

Israel tentatively reaches out to Hamas

Mel Frykberg / 16.06.2015

Following rocket attacks on Israel by an "IS"-affiliated group in Gaza, Israel's strategy of holding not-so-secret talks with Hamas may help to delay the next round of bloodshed, reports Mel Frykberg from Ramallah.

Over the last 10 days the Omar Brigades, a group of Salafist extremists in Gaza affiliated to the Islamic State (IS) group, have fired several rockets at Israel in retaliation for Hamas killing one of its members during a shootout and arresting others.

Israel Defence Forces (IDF) responded by bombing several Hamas military targets and said that it held Hamas as the rulers of Gaza responsible for any attacks on Israel.

This, it appears, is precisely what the Salafists wanted knowing that Hamas would be targeted by any Israeli response as the Salafists continue to battle Hamas for control of Gaza.

"The Salafists accuse Hamas of being too moderate and [question the group's Islamic credentials.](#)" political analyst **Benedetta Berti** at Israel's **Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)** told DW.

"These groups which were previously aligned with al Qaeda, and have now switched allegiances to IS, calculated that by firing rockets at Israel they could drag Hamas into another confrontation with Israel."

Secret talks

But over the last few months Israel has been holding intermittent off-the-record, indirect talks with Hamas, with Qatar, Europe and the United Nations mediating.

The talks are aimed at reaching some kind of understanding that would not lead to a permanent agreement but a long-term quiet and help to avoid another round of bloody fighting.

Israel's security establishment has repeatedly warned that Gaza's economic desperation, aggravated by the blockade and the associated restrictions which have

crippled reconstruction, will lead will lead to a political and military explosion by as early as this summer.

This desperation has seen a growing number of Gazan militants supporting IS, culminating in [last week's rocket strike](#). Similar tit for tat violence preceded the last three bloody wars between Hamas and Israel, another round of which both Israel and Hamas want to avoid.

Israel has stated repeatedly that it would never deal with Hamas which it regards as a terrorist organisation, hence the previous lack of publicity on the talks.

However, the reality on the ground has forced a reassessment.

Reality on the ground

"Israel and Hamas have a shared interest in keeping Gaza calm. Israel does not see any point in having another war with Hamas as this would not change the situation strategically," says [Berti](#).

"Israel also sees that currently there is no political alternative to Gaza and would much prefer to see Hamas controlling the coastal enclave than the IS-affiliated Omar Brigades. Hamas is economically and politically weak so another war would further weaken them, destroy and damage more buildings, exacerbate Gaza's crippled infrastructure, while leading to many more dead and injured," added [Berti](#).

If Hamas' rule was to implode the resulting anarchy and instability would most certainly lead to more attacks on Israel and another war. The organization also wants to remain in power without its rule being challenged by smaller armed groups.

Israel and Hamas have been exchanging messages through the intermediaries not to reach a long-term agreement but to try and maintain the calm for a period of three to five years.

"To keep the calm Hamas has been arresting leaders of the Salafist groups and trying to crack down on their activities near Gaza's borders with Egypt, and Israel so that they respect the ceasefire with Israel," said [Berti](#).

Gaza's reconstruction

Hamas is hoping to gain politically from the calm by Israel easing its crippling blockade of Gaza by allowing more reconstruction material in and more freedom of movement for Gazans.

The easing of restrictions would also allow further trade between Gaza and the occupied West Bank, a major market for Gaza's manufacturing and export dependent economy.

The Israeli government would also like to spin last year's war into a political achievement after intense international criticism for alleged war crimes following the

enormous Palestinian civilian casualty toll, as well as domestic pressure in failing to keep south Israel safe.

An interim understanding between Hamas and Israel would also free Israel of making major concessions or recognising Hamas politically. Israel would also out-manoeuvre the Palestinian Authority (PA) as the peace talks between the two remain frozen and Israel's international reputation continues to spiral.

"However, the situation is more complex than just the talks between Hamas and Israel as there are more players involved," Berti said. "Any peace depends on the Egypt and the PA's involvement too. The PA is managing international aid for reconstruction in Gaza and it doesn't appear too keen currently to help with Gaza's reconstruction due to falling out with Hamas over their [failed unity government](#)."

The international aid is partly dependent on PA security forces taking over control of Gaza's border crossings and exerting its authority over the strip - conditions Hamas has refused to accede to.

Egypt's political involvement, including its blockade of Gaza from the south and its control over the Rafah crossing into Sinai, as well as its bad relationship with Hamas are also part of the equation.

"The situation remains fluid and fragile and it is impossible to predict what will happen in regards to the calm continuing especially if the living conditions in Gaza don't improve significantly," said Berti.

<http://www.dw.de/israel-tentatively-reaches-out-to-hamas/a-18517520>