

INSS Insight No. 1223, November 5, 2019

The Islamic Jihad and the Israeli Dilemma in the Gaza Strip

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The barrage of rockets launched at Sderot and the Gaza periphery by the Islamic Jihad in northern Gaza on the night of November 1, 2019 underscored the Israeli dilemma regarding the Gaza Strip. This attack was yet another indication of the rise of the Islamic Jihad, which impacts on Hamas's status, security stability in Gaza, and prospects for Israel reaching an accommodation with Hamas. For Hamas, Islamic Jihad's growing strength is a provocation, and highlights that Hamas is a "resistance movement" devoid of active "resistance." A weakened Hamas serves Israel's interest regarding a return of the Palestinian Authority to effective control over the Strip, yet it is highly doubtful that the PA will try to regain control in the Strip, as long as there is no political breakthrough in relations with Israel. Therefore, Israel has three main alternatives: a continuation of the status quo vis-à-vis Hamas and the Gaza Strip; military escalation in the Gaza theater; and accommodation with Hamas. Because continuing with the current situation carries a high risk of escalation into a broad military campaign, which would be liable to wreak havoc in the Strip, and because Israel has no interest under the current circumstances to escalate the situation militarily, accommodation is the least problematic alternative. Understandings reached with Hamas that calm the security situation would facilitate a significant improvement in the humanitarian situation in Gaza, and their enforcement would attenuate Islamic Jihad's spoiler potential and, perforce, Iranian clout in the Strip.

The barrage of rockets launched at Sderot and the Gaza periphery by the Islamic Jihad in northern Gaza on the night of November 1, 2019 underscored the Israeli dilemma regarding the Gaza Strip. This incident, which demonstrated both Islamic Jihad's autonomy and Hamas's difficulty in restraining the organization, is another episode in the rise of the Islamic Jihad, which impacts on Hamas's status, security stability in Gaza, and prospects for Israel reaching an accommodation with Hamas.

Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, which is supported and influenced by Iran, has grown steadily stronger. This is reflected in its pursuit of a course that is independent of and challenging toward Hamas, particularly regarding the understandings for calm with Israel and Hamas's relationship with other factions in the Strip. Against this backdrop, Israel faces a dilemma as to the policy it should adopt toward the Gaza Strip. If Israel wishes to

continue to isolate the Gaza Strip from the West Bank, it must ensure security calm in the area, and by extension reach understandings/accommodation with Hamas, which perforce means a trade-off in terms of easing the embargo on the Strip. This accommodation would oblige Israel, while deterring Hamas and exacting a heavy price for violations of the understandings, to ensure that Hamas retains the ability to govern and restrain factions seeking to foil prospects for calm.

The direct dialogue between Egypt and Islamic Jihad in itself attests to the group's rising status. A senior Islamic Jihad delegation recently completed a visit to Cairo made at the behest of the Egyptian general intelligence apparatus, which handles the Gaza issue. The delegation was invited outside the framework of talks Egyptian intelligence holds with Palestinian factions, led by Hamas, with a view to enhancing coordination among them, mainly in order to prevent escalation in and around the Strip. The Islamic Jihad delegation included Ziyad al-Nakhalah, secretary-general of the organization in Gaza, senior political figures Mohammed al-Hindi and Nafiz Azzam, and three commanders of the Saraya al-Quds armed wing, including Baha Abu al-Ata, who is responsible for launching several rocket attacks without command authority. The backdrop to the visit was Egypt's fear that Islamic Jihad would ignore the arrangement between Israel and Hamas that Egypt is trying to forge, as well as concern over non-compliance by the group with Hamas's policy of restraint, and Hamas's noticeable hesitation to enforce this policy. Egypt was able to secure the release of 81 Islamic Jihad operatives, some of whom returned to Gaza with the delegation.

Egypt's heightened efforts to ensure security calm in the Gaza theater reflect concern that tension between Iran and Israel will play out there as well. Islamic Jihad's standing in Gaza is a function of the aid it receives from Iran, which sees the organization as leverage regarding the Palestinian realm and Israel. It is highly doubtful that the group could defy an Iranian demand to take action against Israel at a time of regional escalation involving Iran. The group's buildup since the blow it sustained during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, including its current arsenal of rockets and missiles, some long range, result from Iranian aid and military training. This process has also helped improve the group's status within the Palestinian theater. On occasion, in a departure from its traditional separatism, the group has even served as a mediator between Hamas and Fatah and sought to lead united action by the factions within the Strip. Islamic Jihad has become the second largest resistance group in the Strip, with positions and capabilities that cannot be ignored. Secretary-General Nakhalah, who is very close to Iran and lives in a Shiite suburb of Beirut, consistently calls to step up actions against Israel, while calling on the Palestinian Authority to ignore signed agreements with Israel and urging Palestinians overall to abandon the idea of elections in the PA or steps toward unity.

Hamas has long internalized the difficulty involved in conducting the violent struggle against Israel while fulfilling the civic responsibilities of governance. Since Operation Protective Edge, it has worked to set up channels of dialogue with Arab states, Islamic states, and international forums in the West. It has a foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia and Arab countries which, contrary to that of the Palestinian Authority, stresses refusal to recognize Israel and seek a permanent accord. At the same time, Hamas is willing to advance a temporary accommodation with Israel – albeit while upholding the message that the path of armed struggle against Israel has not been abandoned, and insisting on a sweeping easing of the embargo on the Strip. The Gaza population, which see in Hamas the party responsible for what happens there, desperately need improvements in the water, electricity, and sewerage infrastructures, the possibility of freer movement to and from Gaza, improved employment opportunities, and the guaranteed monthly flow of funds that will sustain the day-to-day living of the many unemployed (without the question marks that arise each month and the frustration occasionally shown by Qatar, which provides the money and is evincing impatience with what is shaping up as an endless flow). Indeed, one element that threatens the stability of the accommodation is the focus on a ceasefire and the entry of money and goods to the Strip on a scale that does not allow reconstruction, development, and hope for the future.

Even if Islamic Jihad activity against Israel has occasionally been convenient for Hamas, its growing strength is a provocation. In essence, the dilemma Hamas faces is that Islamic Jihad highlights that Hamas is a "resistance movement" devoid of active "resistance." Hamas is compelled to contend with the challenge that groups like Islamic Jihad pose without undermining either its own image as leader of the resistance or stability on the ground. Hamas has thus so far avoided taking aggressive and broad action against Islamic Jihad members who violated the understandings with Israel, especially through shooting and rocket attacks. Jihad members have been arrested, but such steps have been less harsh than those taken against Salafi groups in the Strip. (In 2015, Hamas even razed a Salafi mosque.) For now, Hamas relies mainly on deterrence, while availing itself of the pressure of public opinion within the Strip against escalation in the confrontation with Israel, and encourages Islamic rulings by popular clerics who ban independent, rogue actions against Israel.

However, a weakened Hamas serves Israel's interest regarding a return of the Palestinian Authority to effective control over the Strip. As far as the PA is concerned, Islamic Jihad presumably constitutes an easier challenge than Hamas. Yet it is highly doubtful that the PA will try to regain control in the Strip, even if Hamas is significantly weakened, so long as there is no political breakthrough in relations with Israel and given the risk that such a move would be perceived as enabled by Israeli aggression and destruction. This possibility is thus not viable at this time and remains in effect purely theoretical. Such a

reality leaves Israel with three main alternatives: a continuation of the status quo vis-à-vis Hamas and the Gaza Strip; military escalation in the Gaza theater; and accommodation with Hamas. Because continuing with the current situation carries a high risk of escalation into a broad military campaign, which would be liable to wreak havoc in the Strip, and because Israel has no interest under the current circumstances to escalate the situation militarily, accommodation is the least problematic alternative.

Along with being prepared to exact a higher price from Hamas whenever red lines drawn by Israel are crossed by anyone in the Strip, Israel must effect a significant improvement in the humanitarian situation in Gaza, with an emphasis on infrastructures; employment, including the monitored entry of laborers to work in Israel; local agricultural and industrial production; and coordinated efforts with Egypt to bring about a further easing in the movement of people to and from the Strip. Understandings reached with Hamas regarding a calming of the security situation would encourage measures in this direction, and their enforcement would attenuate Islamic Jihad's spoiler potential and, perforce, Iranian clout in the Strip.