

Are Changes Expected in Israel-Gaza Relations?

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About a week after the end of eight days of fighting in Operation Pillar of Defense, the short-term, immediate assessment is that in spite of the fire and pillars of smoke on both sides, there appears to be no fundamental change in the violent game between Gaza and Israel. The main change that has taken place is a clarification of the situation and the principal players' role in managing the periodic rounds of fighting between Israel and Gaza, as well as a more exact definition of the price of violating the established rules of the game for periodic ceasefire agreements. Given the events that had taken place on Israel's southern border on the eve of the operation, the killing of Ahmed Jabari, the commander of Hamas's military wing, as well as the military campaign initiated in Gaza in its wake, were predictable.

The attack on the Hamas chief of staff and the preemptive attack on Hamas's long-range rockets were a tactical surprise. However, the massive rocket bombardment from Gaza against Israeli cities in immediate response to this killing and the IDF counterattacks in Gaza did not surprise anyone who had been paying attention to the reports that saturated the media in recent years regarding the arming of organizations in Gaza and the use of these weapons against Israel. In the past year, rockets were launched on a near-daily basis at border towns. This practice evolved into barrages of three rounds, each lasting for several days during which dozens of rockets were fired at cities in southern Israel. The declaration by Israel's chief of staff several weeks before the campaign that an operation in Gaza was inevitable, clearly signaled that the current campaign, which was intended to put an end to the intolerable situation in southern Israel, was fast approaching.

Operation Pillar of Defense was conducted almost entirely from the air and at the initiative of Israel, which fully grasped the ramifications of killing

Jabari and had prepared for this event from the military, civilian, and public diplomacy angles. The operation was intended to underscore once again to Hamas and the organizations under its auspices the red lines that Israel had established during Operation Cast Lead and that had gradually eroded since. Through Pillar of Defense, Israel again sought to clarify to Hamas that it has Israel's de facto recognition as the sovereign in the Gaza Strip and that it will pay a very heavy price if it does not fulfill its overall responsibility to stop terrorist acts by its members and prevent all acts of violence from the Gaza Strip aimed at Israeli territory.

The limited operation, which ultimately ended without an Israeli ground invasion of Gaza, was also intended to exact a heavy price for the ongoing violation of the rules of the ceasefire formulated in 2009 with Operation Cast Lead. In addition, it was meant to sear into the consciousness of Hamas leaders and the Palestinian public in Gaza the increasing cost that can be expected in each additional round of fighting in the future if the current ceasefire agreement, brokered in Cairo, is not fulfilled.

At this stage, of course, it is not possible to assess whether or when there will likely be another round of violence, which seems to have become routine in Israel-Gaza relations. However, it would appear that after the end of the utterly predictable round of victory celebrations and declarations – unconnected to the actual results of the fighting in Gaza – by the leaders of Hamas as well as its partners in rocket fire and supporters in the Arab world, the organization will have to undertake some soul-searching and decision making in the very near future regarding its military conduct vis-à-vis Israel. Its leaders are well aware of the military results of the battle and the damage the operation caused to Hamas and the residents of Gaza. At the same time, they are conscious of the challenges they face in light of the ceasefire agreement they signed in Cairo, which requires them to restrain the activity of the other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, particularly Islamic Jihad and the Salafist-jihadi organizations.

In spite of the power of Hamas and its hegemonic position in the Gaza Strip, it has already become clear that this commitment is not simple to implement. For example, Islamic Jihad is inextricably linked to Iran, which has armed, trained, and funded it for many years, and even more intensively in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead. Iran intended for the organization to strike and exhaust Israel independently in order to promote their joint interests, on the assumption that Hamas would act or refrain from acting

against Israel irrespective of Iranian interests. And in fact, Islamic Jihad did what was expected of it and was directly responsible for the escalation in Gaza in a number of incidents in the past year, which led to several of the rounds of fighting with Israel. In some cases, these acts were contrary to the wishes of Hamas, which feared that events might deteriorate into all-out war with Israel. Iran's declaration that it intends to rearm its allies and partners in Gaza (including Hamas) – alongside the weapons shipments already streaming to the Gaza Strip from Libya – indicates that the stock of weapons in Gaza will be replenished. Local organizations, particularly Islamic Jihad, are expected to rebuild their damaged infrastructure and resume their former operations.

The Salafist-jihadi organizations have in the past year played a major role in launching rockets and attacking IDF soldiers. They are also responsible for firing dozens of rockets during the operation and are expected to continue to challenge Hamas's monopoly on decision making regarding the manner and timing of the use of weapons against Israel. The most prominent of these organizations are the Shura Council of the Mujahidin, Jaish al-Islam, Jaish al-Umma, and Ansar al-Sunna. They have already proven their willingness to confront Hamas in order to fulfill their declared *raison d'être* – perpetual, unrestricted, and unconditional warfare against Israel. Furthermore, in light of their past, their uncompromising ideology, and the nature of their activities in Gaza and the Sinai, it is difficult to imagine them maintaining the ceasefire, and it is reasonable to conclude that they will be among the first to violate it. The statement published on November 24 by the Shura Council of the Mujahidin should be viewed in this context. According to the statement, the operation in Sinai against the Salafist-jihadi organizations by the security forces of Egypt, which brokered the ceasefire agreement, was conducted “with the approval of the Jews” and was the event that paved the way for the Israeli attack on Gaza. With this announcement, the Shura Council of the Mujahidin made clear that it is not part of the ceasefire agreement, and it called on Hamas to stop persecuting the organization's members in Gaza. There are also Salafist-jihadi organizations operating in the Sinai, such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdes, that collaborate with their colleagues in Gaza. All of these groups can be expected to continue to operate against Israel from the Sinai. Their goal is to cause a deterioration in relations between Israel and Egypt and circumvent the restrictions in Gaza in order to strike at Israel. In particular, they aim to spark friction between Israel and Egypt in

the hope that relations between the two states will deteriorate to the point of a political conflict, and even a military one. Against this backdrop, the Egyptian authorities have reportedly begun contacts with Salafist-jihadi elements in the Sinai in order to recruit them too to preserve the ceasefire with Israel. Although Egypt has a prominent role to play in preventing, or at least slowing down, the rearmament of organizations in Gaza and Sinai and in curbing terrorist operations from Sinai against Israel, it is doubtful that it will fulfill this role with the effectiveness and determination sought by Israel.

The key question, whose answer is far from unequivocal, is: Will Hamas's wish to take advantage of the recent military operation, which further reinforced its control over Gaza, lead it to use its power and influence in Gaza practically and effectively in order to gain formal inter-Arab and international recognition of its sovereignty in Gaza and its inclusion as a main player in the internal Palestinian arena? Towards this end, it will have to prove that it honors its agreements and that it has the ability to maintain the calm on Israel's southern border. Conversely, Hamas cannot afford to completely desist from belligerence against Israel, lest it lose the jihadist identity it has worked so persistently to cultivate over the years, and in light of the criticism of Hamas on this issue by the organizations in Gaza. In addition, the Hamas military units that operate from Gaza, together with their peers in the West Bank, have a strong commitment to continue attempting to kidnap Israelis in order to secure the release of prisoners in Israeli jails not freed in the agreement to release Gilad Shalit, and this commitment eclipses any Hamas commitment to the ceasefire.

It would appear that if Hamas nevertheless demonstrates political responsibility and military or security-based determination, ensuring that its operatives and the other organizations in Gaza maintain a comprehensive ceasefire, then it is likely not only to prevent Gaza residents from experiencing the horrors of another round of fighting with Israel, but also, under certain circumstances, to gain international legitimacy as a partner in the regional political process for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.