

Israel's New Rocket Defence System

The screw turns tighter still on Gaza

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Israel unveiled "Iron Dome" last week, a missile-defence system that is designed to strike a knock-out blow against short-range rockets of the variety fired into Israel by Hamas and Hizbullah. In the short term, Iron Dome is supposed to herald the demise of the rocket threat to Israeli communities near Gaza four years after Hamas won the Palestinian elections.

The period in-between has been marked by a series of inconclusive moves by both sides: Israel's crippling siege of Gaza has yet to break the will of Gazans; negotiations for the release of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured by Hamas more than three years ago, have gone nowhere; reconciliation talks between rival Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah have borne no fruit; and even the savage offensive against Gaza last year, Operation Cast Lead, achieved little in strategic gains for Israel.

Now Israel says it has a winning card in its hand. From May, the first batteries of Iron Dome — developed at a cost of \$200 million — will be installed around Gaza, foiling the efforts of militant factions to continue their struggle against a policy that denies the enclave's inhabitants all but the most essential humanitarian items.

Militant groups in Gaza have done their best to remain defiant. A spokesman for Islamic Jihad declared last week to Maan, a Palestinian news agency, that the rocket defence system "cannot stop the projectiles of the resistance", as it launched sustained volleys of rockets and shells into Israel for the first time since Cast Lead. Ehud Barak, Israel's defence minister, has accused Hamas of turning a blind eye to this activity.

Certainly, several big question marks hang over the Israeli project, despite the large claims being made by Israeli officials.

Analyst Reuven Pedatzur noted today in the Haaretz newspaper that Israel was peddling "deceptions and half-truths" over Iron Dome. He pointed out that the flight time of a few seconds for rockets fired at Israeli communities close to Gaza, such as Sderot, is far shorter than the time needed by Iron Dome to calculate an interception.

Even more significantly, what economic sense does it make for Israel to try to destroy home-made rockets when each interceptor missile costs an estimated \$100,000?

Military analysts reckon that, in addition, Israel will be forced to spend \$1 billion on 20 batteries needed to protect Israeli communities next to Gaza and more in the north that are currently in the line of Hizbollah's fire from Lebanon. That cost will rise rapidly as Hamas and Hizbollah extend the reach of their arsenals. Another system, Magic Wand, can reportedly shoot down medium-range missiles, but each interception costs close to \$1

million. And then there are additional costs to be factored in when groups in the West Bank begin launching rockets, too.

Israel's siege of Gaza could quickly be matched by a war of attrition by Hamas and Hizbullah against Israel's defence budget — at a time when Israel is pondering expensive military adventures further afield, such as in Iran.

Nonetheless, signs of unease have become apparent in Gaza over the past week. Militant groups have again risked engaging in serious clashes with Israel. On Sunday, Israel claimed that more than 20 rockets and mortar shells had been fired out of Gaza in a few days, while Palestinian sources said at least eight Palestinians, including a 14-year-old boy, had been killed in Israeli air strikes.

But even if Iron Dome is little more than a new development in Israel's programme of psychological warfare against Gaza, the pressure is most definitely building on Hamas on several fronts. Israel has significantly tightened its chokehold on the enclave over the past year.

One of Israel's most significant moves has been forcing Palestinians to abandon productive rural land in Gaza, much of it situated just inside the fence that surrounds the Strip.

According to Palestinian officials, Gaza once produced half of its own food, with one-quarter of its 1.5 million inhabitants dependent on agriculture. Today, about half of this land is no longer usable. Some of it was destroyed by the Israeli army during Cast Lead. Other areas, according to Italian researchers last week, have been contaminated with a cocktail of toxic metals from Israeli munitions. And yet more land is off limits because it falls within a buffer zone of 300 metres Israel has declared inside the perimeter fence, as a leaflet drop last week by the Israeli air force reminded Gazans. Farmers say in practice the zone often extends much deeper into the enclave.

As Gaza's chief means of subsistence has been steadily eroded, the lifeline provided by hundreds of smuggling tunnels from Egypt into Rafah, under the one border not controlled by Israel, has come under imminent danger of being severed, too.

Sealing the Rafah border was one of the main goals of Operation Cast Lead, but Israeli aerial bombardments only had limited success in destroying the tunnels there. Instead, Egypt is building a steel wall underground in an attempt to foil the smugglers. Although Cairo is taking the flak for the wall's construction, and has its own interests in punishing Hamas, the driving forces behind the scheme are almost certainly Israel and the United States. US engineers are reported to be providing the technical expertise to make the wall as effective as possible.

Another wall, this one to be built by Israel along the border with Egypt immediately south of Gaza, was announced this week. Although chiefly intended to stop the flow of refugees and illegal immigrants reaching Israel, it is also aimed "to turn the screws on Hamas" by blocking the only way into Israel for terror attacks, Yaakov Katz, an analyst with the Jerusalem Post newspaper, argued yesterday.

The increasing isolation of Gaza — and the ratcheting up of pressure — is designed to send a message to Gaza: that Hamas has nothing to gain, and everything to lose, from resisting Israel's occupation, and that ordinary Gazans should turn their back on the Islamic

movement.

But there is also a message for Hamas's rivals in the West Bank. Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, and his Fatah supporters are being daily reminded that their own chances of extracting significant concessions from Israel — through a policy of quietism — are even more anaemic than Hamas's.

The hope in Israel is that sooner or later Mr Abbas, or his successor, will realise there is no choice but to sign up to whatever territorial crumbs of the West Bank Israel is prepared to concede as a Palestinian state.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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