

BICOM Briefing

Assessing the latest conflict in Gaza

By Michael Herzog

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Introduction

The recent flare-up of hostilities (November 11-13) on the Israel-Gaza front, was the most severe since the last major round of armed conflict between Israel and Hamas in the summer of 2014. Hamas and other armed Palestinian factions fired around 500 missiles and mortar shells from Gaza into Israel in less than two days, while Israel carried out strikes against 160 targets in Gaza.

Background

This conflict had been expected for some time. Hamas initiated violent riots and demonstrations along the border with Israel in May, trying to breach the border fence under the banner of the “March of Return”. Israel and Hamas have been oscillating between sliding towards a military confrontation and subscribing to a programme to stabilise the situation. Both Israel and Hamas have been subjected to competing pressures in both directions. Hamas initiated the riots in order to extricate itself from the dire straits of the acute economic and humanitarian crises it has navigated Gaza into since it seized control of the Strip eleven years ago, and force economic and humanitarian solutions for the area. Facing mounting pressures from Gaza, Israel felt compelled to forcibly restore deterrence and deny Hamas rewards for the violence it started, yet realised that humanitarian solutions for the Gazan population are an integral part of stabilisation. Meanwhile, Egypt and the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process have been working hard to develop indirect understandings between the parties to provide a durable ceasefire and significant economic-humanitarian solutions for Gaza.

It had appeared as though these mediation efforts would prevail. Egypt stepped up its mediation efforts, including on the ground in Gaza, and dropped its immediate conditionality between a Gaza rehabilitation programme and the Strip’s takeover by the Palestinian Authority (PA) through inter-Palestinian reconciliation

(whose chances appear slim in the foreseeable future). Qatar agreed to send significant funds to Gaza in order to increase the supply of electricity and pay the salaries of civil servants for six months. At the same time Israel and Egypt softened their attitude towards the Qatari role, notwithstanding their reservations regarding Qatari support of Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. Ultimately, Qatar was the only party willing to pay the funds required for a stabilisation programme in Gaza. It probably did so to improve its standing with the US and in the region, given existing tensions with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

Qatar’s funds paid for additional turbines to be operated in Gaza’s power station, increasing the hours of electricity from four to 8-10 and sometimes up to 12-16 hours a day. For its part, Hamas managed Friday demonstrations along the border with much less violent friction than usual (though there were still some attempts to breach the border fence and throw explosive charges at the Israel Defence Forces [IDF]). Hamas did not extinguish the fire but only lowered the flames, yet there was a sense that both sides were moving toward a more stable situation.

The flare-up

The immediate eruption was triggered by a covert IDF intelligence-collection operation inside Gaza that was exposed (11 Nov) and escalated into an exchange of fire, resulting in the death of seven Hamas combatants (including a battalion commander) and an IDF Lt. Colonel. Hamas responded by escalating rather than containing the situation, yet did so in a calculated manner to avert an all-out major confrontation with Israel. First, it conducted an ambush on an Israeli bus carrying IDF soldiers alongside the border with Gaza by firing a Kornet anti-tank missile at the bus – severely wounding an Israeli soldier (there is a debate in Israel whether Hamas deliberately fired only after the soldiers disembarked so as to

minimise the chances of escalation). Hamas and other factions then fired nearly 500 rockets into southern Israel. They limited their fire on Israel's southern population centres, threatening to expand it to Beersheba and Tel Aviv, should Israel escalate its response.

As in the past, Israel's Iron Dome rocket interception system proved highly effective, intercepting most (over 100) of the rockets whose direct impact point was due to land in population centres. In order to overcome Israel's Iron Dome, Hamas focused on particular areas such as Ashkelon in southern Israel, concentrating fire with salvos of multiple rockets. One person was killed in Ashkelon, a Palestinian worker from Hebron, and dozens were wounded.

Israel responded by carrying out air strikes against military and terror targets. It specifically struck some 'value targets' with practical and symbolic value for Hamas in the form of high-rise headquarters of Hamas intelligence and military elements, as well as its broadcasting station, Al-Aqsa. Israel was careful to provide ample early warning to the people who were in these buildings in order to limit civilian casualties and collateral damage.

Both parties' lack of interest in a major confrontation soon prevailed and on 13 November, they acceded to strong Egyptian urging to cease the fire and get back on the track of stabilisation. Since then, the situation along the border has been relatively quiet, including a lower level of friction during the weekly Hamas-organised Friday demonstrations. This week, the planned monthly Qatari funding is expected to enter Gaza once again, with Israeli approval (at the same time, Hamas was quick to publicly embrace Iran's announcement following the last round, of financial support to the families of Gazans who died or were wounded while confronting Israel along the border in recent months).

Hamas and the 'battle of perceptions'

Hamas sustained painful blows and had a clear interest in a quick ceasefire. However, in the war of perceptions, its leadership headed by Yahya Sinwar skilfully painted a picture of Israel blinking first. This picture was augmented by the contrast between Hamas-orchestrated "victory celebrations" in Gaza on the one hand, and the resignation of Israel's Defence Minister – who claimed Israel's response was weak – and demonstrations against the ceasefire by inhabitants of Israel's south, on the other.

Indeed, many people in Israel wondered why the government was so quick to embrace the first Egyptian ceasefire proposal based on a Hamas request, immediately following such a heavy barrage of rockets from Gaza, the most in a single day. Especially vocal were the inhabitants of southern Israel who have been living and raising their children under the constant threat of rockets and mortars for many years. They demand a solid ceasefire based on strong Israeli deterrence rather than another fragile, temporary one. In opinion polls, around 70 per cent of Israelis were dissatisfied with the way the government handled the crisis.

Even before the flare-up, criticism against the government had been fuelled by photos of suitcases of Qatari money entering Gaza, which were interpreted by some in Israel as the government buying quiet (incidentally, these photos also fuelled criticism against Hamas in Gaza, as if it was taking "blood money for Palestinian martyrs"). Also to Israel's detriment was the fact that it has publicly over-emphasised its lack of interest in a major escalation with Hamas. This was interpreted by Hamas to mean that it could 'push the envelope' and up the stakes of brinkmanship without triggering a full-scale war – as indeed happened.

Israel and the ceasefire

Why did Israel's defence establishment recommend adopting a ceasefire and why did

Israel's cabinet agree to it so soon?

First, Israel's main strategic concern lies in the north, where Iran is striving to build a formidable anti-Israel military front in Syria and Lebanon, which has set the two countries on a collision course. Israel regards the challenge of Iran and its proxies (especially Hezbollah) as the primary strategic threat to its national security, whereas Gaza is considered a secondary threat. It has no interest in being dragged into a lengthy war in Gaza while preparing for a potential eruption of hostilities in the north. Israel is now especially focused on Iranian attempts to build capacity in Lebanon and Syria for converting some of Hezbollah's arsenal of rockets into highly accurate ones, and establish an operational infrastructure in southern Syria, close to Israel's border.

In this context, on 4 December Israel launched an operation in its territory designed to destroy Hezbollah's offensive tunnels crossing into Israel. This operation was cited as one of the reasons for containing the eruption with Hamas.

Second, Gaza has long presented a conundrum for Israel. In the last decade, Israel was compelled to fight three major rounds of armed conflict with Hamas (2008-9, 2012 and 2014) and still hasn't found a way to establish a long-term, stable ceasefire. Israel does not want to re-conquer Gaza and assume control over its two million Palestinians inhabitants. It could topple Hamas and leave, but would then possibly face a plethora of jihadi groups without any clear address to regulate a ceasefire. It could enter Gaza and destroy a significant part of Hamas' capabilities, but this would require a lengthy operation with a questionable exit strategy, since there is no one to 'hand the keys' to. Ultimately, Israel is left with the very undesirable choice of finding the right balance between weakening Hamas and fostering deterrence against it, while avoiding re-conquering the Strip, toppling Hamas and shouldering an exacerbated humanitarian crisis there.

Finally, Israel could not ignore Egypt and its mediation efforts, given Egypt's importance and the close relations which have developed between the two countries. In this case, Egypt put much of the responsibility for the escalation on Israel's shoulders due to its covert operation in Gaza at the height of a seemingly promising stabilisation effort (it is hard to pass a judgement on Israel's operation without the full picture of its goals and urgency), and assured Israel of the prospects for resuming the above effort and deepening it.

It is also worth mentioning that Israel has just entered an election year. It stands to reason that decision-makers would be wary of a long, costly war in such a period.

High potential for escalation still persists

While neither Israel nor Hamas want another war, the potential for escalation is still high. Moreover, the way the recent eruption ended enhances this potential.

For Hamas, the fact that it provoked Israel (in response to the latter's covert operation) and achieved a quick ceasefire before being significantly weakened by Israel, could boost its self-confidence and its assessment that it can continue playing brinkmanship, banking on Israel's reluctance to go to war. This could prove a fatal mistake. Notwithstanding all the above-mentioned Israeli considerations, there is a limit to Israel's patience and Hamas may inadvertently cross the tipping point towards irreversible escalation. Facing strong domestic criticism over their Gaza policy. Israeli decision-makers are already hinting that if Hamas provokes Israel in the future, it will not be able to escape a very heavy price (without necessarily occupying Gaza).

The challenges of stabilisation

Any stabilisation effort in Gaza must rest on two main pillars – a stable, durable ceasefire and economic-humanitarian solutions. These two

pillars reinforce each other. However, Israel and Hamas view them differently. For example, while Israel demands a complete ceasefire, including the cessation of attempts to breach the border fence, flying incendiary kites and balloons and digging cross-border tunnels, Hamas prefers to alter the level of the flames according to its needs (while also initiating terror attacks in the West Bank, the vast majority of which have been thwarted by Israel. Indeed, such a plan was just exposed by Israel's security services). And while Hamas frames its expectations in terms of "lifting the siege" on Gaza, Israel is focused on facilitating humanitarian and economic solutions without opening Gaza's borders to potential security risks, such as smuggling of weapons and weapon-systems. Moreover, Israel insists on factoring into this process the return of two Israeli hostages and the remains of two Israeli soldiers, who are being held by Hamas as bargaining chips, mainly for the release of numerous Palestinian prisoners.

There are also other actors on the side-lines who are interested in pushing Israel and Hamas towards war, specifically Iran and the PA. For Iran, such a war could make it harder for Israel to counter its intentions and actions in Syria and Lebanon. In fact, some of the factions in Gaza, most notably Palestinian Islamic Jihad, are funded and guided by Iran and have already provoked Israel in the past without coordinating with Hamas. In addition, even within Hamas there are challenges to Sinwar's leadership.

As for the PA, in the last 18 months President Mahmoud Abbas has applied sanctions on Gaza and cut funding for essential needs – which have exacerbated the humanitarian situation – in a bid to pressure Hamas to accede to its reconciliation terms, or face the wrath of its own people. From an Israeli perspective, it looks as if he would be happy to see Israel and Hamas fight each other. In such a case, as in the past, he would privately wish for Israel to destroy Hamas while publicly denouncing it for 'war crimes'. Egypt recently convinced Abbas to give a chance to

the stabilisation efforts, which he had opposed on the grounds that it was ignoring the PA and bolstering Hamas, but there is no guarantee that he will not resume his active objection and apply further sanctions on Gaza.

Conclusion

It is in Israel's interest to return to the track of the Egyptian and UN brokered arrangement, combining a ceasefire with the advancement of economic and humanitarian solutions. However, it is important to incorporate lessons from the recent conflict into this process.

On the one hand, the ceasefire should be enhanced by clarifying its terms to include a more detailed specification of what exactly is forbidden, with Egypt verifying implementation by Hamas on the ground. This should be reinforced with a strong message to Hamas that it is playing with fire by continuously testing Israel's patience.

On the other hand, all parties should enhance their efforts to provide effective humanitarian and economic solutions for the inhabitants of Gaza, with an emphasis on rehabilitating the infrastructure (electricity, water and sewage) and creating jobs. However, these efforts should be clearly linked to the terms of a long-term ceasefire. Hamas must realise that it stands to gain by respecting the ceasefire and to lose by breaking it. Unfortunately, it appears as if Hamas (and potentially other onlookers) may have concluded the exact opposite – violence pays off.

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For more information please contact:
020 7636 5500
info@bicom.org.uk