

Powder Keg in Gaza

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Brief Analysis

Convincing Hamas to contain Gaza's increasingly violent jihadists will likely require international pressure on the group's backers in Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar.

The violent blows exchanged between Israel and armed Islamist groups in Gaza over the past few weeks mark a dangerous shift. The pattern of occasional clashes established after Israel's 2008-2009 Operation Cast Lead has given way to protracted fire with very short lulls. Although neither Israel nor Hamas wants the situation to escalate into a major confrontation, things could ultimately get out of hand as jihadist groups step up their violent activities.

JIHADISTS ON THE RISE

The primary engine behind this deterioration is the growth of armed jihadist groups in Gaza over the past few years. These groups, many consisting of former Hamas members, are ideologically and sometimes organizationally affiliated with al-Qaeda and do not feel bound by Hamas ceasefire rules regarding Israel. Rather, they closely cooperate with Sinai jihadists to plan and carry out terrorist attacks against Israel.

The main jihadist groups currently operating in Gaza are Jaish al-Islam, Jund Ansar Allah, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, and Ansar al-Sunna; the latter two are also part of an umbrella framework called the "Shura Council of Jihad Fighters in Greater Jerusalem." Jaish al-Islam, led by Mumtaz Dughmush, participated in the 2006 abduction of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, among other incidents. Egyptian authorities believe it also played a role in the August 2012 attack that left sixteen Egyptian soldiers dead on the Sinai-Israel border. Al-Tawhid is responsible for the June 2012 Sinai border attack that killed an Israeli citizen, for the April 2011 abduction and murder of Italian journalist Vittorio Arrigoni, and other incidents.

As these groups stepped up their attacks from Gaza and Sinai, Israel has gradually changed its tactics, employing preventive airstrikes against cells that are about to launch rockets as well as interceptive strikes against jihadist

leaders active in terrorism. One salient example is the October 13 killing of Hisham Ali Saidani (a.k.a. Abu Walid al-Maqdisi), a leading al-Tawhid figure with a long track record of jihadist activities in Jordan, Iraq, and Gaza. According to Israeli intelligence, he was on the verge of carrying out terrorist attacks against Israel. In addition, Israel has targeted operatives in Gaza with clear links to impending or perpetrated attacks from Sinai; it is reluctant to act in the peninsula itself for fear of undermining fragile relations with Egypt.

The result has been a new reality of tit-for-tat tactics and more frequent upsurges, with no end in sight. On October 23, for example, an Israeli soldier was severely wounded by an explosive activated on the Gaza border fence. Israel responded with airstrikes against militants in Gaza, who then hit back with a barrage of some eighty rockets over the next two days. An Egyptian-brokered ceasefire lowered the flames for only a short while, as jihadist groups would not abide by it. Indeed, given Cairo's limited sway over these factions, its traditional mediating capacity between Israel and Gaza has weakened.

HAMAS BALANCING BETWEEN PRESSURES

As the governing body in Gaza, Hamas still holds the key to controlling this volatile situation. Yet the increase in Salafist and jihadist terrorist activities is a serious challenge that puts the group between a rock and a hard place.

Ideologically, Hamas sees itself as an Islamic jihadist organization committed to Israel's destruction through "armed resistance." It does not want to lose these credentials, and it resents the jihadist groups for portraying it as collaborating with and protecting Israel.

At the same time, Hamas has domestic and external responsibilities as a government. The scars of Operation Cast Lead remain fresh in its mind, and Egypt has been pressing the group for restraint and containment. With the loss of Syria as an anchor, the resulting rift with Iran, and the added weight on its Gaza leadership, Hamas is even more dependent on Cairo and therefore more careful not to undermine relations with it. Despite being emboldened by the Muslim Brotherhood's ascent next door, Hamas has not received automatic support from Egypt's postrevolutionary government. Having lost effective control over parts of Sinai and shifted its focus to domestic challenges, Cairo is now demanding that Hamas maintain better control over jihadists in Gaza, halt its cross-border activities in and through Sinai, and prevent escalation.

Moreover, Hamas believes that it is in the process of breaking its isolation and economic impasse with the help of a Sunni protective umbrella extended by Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey. The Qatari emir's October 23 trip to Gaza -- the first-ever state visit to the Hamas-controlled territory -- is a milestone in this process. The \$400 million he offered, together with Turkish pledges and other funds, may turn the Hamas entity into a more successful model than its sister-rival in the West Bank, which is on the verge of economic collapse due to its lack of outside financial aid. Hamas is reassured by the thought that this shield compounds Israel's reluctance to escalate into a second Cast Lead. Yet the Sunni influence also restrains the group's own actions.

As Hamas maneuvers between these conflicting pressures, it is playing a complicated, risky game of brinkmanship. It strives to curb jihadists from inflaming tensions, but generally refrains from imposing its will head-on unless they pose a direct challenge to its control of Gaza. While Hamas usually does not initiate rocket fire against Israel, it turns a blind eye to others who do so, or in some cases apprehends and soon releases the perpetrators. In recent weeks, Hamas joined the firing on occasion and assumed public responsibility for it, though it launched only shorter-range rockets and mortars and aimed for open spaces, or what it terms "military targets."

ISRAEL ON THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA

Nearly four years after Cast Lead, it is clear to Israelis that their deterrence in Gaza is eroding. The rockets and mortars falling daily in southern Israel have been driving hundreds of thousands of people into shelters, putting pressure on the government to take stronger action against Hamas. Accordingly, Israeli forces have stepped up their

pinpoint airstrikes against jihadist and Hamas targets in a bid to compel Hamas to impose a ceasefire on the other militant groups. Given the internal dynamics in Gaza, however, these efforts have yet to bear fruit. Israel has also beefed up its active and passive defenses with Iron Dome rocket-interception batteries and additional shelters, but these measures are insufficient to meet the growing challenge.

To be sure, Israel has compelling strategic reasons to avoid major confrontation in Gaza. It still faces a decision on Iran in the coming year, as well as great uncertainty along its borders with Syria and Lebanon. It has also been careful not to shake its very sensitive relations with Egypt, as could be the case if Israel were to invade Gaza. And while the upcoming elections in late January encourage tough responses in Gaza, they inhibit major escalation. Even so, if Israel is unable to stop the current trend, or if the rocket fire causes unbearable physical or psychological damage (e.g., a lethal attack on a school), Israel could well be forced to launch a large-scale operation into Gaza.

CONCLUSION

The situation in Gaza is explosive, with Hamas and other armed groups lighting matches on the powder keg. This calls for immediate efforts to avert an unwarranted escalation. Hamas should be made to understand that it is miscalculating Israel's willingness to continue taking fire and could face undesirable consequences, to the point of losing its hold on Gaza. In addition to Israel's pressure, the United States and the international community should use their leverage over key Hamas backers -- namely Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar -- to convince the group to clamp down on jihadists and enforce a ceasefire.

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