



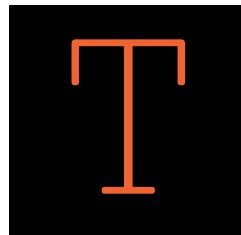
IS ISRAEL CHANGING TACTICS IN GAZA?

**WHAT A TROOP
DRAWDOWN
REALLY MEANS**



“The goals of the war require prolonged fighting, and we are preparing accordingly.”

—Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, an Israeli military spokesman



The Israeli military announced last week that two brigades of reservist troops would be removed from fighting in Gaza immediately

and that three other brigades would be brought back into Israel for scheduled training. What does this change mean?

The exact number of troops being sent home was not disclosed, but the IDF’s announcement suggested that part of the reason for sending troops home was because of the problems that had been caused by breadwinners being away from home for so long. “This move is expected to significantly alleviate economic burdens and enable them to gather strength for upcoming activities in the next year,” the statement said.

Israel’s announcement came not long after the news that Hamas deputy chief Saleh al-Arouri had been killed in a missile strike in Beirut. Israeli forces have moved from doing their major fighting in the north of Gaza and have headed to the south. Is a troop drawdown a change in strategy, a change in necessity or something else?

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We spoke with experts on Israeli national security to understand more about the issue.

PROF. EFRAIM INBAR, PRESIDENT OF THE JERUSALEM INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGY AND SECURITY



Do you see the drawdown as a change in tactics or the way the war is being carried out?

To some extent, it's a necessity. You cannot leave troops there for a long period.

Second, those are brigades that have a function of instructing soldiers, so you need to take them out.

Third, north Gaza is basically conquered. Now the main effort is around Khan Younis and the south. How many soldiers can such a small front take? That's part of it.

And the Americans, obviously, are pushing for different tactics, which may make some sense. But eventually they will cause us to have more costly warfare, because it involves not using so much firepower and air power. But it may look better and give us more time on the political

clock. So it is a mixture of reasons.

It sounds like you don't believe this is a change in the objectives of the war.

No, I don't think so.

The Americans are obsessed with the two-state solution, and they really believe that you have to get rid of Hamas in order to bring in the PA. The government is reluctant to bring in the PA, but there is an agreement on finishing Hamas.

Do you see the government as having a coherent, unified strategy? Obviously, there is some debate going on...

There is a small number of people who dictate strategy together with the military. The larger cabinet has an advisory function—and they are frustrated that

they don't call the shots. So they voice their objections and leak them to the press. They have a constituency to worry about. It's politics.

But as far as the actual carrying out of the war, you see it as unified.

Yes, in coordination with the Americans. They are babysitting all the time.

Babysitting the Americans?

The Americans are the babysitters. They send someone every week. Okay, so they give *parnasah* to our hotels.

Is there anything else you think people should understand about what is going on?

We have to be patient because of the subterranean structures. It takes time. It's not a six-day war.



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PROF. CHUCK FREILICH, SENIOR RESEARCHER AT INSS AND FORMER ISRAELI DEPUTY NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER



You see the drawdown in Gaza not just as a way of resting the troops but as a transition to a different stage in the war.

Yes, a transition to phase three, the lower, but not necessarily low, intensity stage.

Is that because fewer troops mean

a different kind of fighting? What is the phase they are moving into?

There are a whole bunch of reasons for doing this. The war has progressed, and there isn't a need for so many troops. The fighting has localized. Israel has taken most of the territory that it intends to take in Gaza.

There is still some fighting here and

there in the north that they have to clean up, but most of the fighting is concentrated around Khan Younis. There is a question of whether Israel will go into Rafah next in any significant way. So the big part of the fighting is behind us.

Second, because the fighting is in limited areas, it is just crowded, and there isn't freedom of movement for so many troops.

Third, there has been ongoing American pressure to make this transition and to conduct more targeted—and let's say brigade-level—inursions as needed.

And then there is the fact that a few hundred thousand reservists have been called up for a very long time, and businesses were collapsing, people were going broke and their families were suffering.

Does this mean drawing back on Israel's objectives? From what you're saying, it doesn't sound like that is how you see it.

I think there is an appreciation that this is going to take considerably longer than was assumed in the beginning and that it is now a matter of a long-term operation to really try to destroy Hamas as a coherent fighting force. They'll never be fully destroyed, but [the aim is] to destroy them as a coherent fighting force and maybe to topple them.

Most of what could have been achieved by high-intensity fighting has been





“I don’t think anyone has abandoned the objectives, but they aren’t going to be achieved in the kind of timetable that was originally hoped for.”

achieved, and it’s now a transition to this long-term effort.

I don’t think that anyone has abandoned the long-term objectives, but they aren’t going to be achieved in the kind of timetable that was originally hoped for.

You see this partly as acceding to the US demands for humanitarian relief. How does it do that? Is it by lessening the unpredictability for Palestinians?

It’s related to the humanitarian issue, but when people say that, they mean getting food and other things into Gaza. But this is the American demand from the beginning, to reduce civilian casualties by conducting more focused operations.

Fewer bombs, more action by troops on the ground?

Until now, it was a major air campaign and a major ground campaign, and now it will be smaller-scale ground operations. The idea is something like brigade operations.

Do you believe that the government has a coherent strategy? Is there a debate?

Well, there is a debate, but I don’t think it is among the primary people. In the war cabinet, based on open reports, Gantz and Eisenkot are apparently firmly behind this. I think Gallant is also in favor of it. Bibi has not staked out a position, but he is not opposing it, so I pre-

sume that indicates indirect support for it on his part, as well.

Is there any other part of this you think is important to point out?

First, there is the whole home-front issue and the terrible psychological effect this has had on the Israeli public, which I think is very hard to understand from afar. It really undermined the national sense of security and safety.

And there is the northern border, which could blow up at any moment, and then we could have a wide-scale war with Iran that could escalate into a regional war. But that’s the worst-case scenario.

People need to understand that there are still rocket alerts every day, as well as fighting along both borders.

So that’s how people should view this drawdown. It’s not an end; it’s just a change.

That is correct. ●

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