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## **The Erosion of the Israel-Hamas Ceasefire in Gaza**

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Last month's escalation in rocket attacks against Israel originating from Gaza began as a Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) reprisal operation following an Israeli airstrike that killed three of the group's militants. That Israeli attack in southern Gaza was aimed at a PIJ cell that had engaged in cross-border firing against IDF personnel.

This episode reflects the gradual erosion, since early 2014, of the Egyptian-brokered November 2012 ceasefire that ended operation Pillar of Defense. That unsigned ceasefire agreement was the clearest expression of the Israeli government's adoption in recent years of a policy of containment of Hamas based on mutual deterrence. This new policy emerged as the previous approach, in place since the aftermath of Hamas's takeover of Gaza in the summer of 2007 and aimed at bringing down Hamas, has been gradually set aside after failing to achieve its objective. While the first twelve months following the ceasefire were characterized by a significant drop in violent exchanges between the parties, with 2014 the situation has been progressively less stable.

For the purpose of achieving credible deterrence vis-à-vis Hamas, the Israeli government has been strict in responding to any perceived violation of the uneasy state of quiet. It considers Hamas the de facto power controlling Gaza, and thus holds it responsible for any attack on Israel's territory and citizens, regardless of who is the actual perpetrator.

At the same time, Israel's policy of eyeing Hamas as the effective government of Gaza is accompanied by the interest in avoiding an unnecessary escalation and yet another extensive operation in the Strip. So far Israel has focused its attacks mostly on PIJ targets in Gaza, or any other organization that launches rockets and violates the ceasefire, signaling a desire to prevent an all-out escalation – an interest shared by Hamas. At the same time, the Israeli government has been putting pressure on Hamas to control all potential spoilers operating in Gaza, from the PIJ to the local Salafi-jihadist factions. The threat of full reoccupation of Gaza and forcible removal of Hamas made recently by Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman should be read in this context.

For its part, Hamas must contend with the complex problem of preserving its control over Gaza, which in turn requires preventing extensive or frequent confrontations with Israel while not jeopardizing its credibility as the “Islamic resistance.” A sharp decline in credibility or popularity could indeed encourage other actors such as the PIJ to present themselves as a better alternative to Hamas. For these reasons, the group has alternated between a zero tolerance policy with respect to uncoordinated attacks against Israel, with periods when it relaxed its hold on the Strip, wary lest crackdowns on other militant organizations damage its reputation.

Keeping internal challengers at bay is especially important to Hamas, given its increasingly complicated position. Since the ouster of the Morsi government, Egypt’s new political authorities have taken an especially harsh attitude with respect to Hamas, imposing prolonged closures of the border between Gaza and Egypt, while cracking down on underground tunnels, which not only serve to smuggle weapons but also play a crucial role in importing basic commodities into Gaza. This has caused substantial economic damage to the Hamas government, as well as to the Gaza population. In addition, the new Egyptian government has launched an open political confrontation against Hamas based on the organization’s historic connection to the Muslim Brotherhood, declaring the organization illegal and accusing it of being a terrorist group and supporting terrorism in both Sinai and Egypt proper. While Hamas has responded to the loss of the Egyptian ally by working on rehabilitating its relations with Tehran and investing in maintaining Doha and Istanbul on its side, these partners cannot compensate for the loss of the strategic relationship with Egypt. In turn, this explains why, overall, Hamas has been extremely cautious in formulating its policy with respect to Egypt, mindful of not worsening the already problematic relations and repeatedly attempting to calm the situation and restore a working relationship.

Hamas thus has even more of an interest in not entering another round of direct military confrontation with Israel. This then requires defusing escalations and obtaining greater control of the Strip. Hamas continues to have conflicting relations with a number of smaller armed factions operating in Gaza, including the small and loosely organized Salafi-jihadist camp. In the past year, these groups have often been behind the periodic escalations in the form of rocket attacks, and with the increased activism of jihadist groups in neighboring Syria, Lebanon, Sinai, and Egypt itself, these groups may feel the desire to raise their profile in Gaza as well. Even though their military capabilities are relatively minor, these groups have in the past been a political nuisance for Hamas, by attacking its governance record, criticizing its “moderation,” and launching uncoordinated attacks against Israel regardless of the consequences for Gaza. The relationship with the Islamic Jihad is also potentially problematic, even though both

Hamas and PIJ leaders aver that their relationship is strong and their actions are coordinated. However, the rise in the PIJ status and its freedom of action can become an increasing source of friction between the two groups, which have a history of recurrent tension. This is especially the case given PIJ's historical and current closeness to Iran and its interest in raising its profile domestically at the expense of Hamas by attacks against Israel.

Hamas as such seems caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, actively intervening to prevent the PIJ campaign against Israel in retaliation for the killing of its own militants would have been a bad option for Hamas, resulting in worsening internal relations and discrediting the group. On the other hand, the current economic and political crisis makes it important for Hamas to preserve quiet with Israel. To accommodate these competing interests, Hamas needs to play a complex signaling game with Israel. In this sense both parties need to provide mutual reassurance of their interest in returning to a situation of controlled conflict in the south, under which Hamas will “for the most part” keep the quiet and Israel will “for the most part” retaliate in a calibrated and limited way. Needless to say, this signal-based mode of conflict management is far from stable, but short of a larger political engagement and a revision of the current policy, it is the most plausible solution to the current instability.

Another potential option for Hamas, as it attempts to resolve these contradictions, is to try to increase its operations in the West Bank, which it does not control directly, thus attempting to shield itself from direct retaliation. Indeed it is possible that the noticeable increase in Hamas activities in the West Bank could be connected to these considerations. Israel should accordingly maintain a good and cooperative relationship with the Palestinian Authority, notwithstanding a possible crisis that may follow a sour end of the negotiation period. Otherwise Hamas and other groups may take advantage of the tension and growing frustration among Palestinians in the West Bank, and attempt to ignite a return to armed struggle and violence as the preferred way to engage with Israel.

