

Spoiling the Gaza Ceasefire

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Outside Hamas's control, jihadi groups in Gaza and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula may cause the greatest threat to stability in the region.

In negotiating a ceasefire to end the current conflict in Gaza, most of the focus has been on Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), who have launched hundreds of rockets into Israel. But in order for the ceasefire to be sustainable, it must address the role of other, non-Hamas-aligned militants from Gaza and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula who have been involved in the attacks as well.

The jihadis of Majlis Shura Fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis (MSM for short), Jama'at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (JABM), Jaysh al-Ummah (JU), and Jaysh al-Islam (JI) claimed responsibility for 99 rocket attacks from Nov. 11 to Nov. 21 once the conflict escalated. MSM and JABM have cells in both the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. MSM was responsible for the majority of these rocket attacks, having conducted 72 of them --14 of which were in a joint operation with JI on November 20. Five of MSM's rocket attacks originated from northern Sinai. Additionally, JU announced the launch of 26 rockets, while JABM accounted for the final one having targeted the Israeli port city of Eilat from the Sinai.

In the four groups' statements, they mention that they targeted "Jewish settlements" (actually Israeli cities) Eshkol, Sderot, Netivot, Ashkelon, Kissufim, and Karmia, each location on a number of occasions. Further, MSM released four videos and JI published one video both showing members of their organizations launching rockets from Gaza and the Sinai toward Israel. In addition to Gaza-based jihadis, there were also unconfirmed though likely reports from al-Qaeda's forums that members of al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya in the Sinai infiltrated Gaza and joined in the fight with MSM as well as JABM.

This thoroughfare between the Sinai and Gaza amongst jihadis highlights the growing nexus of terror emanating from the two locations. The destabilization of the Sinai after the 2011 Egyptian uprising has helped Gazan jihadis regroup after suppression at the hands of Hamas when jihadis in the past attempted to challenge Hamas' power in

the Gaza Strip.

Therefore, it is possible that if Hamas attempts to implement the new ceasefire, Gaza-based jihadis will further embed themselves in the Northern Sinai safe haven. And while tensions have flared between Hamas and the various jihadi factions in Gaza since Hamas took power, Hamas has also looked the other way following the 2008-2009 war when different jihadis launched rockets into Israel. Both possibilities do not bode well for the sustainability of the ceasefire. Further, a recent analysis by a popular jihadi essayist suggests Gazan jihadis feel slighted by Hamas and PIJ's lack of recognition in their recent efforts in the conflict. As such, these jihadis might attempt to derail the ceasefire.

To be sure, these smaller jihadi groups did not have a large role in the rocket output in the most recent conflict, accounting for about only 6.5 percent of the rockets launched. Yet it shows the potential for them to play a spoiler role in the coming months and years. For instance, between January and October this year, prior to the escalation, various jihadi groups claimed responsibility for 46 rocket attacks, which if one goes by Israeli sources for those ten months, suggests that jihadis accounted for 7.5 percent of the attacks. As a result, if Hamas' al-Qassam Brigades and Palestinian Islamic Jihad -- which accounted for the majority of rocket attacks prior to and during the recent conflict -- hold to the truce, jihadis could fill this potential "resistance" vacuum. It could also provide Hamas cover in terms of plausible deniability.

Moreover, the Sinai has not only become a safe haven for Sinai and Gazan jihadis, but also an important smuggling route for heavier weapons from Iran, including the Fajr 3 and Fajr 5 rockets, which come up from Sudan. Likewise, the Sinai has become a bazaar for smaller arms coming from the new weapons black market in Libya. As a result, the stability of the Sinai is crucial in staving off another conflict or at the very least postponing it. The Egyptian government's interdiction of arms coming from Libya yesterday provides welcome and potentially positive signs that Cairo is willing to take on this responsibility.

As a consequence of the changes in the region over the past two years, current tools Washington has to diffuse this situation will not necessarily be as easy or effective as in the past. The United States can no longer lean on authoritarian governments that do not take the opinion of their people into account. As such, the inability or unwillingness of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood-led government to truly tackle the militant problem in the Sinai has further degraded and helped solidify a militant safe haven for jihadis to train and plan with impunity.

Therefore, Washington must use its economic leverage with aid and international monetary loans to compel the Egyptian government to take the problem in the Sinai seriously. If not, even if the current conflict mainly between Israel and Hamas is held off for some time and Hamas is able to control rocket fire from Gaza, jihadis will continue to have the ability to launch rockets or plan cross-border attacks from Northern Sinai. This will further aggravate the tenuous relations between Egypt and Israel and could even spark a military confrontation on Egyptian territory. Reestablishing Egyptian control in the Sinai, therefore, should not be seen as a gift to Washington or Tel Aviv, but rather for its own security and stability.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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