



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

### Hamas's Irrational Rationale

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Gaza Strip's rulers do not subscribe to governmental norms and are indifferent to their people's hardships, but the notion that Gazans will rise up against them is false. Still, reports of Hamas's eagerness for war with Israel are greatly exaggerated.**

A new report by the UN has made headlines recently, alerting the world that after a decade under Hamas rule, the Gaza Strip has effectively become unlivable for the 2 million Palestinians that call it home.

This report was followed by even bigger headlines predicting that given the dire situation, it is only a matter of time before Hamas provokes fresh hostilities.

I believe the descriptions of both Israel's share of alleged responsibility for the crisis in Gaza, as well as Hamas's alleged eagerness to go to war, have been greatly exaggerated. There is no dispute that the life of the average Palestinian in Gaza is difficult, regardless of whether he is or is not a Hamas member. The Islamist terrorist group has never based the decisions by which it governs on what best serves the Palestinians' interests, but on its own considerations, its war readiness, and the external pressure it faces over its activities.

As important as Gaza's economic stability is, the last conflict on the southern front, Operation Protective Edge in 2014, erupted when Hamas was in the midst of advanced preparations for a major terrorist attack, prompted by several Gaza assassinations and the mass arrest of its operatives in the West Bank by the Israeli military. According to foreign media reports, the Shin Bet security agency had warned that the attack was imminent. True, Hamas was under significant economic pressure, but it was not Gazans' daily hardships

that drove it to provoke the rapid security escalation that resulted in the military campaign. There is no room for naiveté on this matter.

Perhaps this is also the time to debunk two other optimistic misconceptions about Gaza and its potential fate: the dire situation will not prompt Gazans to overthrow Hamas, and economic stability does not necessarily spell security stability.

The hardships experienced by the Strip's residents, no matter how terrible, will not drive them to stage a coup to topple Hamas's rule. The organization is entrenched in Gaza and is notorious for its brutality towards any sign of dissidence, and the Palestinians know there is no viable alternative waiting for an opportunity to rule.

For all these reasons, it is time everyone got used to the idea that Hamas is not about to relinquish its dominant position in the Gaza Strip, let alone concede to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Nor will the local population expel it no matter how bad things get. Like any other organization, Hamas craves regional and international legitimacy, but it will not forgo its rule, its military power, or its means of oppression to achieve that.

The assumption that if Gaza experiences economic stability and prosperity Hamas would refrain from provoking hostilities is also baseless. This misconception is based on the theory that Hamas operates by governmental norms and prioritizes the needs and welfare of its citizens. This logic does not apply to Hamas.

### **Hamas is solely responsible**

Israel has vested interests in the Palestinians' welfare. It wants to see Palestinian despair decrease; it wants the average Palestinian citizen to acknowledge that his situation is much better than that of his brothers elsewhere in the Middle East. This is the Israeli interest with regard to the people living under the Palestinian Authority's rule in the West Bank, and in principle, also with regard to the Palestinians in Gaza, both from a humanitarian standpoint and to prevent despair-fueled chaos.

But Gaza is ruled by Hamas, whose only priorities are bolstering its military power and cementing its grip. This is why all the supplies Israel allows into Gaza on a daily basis to facilitate normal life have little chance of reaching the people. Hamas first and foremost takes care of its leaders and makes sure it has what it needs to sustain its terror tunnel digging enterprise and its weapons production efforts. It then sees to the needs of its members. Then and only then, what little is left is diverted to rehabilitation efforts that benefit the population.

This is why the argument that Israel is responsible for Gaza's inability to recover from its plight is baseless. It is Hamas that determines the priorities by which to allocate resources in the enclave, and the more construction materials enter Gaza, the easier and faster it is for Hamas to restore its military capabilities.

Should Israel sacrifice its own security on the altar of Gazans' living conditions? I don't think so. True, Israel is responsible for the blockade, but it has to be maintained to prevent the smuggling of sophisticated weapons into the enclave. Already, most of the organization's weapons are locally produced. Should Israel simply allow Hamas to import more weapons by air and sea, or import the technology that would improve its rockets' range and accuracy? The only logical answer to that is no.

A strategy for Gaza must be clear, even if complex and difficult to carry out. For the foreseeable future at least, Hamas remains the entity Israel holds responsible for any act of terror, be it an attack or rocket fire by one of the smaller radical groups that Hamas is struggling to rein in. Hamas is solely responsible, which is why it cannot be written off.

Still, Israel must also make sure Hamas is not growing strong enough to challenge the IDF in a way the military cannot counter. It is important that Israel maintain the ability to generate enough deterrence among Hamas leaders to make them question the organization's future if it provokes war.

Israel needs Hamas to be weak enough not to attack, but stable enough to deal with the radical terrorist groups in Gaza. This line may be blurry but the logic is clear. The challenge lies in walking this blurry line.

Hamas can be undermined to the point that its existence is threatened. To accomplish this, Israel would need to seize large parts of the populated areas in Gaza; destroy miles and miles of terror tunnels; locate and eliminate Hamas commanders; and locate and destroy headquarters and weapons production sites, even if most of them are hidden in densely populated neighborhoods.

The results of such an operation would be hard to swallow in Israel, and even more so overseas. The IDF would surely sustain multiple casualties; Gaza would pay a heavy price in terms of fatalities among terrorists and civilians alike, which would undoubtedly number in the thousands; bombing large areas would cause massive infrastructure damage that would leave the enclave in utter ruins; and while there is no telling what damage bombing the tunnel grid would cause, it would certainly be massive.

Once the dust settles on such an operation, a familiar question would arise: now what? Does the IDF leave Gaza to the hell of warring terrorist groups left unchecked by a strong ruler, or does it stay? Will Israel be responsible for Gaza's rehabilitation, shouldering the economic burden that implies as well as the burden any occupying power bears under international law? These are difficult questions that underscore the fact that the everyday dilemmas with respect to what should be done about Gaza are, for now at least, better than the alternative.

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