Debates are still raging in both the Israeli and the regional media as to why it was necessary to expend so much energy and resources on operation Cloud Pillar and mobilize 75,000 reservists (7.5 times more than during Molten Lead, the IDF’s last operation in Gaza) just to enter a very hasty and far from triumphant truce with Hamas.

At first glance it does look strange, to say the least. The right-wing Israeli government led by Benjamin Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman, which has cultivated a “hawkish image,” agreed in exchange for a ceasefire to open border crossings with the Gaza Strip, ease the movement of people and goods, and allow freedom of movement in the so-called “security zone”. And it did so knowing full well that both the Palestinian and the Arab Street will consider it a crushing defeat of the Zionist regime.

Netanyahu may offer any number of excuses, as he did at the joint press conference with Avigdor Lieberman and Ehud Barak in Jerusalem on November 21, or he may get the state-controlled media to roll out counter-propaganda. But it will not convince the average Israeli voter, who, according to the polls, was willing to spend more time in bomb shelters just to crush Hamas.

The popular explanation for the government’s actions is that the military campaign was forced on Netanyahu, and he did everything he could to avoid it.

That is hard to believe, of course, knowing how keen the current Israeli prime minister’s political instincts and ability to maneuver between the raindrops are. The more so since, despite operation Cloud Pillar’s outward weakness, it was by and large a success.

After all, the chief objective of the military campaign in Gaza was not to take out Hamas, which is currently in disarray, but to test a number of elements that would be involved in a war with Israel’s much more serious enemy and main “headache” — Iran. While simultaneously “mopping up” the pro-Iranian elements in Gaza, of course.

"Mopping up" Iran’s rear area

I have said previously in the pages of New Eastern Outlook that, as a result of the “revolutionary” events in Syria, Hamas, which until recently was a monolith, has in fact become a mosaic structure consisting of groups aligned with regional forces that sometimes are in opposition to one another. I have also written that in recent years Qatar, sometimes alone and sometimes working through Egypt, is trying to “privatize” Hamas and other influential forces in Gaza.

Obviously, if the choice is between two evils, a “Qatari” Gaza currently looks more attractive than an “Iranian” Gaza. Therefore, the IDF’s military operations during operation Cloud Pillar looked like a “mopping up” of pro-Iranian figures and not a declared war on terror.
The assassination of al-Qassam Brigades commander Ahmed Jabari, which essentially began the military operation, is an eloquent example of that. The fact that the man killed was involved in the abduction of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit is doubtless an added "electoral bonus" for the Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu coalition in the parliamentary elections coming up on January 22.

But that was not the main factor here. Nor was it the fact that Jabari headed Hamas’ military wing, Gaza’s police forces and air defenses, or that he was Islamic Jihad’s propaganda chief. The main thing is that he was Tehran’s man.

Persistent rumors flying around Gaza suggested that the al-Qassam Brigades were preparing an armed coup to unseat the Strip’s current leadership led by the “renegade” Ismail Haniyeh, who has recently been openly declaring a pro-Qatari policy. That was particularly evident during the sensational October visit to Gaza by Qatari Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. Incidentally, Israel decided to intimidate Haniyeh himself by firing on his villa, probably thinking that he had not yet come to a final decision about whom to side with.

All things considered, the job of clearing pro-Iranian elements out of Gaza can be considered a success. Israel’s situational ally — Qatar — can now safely use the “tamed” Hamas (and evidently its military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades, as well) in its ambitious plans to restructure the Greater Middle East. Primarily in Syria.

And after operation Cloud Pillar, Israel will be able to count a “passage” through Iran’s rear areas as a plus.

**Successes and “dizziness with success”**

Israeli propaganda calls improvements to defense and warning systems one of the main differences between this operation and previous ones. The Iron Dome tactical missile defense system has been much discussed. It is designed to protect against rockets at ranges from 4 to 70 km, and it proved 87% effective during the military operation by shooting down a total of 421 rockets fired at Israel from the Gaza Strip.

Moreover, an improvement to Iron Dome cut the number of interceptor missiles needed in half. The second achievement of the current Israeli government is improved relations with US President Barack Obama, which have not been exactly rosy in recent years.

An important plus for Israel has undoubtedly been progress in conducting information warfare, one of its biggest weaknesses. A specially trained team of Israeli “virtual warriors” fought the Arab “virtual street” quite successfully in the social networks.

Progress has clearly been made. Israel can also consider the anti-Iranian “training exercises conducted under near combat conditions” a positive achievement. In this regard, after feeling frustrated during the first few days of the truce with Hamas, the Israeli press began featuring more “gung ho” rhetoric. There has been wild praise for Iron Dome, the stoutheartedness of the home front, the courage those living in the south, the tremendous discipline of the Israelis, etc. After Cloud Pillar, Israel can beat Iran with one hand tied behind it.

However, it would do well to let things cool down somewhat. After all, although the Israelis have always been successful in war, throughout their modern history they have essentially only fought their “cousins” — the Arabs.

The mentality of the Persians differs greatly from that of the Arabs, despite the fact that they have a religion in common. They differ militarily, as well. And Israel’s “dizziness with success” may play a very cruel joke on it.

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