**DID ISRAEL AVERT A HAMAS MASSACRE?**

By: Adam Ciralsky

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Yossi Adoni, a village leader in Zarit, is worried. For years, residents in his small Israeli farming community, on the northern border with Lebanon, have heard drilling under their homes, late at night. His mother, Ruth, for one, says she has often been awakened by “the trembling and noise from a jackhammer.” Her next-door neighbor, Shula Asayag, insists that the subterranean vibrations have become so intense that picture frames and TV sets have crashed to the floor. “My children are afraid to come and visit me,” she explains. Adoni and other officials contend that they have heard similar stories from other towns along the border.

Nearby, Shlomo Azulai tends an Israeli apple orchard. For months he watched in disbelief as clouds of dust appeared on the ridgeline below the Lebanese town of Marwahin and steadily moved in his direction. He observed earthmovers operating in, around, and then underneath an enormous greenhouse. “After a while,” Azulai claims, “the excavator was so far underground I could no longer see it.” When he alerted the Israeli Defense Forces (I.D.F.), he says, they dismissed the moving dust clouds as “small fires”—nothing to worry about. But Azulai has reason to worry. In 2006, Hezbollah operatives positioned across the border fired a guided missile at his Toyota Hilux, driving shrapnel into his arms, torso, and lower abdomen.

Now, eight years later, Azulai and his neighbors believe Hezbollah may have pulled off a far more provocative gambit: building a tunnel under Zarit, which the group could conceivably use to send forces into Israel to massacre civilians.

What once may have sounded like rejected scenes from a remake of \*Poltergeist,\*now strike Israelis in the north as harbingers, especially after this summer’s Gaza war, which laid bare a complex of subterranean tunnels that had been dug under Israel’s southwestern border with the Gaza Strip—an area ruled by Hamas, a party whose credo calls for the destruction of the State of Israel.

The threat, indeed, is all too plausible to Israeli intelligence officials, who agreed to share with Vanity Fair the backstory of how earlier this year they may have narrowly averted their nation’s own 9/11. The alleged plan of attack (as pieced together by defense and security professionals through electronic intercepts, informants, interrogations of Hamas operatives, as well as computers and satellite imagery obtained from Hamas compounds during the war) was chilling: a surprise assault in which scores of heavily armed Hamas insurgents were supposedly set to emerge from more than a dozen cross-border tunnels and proceed to kill as many Israelis as possible.

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Khalid Mishal, the leader of Hamas, also agreed to speak to Vanity Fair, to give his perspective. He insists that such a nightmare scenario is a post-hoc justification and that employing the tunnels to kill Israeli citizens was never Hamas’s intention. Instead, he insists, his group only targets soldiers and those living on occupied territory.

The New Normal

Israelis and Palestinians have returned to what passes for normal after a 50-day war. And both Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his implacable foe, Hamas chief Khalid Mishal—a man Netanyahu tried unsuccessfully to assassinate in 1997—are declaring victory, pyrrhic as it may be. For Mishal, some 2,100 Palestinians—including key members of his high command and several hundred fighters—are dead. “Over 12,000 injured, mainly women and children,” Mishal tells Vanity Fair, in a wide-ranging interview at his residence in Doha, Qatar. “Tens of thousands of homes destroyed. Mosques, hospitals, churches, electricity and waterworks, ambulances, residential towers, entire neighborhoods destroyed.”

Throughout the war, which lasted most of July and August, Mishal spurned an Egyptian–brokered ceasefire proposal and instead instructed his people to continue firing rockets and fighting on until Israel met his demands, designed to boost his group’s sagging fortunes. In the end, with large portions of the Gaza Strip reduced to rubble by Israeli planes and artillery, he failed to win any of his big-ticket items (a new airport and seaport, and the release of Hamas prisoners held by Israel) and instead acceded to an Egyptian framework, which, had he accepted it weeks earlier (as Netanyahu had), might have spared hundreds of Palestinian lives.

Netanyahu has an entirely separate set of problems. After being accused of using excessive force in Gaza that disproportionately killed or maimed civilians, including an estimated 500 children, the U.N. Human Rights Council opened a war-crimes inquiry. In world capitals, support for Israel’s policies is waning and anti-Semitism is back with a vengeance. Across Europe, there are calls to officially recognize a Palestinian state, and last week the former Israeli ambassador to the European Union conceded, “The problem is that we are drastically losing public opinion,” in the wake of scuttled peace talks and the Gaza war.

At the same time, members of Netanyahu’s own security cabinet say he failed to go far enough to decimate or expel Hamas’s leadership once and for all. Instead, the prime minister signed what some contend was a conciliatory ceasefire. Not only did it lack Israel’s central demand—the demilitarization of Gaza—but it actually allowed building materials back in, a concession that intelligence sources fear may help Hamas reconstitute its elaborate network of tunnels, which Netanyahu himself had cited as justification for launching a ground war. As for the Israeli public, there is lingering anger that the vaunted security establishment, which Netanyahu oversees, appears to have left the nation vulnerable to an elaborate and unthinkable attack from below.

Going Underground

To much of the outside world, it was a battle of the skies, a lethal light show: Hamas relentlessly firing rockets—4,600 in all—and Israel responding with Iron Dome, a futuristic system that literally knocks them out of the sky. By any objective measure, the defense shield worked. In all, five Israeli civilians died and 127 were wounded as a result of rocket fire, and Israel’s leadership was able to buy time to plan a response. (The conflict ultimately claimed the lives of 67 Israeli soldiers.)

But according to Dr. Daphné Richemond-Barak, a law professor and leading authority on asymmetric warfare, Iron Dome may have had an unanticipated consequence for Israel. During the system’s debut, in a previous clash in 2012, she says, “Hamas saw how well Iron Dome worked in shooting down incoming rockets. They needed a new way to terrorize Israel. The tunnels gave them that.” Mishal seems to agree: “In light of the balance of power which shifted towards Israel, we had to be creative in finding innovative ways. The tunnels were one of our innovations. As they say, necessity is the mother of invention.”

The use of tunnels in war, ironically, has been a mainstay of Jewish resistance for centuries: against the Romans before Christ’s time, against the Nazis during the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising and against the British as militias fought to create what in 1948 would become the Jewish State. Other warring factions have employed tunnels in conflicts as diverse as the American Civil War, W.W. I, Korea, and Vietnam. “They’ve been used since biblical days,” Richemond-Barak argues, “but they’ve evolved into a global strategic threat”—even showing up in a surprising number of recent war zones such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Mali.

Richemond-Barak said she was particularly struck by an attack last May in which jihadists, after rigging a 350-foot-long tunnel with explosives, leveled a Syrian Army command center in Aleppo. Abu Assad, the self-professed mastermind of the operation, claimed that he got the idea from a Gazan who paid him a visit: “They said they had some success in Palestine, so I decided to try it.”

While Israel, a nuclear power, takes pride in having fielded one of the world’s most technologically advanced armies, its adversaries have charted a decidedly different course. For half a century, the Palestinian resistance has proved to be something of an incubator for the tools of unconventional warfare: hijacking, hostage-taking, suicide bombings—all highly visible terror tactics designed to attract the world’s media outlets. As a result, Israel has repeatedly been forced to adapt to its enemies’ lower-cost, higher-yield methods.

Underground networks are just the latest example. According to the Israeli Security Agency, better known by its Hebrew abbreviation, Shin Bet, Hamas began building tunnels under the Gaza Strip as early as 2000. For the most part, these were crude structures designed for one-off attacks against Israeli forces, which withdrew from Gaza in 2005. A year later, however, Hamas used just such a tunnel to sneak into Israel and kidnap a 19-year-old soldier named Gilad Shalit. “This was one of the most asymmetrical incidents in recent memory,” a senior Israeli intelligence official asserts. “One Israeli soldier was held for five and a half years and traded [in 2011] for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners.” Another top official agreed, “This was a proof of concept for them. Tunnels work.”

During Shalit’s captivity, Hamas continued to build tunnels of all shapes and sizes. These conduits, say intelligence sources, allowed the group to smuggle money, supplies, and weapons into Gaza from Egypt, send operatives out through Egypt for advanced training in Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and Malaysia, and bring mentors in from Hezbollah to teach people how to manufacture rockets—and build better tunnels. Hezbollah was particularly adept at tunneling, having learned the dark art from its patrons in Iran who have burrowed deep underground to hide nuclear facilities in places such as Fordow and Natanz.

According to the Shin Bet, Hamas took what it learned from Hezbollah—about subterranean rocket-launching sites, weapons bunkers, and command and control rooms—and kicked it up a notch, building “an intricate layout of tunnels connecting between posts, positions, mosques, training camps, and rocket launching sites.”

\*Vanity Fair’\*s team was taken to Glilot—an intelligence base north of Tel Aviv—to examine items supposedly seized from Hamas hideouts, including a wall-size satellite photo bristling with yellow Post-Its showing the names of various operatives and their assigned areas of responsibility. While the evidence Vanity Fairwas shown focused on military targets, I.D.F. spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Peter Lerner claimed they also recovered a variety of high-resolution maps that pinpointed potential sites in Israel, and included civilian areas.

Tunnel Vision

While seemingly low-tech, tunneling requires copious quantities of cash, cement, fuel, and rebar. Fortunately for Hamas, world events conspired to assist in this effort. During the Arab Spring, while Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was busy fighting for his political and personal survival, Hamas built a virtual underground super-highway to the Sinai through which it managed to import an ever-more-sophisticated arsenal, including longer-range rockets, anti-tank guided missiles, and shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles. By 2012, when Egypt elected Mohammed Morsi (the head of the Muslim Brotherhood—and a Hamas ally), Hamas was riding high. It had significantly expanded the scope and use of what has come to be known as “subterranean Gaza,” even creating a special engineering unit within its Al-Qassam Brigades to handle tunnel excavation.

In addition, Hamas created a secret commando unit, called Nukhba (the “selected ones”), and trained its men to fight and maneuver through the tunnels on foot and on small motorcycles. According to an official in the Shin Bet, which has been interrogating Hamas members who were captured during the fighting, “The offensive tunnels were top secret not only because [Hamas] had spent a fortune building them, but because they understood that once we found out about the project, there would be no turning back.” Hamas detainees have told their Israeli interrogators that they received $300 a month for excavation work and that there were two tiers of laborers. The master tunnelers were supposedly told where in Israel proper their excavation work would end up; such knowledge was not shared with the work-for-hire diggers. As for the Nukhba fighters, the Shin Bet official tells Vanity Fair, “They were an elite force . . . [trained] to execute strategic terrorist attacks. . . . [For the eventual operation, they would be] heavily armed: R.P.G.s, Kalashnikovs, M-16s, hand grenades, and night-vision equipment.” To maximize the element of surprise, they would wear—as can be seen from their own videos—I.D.F. uniforms, including mitznefet, the distinctive helmet covers worn by Israeli soldiers.

Hamas’s strategic advantage began to deteriorate last year, however, when Morsi (later charged with, among other things, spying for Hamas and Hezbollah) was overthrown in a coup. His replacement, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, immediately went about targeting the entire Muslim Brotherhood—and then Hamas. “The Egyptians started to exert real pressure,” says a senior Israeli defense official. “They destroyed nearly 1,000 smuggling tunnels between Gaza and Sinai. Think about that: 1,000 tunnels along a border that’s 13.8 kilometers (8.6 miles) long. The fact that the border is standing and didn’t cave in is a feat.”

Mishal disputes the notion that Hamas stepped up its rhetoric and war plans to counteract increased regional pressures, particularly from the new Egyptian government: “This is the Israeli version of the story,” he says, “to justify what Israel has committed in Gaza. Sadly, it is also the version of the story by some parties in the region—some are Palestinian, others, not. But it’s incorrect. War is no game; it is not an escape hatch for avoiding a few challenges.”

While the Egyptians may have laid waste to the smuggling tunnels—in some cases by literally flooding them with raw sewage—Hamas’s prized possession remained untouched: a deeply burrowed network of cross-border passageways into Israel.

Choices and Consequences

A debate is now raging about what Netanyahu’s government knew and sought to do about the threat; politicians are pushing for a formal inquiry. Yet in gauging the contentions of senior Israeli officials, it appears that the failure to address the subterranean danger more proactively was more a sin of omission than commission. The intelligence about the ongoing tunneling was substantial but not definitive; the routes were dug at varying depths, evading high-tech tools such as ground-penetrating radar. “We knew about the existence but not the extent of the tunnels and for years considered many, many proposals for how to identify them,” a top intelligence official notes. “Some critics, even some who worked [on] this issue, fault us for not accepting or adopting their solutions. But I can tell you there were many solutions being offered.”

At the same time, he says, “We were trying to solve two problems at once in the mid-2000s: tunnels and short- and medium-range rockets. In the case of Iron Dome, the solution was developed almost in parallel with the problem. With tunnels, the challenge grew faster than the remedy.”

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A year ago, that challenge was thrown into sharp relief as workers at Kibbutz Ein Hashlosha, which sits on the border with Gaza, heard digging underground and called in the I.D.F. A week later, officials announced the discovery of a massive tunnel located some 50 feet below the surface. It ran a mile and a half from the village of Abbasan Al-Saghira, in the Gaza Strip, and ended on or, rather, under, the kibbutz’s doorstep.

To see the tunnel, I drove out in the back of a seven-ton I.D.F. armored vehicle called a Ze’ev, the Hebrew word for “wolf.” From the inside, the tunnel feels like a colossal sensory-deprivation chamber. It is pitch dark and, 10 yards in, it became impossible to hear \*Vanity Fair’\*s photographer, standing steps away. Our escort, Captain Daniel, whose last name is withheld per I.D.F. regulations, explained, “They had a specific plan: 20 to 30 terrorists would emerge from the opening of the tunnel and attack the residents of Ein Hashlosha [the nearby kibbutz].”

Hamas made no effort to hide its handiwork when this passageway was unearthed in 2013. Mishal’s deputy, Moussa Abu Marzouk, took to his Facebook page, writing, “The tunnel which was revealed was extremely costly in terms of money, effort, and blood. All of this is meaningless when it comes to freeing our heroic prisoners.” He insisted, by way of explanation: “It would not have been possible to free hundreds of our prisoners without the Shalit tunnel.”

After the tunnel’s discovery, Israel halted the transfer of construction materials into Gaza, and Major General Shlomo Turgeman, the head of the I.D.F.’s Southern Command, issued a prescient warning: if Hamas were to use such a tunnel to carry out a terror attack, Israel would hit back hard and “leave Gaza looking very different.”

Last March, another tunnel was uncovered, penetrating three times farther into Israel. By April, the Shin Bet tells Vanity Fair, Israeli officials firmly believed something big was in the works—and Hamas did nothing to assuage their fears. “The occupation is hysterical and confused in the face of the resistance army’s tunnels,” said Abu Obeida, spokesman for Al-Qassam Brigades. “[B]ut we’re ready for any scenario and we’ll teach the enemy a harsh lesson.”

Today, Mishal seeks to downplay such talk: “If what Israeli leaders are claiming is correct—that Hamas dug those tunnels to attack the Israeli towns and kill civilians—how come Hamas hasn’t done that [before now or] during the war? . . . The Israeli leadership is lying. Evidence of this is that when they declared war on Gaza they did not declare the tunnels as part of the military targets. But when they discovered the tunnels, this is when they started to raise the issue. This proves that they first started the war and then looked for justifications.”

Mass Terror

Last spring, Hamas was already sensing isolation. Egypt had begun curbing Hamas’s access to everything from cigarettes to guns. And a widely touted merger with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, according to analysts in the region and Israeli security sources, had brought Gazans limited economic benefit. Some observers—in Israel, the Arab world, and the West—perceived Hamas to be on the ropes. Around the same time, intelligence about a pending attack—electronic chatter and word from informants—began setting off alarm bells inside Israel’s stereotypically anxious security establishment.

“Hamas had a plan,” says Lt. Col. Lerner, summarizing on the record what six senior intelligence officials would describe on background. “A simultaneous, coordinated, surprise attack within Israel. They planned to send 200 terrorists armed to the teeth toward civilian populations. This was going to be a coordinated attack. The concept of operations involved 14 offensive tunnels into Israel. With at least 10 men in each tunnel, they would infiltrate and inflict mass casualties.”

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As a senior military intelligence official later explained, the anticipated attack was designed with two purposes in mind. “First, get in and massacre people in a village. Pull off something they could show on television. Second, the ability to kidnap soldiers and civilians using the tunnels would give them a great bargaining chip.”

Mishal insists that “the tunnels may have been outwardly called ‘offensive tunnels,’ but in actual fact they are ‘defensive’ ones.’” When pressed to explain why most of the tunnels actually ended up under or near civilian communities or kibbutzim—not military bases—he concedes, “Yes, true. There are Israeli towns adjacent to Gaza. Have any of the tunnels been used to kill any civilian or any of the residents of such towns? No. Never! . . . [Hamas] used them either to strike beyond the back lines of the Israeli army or to raid some military sites . . . This proves that Hamas is only defending itself.”

Reports would later surface that Hamas’s main attack was planned to coincide with the Jewish New Year—Rosh Hashanah—in September 2014. “It may have been,” says a top intelligence official, in his office in the Kirya, Israel’s Pentagon. “But ultimately everything was moved up. Hamas’s grand plan for the tunnels failed because the kidnapping set things in motion before Hamas had everything ready.”

An Eye for an Eye

On June 12, 2014, three Jewish teenagers—Gilad Sha’er, Naftali Frenkel, and Eyal Yifrah—went missing while awaiting a ride home. In response, Israel arrested hundreds across the West Bank over the next 11 days, weakening Hamas’s influence and infrastructure there. On July 2, shortly after the bodies of the three teens had been found in a field near the city of Hebron, three Israelis conducted a horrific revenge attack in which they kidnapped and then burned to death a 16-year-old Palestinian boy named Mohammed Abu Khdeir.

Although a Turkish-based Hamas operative, Saleh al-Aruri, would eventually admit that members of Hamas’s Al-Qassam Brigades had been responsible for the initial abductions and murders, Mishal insists that he and Hamas’s top brass were caught off-guard by the attacks, claiming they had no advance knowledge, but defending the action nonetheless. “It turned out that a Hamas field group in the West Bank had killed those three settlers,” Mishal admits. “This was a legitimate operation . . . [but] we never gave orders to execute this operation, or to stop that one. We present general policies.”

With the Gaza economy faltering and Hamas’s lifeline to Egypt severed, Israel, according to two intelligence sources, was considering its options for launching a preemptive tunnel attack. Both sides, it seems, felt a need to act, and forcefully. Although Mishal contends that Israel instigated the initial salvo, Hamas and its affiliates had been firing rockets off and on throughout June—aimed largely at the sparsely populated western Negev. Then, in early July, the group shot nearly 200 rockets toward more populated areas, including Israel’s largest southern city, Beersheba.

On July 7, Israeli jets bombed a tunnel that began in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, and exited near Kibbutz Kerem Shalom, killing seven members of Hamas, who were trapped inside. To outward observers, it looked as if the casualties may have been incidental. But highly placed government sources tell Vanity Fair they feared these operatives were the first wave. “When the operation started, we expected the mass attack in July,” a senior military intelligence official explains. “We suspected they would hurry up and do it during the air war, before the ground operation.”

Hamas considered the men who died in the tunnel bombing to be among its most elite, warning publicly, “The enemy will pay a tremendous price.” The next day, all hell broke loose, with Hamas firing some 150 rockets. Over the next 10 days, Hamas would send some 1,500 more, while the Israeli air force and navy would pound sites in Gaza with little letup. Despite warnings by Israel to leave their homes, thousands of civilians were caught in the crossfire. Human-rights groups charged that Israel failed to exercise sufficient restraint when hitting populated areas. Israel argues that Hamas used local citizens as human shields and fired rockets from civilian areas.

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“Netanyahu has perpetrated a real holocaust in Gaza,” Mishal now says—offering his assessment, as it so happens, in an interview conducted in Qatar on the first day of the Jewish New Year. “He is replicating what Hitler did to the Jews in the 30s and 40s.” Netanyahu, for his part, would stand on the floor of the U.N. General Assembly last month and declare, “When it comes to their ultimate goals, Hamas is ISIS and ISIS is Hamas.”

As the air war raged, Israeli troops sought to find and neutralize all cross-border tunnels, even though they were uncertain about their precise locations. Colonel Ghassan Alian, a Druze, is the first non-Jew ever to command the prestigious Golani Brigade (and the highest-ranking member of his faith in I.D.F. history). He says that there were not only long “offensive tunnels” but also countless, smaller “defensive or tactical tunnels” in the Gaza Strip that were used by Hamas as supply channels, escape routes, or hiding places for Hamas fighters.

Once the I.D.F. entered Gaza, dodging R.P.G.s and fire from heavy machine guns, says Alian, they came to a harsh realization: “Entire houses were rigged to explode and collapse on our soldiers. There were all sorts of explosive devices. Some [were set to be] triggered by cell phones and other remote controls. Others were pressure activated and hidden under ordinary looking house tiles.” His cohort, Sergeant Rafi (whose last name has also been withheld for security reasons), concurs, “We went to many houses and found tunnels inside houses, outside houses, defensive tunnels, offensive tunnels. They spent years planning for this.”

Golani’s mission was to destroy what intelligence officials believed were four particularly lethal tunnels that began in the Gaza Strip town of Shejaiya and ended a stone’s throw from Israeli kibbutzim. Shejaiya had long been Hamas’s first line of defense and Israel’s efforts to warn its 100,000 residents to flee only reinforced its symbolic and strategic importance in Hamas’s eyes. “In this war,” claims Alian, “the biggest fight, the hardest battle, was for control of that neighborhood.”

I.D.F. soldiers in Shejaiya and elsewhere quickly came to understand that tactical tunnels presented as imminent a threat as the strategic cross-border variety they were sent to find. On August 1—two weeks into Israel’s ground campaign—Lieutenant Matan (who offers only his first name) was in the Gaza town of Rafah, when he and his fellow soldiers heard shots, he says in his first interview about the incident. Tracing those sounds to a nearby guard post, a tunnel opening was discovered. He and another soldier clambered down three meters, descending into the darkness. After firing some warning rounds, he stopped in the dank passageway, only to find portions of a bloodied uniform belonging to a 23-year-old lieutenant named Hadar Goldin, later determined to have been killed and his body kidnapped, according to the I.D.F. spokesperson’s office. (Goldin, unbeknownst to his abductors, turned out to have been a relative of Israel’s Defense Minister, Moshe Ya’alon.) “The Hamas operatives were like ghosts—honestly, like ghosts,” recalls Golani’s Sgt. Rafi. “If they wanted to shoot, they came out of a tunnel, shot, and ducked back into the tunnel.”

Israel’s elite Golani and Givati brigades eventually dismantled much of subterranean Gaza, but at considerable cost—with Golani alone losing 14 soldiers in the initial hours of the ground war. The Palestinian town of Shejaiya, meanwhile, would lose 60 civilians, its landscape, from certain vantage points, left looking almost apocalyptic. As for Rafah, Hamas officials allege that the I.D.F. bombed indiscriminately during its search for Lt. Goldin, resulting in the deaths of dozens of Palestinian civilians.

Over the Border

All told, Israeli military and intelligence sources say that they found and destroyed 32 tunnels within Gaza, 14 of which crossed into Israel, and believe that they managed to stave off a mass terror attack. Still, Hamas fighters, before it was all through, succeeded in using its underground network to emerge inside Israel and pull off several brazen attacks that claimed the lives of 11 I.D.F. soldiers.

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Israel’s security services are now wrestling with what Donald Rumsfeld famously called a series of “known unknowns.” They consider Hamas severely hamstrung (even after reaffirming its ties to the West Bank–based Palestinian Authority by forming a unity government), having abetted the suffering of its citizens and having lost substantial regional prestige. (Many Arab nations remained uncommonly silent as the Israelis struck Gaza.)

Mishal, however, remains defiant. He contends that the world, repulsed by the carnage, has rushed to support the Palestinian cause and the people of Gaza. In contrast to Israel, he says, “we won the ‘moral’ battle. We focused on targeting the troops who attacked us, while they killed the women and children. . . . This is the real image of the battle.” Mishal’s unity-government partner Mahmoud Abbas, head of the Palestinian Authority, takes an antithetical view. Last week he told Egyptian television, “I don’t delude myself by saying, ‘It was a victory.’ What victory? . . . For what did we suffer through those 50 days? We had 2,200 fatalities, 10,000 injured, 40,000 homes and facilities and factories destroyed. Tell me, what did we achieve?”

When asked how Hamas’s purported desire to spare civilians comported with the fact that it fired 4,600 rockets at population centers in Israel, Mishal explains, “When rockets are fired out of Gaza, they are fired on military targets. The accuracy of such rockets is limited. So, they sometimes miss their targets. That’s why, when we acquire the smart, accurate rockets, striking of military targets will be more accurate.”

Israel’s troops, meanwhile, have moved north. On \*Vanity Fair’\*s recent visit, some of the same soldiers who had swept into Gaza are now manning a forward operating base in the Golan Heights—a contested mountainous area between Israel and Syria. The Israelis watch as the Syrian Army (unsuccessfully) battles rebels from the Nusra Front (the Syrian arm of al-Qaeda). These insurgents, after kidnapping and later expelling U.N. peacekeepers in September, have reignited a border that had remained peaceful for four decades. Recently, Israel shot down a Syrian aircraft that strayed into its territory. And to make matters worse, ISIS elements are entrenched farther north, attempting to establish a caliphate, using war-torn Syria and Iraq as their base.

Tensions have also escalated on Israel’s other northern border—with Lebanon. In the past week a member of the Syrian opposition was quoted as telling CNN that Hezbollah appears determined to flex its military muscle on the Israeli border. I.D.F. troops have fortified their positions there. And Israel has other worries as well. Sources in these northern neighborhoods tell Vanity Fair that the I.D.F. is planning to send an engineering team to one of the Israeli towns whose residents have been awakened by the subterranean clamor. Although some officials are publicly skeptical (possibly to avoid alarming residents and parry criticism that they have ignored another threat), privately they say they have serious concerns about what Hezbollah might have in the works. A recent account in the Arab newsmagazine Al Watan al Arabi quotes a Hezbollah member as asserting: “Quality-wise, [our tunnels] are on par with the metro tunnels in the major European cities.”

“We say in the I.D.F. that ‘procedures are written in blood,’” says one senior intelligence officer. Harkening back to previous aboveground attacks by Hezbollah, he continues, “I can see them doing it again and going underground to do it.”

And the goal of at least one of these Israeli platoons scheduled to arrive on the border with Lebanon? To plow deep into the ground to find and, hopefully, silence the source of those noises in the night.