstrations and friction - compared to two - five years ago.

This week, a new GOC Central Command, Nitzan Alon, took over from Avi Mizrahi. During the induction ceremony, the speakers praised the general atmosphere of quiet in the West Bank, once an arena of murderous attacks. But that quiet cannot be taken for granted. Israel continues to expect the PA's security units to do the job for it amid a total political impasse, and as young Palestinians in the West Bank watch their peers in neighboring countries topple one regime after another.

In the background, even if this goes completely unreported by the Israeli media, extremist settlers continue to commit acts of sabotage. This week alone, there were two cases in which trees belonging to Palestinians were destroyed - as part of the "price tag" actions of retribution in the southern part of the West Bank.

"The security coordination with the PA will not last forever," a senior IDF officer warns. "That roof has already begun to leak."