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## **Rockets in the South Yet Once More: Israel's Gaza Dilemma**

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The rocket barrage fired by Islamic Jihad from the Gaza Strip on Wednesday, March 12, 2014 served as a reminder that the achievements of Operation Pillar of Defense could easily disintegrate and that the volatile situation in Gaza could escalate very quickly. For its part, Hamas has attempted to navigate the tension between its jihadi agenda and the constraints and considerations pushing the movement toward a pragmatic policy. However, in their determination to fire rockets and launch attacks against Israeli targets, Islamic Jihad and other extremist Islamist groups in Gaza have challenged Hamas in its struggle to maintain stability in Gaza. At the same time, the official website of al-Quds Brigades, the military wing of Islamic Jihad, notes that the rocket fire at Israel is a response to Israeli ceasefire violations, and the organization does not intend to end the quiet.

Whether the action was coordinated with Hamas and received its approval, or this was an attempt by Islamic Jihad to embarrass Hamas and position itself as the leader of the resistance, Israel holds Hamas responsible for shattering the peace. Israel assumes that for Islamic Jihad to have fired such a large number of rockets there would have had to be some type of coordination with Hamas. Nevertheless, Hamas presumably has an interest in avoiding a new round of escalation.

Along with a desire to maintain the relative quiet prevailing since Operation Pillar of Defense, it appears that the main factor leading Hamas to act with restraint is its desire not to challenge its governance in Gaza. Once a movement characterized by maneuver between various identities and obligations, it appears that in recent years, against the backdrop of the events in the Arab world, Hamas has focused more intensively on ensuring its governance and its political achievements in the Gaza Strip. It has invested much effort in calming the volatile public sphere and maintaining quiet in the area. Hamas is likely aware that escalation against Israel could cause harm to the movement, and in particular, increase public pressure in Gaza.

As a result of Operation Pillar of Defense and the events in the Arab world, Hamas is under pressure from the local population, pressure for restraint that the organization

cannot ignore. This in turn requires a reexamination and reassessment by Israel of its Gaza policy. More specifically, there is a need to define the approach toward the situation in the Gaza Strip as well as the Israeli strategic objective in the event of another military operation that could begin without much notice, even if this is expressly contrary to the wishes of both sides.

Because it is unlikely that the Palestinian Authority will regain control of the Gaza Strip in the near future, Israel has an interest in maintaining Hamas's hold in Gaza. At least until this past week, Hamas has proven itself, to be relatively restrained and effective in its ability to control the area. An undermining of the Hamas government could create fertile ground for subversive activity by more extreme organizations in Gaza, particularly Salafist-jihadi groups, which could initiate unrestrained military action against Israel, subject to their military capabilities. It is preferable for Israel to maintain the Hamas government in Gaza while reducing the security threats it poses and posed by the other Palestinian terrorist organizations.

The assumption that there is a direct connection between calm in the Gaza Strip and the desire of Hamas to remain in power requires Israel to adopt a policy that will allow this calm to continue, along with careful cost-benefit calculations in every operation against Hamas. This is a sensitive dynamic that decision makers should acknowledge, especially during limited operations, and under the assumption that in current reality, no action should be taken in a manner that will create chaos in the Gaza Strip.

However, if large scale violence develops, then the overall strategy points to two main choices. The first is an enhanced version of Operation Pillar of Defense or Operation Cast Lead. The goal would be to attempt to create the conditions for a settlement and an improved security situation for a period of time. The second alternative is broader and involves a radical change in the situation. This could be necessary in the event of an extreme deterioration in the security environment, e.g., an attack that demands a harsh Israeli response. In such a scenario, it is possible that a prolonged presence in Gaza would be required that would allow a more extensive strike at the terrorist infrastructure, or even a full occupation of Gaza. This should end with an attempt to transfer authority to another suitable actor, but not before eliminating the terrorist infrastructure and the hostile forces there.

If the rocket fire continues, Israel will have to step up its response. However, at this stage, it would have to be focused mainly on Islamic Jihad targets and not escalate into a large scale confrontation. A cautious and limited response would attempt to convey a threatening message to Islamic Jihad and Hamas, and at the same time, would seek not to drag the parties into a more serious deterioration. Although past experience shows that it is difficult to anticipate the dynamics in the Gaza Strip, it appears that currently a large scale conflict with Israel is not in the interest of Hamas or Islamic Jihad, and therefore the

chance that a limited Israeli operation would deteriorate into an all-out conflict is relatively slim.

The Egyptian attempt to formulate a ceasefire with Islamic Jihad could be a real turning point because for the first time, the organization would be the main actor in such an arrangement. This is in part due to the weakening of Hamas's image as the sovereign in the Gaza Strip and the leader of the resistance, and the dramatic deterioration in relations between Egypt and Hamas since the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood regime in July 2013 and the rise to power of the military government. The decision to interact directly with Islamic Jihad may subsequently enhance the organization's image in Egypt and perhaps boost it as well among the Gaza population, at the expense of Hamas.

Hamas's distancing from the "axis of resistance," the crisis between Gaza and Egypt, and the destruction of the tunnels are perceived by many as a sure victory over Hamas. Nevertheless, Hamas is now the only force capable of continuing to control Gaza, as long as the rift between it and the Palestinian Authority remains. Ironically, if Hamas were to stop governing, Israel would be forced once again to cope with the problem of Gaza, which could turn into a more threatening and unfamiliar environment. This does not eliminate the need to reduce the existing military threat in Gaza, but it does require a level-headed, integrated decision that will make it possible to maintain the relative calm that was preserved until the latest round of rocket fire.

