

The Next Round in Gaza Will Be Deadlier

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An Israeli-Palestinian truce ended the fighting but didn't address the issues driving it.

Every two months or so for the past year Israel and Hamas have engaged in a deadly but relatively limited round of violence—with the Islamic militant group firing rockets from the Gaza Strip and Israel responding with airstrikes for a day or two until international mediators step in and stop the fighting. The latest round over the weekend was the most lethal since the 2014 war but consistent with the pattern.

Yet there are signs—economic, military, and political—that this could be the last of the short-lived escalation rounds. Absent a more durable diplomatic arrangement between Israel and Hamas, which rules Gaza, the next engagement will likely be much broader and deadlier, and not so easily contained.

The proximate cause for this last round, like all the ones that came before, was economic. Hamas has attempted to break the 12-year blockade around the coastal enclave through the calibrated use of violence: negotiating via rocket and other means (including mass border protests) in order to extract concessions from Israel. Indeed, a cease-fire deal—what some term an “armistice”—between Israel and Hamas has been on the table since last fall. In return for a halt to the violence, Israel would countenance several far-reaching steps, loosening restrictions, to improve Gaza's dire humanitarian conditions.

With tensions already rising on Friday, the senior Hamas official Khalil al-Hayya said that, despite an agreed timetable, Israel was tarrying in implementing some of the clauses in the deal. “All the options are open, and we know how to cause Israel to fulfill the understandings,” he said. The next morning, Palestinian militant groups began firing rockets into Israel.

Hostilities ended two days later at essentially the same point from which they began: with the two sides haggling over the very same cease-fire deal. Israel, for its part, has now reportedly committed itself to move forward

expeditiously on implementation in the coming days.

Tangibly, the cease-fire calls for tens of millions of dollars in Qatari cash to be moved into Gaza every month, paying for Hamas public sector salaries, subsidies for the poor and injured, and a United Nations-sponsored cash-for-work program for some 15,000 locals. In addition, Qatari-funded fuel shipments would resume, the fishing zone off the coast of Gaza would be re-expanded, and crossings into the territory reopened (all had been curtailed by Israel over the past week).

Humanitarian and development projects run primarily via the U.N. are also believed to be part of the agreement, helping to mend Gaza's shattered health, water, sanitation, and energy sectors. Electricity generation would be improved via repairs to Gaza's sole power plant and, later, via the introduction of new lines and solar power from Israel.

Israel also reportedly agreed to lift a third of its restrictions on the import of so-called dual use items—potentially utilized for military purposes—into Gaza, and to ease restrictions on some exports from Gaza.

It's a long list of demands that, if implemented, would go some way in stabilizing the situation—but also bolstering Hamas's power, which Israel is loath to do. Yet if the demands aren't met then, as one Gazan politician **told** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/gaza-official-israel-agreed-to-implement-ceasefire-concessions-within-a-week/>) the Times of Israel, “all options would be on the table.” If this sounds eerily similar to last Friday's threat, then that's the point. Yet Israeli officials don't even acknowledge there is a cease-fire, let alone the concessions they are being asked to make. That is likely not good enough this time.

In pure military terms, the options this last round on both sides seemed to increase exponentially. Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the other Gazan factions fired over 600 rockets and mortars into Israel in less than 48 hours, causing widespread panic and bringing life in all of southern Israel to a halt. Three Israeli civilians were killed by rocket fire—the first civilian deaths since 2014 due to violence emanating from Gaza.

Israel's Iron Dome rocket defense system performed well overall but was overwhelmed during one intense stretch of constant Palestinian barrages on Sunday. For the first time in five years, too, major cities in southern Israel were targeted on a sustained basis via longer-range projectiles. Another Israeli citizen was killed when a guided anti-tank missile struck his car near the Israel-Gaza border, a further sign of escalation.

In response the Israeli military struck back hard, bombing over 300 targets inside Gaza including several multistory buildings and the homes of militant commanders alleged to be staging grounds for military operations. Indicatively, after a long hiatus, the Israeli military resumed the practice of targeted assassinations of high-value figures, one from Hamas and the other from Islamic Jihad. Over 20 Palestinians were killed in the two days of fighting, roughly half of whom were acknowledged militants.

The Israeli military under new Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi has taken on a more aggressive approach in responding to violence coming out of Gaza. “This time it appears, any restrictions the IDF may have operated under, were lifted,” veteran Israeli military correspondent Ron Ben Yishai **wrote** (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5505129,00.html>) in the Ynet news portal. In this, the military is simply following the overall political and public mood inside Israel after months of periodic escalations—with each one growing more lethal.

Opposition leader Benny Gantz, himself a former army chief of staff, criticized the government's policy, demanding a full military offensive. “We must restore the deterrence that has been eroded catastrophically for more than a year,” he said at the height of the weekend's violence. More worrying for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu were widespread criticisms from supporters within his right-wing camp after a cease-fire was reached.

“I think this is a failure for Netanyahu, and I am sorry I convinced people to vote for him,” one southern Israeli

resident said. “Gaza decides when to start a war and when to stop it.”

Gideon Saar, a senior official from Netanyahu’s Likud party, aired rare criticism of his boss, tweeting that “the circumstances in which the cease-fire was reached are very lacking for Israel ... [t]he time in between rounds of violence targeting Israel and its citizens is decreasing, while terrorist groups in Gaza are getting stronger. A [military] campaign was not prevented, but postponed.”

Conspicuous by his complete silence during the weekend’s escalation (and still) is former Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman. Lieberman angrily resigned from Netanyahu’s government last November after a similar round of violence—and cease-fire—in Gaza, protesting what he called Israel’s “surrender to terror.”

After his successful re-election last month, Netanyahu is dependent on Lieberman’s small party to form a governing coalition in parliament. Lieberman, however implausibly, is being touted for a return to the defense ministry. But in exchange for his political support, he has publicly issued a set of demands including a major shift in Gaza policy.

“I resigned because of a substantive difference: the prime minister supports an arrangement [with Hamas] and I support a [military] decision in the Gaza Strip. This isn’t a simple difference,” Lieberman said after the election.

The day after the rockets and fighter jets fell silent, Netanyahu told the Israeli public that “the campaign is not over and it demands patience and sagacity. We are prepared to continue. The goal has been—and remains—ensuring quiet and security for the residents of the south.”

Whether this “quiet” will be achieved via a true cease-fire arrangement with Hamas (despite Lieberman’s protestations) or a military offensive is now the key question. Islamic Jihad leader Ziad al-Nakhleh yesterday continued with the threats. “The last escalation was only a live fire drill in preparation for the major campaign that is coming,” he warned.

Neri Zilber is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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