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The Long-Term Implications of the Israel-Hamas Clash

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- The current clash between Israel and Hamas did not begin with rocket fire but with ramped-up terror activity on the Israel-Gaza border. Hamas' strategy has changed over the past two years. It believes the "Islamic Spring" has altered the balance of power between the Arab world and Israel.
- Egypt is now Islamist and led by the Muslim Brotherhood movement, the parent-movement of Hamas. Egypt's new Islamist government regards Hamas as a strategic partner in the struggle against Israel. Indeed, it is through Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood regime that Hamas now enjoys the possibility of dialogue with the United States and Europe.
- Liberating Palestine "from the river to the sea" is portrayed as a fully realistic goal for the present generation thanks to the Islamic Spring, which has redrawn the map of the Middle East. Conversely, Hamas views Israel as floundering in growing strategic distress as Turkey and Egypt become major, bitter enemies within the Arab world's new vision of its struggle.
- Hamas views each round of armed conflict with Israel as a stage in a long-term war of attrition. Hamas leaders hope the increasingly severe and violent outbreaks will eventually erode Israel's resilience, while goading the masses toward the emergence of a united military front for the liberation of Palestine.
- Despite the military blows it has suffered, Hamas is coming out stronger from this round of conflict with Israel. With its rocket fire on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Hamas enjoys wall-

to-wall backing in the Arab world. The financial aid that will flow into Gaza will enable Hamas to rebuild and even further develop its military infrastructure for the next round.

Hamas Changes Its Strategy in the Wake of the Arab Spring

The current clash between Israel and Hamas has been continuing in a mode of static warfare, marked by ongoing missile fire at Israeli communities from Gaza and Israeli aerial attacks on terror targets. Intensive, behind-the-scenes political activity is aimed at working out a ceasefire. Israel's call-up of tens of thousands of reservists for a Gaza ground operation is meant to pressure the Hamas regime to agree to a ceasefire.

Even now, with the hostilities still going on, the main political and security implications of this round of fighting are evident. This clash did not begin with rocket fire but with ramped-up terror activity on the Israel-Gaza border, including the detonation of an explosive-filled tunnel that had been dug into Israeli territory and the firing of an anti-tank missile at an IDF jeep on a border patrol.

These attacks, part of a long series of shooting and explosive-charge incidents along the border, showed how Hamas' strategy had changed over the past two years. In Hamas' view, the Arab Spring, which has become an Islamic Spring in the Middle East, has altered the balance of power between the Arab world and Israel.

Egypt, in the past a close U.S. ally and supporter of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah led by Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), is now Islamist and led by the Muslim Brotherhood movement, the parent-movement of Hamas. Egypt's new Islamist government regards Hamas as a strategic partner in the struggle against Israel. It musters all its political power to help Hamas in the international arena, including harnessing the Arab League to this mission. Indeed, it is through Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood regime that Hamas now enjoys the possibility of dialogue with the United States and Europe.

Hamas has also drawn great encouragement from its political achievements. Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh was received as a head of state in visits to the Arab Spring countries and Iran, and the emir of Qatar made the first state visit to Gaza and bestowed Arab legitimacy on Hamas' rule.

An Accelerated Timetable for Israel's Destruction

The power-drunk mood is evident in the statements of senior Hamas officials over the past two years. In the past, Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin predicted Israel's destruction by the end of the third decade of this century, and other senior Hamas figures said the next generation would be the one to witness the liberation of Palestine. Today, though, the tune has totally changed. Liberating Palestine "from the river to the sea" is portrayed as a fully realistic goal for the present generation thanks to the Islamic Spring, which has redrawn the map of the Middle East, and in light of the decisive role of the *jihad*-ready Muslim masses in giving the region its character.

Conversely, Hamas views Israel as floundering in growing strategic distress as Turkey and Egypt become major, bitter enemies within the Arab world's new vision of its struggle. The Hamas leadership sees Israel's political and military options, including the exercise of its right to self-defense, as increasingly limited.

In the context of the new balance of power, Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal asserted that Israel can neither swallow Gaza nor eject it; that is, it has no real way of coping with the challenge Hamas poses to its security and, in the long term, existence. It was this that led Hamas to adopt a new, bolder and provocative policy that seeks to substantially and systematically erode the “rules of the game” that prevailed in the informal ceasefire understandings between Israel and Hamas, whereby the Palestinian armed struggle was kept on a low flame.

Building a United Front for the Liberation of Palestine

Although, in hindsight, Hamas made a tactical error regarding Israeli policy, its basic approach has not changed: it views each round of armed conflict with Israel as a stage in a long-term war of attrition. The increasing severity and frequency of these clashes are, then, analogous to birth pangs, with Hamas leaders hoping the violent outbreaks will eventually erode Israel’s resilience and afflict its economy. At the same time, Hamas sees these armed clashes as a means of inflaming the West Bank, thereby opening a further front against Israel and wresting rule from the Palestinian Authority. The ultimate goal is to goad the masses into more and more Islamic revolutions until the emergence of a united military front for the liberation of Palestine.

Despite the military blows it has suffered, Hamas is coming out stronger from this round of conflict with Israel. Neither Egypt nor Turkey, nor any of the Arab League countries, has condemned Hamas’ rocket fire on Israeli communities, including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, as a war crime. On the contrary, Hamas enjoys wall-to-wall backing in the Arab world, and the current crisis has highlighted Egypt as Hamas’ new patron since the closing of the group’s offices in Damascus. The financial aid that will flow into Gaza will enable Hamas to rebuild and even further develop its military infrastructure for the next round.

“Blockaded” Gaza is not blockaded at all. Its border with Egypt is open, for all intents and purposes. Hundreds of thousands of people pass through it, along with commodities at a rate of millions of dollars annually, together with enormous quantities of weapons, as the latest clash has made evident. This de facto open border with Egypt gives Hamas an important advantage in rehabilitating its capabilities and developing its military infrastructure.

Long-Term Trends

The new Middle East has not brought tidings of democracy with Western values of human rights. Instead democracy has provided a one-time means for the Muslim Brotherhood and other movements to take the reins of power. The real aim is to institute *shari’a* law in stages – in the view of the worldwide Muslim Brotherhood movement, the only real form that democratic values can take.

Egypt is hostile to Israel and in a historical process of conflict with it. At this juncture, Egypt is not prepared politically, economically, and militarily for a military campaign. The regime is still engaged in consolidating its rule, and the economy (and the army as well) is still dependent to a great extent on Western aid. Syria, for the time being, has other preoccupations as its army suffers harsh blows in a protracted civil war, and this too reduces the chances of an Arab front threatening Israel as in the 1973 war.

Egypt, then, given all these constraints, is focusing instead on encouraging the Palestinians in an ongoing campaign of attrition that displays patterns of popular struggle and terror with on-and-off escalations. The background stage-setting of Palestinian terror, or what Egypt and the

Palestinians call “exercising the right of resistance,” is vital to Egypt’s diplomatic endeavor that seeks, through political channels, to weaken Israel in the international arena and, using political, economic, and legal tools, circumscribe its right to self-defense, erode its resilience, and loosen its hold on the West Bank territories that are indispensable to its national security.

The Iranian Role

Although Hamas has tried to conceal Iran’s role in building the military infrastructure in Gaza, that role has been confirmed and officially acknowledged by Islamic Jihad. Fajr-5 missiles and other weapons have been ferried from Iran and Hizbullah to Hamas and the Palestinian terror organizations, and Iran has given much assistance in training the Palestinian forces for battle.

Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood are prepared to cooperate with Iran even though it is actively supporting the Assad regime in Syria – which, over the past two years, has been committing war crimes against the Sunni population that reach the level of crimes against humanity and genocide.

The Iranian role reveals more than anything else the supreme common denominator between radical Shiite Islam and radical Sunni Islam. The two sides are able to overcome their profound differences and cooperate on the basis of a shared sphere of interests: the struggle against Israel, the continuation of the revolutions of the Islamic Spring, and the ejection of Western influence from the region.

Israel’s Need for Defensible Borders

Gaza’s transformation into a terror entity, with an extensive military infrastructure and advanced weaponry, removes the basis for any claim that territory is no longer important in the missile era, and demonstrates the vital need for continued Israeli control of key areas of the West Bank that, under any scenario, would give it even minimally defensible borders. A withdrawal to the 1967 lines would likely result in Israel facing yet another military and terrorist front that could, by linking up with regional actors such as Iran, Egypt, and Hizbullah, threaten Israel’s continued existence.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, unlike other loci of confrontation, exerts strong impacts on the Middle East and the world as a whole. The international community, which has sprung into political activity to prevent a wide-scale Israeli military operation in Gaza, is thereby effectively safeguarding Hamas’ regime and granting it immunity. The fear is that an all-out confrontation would spark an uncontrollable eruption of violence that would endanger Western interests in the Middle East, while also agitating Muslim communities in the West.

Once again, radical leftist organizations have come out in support of Hamas. In Toronto, for example, Canadian leftist activists have upheld Hamas’ “right of resistance” as evidenced in the current hostilities, ignoring the fact that international human rights organizations define such tactics as war crimes. The unwritten alliance between the radical left and Hamas rests on common demands that the West change its policy in the Middle East, stop supporting “illegitimate” Israel, and instead opt for cooperation with the rising Islamic forces.

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