



How Feasible Is a Long-Term Truce with Hamas?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The prospect of a long-term truce between Israel and Hamas brings with it both risks and opportunities. While it remains far from clear that such an arrangement is even feasible, Israel is giving Egyptian mediation efforts a chance.

At present, the Israel-Hamas truce is based on the minimal formula of 'quiet for quiet.' Many obstacles stand in the way of efforts to broaden this arrangement.

As time passes, this minimalist formula, in place since the end of Operation Protective Edge in 2014, faces a growing risk of collapsing into a new war.

The truce has already been punctured by five major escalation rounds since May of this year alone, in which Hamas and other armed radical forces in Gaza terrorized southern Israeli areas by firing over 600 rockets and mortars.

The Israel Air Force responded by launching extensive waves of air strikes, hitting hundreds of high-value Hamas military assets in Gaza. Targets included Hamas naval attack tunnels, rocket manufacturing factories, battalion headquarters, command posts, urban warfare training camps, and other enemy assets that Hamas invested considerable time and money into creating.

These rounds of fighting appear to be the result of a calculated campaign by Hamas leader Yihya Sinwar to escalate the situation to the brink of war, but to hold back from tumbling into the abyss.

Sinwar's campaign of calculated brinksmanship began in March with a series of mass infiltration efforts and border rioting incidents, and continued into armed exchanges with Israel in recent months.

Sinwar's strategic goal is to pressure the Israeli government into agreeing to demands to ease security restrictions around Gaza by widening the ceasefire understandings. This, Sinwar appears to believe, will prevent an economic-humanitarian meltdown in Gaza that would threaten the viability of his regime.

A broader ceasefire, Hamas hopes, would allow international investment to pour into Gaza, as well as lead to the opening of border crossings, economic and infrastructure projects, the construction of a seaport, and the improvement of purchasing power for Gazans.

Hamas prioritizes the needs of its armed wing over that of its civilian population, and cynically diverts funds and materials towards its military force build-up program. But it is highly concerned about the prospect of an economic crash that could lead to a popular uprising against it by Gazans. Hence, it is looking for a way to end its regional isolation so that outside elements can come in and rescue the faltering Gazan economy.

As part of this same effort, Sinwar tried to reach a reconciliation with his internal Palestinian foe, the Palestinian Authority (PA), by offering it a deal by which the PA would rule Gaza politically and act as a conduit for international funds, while Hamas would maintain its military wing and enjoy a monopoly of arms.

The offer was rejected out of hand by PA President Mahmoud Abbas, who described it as "the Hezbollah model." Abbas also insists that Hamas disband its military wing if internal Palestinian reconciliation is ever to occur.

The Ramallah-Gaza impasse, and the PA's own sanctions against Gaza, in place to punish Hamas for splitting away from Ramallah's rule, is one of the main reasons that all efforts to expand the Israel-Hamas ceasefire have failed so far.

With the PA avenue blocked, Hamas turned to the riskier tactic of controlled escalation against Israel.

Hamas's negotiation tactics have alternated between talks and mortar shells, but its short-term goal remains the same: to open up Gaza to the world while holding onto the terrorist army it has built.

The intended audience for Hamas's moves is not only Israel and the PA, but also Egypt. Cairo holds the keys to the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Sinai, a crossing Hamas would like to see opened for good. Egypt, for its part, does not wish to see a new armed conflict erupt in Gaza, a development Cairo would view as a destabilizing and destructive regional event, despite Egypt's inherent hostility towards Hamas.

Hamas, aware that all the regional actors would prefer to see war avoided, has been signaling to Israel, Egypt, and the PA that it is prepared to go to war, if necessary, to avoid the scenario of a domestic uprising due to an economic crash.

Hamas's regional isolation is not a new problem for it. It became acute when Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government, a natural ideological ally of Hamas, and which Hamas had hoped would become its regional power sponsor, was replaced by the anti-Hamas administration of Egyptian President Al-Sisi in 2013. While Iran has offered some assistance, this is a far cry from the kind of outside support Hamas had hoped to enjoy, and Hamas's willingness to collaborate with Tehran has earned it the ire of Sunni powers.

Hamas's efforts to break its isolation was a major factor behind the outbreak of the 2014 conflict with Israel. Today, the very same factor could spur a new war.

Raising the stakes further, Hamas has in recent months introduced a new 'tit-for-tat' principle, obligating it to fire projectiles at Israel every time the IDF operates against terrorist activity in Gaza. This principle is designed to protect Hamas's public image and defend it against accusations by other armed Gazan organizations who have suggested that Hamas has become a pushover in its dealings with Israel.

These factors have all combined to place Hamas and Israel on the verge of a new war. Yet despite Hamas's radical Islamist ideology, its leadership is keen to preserve its rule in Gaza, and it is aware that a new war with Israel would jeopardize that.

Sinwar seems to recognize the futility of any new war with Israel at this juncture, particularly in light of the effectiveness of Israel's Iron Dome air defenses and new anti-tunnel technology. The new counter-measures are supposed to entirely eliminate the threat of cross-border tunnels by the end of this year.

At the same time, Hamas's rocket and mortar shell production efforts have been intensifying over the past year. Gaza is crisscrossed with a maze of internal combat tunnels, and Hamas's battalions are well equipped for intensive asymmetrical urban warfare. Hamas is also working on new attack capabilities, likely in the form of drones, and new sea-based attack cells. This means that Hamas's force build-up program is changing direction, but not stopping. Hamas has become adept at domestically producing its own arms due to its difficulties in smuggling in weapons from Sinai.

Israel too has its reasons for wishing to avoid a major Gaza conflict at this stage. One reason is that a full-scale conflict would mean fewer resources would be

at Israel's disposal against the bigger and significantly more dangerous threats that are developing in other arenas.

The Gaza Strip is the least stable arena in Israel's environment, but it is only one of five active arenas, and it is not the most threatening. The Lebanese and Syrian arenas to the north constitute significantly higher threat levels. Lebanon is run by Hezbollah, the most powerful enemy actor in Israel's environment. Hezbollah's firepower capabilities exceed those of most state armies in the world.

In Syria, Iran has been pursuing major efforts to set up attack bases against Israel and flood the country with Shiite militias under Tehran's command.

According to international reports, Israel regularly deploys precise air power and high-quality intelligence to stall Iran's takeover of Syria, but the situation remains explosive and unpredictable.

While the IDF was designed to fight on multiple fronts simultaneously and emerge with clear victories, it seems fair to assume that the Israeli defense establishment would prefer to focus its resources on the more dangerous northern fronts, and prioritize those over Gaza if possible.

Stopping Iran's takeover of Syria is Israel's foremost immediate goal, and a Gaza conflict now would serve as a distraction from the more dangerous threat developing to the north.

In addition, it seems unlikely that Israel would be able to find viable substitute rulers to replace Hamas in Gaza. That means that containing and deterring Hamas, so long as this is possible, is preferable to any full-scale conflict involving ground forces moving into one of the world's most heavily armed and dense urban warfare environments. Such a conflict would only become absolutely necessary if Sinwar chooses the option of war.

Thus, while the IDF is now fully prepared to decisively defeat Hamas, Israel has chosen the option of containment and deterrence instead.

As a result of these factors, Egypt's active mediation efforts in Gaza serve Israel's interests.

The chances of a broad truce arrangement remain low, but a limited ceasefire that is still firmer than the current unstable set-up might be within reach.

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