

## Conference Call with Col. Grisha Yakubovich

**Omri Ceren:** Thank you for that and thank you all for joining us today and thank you in advance to our speaker, who is going to be running us through some of the humanitarian dimensions of what's going on in the Gaza Strip specifically, and more broadly between the Israelis and the Palestinians. As you know there are huge debates, as there are every time that hostilities flare up between the Israelis and the Palestinians, over the degree to which Israel is taking measures to ensure that Palestinian civilians are minimally, remain minimally impacted by the hostilities to the greatest extent possible, and we wanted to make sure that you had access to somebody who could walk you through what those measures are, what the challenges are, and what the current situation is. And for that today, we have Col. Grisha Yakubovich. He is the head of the Civil Department of COGAT. COGAT is the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories. It's the unit of the Israeli Ministry of Defense that is charged with ensuring that humanitarian activities continue to occur more broadly with coordinating civilian issues between the government of Israel, the IDF, the international community, the Palestinian Authority, and so on. We'll do this the way that we usually do these calls which is: the speaker will give the overview and then as this is occurring if you want to ask questions, go ahead and email them to [press@theisraelproject.org](mailto:press@theisraelproject.org), [press@theisraelproject.org](mailto:press@theisraelproject.org) and based on the traffic that we get during the call and how the queue lines up, we'll figure out how to do Q&A as the call progresses. So, on that note I'd like to hand things over to the colonel for an overview of what's going on. Colonel Yakubovich?

**Col. Grisha Yakubovich:** Hi Omri - good morning everybody. For us here in Israel this is afternoon. Thank you for the introduction. A few things that I would like to share with you. We entered into this operation with some lessons that we have learned from the Operation Cast Lead. The main four lessons that we already are implementing in this operation are like so: The first one are the crossing points. During the whole operation the two major crossing points are open under fire, under mortar shells, under the fire of snipers, under tactical operation movements of the Israeli soldiers, even trying to protect the Israeli civilian workers that are operating those crossing points. So Erez is for, Erez is actually a pedestrian crossing point - it serves patients that leave Gaza to be treated in Israel and Israeli hospitals, and of course it serves the international community that are going in and out during this operation into Gaza and back to Israel. We also authorized Palestinians that have international nationality or international passports also under the request of the diplomats in Israel, to leave [inaudible] Gaza. And we have something like more than 800 Palestinians that left Gaza Strip, and we evacuated them from Gaza. Kerem Shalom crossing point is actually the major one to provide goods to the Gaza Strip, so during the whole operation goods entered into Gaza and the majority is food, diesel, fuel, so

people would be able to live their lives normally as possible under a very, very major operation, in between Hamas that is using the civilian [inaudible] places to open fire on us. The second lesson, or the second thing that we learned and implemented already, we have civil affairs field officers that are actually assigned to every battalion and - actually more than that - from the level of the battalion up to the level of a division, and they are actually a part of the battalion, a part of the fighting forces to make sure that civilian needs will be treated as fast as possible under operational conditions - that is not so easy - and that they will provide those people there, that are being used unfortunately by Hamas, to interfere in this operation or to be a shield, a human shield, when the IDF are trying to deal with terror. We have one example to share with you. We have dozens of examples. Sixteen people a few days ago, the majority of them at the age of [inaudible], and more than that, that came to our civil affairs field officer in the north of Gaza to ask for some help, and unfortunately one of them was booby-trapped and he tried to explode himself and to kill our officer.

The third lesson that we learned: We opened a field hospital at the early stages of this operation and the hospital is at Erez crossing point. Unfortunately Hamas is threatening people, threatening ambulances, threatening doctors *not* to send wounded to this hospital. And from their reasons, they don't want to have people get the better treatment or whatever. But this hospital is occupied with the most advanced equipment that the State of Israel can provide, so we will help those poor people that Hamas is refusing to evacuate them.

The fourth lesson that we learned, and we are already implementing, is the effort of infrastructure. The damage under fire is a problematic one, it's something that we are trying to avoid but we cannot hit a terrorist without having some damage. So damages are in electricity, in water systems, in sewage systems, communication systems. And our understanding is that if we will not do whatever we can do, and have this effort to repair some of those problems in the infrastructure, we already [inaudible] to fix 32 infrastructural repairs, totally, from the beginning of this operation and we are going to have some few more this night and tomorrow morning. We understand that is will not do that, this is one of the things that can stop an operation and that can harm our legitimacy as the IDF and the State of Israel. Just to let you understand what is the meaning of dealing with the coordination issue, I will give you two examples from what I've gone through under this operation, so I will be clear. We have some lines that are supplying electricity to the Gaza Strip. This is actually the majority of the electricity that the people of Gaza get- from Israel. They have also a power plant, and they are getting some little bit of electricity from Egypt, but the majority is from Israel. Unfortunately, the [inaudible] lines fall, some of the wires were cut because of Hamas missiles into Israel. From that moment, a chain reaction had begun. When five lines fall, it impacts immediately on the other lines. So we need to fix the lines, and I will take for example a line that is called the Romach line, we need to coordinate with the Israeli electricity company so

they will be ready to fix the lines. And they are civilians, let's not forget that. And then we have to coordinate with the Palestinian electricity company, and then we have to coordinate it with ICRC. ICRC is the Red Cross. And then we have to coordinate it with the PA that sits in Ramallah so they will allow those teams in Gaza to have this repair. At the end we have to coordinate it with our field officers, with the battalion on the ground, and you can just imagine how many coordinations we have to make only to fix a wire so the people in Gaza, at the end, will have electricity, so their civilian basic systems will continue working. So of course, we try to fix some of the lines, though in some occasions, Hamas refused to coordinate those repairs. Some others they opened fire. We need to make sure that our Israeli IT workers will be safe, this is also a very important mission. This is an effort, OK? This is an effort that we are investing a lot of energy in that and this is an ongoing effort. In the second example that I will give you that I did personally, we had some few days ago a request from IC, from ICRC, the Red Cross, to have a ceasefire in Shuja'iya neighborhood. You probably all heard about this event there. So after negotiations with ICRC, and they are talking to Hamas and we are talking to the highest levels on our side, I found myself at the Red Cross headquarters, sitting inside the room, sitting with the head of Israeli delegation. So, it was something like, the guy from Hamas is calling to ICRC asking for the ceasefire, I'm calling to my commander, Major General Poli [Mordechai], that is talking directly to the Chief of Staff Benny Gantz. And we get the authorization to have the ceasefire for two hours. I told that to the Red Cross, they informed Hamas, and then from Tel Aviv I was in touch directly with the brigade commander and I told him that the ceasefire is authorized. It took them only not more than twenty minutes that they violated the ceasefire, opened fire from a hospital on our soldiers. Unfortunately, one of them was injured badly. I am happy to say that he is alive and not dead but he is still in a critical situation in Israel. It took them another fifteen minutes to violate the ceasefire again, and from a different place, they opened fire again on one of our soldiers and he was also injured badly. And I am happy to say on this event that he is alive. But we decided to continue with the ceasefire because we understood that there are many people there, many people who are injured that need to be evacuated. We succeeded by this direct coordination with the highest levels in Israel and with the lowest operational levels by having a direct contact with the Red Cross that were talking to Hamas people, in spite of not respecting the ceasefire to evacuate more than 25,000 people from that area, they say something like 300 people from being wounded, or whatever, evacuate from wounded. And we extended the ceasefire for another 2 hours because we understood that the situation there is going to be critical. And, at the end, we had to close this window because Hamas were not respecting the rules that we decided, and we continued the engagement and operation [inaudible] hours after the ceasefire. Thank you. If you have questions, I'm ready.

**Omri Ceren:** Thank you for that. On that note, I think we'll do questions by e-mail. Go ahead and e-mail in questions that you have to [press@theisraelproject.org](mailto:press@theisraelproject.org), [press@theisraelproject.org](mailto:press@theisraelproject.org). And Colonel, a couple of questions have come in during the call. One has to do with something that you didn't bring up, but that COGAT has been in the news for, and that's of interest to journalists on this side of the Atlantic, which gets asked about in the State Department all the time, which is: What are the procedures, and where are, where is the army – what is the current situation on -- the evacuation of American citizens from the Gaza Strip? There's an estimated 300 American citizens in the Gaza Strip, and what are the procedures for them asking to be removed, how does COGAT participate in helping them get removed if they want, and are there any updates on what's going on with American citizens in that area?

**Col. Grisha Yakubovich:** OK, the procedures are simple: I'm here directly in touch with Ambassador Shapiro and with his DCM Bill Grant and we succeeded under their request to evacuate the people that we have been asked to evacuate; we assisted them. The procedures are very simple. All they have to do is to apply to, to e-mail. After, they even sit with us in our offices, give us the name and we are trying to do it as fast as possible. Let's not forget: Last time that we did it already twice, Hamas is not sitting tight behind and waiting that this will be completed; Hamas are opening fire even after we coordinate those people to leave Gaza, so this is not a simple operation. We hope that at the coming days the rest of the list will be able to leave Gaza as fast as possible and we are dealing with that personally as COGAT because this is very important to us, especially the request of the American embassy in Israel.

**Omri Ceren:** The next question has to do with something that you gestured at but you didn't get at. A lot of, in the past, and this is now becoming a huge issue, a lot of the humanitarian supplies that COGAT helped facilitate into, the entrance of into the Gaza Strip, especially cement, was diverted by Hamas for military purposes. Are there any discussions within COGAT about what the post-war environment may look like, and how future humanitarian efforts can avoid repeating the same problem, which is giving dual-use materials that Hamas then takes for military purposes?

**Col. Grisha Yakubovich:** If you remember the Marmara event, the policy before the Marmara event was very simple toward Gaza: Nothing is allowed to enter except some certain things that we allowed. This policy created a lot of delegitimacy against Israel so after the Marmara, we changed the policy and actually, what you said, that everything is allowed to enter the Gaza except dual-use: cement and building materials were a part of that. But we feel that a special procedure for international community who build projects inside Gaza so we allowed companies under the request of [inaudible] to build projects inside Gaza. The cement that entered to Gaza during all that period was cement and building

materials that came from Egypt, from the tunnels, into Gaza. After, let's say after the last, the last tunnel that we found -- we found the first tunnel at October 13 and the second one I think was found at February -- just to let you understand what is the meaning about the tunnel; we found the last tunnel it was something like 2, 2.4 kilometers. By the way, I just have to mention that after Pillar of Defense operation, and the understanding that the Egyptians were part of that, we allowed some cement and other [inaudible] to the private sector inside Gaza. And then we found the tunnels, so we tried to estimate what is the meaning of the tunnels. How much, how much money does it cost, or what can be done? So just to let you understand: One tunnel is something like 300 tons of cement [inaudible]. What can we build with 300 tons, 360 by the way, probably more accurate, they could build with 300 tons of cement -- something like a big clinic, three stores high, three floors high, and this is the [inaudible] that Hamas prefers to get the cement and build the tunnels, instead of building maybe a clinic, or building a school, and Hamas preferred that international community money will not be used to build those clinic or to build those schools, and they took those building materials to build those tunnels. So now we've found, I think already something like 42 tunnels, so just imagine what could Hamas build for the people of Gaza if they would use this cement and building materials not for tunnels. I don't think that they will have or they would need so much money from the donors, they could use the money maybe to equip clinics, or to equip schools, and not to build those tunnels.

**Omri Ceren:** The third question we have is about something we talked about earlier: the way that ceasefires get implemented. So you talked about who talks to whom, but I was wondering if you could go back and give us one more view of what actually happens politically and then on the ground when the Israelis decide that they will embrace a ceasefire. Where does the decision begin, who gives the orders to stand down, and then what does COGAT do during the ceasefires; who do they work with, who do they coordinate with?

**Col. Grisha Yakubovich:** Sorry, I think we had some problems with the line. Could you ask it again?

**Omri Ceren:** During ceasefires, when a ceasefire is ordered, what does COGAT do on the ground? Who is COGAT working with? What does it look like during the hours of the ceasefire? What is COGAT doing during ceasefires?

**Col. Grisha Yakubovich:** A ceasefire, this is something that we as COGAT use to stable the civilian situation, OK. This is the main use that we are trying with the [inaudible]. It means that we will coordinate with the UN, we will coordinate with the Red Cross, we will coordinate with the Palestinians. So the moment we know that there, a ceasefire will be authorized in a certain place or in the whole area, that will be the moment that will help us a lot, and it will make our job a little bit easier to coordinate with everybody, to put assistance in, to evacuate

the injured, to allow coordinations to fix electricity lines and water, and communication and sewage.

But you know, I will use this question, if you don't mind, and I will try to answer a full answer: What does Hamas do when we have the ceasefire? OK, so we have seen Hamas, for the last ceasefire - we had one ceasefire in Shuja'iya, and we had one humanitarian pause. So we as COGAT, with the IDF, with the international community in Gaza, implemented huge efforts, to stabilize the civilians, or the situation of those [inaudible] civilians, and what we see is Hamas using ambulances to move the terrorists, we see Hamas bringing more forces, bringing more arms, and preparing themselves for the next battle, or for the night battle, or whatever.

And I will use it also again to speak a little bit of the relationship between Hamas and the population. I think that you've seen that and know that they use those poor people as a shield. They force people to go up to the roof. We are sending people a lot to leave an area, to evacuate a building, to go to a certain place because we want to react and we know from people, we are talking to the people that are crying, and saying we can do nothing, we are forced to stay here, please help us, and other things. And I have dozens of examples and records that we recorded, of poor people that are probably more afraid from Hamas than they are afraid from us. And we use, we use many, many ways to try and to help those people and to warn them in advance, so we will minimize, to minimum, to minimize [inaudible] the civilian casualties in Gaza. The ones that are responsible for [inaudible] the casualties are actually Hamas.

We throw paper from airplanes, we call to people in their houses, we have a special system, a special way, to announce before we attack a house that a terrorist lives in that house, and from that house he is operating other forces to shoot missiles into Tel Aviv. So if someone is blamed for those people, all those civilians, that are injured or that are stuck in places, it is only Hamas as a terrorist organization that don't have a value to human life, and we are the ones that are defending ourselves, and we are not [inaudible] looking on our civilians in Israel [inaudible], but we are defending also, and trying to defend those people that are in Gaza under Hamas terrorism. I'm sorry for you that you asked me a short question and that the answer was long.

**Omri Ceren:** Not at all. One last question and then we will wrap up. I know that COGAT has in the past, had been in tension with the UN refugee organization, both in general and specifically about their schools. There's been news, obviously, over the course of this week, about rockets being stored in UNRWA schools. And now rockets disappearing. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the relationship in the past that COGAT has had with providing materials specifically to Gaza's educational system, materials for textbooks,

things like that. What is the role that COGAT plays in making sure that educational materials end up in the Gaza Strip?

**Col. Grisha Yakubovich:** Well, this is an excellent question, and a very delicate one. My answer will not be short and will not be so simple because there are two aspects to what you've asked. On one hand, if the UN would not be in Gaza, I believe that the situation of the people in Gaza will be much, much worse than it is today. So actually they are very important players here, to make sure that civilians will get their basic needs, refugees, they are providing food and actually, to be honest with you, if they would not do that, I don't know who would do it. Either Israel would have to do it or, or somebody else. So they're actually, on one hand, implementing a very, very important mission.

Now, let's not forget, they are also working inside Gaza. The majority of their workers are Palestinians that are under Hamas terror regime, that are [inaudible], afraid, and they cannot really do much living under those circumstances. On the other hand, yes, we talk to UNRWA and the UN and we said, if your facilities in the Gaza coordinates are sensitive ones - and we have to be careful not to harm them, and not to shoot at them, and we are doing all we can to avoid from hitting them - be aware that you cannot, that you cannot allow Hamas to use those places for terror events or for terror acts. So, yes, we've seen pictures of the approximately twenty rockets that Hamas brought into a UN school in refugee camp [inaudible]. We were quite annoyed that Hamas called the Hamas police - that the UN, UNRWA called the Hamas police and told them to take those rockets. On the other hand, I don't know if I would do something else. They have nobody else to apply to. We understood that, in another school in Jabalia, they found another something like four rockets. After a few hours, we got a call from UNRWA and they said when we came to alert about it, and we came back, we, we didn't find those rockets. Somehow, they vanished.

So I'm trying to answer you a very balanced and honest answer. Because on one hand they are important- they are actually the ones now that are holding those people who evacuated from their houses, so they will not injured, and on the other hand, Hamas is using their cover as a UN organization, by bringing missiles to schools or by using empty bags that were delivered to refugees for food, like flour, and after those bags were empty, they used them to hide the sand from the tunnels that they dug, so when the bags were out on the truck, if an IDF airplane looked at it, the image was that this is a UN truck taking some UN products somewhere and that was a cover to dig those tunnels.

**Omri Ceren:** That is exactly thirty minutes and it's all the time we have today. Thank you everybody who joined us on the call, thank you, Colonel, for taking the time to go over these issues with us. If anybody has any follow-up questions you can go ahead and find us at [press@theisraelproject.org](mailto:press@theisraelproject.org). And thank you again everybody.