

INSS Insight No. 1376, August 31, 2020

Escalation in the Gaza Arena: An Old-New Story

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With the ongoing struggle against the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic and societal consequences dominating the headlines in Israel, a public opinion survey conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in August 2020 found that the public was less worried about security threats than threats to healthcare and the economy. Recently, however, the Gaza Strip has reminded Israel that the security threats still exist. The significant security escalation in the Gaza arena in recent weeks is liable to develop into a military conflict, even though neither Israel nor Hamas wants this outcome. At the same time, the parties deem it necessary to respond to each other's actions. The Israeli government and military leadership are attempting to maneuver between the need to use force to maintain deterrence against Hamas and deny the organization any achievement on the one hand, and on the other hand, the goal to achieve calm in the area bordering the Gaza Strip and improve the sense of security among the population. The only way to achieve calm is by returning to the understandings reached with Hamas in late 2019 and the principle of a large-scale easing of the closure and development of infrastructure projects for improving conditions in the Gaza Strip.

The current escalation in the Gaza arena evolved following a period of relative quiet, which included Hamas's focus on containing the coronavirus. The latest developments began on August 6, 2020, with a report of fires in the area bordering the Gaza Strip. Fragments of incendiary balloons were found in the area, as well as an explosive balloon. The IDF responded the same night with an attack on Hamas's underground infrastructure in the northern Gaza Strip. Encouragement from Hamas, combined with reports in the Israeli media of the fear caused by the balloons and the damage caused by the fires, increased the motivation among Palestinian factions to continue such activity. The IDF responded with aerial attacks and tank fire at Hamas installations. Hamas spokesmen portrayed the incendiary and explosive balloons as a "nonviolent means of popular resistance," and claimed that the Israeli attacks were disproportionate and part of Israeli aggression. Hamas is therefore allowing smaller factions that it operates under the Joint Armed Factions Committee (allegedly not subject to its authority) to launch rockets against the communities near the Gaza Strip as a response to Israeli attacks, without an incriminating signature.

Hamas initiated a limited campaign and is conducting measured and calculated escalation in order to attain its goals, but is mindful to maintain intensity below the threshold that would lead to an Israeli military campaign. Hamas does not want to jeopardize the achievements of its military buildup, especially its infrastructure for manufacturing rockets, unmanned aerial vehicles, and other weapons. Hamas is therefore using rogue groups as its proxies in order to evade responsibility for this activity. Israel also prefers to postpone a military operation, and has attacked Hamas military infrastructure targets in response, taking care not to cause fatalities. At the same time, Israel has imposed restrictions on the Gaza Strip, including the closing of the Kerem Shalom border crossing, except for the entry of humanitarian supplies; a halt in fuel deliveries to the Gaza Strip (the availability of electricity has fallen from 10-12 hours a day to only four hours, while the summer heat exacerbates the problems caused by prolonged power outages); and cancellation of fishing areas.

Causes of the Escalation

The global focus on halting the spread of the coronavirus, including in Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and the Gaza Strip – which the Hamas government sealed off almost completely to the entry of people from outside – arrested any progress in projects designed to improve living conditions in the Gaza Strip. Hamas believed that it contained the spread of the coronavirus in the Gaza Strip, but in the absence of any substantial improvement in civilian infrastructure, it concluded that applying measured pressure on Israel and the relevant international agencies is the only way to resume progress on the long-term projects that were agreed on, including construction of a desalination facility and industrial zones. The Hamas leadership is worried about the economic deterioration in the Gaza Strip, which was aggravated by the pandemic, and about soaring unemployment. Hamas believes that Israel is deliberately procrastinating as to fulfillment of its obligations and seeking to ignite a wave of protest in the Gaza Strip against the Hamas rule. Hamas, therefore, is demanding immediate and substantive relief in the closure and improvement in civilian lives. It aims to engage the IDF with a limited level of friction along the Gaza Strip border in order to let off steam, mainly among unemployed young people, by directing their rage and frustration against Israel.

At the same time, the Hamas leadership believes that the time is ripe to strengthen its status internally, following the developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena in recent months: President Trump's plan (which has not yet been taken off the agenda); the planned Israeli annexation of territory in the West Bank (which according to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is only suspended, and remains relevant); and the normalization agreement between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel. Hamas's guiding strategic goal is to make it clear that PA President Mahmoud Abbas's political

platform has failed, and that the challenging Israel with resistance led by Hamas is what will score points for the Palestinian people. Gaining achievements by escalation on the Gaza Strip front is Hamas's way of making this point.

In Hamas's view, as time passes without achievements, the organization loses its relevance, and its status and governmental stability are undermined. An unrealized achievement was the initiative of the Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar: a limited deal for the release of Palestinian prisoners (mainly older people) in exchange for information about Israeli prisoners and kidnapped soldiers held by Hamas, as a preliminary step on the way to a large-scale deal. The initiative failed because of unbridgeable differences between the two sides and the political crisis in Israel, which made it difficult to reach decisions in the matter.

Another problem worrying Hamas is the expiration of Qatar's commitment to transfer funds to the Gaza Strip. In the past, controlled escalation against Israel has proven to be an effective means to pressure Israel to persuade Qatar to extend its commitment. On August 16, 2020, Qatar announced that it would extend the grant to the end of the year, and perhaps even longer. Nonetheless, Hamas is not satisfied with the humanitarian package, and is demanding the extension and enlargement of the package beyond aid for the Gaza population, so that development of the infrastructure projects in the Gaza Strip can be expedited and the Hamas rule can be consolidated.

Sinwar's assertive and aggressive actions and willingness to go to the edge of war can also be attributed to the internal elections process in Hamas scheduled for the end of the year, and the need to fortify his status as leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Sinwar is in dire need to showcase his achievements.

The Permanent Intermediary

Similar to previous events, the mediators between Israel and Hamas are Egypt and Qatar. In mid-August, an Egyptian mediation delegation visited Ramallah, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Egyptian and Palestinian sources reported that Hamas demanded the following concessions in exchange for calm: (1) the opening of the Kerem Shalom border crossing continuously, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and an increase in the number of trucks and dual-use materials allowed into the Gaza Strip; (2) an increase in the number of permits to enter Israel for trade-related activity; (3) expansion of the permits for Gaza's imports and exports; (4) extension of the fishing zone to 20 nautical miles; (5) progress in water infrastructure projects and construction of Power Line 161 from Israel to the Gaza Strip, which is designed to increase power capacity in the Gaza Strip by 30 percent; (6) progress in employment projects for academics and workers in the Gaza Strip; (7) an increase in the Qatari grant and doubling the number of people eligible for

support. At the same time sources close to Hamas confirmed that the organization would be willing to compromise on some of its demands, realizing that it is unrealistic to expect that all would be met. Israel warned Hamas that a resumption of the Israeli policy of targeted killings of the organization's leaders responsible for fanning escalation was possible.

On August 19, Minister of Defense Benny Gantz met in central Israel with heads of local authorities from southern Israel. He stated that Israel "had changed the equation" in the Gaza Strip, and that it would respond to any violation of its sovereignty. Moreover, "we don't just know how to strike buildings and targets, but also those operating within them. The State of Israel has no interest in the Gaza Strip besides the return of the boys [two soldiers' remains and two captive citizens] and complete quiet." If these objectives are attained, he added, "we can develop Gaza."

Conclusion and Recommendations

Hamas does not accept the equation cited by Benny Gantz; it demands substantive easing of the closure and progress in infrastructure projects, with a subsequent end to provocative aggression in areas bordering the Gaza Strip. Hamas can therefore be expected to continue launching incendiary balloons, using sporadic rocket fire, and dispatching squads to arouse disturbances at the border fence, unless a real chance emerges of improving the situation in the Gaza Strip.

The current government in Israel is busy with internal problems and the effect of the pandemic, which renders it incapable of devoting time to address the Gaza Strip problem in full. Furthermore, there is no readily available option that can solve the problem, even if pursued with determination. The strategy guiding Israel's handling of the Gaza Strip is to treat it as a chronic illness requiring a pain reliever from time to time. For Israel, Hamas bears sole responsibility for what happens in the Gaza Strip. Even though there are no direct contacts with the organization, in effect it is a partner for arranging "understandings," not "agreements," through mediators. Israel is managing the conflict with Hamas in an effort to gain time, in the hope that something will change in the future. In practice, Israel is recycling what was agreed on in previous rounds of fighting, while sharing the burden with other players (Egypt, Qatar, and the UN). As of now, Israel has no creative cards, although it might dabble with the idea of enlisting help from its new friend, UAE, in an investment of resources in improving living conditions in the Gaza Strip, possibly at the expense of Qatar's involvement, which is extremely bothersome to the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

The current escalatory dynamic in the Gaza arena is likely leading toward limited combat activity, and later even to a large-scale military operation, unless the two sides are able to

reach a compromise. In order to put a stop to the escalation process, there seems to be no alternative to a return to implementation of the understandings in the arrangement reached in December 2019 with UN intervention – a major relaxation of the closure and progress with essential civilian infrastructure projects in the Gaza Strip.

However, with the discovery of multiple cases of Covid-19 inside the Gaza Strip, Hamas has lost a major playing card and cannot hold out under Israel's sanctions for much longer. When the escalation first ignited, Hamas leaders believed they had an advantage – Israel was beset by a government crisis and the number of coronavirus cases did not seem to be declining. Hamas reasoned that it can continue escalating until it reaches its desired achievements, as Israel will eventually compromise. Currently, as the number of cases in Gaza is spiking and seems to be quickly getting out of hand, Hamas is pressured by the civilian demand to resume the regular supply of fuel and products. Although under these new circumstances the equation seems bent against Hamas, the organization is unlikely to retreat fully without some achievements, and it will continue its activities, albeit on lower flames and with extra caution to avoid an Israeli military campaign. Nevertheless, its willingness to compromise has increased. Israel can, as an act of goodwill, expand its medical and humanitarian aid to the Gaza population, in the realization that without improvement of the domestic plight and what appears as gains for Hamas at Israel's expense, the organization will continue the current escalation. This story is the same tale as what was previously told.