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How to Stop the Shooting from the Gaza Strip

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For over a month, and for the first time since the end of Operation Protective Edge in 2014, there has been steady rocket and mortar fire from the Gaza Strip toward Israel. The shooting began in late October 2017 as a reaction by Islamic Jihad to the exposure and destruction of a tunnel, causing the deaths of 14 activists, and increased following the United States recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Islamic Jihad has been joined by "recalcitrant" factions from the Salafi jihadist stream. Primarily out of internal considerations, and contrary to its conduct in recent years, Hamas did not initially show determination to stop the firing, and thus de facto permitted letting off steam, although it did not abdicate completely, in order to prevent greater escalation. Until last week, Israel had a standard response, guided by the principle that Hamas is the sovereign responsible power and address in the Strip, and must therefore pay the price. The organization's command posts, tunneling infrastructure, and positions were attacked in order to propel it to dissuade the Salafi jihadist and Islamic Jihad elements from continuing to shoot.

The familiar Israeli strategy relies on a number of working assumptions. The first is acceptance of Hamas rule in the Strip and its designation as the responsible address for what occurs there, without official recognition of it as a legitimate actor. The second is the need to maintain military, political, and economic pressure on Hamas, in order to deter and weaken it, and to hinder its military growth. Third is the assessment that the basic Israeli deterrence of Hamas since the summer of 2014 is still in force and that Hamas fears escalation. The fourth assumption is that Hamas is currently focused on implementing internal Palestinian reconciliation and promoting its internal and regional legitimacy, and therefore escalation to a military campaign with Israel does not serve its purposes. Finally, Israel has no interest in translating the existing tension into a broad conflict, since it is not seeking a substantial change in the situation in Gaza. At present, its aims with regard to Hamas and the Strip are to stop the fire and achieve calm and stability. In addition, Israel does not wish to be perceived as the party that hinders internal Palestinian reconciliation efforts, which are supported by Egypt and, apparently, the Trump administration.

However, Israel's response strategy currently appears ineffective, and Hamas is finding it hard to stop the shooting. The trend toward escalation intensifies in view of the Hamas decision to change the rules of the game in the Palestinian arena, including toward Israel.

In recent months, there have been signs of a change in the assumptions underlying Hamas conduct. Since its establishment, the organization has identified itself as bearing the standard of resistance, but at present it is mainly engaged in promoting the reconciliation with Fatah as an opportunity to rid itself of civic responsibility for what happens in the Gaza Strip (although without giving up its military force), and above all the responsibility for preventing "resistance" actions by other elements against Israel. But the reconciliation process has encountered difficulties because Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has withheld the transfer of the payments promised to Hamas in Gaza, and is also reluctant to take civic responsibility for the Strip. Hamas's motivation to stop the firing was weakened further by the popular protests that erupted in the Strip in response to President Trump's announcement regarding Jerusalem. Leaders of the organization participated in the demonstrations along the Gaza border, and the incidents resulted in deaths and injuries.

So far, the harm to Hamas from controlled shooting toward border settlements has not increased, particularly while the leadership estimates that Israel will likely retain the familiar response mode. Moreover, the Hamas leadership understands that they are gradually losing the attack tunnel enterprise, which was a strategic advantage for them, thanks to IDF efforts to detect and destroy the tunnels, while constructing a massive underground barrier. At the same time, Hamas finds it hard to launch a high quality attack on Israel from Judea and Samaria, due to the success of efforts by the GSS and IDF to frustrate such attacks, and also due to the difficulty of recruiting activists for an attack while the organization is imposing calm on the Gaza Strip – the area under its control.

Another expression of the change in Hamas's approach is the participation in shooting by Islamic Jihad, which is under the influence of Tehran and equipped with Iranian weapons, and is the second largest force in the Strip after Hamas. A decisive reason for Hamas's unwillingness to restrain the firing by Islamic Jihad is apparently its desire to ensure continued Iranian support, with money and arms. Last year, Yahya Sinwar, leader of Hamas in Gaza, was able to halt Islamic Jihad's rocket fire. Therefore, it appears that the considerations today are different. Sinwar even announced that the Hamas and Islamic Jihad military arms had received a call from Qassem Sulimani, head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, telling them that "Iran will send all the assistance necessary to defend Jerusalem."

In fact, conditions in the Gaza Strip today resemble those that prevailed before previous rounds of hostilities, above all Operation Protective Edge. The worsening infrastructure crisis (electricity is supplied for a few hours each day – in spite of the removal of sanctions by Mahmoud Abbas over payment to Israel for electricity, the shortage of

drinking water, defective treatment of sewage) is joined by a wave of layoffs in the private sector, a significant rise in the number of small and medium traders going bankrupt, and severe damage to the liquidity of banks and commercial institutions. Hamas's own economic hardships are also apparent: the last salary payment to its employees, equal to 40 percent of the normal wage, was transferred last October.

Against this background, the frequency and extent of incidents and warnings is increasing, in the pattern of action-reaction between Israel and Hamas, and the risks of escalation are becoming more severe. Escalation has its own dynamics, even when the interests of both sides are to avoid a conflict. Israel's strategic problem is that on the one hand, it is not prepared to let the shootings become part of the normal routine for the communities around the Strip, and on the other hand, it wants to avoid a broad confrontation in Gaza, assuming that it would probably have to conquer the whole Strip, prompted by the desire to correct the failings of the previous confrontation. In addition, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman has declared that the next round of fighting in Gaza must be the last for Hamas: "To go in with full force and not to stop until the other side waves a white flag and cries 'enough.'" Apart from the cost of the fighting, taking control of Gaza will impose heavy costs on Israel: direct rule of about two million Palestinians; exacerbation of Israel's demographic problem; the economic and humanitarian burden; the need to deploy IDF forces in the area for a long period; and heavy political costs.

In tandem, escalation has the potential of causing heavy damage to Hamas, particularly ending its control of Gaza. Even Egypt could suffer, and therefore Cairo is trying to restrain Hamas as well as Israel, and to revive the reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah. However, Egyptian enthusiasm has waned in view of the growing difficulty of regulating relations between the rival Palestinian camps, and in view of the receding option of a political initiative between Israel and the Palestinian Authority mediated by the Trump administration. It appears therefore that the road to a further round of fighting in Gaza – after over three years of relative quiet – is growing shorter. Evidence of this was the change in the format of the Israeli response following the shooting by Islamic Jihad. On the night of January 4, 2018, Israel struck an Islamic Jihad tunnel. Attacking Islamic Jihad infrastructures and tunnels means removing responsibility from Hamas, and implies recognition of its inability to control the situation as the sovereign power in the region.

If Israel wishes to avoid escalation, it must find ways to take immediate, forceful action to reduce the humanitarian and economic pressures on the Gaza Strip, without being perceived as relaxing its attitude toward terror, and while strengthening its deterrent power toward Hamas. It has a number of options:

- a. Israel can transfer a message to Hamas that it is prepared to delay its response for a defined time, to enable Hamas to restrain the elements responsible for the shooting and to cut off the chain of action-reaction, while clarifying that if Hamas does not show determination to stop the shooting, the response will be severe.
- b. It can intensify the military response in order to cause serious damage to Hamas, such as a daytime attack on a manned Hamas installation or other valuable assets, in order to impel it to change its patterns of action. There is a reasonable chance that a response of this kind, as distinct from targeted killing on senior members of the organization, will not yet lead to a broader military confrontation.
- c. Israel can challenge Hamas at the political dimension, by public recognition of it as the main source of power and the address for responsibility in the Strip. In return for quiet and stability, Hamas will be offered essential aid that is denied by the Palestinian Authority, particularly electricity and water. A supply route can be established from Ashdod Port to the Strip, and workers will be allowed to enter Israel to work in areas around Gaza. The significance of such a move, which would reflect a substantive change in Israeli policy toward Hamas and Gaza, is the acceptance of a semi-political hostile, armed, and not demilitarized entity in the Strip, and an end to the option of initiating a political process in the near future, due to the tension that such a change of direction would cause between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.
- d. Another option, which is preferred and recommended, is to enlist Egypt to mediate. Israel must give Cairo a toolbox that will include significant infrastructure-related and economic rewards, designed to tempt Hamas to make a genuine effort to keep the area calm. If Hamas refuses to cooperate with the Egyptian offer, a harsh attack on it will become more legitimate. To make this offer more attractive, Israel must show that it is prepared for the possibility of a military confrontation that could lead to the conquest of the Gaza Strip. It is estimated that a demonstration of such readiness would help calm the situation, at least in the short term, and even encourage the continuation of the internal Palestinian reconciliation processes. Even if this process does not succeed, Israel will not be perceived as responsible for the failure. Involving Egypt in the efforts to restore calm will serve the Egyptian interest of remaining an important element in Palestinian affairs and being an asset for the US administration in promoting the peace process, and will thus help block the influence of Iran, Turkey, and Qatar in the Gaza Strip.