

Another Clash in the Gaza Strip: Does Israel Have Any New Ideas?

Yohanan Tzoreff | No. 1734 | June 11, 2023

With the end of Operation Shield and Arrow – the most recent round fought between Israel and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip – talk of a *hudna* or an extended arrangement at the Israel-Gaza border resurfaced. The discourse is driven by the fact that as in the two previous rounds, Hamas did not take an active part. Nonetheless, is highly doubtful that Hamas’s non-intervention is an indication of its desire for quiet. More likely, it points, rather, to new understandings with the resistance front, whereby all elements can be involved, even without actual participation in the fighting. Moreover, Hamas’s room for maneuver may prove limited, should an expanded arrangement be cast by its rivals as a separate understanding with Israel, which goes beyond the familiar temporary nature of ceasefire agreements. Therefore, Israel, which does not intend to reinstate its rule over the Gaza Strip and is not using terms like “political process” or “agreement,” would do well to continue with the current format of quiet arrangements vis-à-vis Hamas. This means reducing the threat posed by Gaza and providing for the daily needs of its population, while trying to improve the situation in the region.

The end of the most recent round of fighting with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza – Operation Shield and Arrow (May 9-13, 2023) – has restored the issue of the Gaza Strip to the agenda, accompanied by several old ideas: *hudna*, or ceasefire, or in more general terms, “arrangement,” whereby Hamas is recognized as the responsible entity and the Gaza Strip receives additional benefits regarding reconstruction, construction, and employment, as well as freedom of movement to and from the Strip. In return, Hamas would commit to maintain calm for years to come, and not merely weeks or months. Supporters of this move claim that it may also

help address the complex situation expected after Abu Mazen departs the political scene, since coordination between Israel and Hamas may assist in shaping the Palestinian reality during the transition phase.

Bolstering the logic of “arrangement” is that this was the third time since 2019 that Hamas has refrained from intervention in the conflict between Israel and Islamic Jihad, leaving the latter group alone in the fight. It follows that more than escalation, Hamas seeks reconstruction and the improvement of daily life for the Gaza Strip population. Proponents of this policy are encouraged by the coordination between Hamas and Israel, established through Egyptian mediation following Operation Guardian of the Walls in 2021, which has enabled the entry of laborers into Israel and goods into the Gaza Strip. In their view, Hamas’s conduct reflects responsible governance and the desire to preserve its rule; these outweigh the spirit of “resistance” and translate into care for the population and efforts to increase the sources of income and enhance the volume of trade. Hamas’s efforts to restrain PIJ attempts to fire rockets at Israel during this period; the criticism and rage expressed by PIJ leaders regarding what to them is the “poor performance” of Hamas leaders; and the damage to the “resistance” have strengthened arguments in favor of an arrangement. According to Arab media, the visit by the heads of Hamas and PIJ in Egypt, which began on June 2, is also intended to enhance the calm and expand the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, likely in coordination with Israel.

Indeed, since Operation Protective Edge, in Islamic terms, Hamas has demonstrated far-reaching pragmatism toward the conflict with Israel– for the benefit of the Gaza population, and the Palestinians in general. The vast destruction and the blow it sustained in 2014 have led the organization to diversify the forms of its struggle against Israel and adopt patterns of a popular struggle, at least temporarily. In May 2017, following lengthy internal debates, Hamas released a new political platform, which, as its leaders claimed, replaced its original charter and has served as a guiding plan, albeit without abolishing the charter itself. The document stated that according to the national unity and consensus principal, Hamas would be willing to cease its armed resistance or shift to popular resistance, and even

settle for a state within the borders of June 4, 1967, without recognizing Israel or signing a peace treaty with it, as long as such a decision was a national decision endorsed by the Palestinian people, and not by the organization alone. In May 2018, two days after clashes between Palestinian demonstrators and the IDF along the Gaza Strip border fence, which claimed the lives of many Palestinians, Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, declared that Hamas had chosen the path of popular resistance, as this was “the most appropriate form of struggle for the time being.”

Since then, and until 2021, Hamas has focused most of its efforts on the internal Palestinian political scene. Hamas has repeatedly made it clear that it cannot liberate Palestine alone through armed resistance, just as Fatah could not reach a peace agreement with Israel through negotiations on its own. At the same time, Hamas sought national reconciliation and strove for elections, in which, as its leaders believed, it would score an impressive achievement that would help it become a part of the national leadership and ultimately assume control. However, Abu Mazen waylaid these plans, canceling the elections in 2021. He forced Hamas to change its strategy and in effect caused the outbreak of the Guardian of the Walls clash, which took place in multiple arenas – the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and within Israel proper. Hamas has been trying ever since to avoid a confrontation within the Gaza Strip and shift the conflict to the West Bank, where it attempts to incite the population to act against the Palestinian Authority, and even bring about its collapse.

However, it is doubtful whether this chain of events validates the ideas of an arrangement in their current form. First, following Operation Shield and Arrow, the question remains whether Hamas truly avoided taking any part in it and whether this “non-intervention” caused it to lose some of its power, and whether Islamic Jihad, which suffered most of the blows during the fighting, was actually weakened as a result. Indeed, comments made by senior PIJ and Hamas figures after the fighting create the impression that at least in terms of public image, Hamas’s non-intervention benefited both organizations, and the fact that PIJ stood up to Israel alone strengthened its

position in the eyes of many Palestinians. Spokespersons for both organizations have made it clear that this marked the formation of a new *modus operandi*, whereby not all organizations take part in the fighting at the same time but rather support it, each in its own way, be it through a joint war room, spokespersonship, or public support. Comments made by senior figures, including PIJ Secretary General Ziyad al-Nakhala and Mousa Abu Marzouk, one of the leaders of Hamas, do not reveal any tension between the organizations, but rather understandings tailored, in their view, to the current state of affairs. It seems that both organizations have managed to preserve their power to a large extent. Nevertheless, while Hamas is still setting the rules, it will be required from now on to cope with Islamic Jihad, especially when an attempt is made to consolidate the idea of an arrangement into a binding agreement of a more formal nature than the “calm in exchange for calm” principle.

large-scale settlement involving the construction of new infrastructure and a seaport and the opening of the Gaza Strip for exit and entry of people and goods has political attributes. Even a limited arrangement based on mutual consent – namely, *de facto* Israeli recognition of Hamas as the responsible, let alone sovereign, entity in the Gaza Strip – is not a trivial matter for Hamas. Furthermore, Hamas is in ongoing competition with the Palestinian Authority for the heart of the public. Notwithstanding its limited resources, it enjoys wide popularity, which creates a balance of power between these two organizations. A more comprehensive arrangement might force Hamas to face accusations of having preferred separate arrangements with Israel, and just like its rival Fatah, plays into Israel’s hands and enables it to proceed with its divide and conquer policy. The strategy formed by Hamas in recent years is intended to handle such accusations, which it has faced since it took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. Therefore, Hamas can be expected to ensure that any move taken in coordination with Israel in the Gaza Strip will be of a security-related and humanitarian nature and lack political implications.

Israel has proven in action rather than rhetoric that it has no intention of returning to the Gaza Strip. This directive has guided the Israeli security establishment since 2005, and has not gone unnoticed by the Palestinians. (The voices in the extreme right calling for the return to Gaza are not perceived by the other side as a viable challenge.) Consequently, Hamas can afford not to meet the expectations without the risk of an Israeli response, as happened during Operation Shield and Arrow, when it did not prevent Islamic Jihad from firing rockets, while it continues to encourage and guide acts of terror in the West Bank. This fact, and mainly Hamas's attitude toward PIJ in the Gaza Strip, may also point to the limits of its restraining power. That said, it is unthinkable that Israel would not demand, as part of an expanded arrangement, a resolution to the issue of its captive citizens and missing soldiers, as well as a complete cessation of involvement in terror in the West Bank or any other region. It is highly doubtful whether Hamas could accept such demands, and this puts the very feasibility of a broader arrangement in question.

Consequently, Israel must acknowledge the current reality, where due to the split among the Palestinians, Israel's security demands that have a political dimension or bear political significance cannot be satisfied without inter-organizational Palestinian coordination. If Hamas elects to reach a separate, expanded arrangement with Israel, it is bound to find itself in the same weakened position in which the Palestinian Authority stands today, due to the increasing awareness to the danger of Israel's divide and conquer policy, as well as the strong opposition to any move that is not based on national consensus. At present, as long there is no political move on the agenda, Israel would be better off if it continues handling the security threat from the Gaza Strip in the current format of a quiet dialogue focusing on the effort to preserve calm along the border, in return for satisfying the subsistence needs of the inhabitants of the Strip, while attempting to strengthen and extend it to other sectors, yet without formal declarations or presumptive rhetoric.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen