

GAZA RIOTS: NOVEMBER 2018

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Abstract

Violence erupted in the Gaza Strip last November between Israel and its rival Hamas. Although events surrounding the eruption appear unexceptional at first, they might clarify a path to stability.

KEY EVENTS

In early November, an unsuccessful clandestine operation by Israel in Gaza killed seven Hamas fighters and one Israeli medic (BBC News, 2018a). Hamas and Israel's Defence Forces (IDF) engaged immediately. Militants fired approximately three hundred rockets deep into Israel and IDF command despatched at least seventy aerial strikes against Hamas targets and other extremist elements (BBC News, 2018b). Street protests shook Gaza for days. Rocket attacks from Gaza increased, deployments by Israel at the border ramped up, and IDF helicopter attacks on Hamas positions intensified (BBC News, 2018c).

BACKGROUND

Hamas rose to power after election by Gaza's people in 2006. It moved decisively toward full control of the enclave in 2016 by splitting from the Palestinian Authority (PA) administration based in Ramallah. Both Israel and the PA resist any strategy that reinforces Hamas as the voice of Palestinians in Gaza.

Of supreme concern to Gaza residents is the blockade established by Israel around Gaza in 2007. The blockade has vastly deteriorated conditions of life for the enclave's civilians (Reuters, 2019), and violence, usually in the form of rocket attacks on Israeli settlements and attacks on IDF personnel, has been the tool employed by Hamas to pressure Israel to open Gaza to humanitarian relief and trade.

Each May, Palestinians observe the anniversary of their expulsion from Israel in 1948 in a series of mass demonstrations. In the eyes of Israel's Government and the IDF, these yearly "Great March of Return" protests are simply episodes of mass violence orchestrated by Hamas (International Crisis Group, 2018). Through the spring and summer of 2018, two hundred Palestinians were killed

by live fire in Gaza and many more were injured, with most of the bloodshed occurring in the course of protests (Pike, 2018).

November's escalation created the conditions for Israel and Hamas to negotiate a tentative ceasefire plan. In its initial step, Hamas would end violent protests and return the Gaza Strip to a state of relative calm. The second step would provide Gaza's people with water, sanitation and aid and then commence brokered talks on a prisoner exchange across the Israel-Gaza border. The third and final step would see the beginning of substantive reconstruction of Gaza with the backing of regional partners (International Crisis Group, 2018). Each step in the sequence appeared in earlier negotiations, but because the plan was neither brokered by a major power nor confirmed in multilateral talks, it failed to produce a formal settlement.

THE SECURITY PROBLEM

Rocket attacks from Gaza into Israeli settlements continue. New demonstrations to mark the Great March of Return have already resumed (UN News, 2019a; BBC News, 2019b). Unpredictable violence will almost certainly rekindle street violence and provoke aggressive IDF reactions (BBC News, 2019a).

To the degree Israel is willing to let humanitarian aid pass through the blockade it remains suspicious about measures that could energize or increase militant activities in its enemies (International Crisis Group, 2018). The IDF is committed to respond with armed force against Hamas' rocket attacks, but so far Israel has shown itself averse to mobilizing significant ground forces (Kennedy, 2019). Recently Israel started to gradually open designated crossings into Gaza (BBC News, 2019c).

For Israel and Hamas alike, the likelihood of breaching a ceasefire arrangement and regressing into bloodshed is high. The rivals are equipped to continue the cycle of repetitive violence until a lasting agreement is concluded between them (Kennedy, 2018). The challenge for the international community is to find a strategy that interrupts the cycle of violence while also laying the groundwork for long-term stability. How can international partners help Israel and Hamas engineer a long-term plan for stability, and what type of plan will be durable enough to withstand new episodes of violence?

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

First and foremost, it is critical to ensure the “ultimate deal” for Arab/Israeli peace purportedly under development in Washington does not interfere with the sequential plan devised last fall in talks between Israel and Hamas. A peace plan coordinated by high-profile personalities would capsize under the weight of a credibility gap created by recent U.S. efforts to shape the trajectory of events in the Near East (Holmes, 2019a).

The sequential ceasefire plan survived the challenging early months of 2019 for a number of reasons. Political calculations in Israel undoubtedly came into play. Israeli officials were reluctant to risk ground operations or directly negotiate with Hamas leading into spring federal elections (Kennedy, 2018; Jane’s Country Risk Daily Report, 2019). Discord about a possible ceasefire brought about the resignation of Israel’s Defense Minister, and this placed Prime Minister Netanyahu effectively at the top of IDF command (BBC News, 2018d). So at a moment when the power to attack Hamas was concentrated in his office, Israel’s top politician had stark reasons to postpone his military reaction.

Even though its extreme elements pose significant danger, Hamas is beginning to recognize the advantages of turning attention to governance and economic development (Holmes, 2019b). Egypt’s constructive involvement in negotiations and willingness to broker dialogue between Israel and Hamas is a major reason violence has spiraled out of control (UN News, 2019b).

The plan received bilateral backing because it provides both sides with material benefits rooted in broad popular support. The immediate priority for Israel is stopping Hamas’ rocket attacks on settlements near the Gaza border. For Hamas, the uppermost priority is opening Gaza’s borders to trade and development. Last fall’s ceasefire plan offers the rivals a path to achieving their central priorities through a series of independent targets.

It is difficult to predict how the security situation in Gaza will develop in the coming weeks. Partners in the global community should take advantage of the opportunity to empower elements in Israel, the IDF and Hamas that support last fall’s sequential plan. But the window of opportunity is closing. Each eruption of violence pushes the plan further away, and if Israel and Hamas are not able to realize an arrangement that ceases rocket attacks and breaks the siege, the situation will deteriorate. Failure to establish a permanent security arrangement

would easily expose civilians on both sides of the Israel-Gaza border to violence on a much larger scale (Melman, 2019).

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