

Will The Ceasefire Last?

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Without significant diplomatic follow-up, the Gaza ceasefire will likely last only as long as it takes Hamas to rearm.

The ceasefire Egypt brokered with American help will last for a period of time. But without significant diplomatic follow-up, it will likely last only as long as it takes Hamas to rearm. Why? Because the factors that led Hamas to initiate the violence remain unchanged. For that matter, the factors that drove Israel to respond as it did to the Hamas attacks also remain in play. And while Egypt, which emerges from the conflict with renewed regional standing and street cred, has every interest in seeing the agreement it mediated stand, it will almost certainly be unwilling to stem the torrent of weapons flowing across its territory into Gaza.

Hamas initiated the current round of hostilities against Israel at this particular moment not at Iran's behest, but because it felt emboldened by the rise of Islamist allies in the region, because it had accumulated a sufficiently large stockpile of rockets from Iran, and because some of the most hardline militant leaders of the group's Qassam Brigades won spots on the Hamas Shura Council in Gaza and now dominate both the group's military and political elements in Gaza.

Ever since it assumed control of the Gaza Strip by force of arms, Hamas has faced an acute ideological crisis: it could either engage in acts of violence ("resistance") targeting Israel, or it could effectively govern the Gaza Strip, but not both. The result is a tension within Hamas, the "Islamic Resistance Movement," which has been forced to suspend the resistance for which it is named and by which it defines itself. And while Hamas is not a monolithic movement, the one constant among its various currents is its self-identification as a resistance movement. Meanwhile, Hamas has been increasingly challenged from the right by traditional allies like the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC), and by still more radical salafi-jihadi groups like al-Tawhid wal-Jihad and the Mujahideen Shura Council Beit al-Maqdas. The latter are comprised of several smaller salafi-jihadi factions, which bound together for the express purpose of being better positioned to confront Hamas's calls for restraint and pursue a strictly militant agenda of targeting Israel.

As it contended with this challenge, Hamas underwent a significant change of its own. In April 2012, Hamas hardliners dominated in secret elections for the Hamas Shura Council and Political Bureau in Gaza. For example, the former head of the Damascus-based military committee, Imad al-Alami, was elected deputy chief of the Gaza Political Bureau. Relative moderates were defeated, while Qassam Brigade leaders loyal to military leader Mohammad Deif won or retained seats on the Political Bureau, including the late Ahmed Jabari, his deputy and successor Marwan Issa, and others. Under this new, more militant political leadership, Hamas leaders gave greater weight to their responsibility to engage in acts of "resistance" against Israel over their responsibility to effectively govern the Gaza Strip. And they felt emboldened by the show of regional support in the wake of the Arab Awakening, from the fact that their fellow Muslim Brothers were now in power in Cairo, to the state visits to Gaza of the Turkish President and the Qatari Emir.

In the wake of a ceasefire, Hamas will still have to balance governance with resistance and contend with challenges to its credentials from small groups unencumbered by the responsibilities of governing and keen to continue attacking Israel. Meanwhile, Hamas hardliners, for whom the responsibilities of governance cannot trump resistance, remain in power. In agreeing to the ceasefire Hamas demonstrated tactical flexibility, not strategic change.

For its part, Israel responded as severely as it did to Hamas's provocations (firing an anti-tank missile as an IDF jeep on the Israeli side of the border; filling a border tunnel with explosives to capture an Israeli soldier; and placing an explosive at the border fence) because it could not tolerate a situation in which Hamas and other terrorist groups in Gaza continued to stockpile long-range rockets -- including Iranian- and Chinese-made Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 missiles -- and other strategic weapons that could threaten large swaths of the Israeli population at once. These weapons are smuggled into Gaza via rat lines that run the length of Egypt, north to south and east to west. Iran ships weapons to Sudan and, as the recent Israeli attack on a weapons factory in Khartoum revealed, manufactures weapons there as well. These are then trucked north through Egypt, across the Sinai, and into Gaza -- a distance of over 1,500 kilometers. Other weapons, including small arms and man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADs, or shoulder-fired missiles), have been flowing east out of Libya, across northern Egypt, and into Gaza.

Not only had Hamas other groups amassed arsenals of some 10,000 rockets, Hamas built weapons labs where they were producing their own long-range rockets (albeit with much smaller payloads), and developing a domestic capability to produce unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV's). Recently, Hamas made significant improvements that increased the range, accuracy and payloads of its domestically manufactured rockets. Over the past week Israel destroyed many of these weapons systems, as well as launch pads, production labs, and command and control facilities. And Hamas fired off around 1,000 of its rockets, further depleting its arsenal.

So, how long will the ceasefire last? To a very large degree that depends on how seriously Egypt will take its responsibility to patrol its sovereign territory and prevent Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza from rearming. Hamas takes a long view of its conflict with Israel, and nothing indicates it is about to moderate its views. Its intent to confront Israel militarily remains unchanged, and it continues to oppose progress toward a two-state solution. So long as a negotiated two-state solution remains Fatah's goal, Hamas will continue to resist serious reconciliation talks between the two dominant Palestinian factions. Absent any real shift in its ideology and intent, the only true factor determining how much of a threat Hamas continues to pose is the question of its capabilities.

The ceasefire will last as long as it takes Hamas to rearm, and likely not much longer than that. As one Israeli official put it to me a few weeks ago, "We don't know when Hamas will attack, but we fully expect at some point they will. They are not collecting all those rockets as paperweights." So, will Egypt shut the weapons smuggling rat lines crisscrossing its territory, or not?

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