

BICOM Briefing

Israel and Hamas: between violence and ceasefires

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The Recent Violence

Violence between Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Israel escalated on Tuesday 29 May when 180 missiles and mortars were fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel - the largest attack since Operation Protective Edge in 2014. In response, Israel bombed 65 Hamas and PIJ targets in Gaza, including military compounds, munitions warehouses, drone facilities and naval positions, which the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) said contained “advanced, unmanned submarine vessels, capable of maritime infiltration and carrying out maritime terror attacks”. The IDF also destroyed a tunnel beneath the Kerem Shalom Crossing built to infiltrate into Israel and transfer munitions to Egypt. This was the tenth Hamas tunnel the IDF has located and destroyed since October 2017. No deaths were reported on either side.

The violence was triggered on Tuesday 29 May when PIJ fired 27 missiles at Israeli communities near the Gaza border, with one exploding near a kindergarten, which was empty at the time. It followed a series of events between 25 and 28 May, including a successful attempt by Palestinians to infiltrate into Israel, and PIJ fighters planting an improvised explosive device near Israel’s border fence, to which the IDF responded by targeting a military observation post, killing three PIJ operatives. Palestinian Islamic Jihad is ideologically aligned to Iran, which provides \$70m a year in funding support. This has led some analysts to believe that PIJ’s actions this week reflect an attempt by Iran to initiate a conflagration on Israel’s southern border.

The current round of violence ended on Wednesday morning, after reports of a ceasefire understanding between Israel and Hamas via Egyptian mediators. Palestinian media quoted a Hamas spokesperson who said that “a consensus was reached to return to the ceasefire understandings after many hours of mediation,” while a Palestinian official said the terms of understanding did not go beyond a “restoration of calm on both sides”. The IDF said it would respect the ceasefire, provided missile fire from Gaza ends.

Yet despite the restored calm, Hamas has threatened more violent disturbances along the border. In an interview with a Kuwaiti newspaper over the weekend, Hamas leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar specified that demonstrations / riots are planned for four

consecutive days beginning on 5 June, known as Naksa Day (marking the anniversary of the 1967 Six-Day War), and running until 8 June, which is Iranian al-Quds Day. These signify a continuation of the demonstrations / riots that began on 30 March.

Humanitarian aid for Gaza and its challenges

Israel and the international community are acutely aware of the pressing need to provide humanitarian relief to Gaza. At the end of January, the 15-member Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee met in Brussels to discuss the severe humanitarian and economic challenges within Gaza. US Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt tweeted that he “spoke with EU Heads of Mission and representatives from Norway, Switzerland, Canada, and Australia to Israel” and reiterated that the US “will work together with our friends and allies in Europe and beyond to advance peace”. At the meeting, Israel presented a \$1bn reconstruction plan, which included improving Gaza’s desalination plants (\$710m), electricity lines (\$36m), gas pipelines (\$80m), and upgrading the Erez industrial park on the Israeli border.

Many Israeli ideas for humanitarian projects for Gaza have been discussed in recent years with practical steps detailed in previous BICOM and *Fathom* publications. [Grisha Yakubovich](#), a former senior officer in COGAT (Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories) proposed in December 2016 that Israel could extend a gas pipeline from its own gas network to Gaza – because it would guarantee a constant supply of electricity – and would subsequently increase international donors’ willingness to invest in critical infrastructure projects. Former director of the National Security Council [Giora Eiland](#) called for the establishment of a new sea port. And in August 2016, BICOM’s Senior Visiting Fellow, [Michael Herzog](#), recommended a series of energy, water and sewage projects, as well as strengthening Gaza’s economy. These include: bringing the existing power station in Gaza to its full capacity (from about 70 to 140 MW); rehabilitating the electricity transmission system inside Gaza; connecting Gaza to Israel’s natural gas transmission system (via the Gaza power plant); and establishing

a desalination plant. In the more immediate timeframe, it could include: providing water from one of Israel's existing desalination plants in the Mediterranean; activating the existing waste water plant in Beit Lahiya in northern Gaza, which could deal with one third of Gaza's wastewater; and building another waste water plant in central Gaza. COGAT presented a list of humanitarian projects at the recent donors' conference in Brussels.

There are a number of major structural and political challenges to alleviating the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

The main challenge preventing reconstruction is *Hamas's history of diverting reconstruction materials for military purposes*. Since the end of Operation Protective Edge in August 2014, Hamas has invested approximately 20 per cent of its budget on its military build-up, spending approximately \$42.5m per year on tunnels. The group's military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, numbers 15,000–20,000 fighters and possesses close to 10,000 missiles – most of which have a 20-40km range.

Hamas also continues to reject the internationally-accepted Quartet conditions for negotiations: that a Palestinian interlocutor must recognise Israel; abide by previous diplomatic agreements (such as the Oslo Accords); and renounce violence as a means of achieving goals. Accepting these conditions would allow the international community to open a dialogue with the group. Hamas rejects the Oslo Accords and asserts that resistance for the liberation of Palestine will remain “a legitimate right, a duty and an honour”.

The international community is reluctant to invest more money in the Strip as long as Hamas is in charge. Yet the failure of the recent Palestinian reconciliation process – which Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) blame on one another – means that a return of the PA to Gaza is looking increasingly unlikely.

Israel fears that Hamas will use Israeli/international gestures to strengthen itself. There are also domestic-political concerns of forging a major agreement with Hamas without an understanding on a prisoner exchange, which would involve the return of the remains of two IDF soldiers and two civilians being held by Hamas.

Towards a comprehensive ceasefire?

Despite these challenges, *Israeli Channel 10 News reported that serious ceasefire talks, which would include reconstruction of Gaza, are being facilitated separately by Egypt and Qatar*, as Hamas seeks to translate the recent turmoil into diplomatic achievements and Israel seeks to alleviate some of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Qatar was reportedly responsible for Hamas taking down its protest tents and cancelling riots that were planned to be held on 15 May (Nakba Day). Driven by the hope for a better relationship with Washington, Cairo and Riyadh via a stronger relationship with Israel, the Gulf statelet is trying to forge understandings between Israel and Hamas.

As talks continue, the framework for a short-term ceasefire agreement is becoming clearer. Israel reportedly presented a number of demands, including: no rocket fire by any organisations; no tunnel construction; no entry into the so-called “security perimeter” (the buffer zone west of the border fence); and the resolution of the soldiers' remains and captives issue. In return, Israel is prepared to significantly ease the travel restrictions at the border crossings, help infrastructure projects to begin to improve Gaza's humanitarian situation and to allow more cargo to enter the Strip, provided this isn't exploited by Hamas to build up its military capability. The Egyptians are also prepared to significantly ease restrictions at the Rafah border crossing. What the current discussions do signify is that while an ambitious long-term ceasefire will be near impossible to obtain, an arrangement that leads to a calm border in return for some reconstruction may be possible.

Such a framework – if agreed – would be significant for two reasons.

The agreement would end the “demilitarisation for reconstruction” principle. One significant component is that Israel is willing to drop its previous demand for a long-term ceasefire with Hamas - the full demilitarisation of the Gaza Strip. While serious questions remain as to whether achieving Hamas's demilitarisation is possible, (or even whether the much lower bar of preventing Hamas's remilitarisation is achievable) this proposed quid pro quo has been the leading strategic principle for alleviating the humanitarian problems of Gaza since it was first

detailed in a paper by Shlomo Brom and Udi Dekel from the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). Following the 2014 war, *Fathom* interviewed a number of experts to discuss the principle, including [Asher Susser](#), [Matthew Levitt](#), [Jonathan Spyer](#), [Michael Herzog](#), [Emily Landau](#), [Einat Wilf](#), [Benedetta Berti](#) and [Gershon Baskin](#). At the current time, it seems like many in the Israeli government – although pointedly not Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman – are willing to drop the demand.

The agreement would also reflect a *weakening of PA President Mahmoud Abbas and his claim to represent the people of Gaza*. Despite Hamas control on the ground, traditionally Abbas has been considered the official Palestinian interlocutor, especially as the Oslo Accords define the West Bank and Gaza as a single territorial unit. Since Hamas violently took over Gaza in 2007 neither Israel nor the international community has been willing to de-facto recognise a separate political entity that exists in the Gaza Strip separate from the West Bank. However, with Abbas having enforced financial sanctions on Gaza – welfare cuts, slashing salaries, temporarily reducing its payment for electricity supplied by Israel – the Palestinian reconciliation dead in the water, and the humanitarian crisis getting worse, the international community may become increasingly convinced of the pressing need to alleviate the situation even without Abbas.

Looking forward - what to expect

With renewed discussion of a longer-term ceasefire, the next key dates will be 5-8 June and the violent demonstrations along the border promised by Hamas leader Sinwar. One key question will be whether Hamas can bring tens of thousands of people to the border, as past numbers have been less than the organisation hoped for. Another will be whether violent demonstrations will spread to the West Bank.

Despite this past week's violence, both sides seem to have carefully calibrated their responses to one another, with no casualties reported from IDF strikes or Hamas/PIJ missiles. If this were to change – either by accident or design – the two sides could quickly find themselves spiralling into a serious conflict.

A more comprehensive ceasefire along the principles described above is a possibility, although it may fall apart over the difficulties of agreeing a potential prisoner exchange, and the strategic consequences of bypassing the PA. Alternatively, the Trump administration may seek to forge understandings over Gaza in the framework of presenting its long-awaited peace plan over the summer.

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