

The Fuel for the Flames

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Articles & Testimony

How forces inside Israel, Gaza, and Egypt are feeding the latest deadly conflagration, and what Washington can do about it.

As I sit here in Jerusalem and watch not just a war of words but also exchanges of rockets and air strikes between Israel and Hamas, it feels as if we are at one of those hinge points in the Middle East. The Arab Awakening has initiated changes without transformation. It has produced new governments, principally Islamist-led, but no certainty about how the region will ultimately evolve.

Will these new governments be driven by their ideological beliefs and aspirations that are inherently anti-western and anti-Israel? Or will they rationalize that long-term Islamist aims can and must wait in order for them to act in a way that will be necessary to improve their economies, lest they lose the legitimacy they may currently have with their publics -- publics that now have an expectation that their needs and hopes should count for something?

Nowhere are these questions more likely to be put to the test than in Egypt today, particularly with the events in Gaza. Hamas is quite literally an outgrowth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. They are not just sister parties, they are organically linked.

Emotionally, ideologically and even politically, given the mood on the Egyptian street as pictures of Palestinian casualties in Gaza provoke anger, President Mohamed Morsi instinctively supports Hamas.

And, so, without any recognition that Israeli civilians are targeted by Hamas rockets from a territory Israel left completely in 2005, Morsi has condemned the Israeli "aggression" in Gaza and recalled Egypt's ambassador to Israel. He has sent his Prime Minister, Hesham Kandil, to Gaza to express solidarity and strong support.

But he may well have conveyed something else in private, namely: Find a way to bring this to an end; we are not going to war with Israel over you, and if you provoke the Israelis with continuing rocket attacks on Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, you are on your own.

Why might that be his message? Because the last thing Morsi needs is a conflict that drags on and actually leads to Israel feeling it has no choice but to send ground troops into Gaza and root out Hamas in a bloody, prolonged conflict.

Egypt's public would probably demand that he break the peace treaty under such circumstances. But the treaty is not a favor that Egypt does for Israel; it has saved countless Egyptian lives. Leaving aside over \$60 billion in U.S. assistance that Egypt received over the years, monies the Muslim Brotherhood may erroneously claim went to Mubarak and not the Egyptian people, it is the treaty that remains the linchpin for making it possible for Egypt to receive essential assistance, loans and investment that it needs to confront its collapsing economy.

Who is going to invest in Egypt if there is no peace treaty and in its place is the prospect of conflict and confrontation? Morsi understands that, and that is why, with all his tough rhetoric toward Israel, he is not saying he will revoke the treaty.

But it is one thing for him to recognize that reality, and it may be another to sustain this posture under pressure. Hamas, after all, has acted to provoke Israel, and Israel has decided to draw a line. Realities on the ground may well escalate, and Egypt's new leaders are being tested -- and the U.S., Europeans and even the Saudis and others in the Gulf will need to let Morsi know that he cannot let Hamas dictate Egypt's future.

Let's be clear. Hamas triggered this latest eruption of conflict. In the last two weeks, it loaded a tunnel with a massive amount of explosives and blew it up along the fence with Israel seeking to kill the Israel forces in the vicinity. It fired an anti-tank rocket at an Israeli jeep wounding four Israeli soldiers again on the Israeli side of border.

This followed a pattern of increasing rocket fire from Gaza. Though Islamic Jihad, the Popular Resistance Committee and Salafis may have been responsible for most of the rocket fire coming out of Gaza during the course of this year, Hamas in the last weeks was doing far less to prevent it, and suddenly it began to assume responsibility for the attacks.

While it is probably true that Hamas leaders felt pressure to show they had not given up resistance against Israel -- their only real strategy and claim to rule -- there is more to the shift in Hamas' behavior. With a new Egypt led by the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas leaders felt they could do more to carry out attacks against Israel and demonstrate their "resistance" credentials.

They doubted that they would face much pressure from Egypt, instead believing that they could put pressure on Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood colleagues to do more to break relations with Israel.

Moreover, with Israel facing elections and preoccupied with Iran, they may well have calculated that Israel would not want to escalate and that Hamas could, thus, create a new normal and Israel would adjust to it.

But Hamas miscalculated and was surprised by the Israeli reaction. The best proof of that is Israel was able to track and kill the head of the Hamas military wing, Ahmed Jabari, who would have gone underground quickly if he thought Israel was about to strike.

For its part, Israel was not about to let Hamas define a new normal that would prevent Israeli forces from patrolling along the security fence separating Israel from Gaza -- nor was it about to allow Hamas to fire or permit groups like the Iranian-armed Islamic Jihad to shoot rockets from Gaza and force up to a million Israelis in southern Israel to move in and out of shelters.

So Israel acted to re-establish its deterrence and not let it erode. In killing Jabari, Israel eliminated a man not simply responsible for the deaths of dozens of Israelis, but the leader of the most militant part of Hamas who was also instrumental in planning all attacks against Israel.

But the Israeli attacks have also been guided by a strategic rationale to set back Hamas' ability to launch its longer-

range rockets against Israel. So Israel has been striking Hamas' weapons infrastructure and the sites of the Fajr 5 rockets capable of hitting Tel Aviv and even Jerusalem.

To this point, Israel has been targeting these capabilities, not Hamas fighters. This is the best indication that Israel would like to keep this conflict limited with the aim of re-establishing its deterrence, destroying a significant part of Hamas' long-range arsenal, and restoring calm.

That, however, could change. Israel's call up of reservists is designed to put more pressure on Hamas to stop the conflict. But should Hamas keep firing rockets at Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, it will cross an Israeli red-line. Bringing life to a standstill in Israel's heartland will not be tolerated. The IDF could launch ground forces into Gaza, and Israel's war aims could expand -- and that could happen sooner rather than later.

That is probably the last thing that Hamas' leaders want. Their hold on power could be shaken. The irony is that Israel and Hamas probably both want to keep this conflict limited. Israel does not need to get caught up in a long bloody conflict in Gaza, with high casualties and growing international pressure on it to stop. Hamas leaders have no desire to lose their grip on power. Logic would argue for the conflict to be brought to an end with some understandings that would prevent it from resuming soon.

But logic does not always work in the Middle East. Neither side wants to appear that they needed the ceasefire. Both will want to claim victory, and the longer it takes to broker a ceasefire, the greater the danger of this spinning out of control, particularly if Hamas keeps firing at Israel's largest cities.

For our part, we can put pressure on Egypt and mobilize others, like the European Union and even the Saudis, who have no interest in Hamas shifting the focus in the Middle East away from Syria, to do the same. Egypt has many pressing internal needs, and Hamas is the junior partner in their relationship.

No doubt, Hamas will ask the Egyptians to open a free trade area with Gaza, and get assurances from Israel that may include ending its practice of blocking what can enter Gaza from the sea. Israel, in turn, will seek assurances from Egypt not only about Hamas stopping all fire out of Gaza but also about Egypt preventing the smuggling of arms through the Sinai into Gaza.

Is Egypt up to or even willing to play this role? Much will depend on what matters most to Egypt's new leaders: their ideology or the country's economic needs. How they resolve this question may affect not only when this conflict ends -- and on what terms -- but also tell us much about the direction of Egypt during this time of transition in the Middle East.

Dennis Ross is counselor at The Washington Institute. ❖

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