

Sustaining an Israeli-Palestinian Ceasefire

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Brief Analysis

The Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire announced on February 8 in Sharm al-Sheikh created a window of opportunity that will slam shut quickly if terrorists resume attacks against Israel. After four-and-half years of incessant terrorist activity, Israeli tolerance for negotiating peace in the face of ongoing attacks is nil. The entire project, therefore, is premised on the assumption that the ceasefire will hold. But will it? Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have so far dismissed it, and previously negotiated ceasefires have all failed. Moreover, Iran and Hizballah are more proactively involved in recruiting, training, and financing Palestinian suicide bombers than ever before.

Selling the Ceasefire

Under the ceasefire, Israel agreed to “cease its military operations against the Palestinians everywhere,” in return for Palestinian groups stopping “all of their actions of violence against the Israelis everywhere.” Meanwhile, Hamas and PIJ officials conditioned their support for a ceasefire on the release of Palestinian prisoners, including those convicted of killing Israelis. The catch is that they have thus far rejected the number and type of prisoners Israel is considering for release. Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon, the Israeli Army chief of staff, reportedly supports demonstrating some flexibility in determining candidates and numbers for prisoner release. Yet, Shin Bet head Avi Dichter adamantly opposes releasing proven terrorists. His concern is not unfounded—suicide bombings and other attacks increased dramatically after Palestinians released hardened terrorists from prison in 2000 and 2001.

After failing to gain the approval of groups like Hamas for the proposed ceasefire, the parties settled for a verbal agreement on February 9 to halt terrorist attacks and reprisal strikes. The terrorist groups issued verbal statements of their own, however, dismissing the ceasefire as nonbinding. “There is [no] such thing as a free ceasefire,” declared Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri, complaining that Israel was offering to release an insufficient number of Palestinians. Hamas representative to Lebanon Osama Hamdan insisted that Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas’s pledge of a ceasefire “does not commit the Palestinian resistance.” PIJ member Muhammad al-Hindi concurred, stating, “This summit is predictable and has brought nothing new.”

Indeed, both Hamas and PIJ continued to dispatch suicide bombers in the days leading up to yesterday’s summit in an effort to undermine the prospects for a ceasefire declaration. In the two days prior to summit alone, Israeli authorities arrested Hamas operative Yusuf Qadakh, suspected of planning a suicide bombing, and Aishah Samhat, a twenty-one-year-old female PIJ operative found with an explosive belt.

Terrorists As Spoilers

Even in the event that Abbas is able to sell the ceasefire to Hamas and PIJ, history suggests that the prospects for it holding are slim. Ceasefires have been regular occurrences in relations between Hamas, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and Israel over the past decade. Hamas has agreed to more than ten ceasefires since 1993, but not a single one has held (see [PeaceWatch no. 424 \(templateC05.php?CID=2115\)](#)). The willingness of Hamas and PIJ leaders to agree to ceasefires at certain times is understandable—all past truces were brokered during periods when the groups needed a respite to regroup after Israel and/or PA crackdowns. During each of these ceasefire periods, Hamas leaders continued to support the main goal of the original Hamas charter (the creation through sanctioned violence of an Islamic state in all of “Palestine”). Far from indicating an ideological shift, ceasefires have traditionally served as breathers, allowing groups to rearm, replenish funds, and consolidate cells before undertaking further attacks.

In all likelihood, Iranian-sponsored groups such as Hamas, PIJ, and Hizballah will continue to heed Tehran’s call to torpedo the nascent revival of the peace process. During a late January meeting in Beirut, Hassan Nasrallah and Khaled Mishal, the leaders of Hizballah and Hamas, respectively, declared that resistance against Israel was the only option until “all of Palestine” was liberated. Understandably, PA officials are worried. “We know that Hizballah has been trying to recruit suicide bombers in the name of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades to carry out attacks which would sabotage the truce,” stated one official. Indeed, just hours after the ceasefire announcement, al-Aqsa members fired on a car near an Israeli settlement in the West Bank and then attacked the army unit sent to investigate the shooting. Another PA official cited intercepted email communications and bank transactions indicating that Hizballah has increased its payments to terrorists: “Now they are willing to pay \$100,000 for a whole operation whereas in the past they paid \$20,000, then raised it to \$50,000.”

Cause for Optimism

Despite these factors, there are reasons to be hopeful. Ever cognizant of the mood on the Palestinian street, Hamas is traditionally more aggressive when support for its attacks is high among Palestinians. Yet, recent polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research indicate that 80 percent of Palestinians support both a mutual cessation of violence and an immediate return to the negotiating table. The prospect that the Israeli government will dismantle settlements, combined with the democratic election of a new Palestinian leader, has created momentum that, if maintained, could lead Hamas and PIJ to reconsider the efficacy of attacks in the near term. Moreover, in response to Palestinian concerns, European Union (EU) officials are considering adding Hizballah to their list of designated terrorist groups.

What Can Be Done

For a ceasefire to work, the parameters of the agreement—especially if it is a verbal one—must be explicit. In the immediate term, then, newly appointed U.S. security coordinator Lt. Gen. William Ward should hold trilateral discussions to ensure that the parties’ understanding of and expectations for the ceasefire are the same. At the same time, Abbas must push ahead with efforts to reform the Palestinian security services. These measures should establish a protocol for action in the event that Hamas, PIJ, Hizballah-sponsored Fatah groups, or others continue to conduct attacks. They would also position Palestinian forces to be able to prevent Hamas and PIJ from regrouping during the ceasefire as they have in the past.

In addition, U.S. officials should press their European counterparts to add Hizballah to the EU terrorism list. Although some Europeans resist banning Hizballah on the pretext of it being a political party in Lebanon, Israelis and Palestinians agree that the organization represents the single most dangerous threat to the peace process. Indeed, Hizballah is the only so-called political party that finances suicide bombings and has an arsenal of 30,000 rockets. As a member of the Quartet, and in light of calls throughout Europe for more proactive attention to the peace

process, the EU should do everything in its power to ensure that the ceasefire holds. Banning Hizballah would go a long way toward facilitating Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Speaking from Jerusalem earlier this week, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that “without the Palestinians making a strong stand against terrorism, it is going to be very difficult to have permanent progress between the Israelis and the Palestinians.” Rice added that she suspects Abbas understands this, but the reality is that Hamas, PIJ, al-Aqsa, and Hizballah do too. Taking action against these groups and preparing Palestinian security forces to contend with their continued attacks will be crucial to keeping this window of opportunity open.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow and director of the Terrorism Studies Program at The Washington Institute and author of the forthcoming book *Exposing Hamas: Funding Terror under the Cover of Charity* (Yale University Press, 2005). ❖

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