



Point of View No. 89

Hamas's Strategic Turnaround: Why is this Military Clash different from all other Previous Clashes?

In this document, the Reut Institute claims that the present military clash in Gaza demonstrates a strategically important turning point in Hamas's self-perception of its role in the Palestinian national movement, especially regarding its approach towards the PLO. The war is in fact an implementation of Hamas's "Plan B," created in the event of cancelled Palestinian elections. Hence, this current bout of fighting differs from preceding rounds because it does not solely deal with "tactical" issues related to the Gaza Strip. This perception may have implications on the fighting's length and conclusion, as well as on the working assumptions and agenda of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

What's the issue?

Up to now, Hamas's perception of its place within the Palestinian national movement can be characterized by two stages:

1. **Stage 1: Challenging the official Palestinian framework (1987-2006)** - Since the formation of its military branch (1987-88), Hamas has presented an Islamic-nationalist alternative to the PLO's secular-nationalist bent on the Palestinian national struggle. Hamas refused to recognize the Oslo Accords and, by extension, the Palestinian Authority (PA), which was created from the agreements. Accordingly, Hamas has refrained from participating in governmental institutions.
2. **Stage 2: Attempting to take over the PLO from within (2006-2021)** -
 - **Hamas's choice to participate in the PA Legislative Council elections in 2006 represented a strategic turning point** from an organization presenting itself as an alternative to the PA and PLO, to one attempting to wrestle control from within, at the expense of Fatah, in order to appropriate the PLO's status as "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people".
 - **The desire to establish a "new PLO" with Hamas has become a major goal.** Even after seizing control of the Gaza Strip by force in 2007, Hamas has not changed this approach. In all rounds of hostility with Israel, the conditions stipulated by Hamas on Israel regarding a ceasefire only concerned Gaza (a seaport, airport, prisoner release, and transfer of funds) and did not touch upon any national issues. In intra-Palestinian unity negotiations, Hamas's core demand was the creation of a new PLO.
3. **Stage 3: Following the suspension of the elections, Hamas presents itself once again as an alternative to the official Palestinian framework (2021).**
 - **Before Mahmoud Abbas announced the Palestinian elections,** Hamas found itself at an ideological dead-end with no viable political future, a collapsing economy, and an inferior military apparatus vis-à-vis Israel. The achievements presented by Hamas were purely tactical and amounted to "harassing" Israel, e.g. balloon terrorism, border fence demonstrations, and shooting at Israeli towns along the Gaza border.

- **Hence, Hamas welcomed Abbas's declaration to hold elections in the PA and PLO.** A victory in the PA Legislative Council would have enabled Hamas to be perceived as the true representative of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as to gain a foothold within the PLO. Furthermore, it would have paved the way for Hamas's legitimate recognition in the eyes of the international community.
4. **One of the core indications of Hamas's strategic turnaround is its attitude towards Jerusalem before and after the announcement of the cancellation of the Palestinian elections:**
- **Hamas was ready to hold Palestinian elections even without Jerusalem.** As Fatah loudly articulated that it would not hold Palestinian elections without Jerusalem's participation, unofficial Hamas sources declared that they would oppose postponing the elections for any reason. For Hamas, the path leading to the Palestinian people is first and foremost through an internal takeover of the PLO and PA.
 - **Following the elections' cancellation, Hamas framed Jerusalem as the catalyst for launching a military campaign against Israel.** As its path to take over the PLO and PA has been blocked, Hamas understands that the primary way to lead the Palestinian nation is by positioning itself as an alternative to the PLO and standing at the forefront of Jerusalem issue.

Why is this important?

5. **In light of Hamas's aspiration to be perceived as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people (at the expense of the PLO), in the current conflict Hamas aims to:**
- **be portrayed as the protector of Jerusalem and to create a clear connection between the current conflict and the issue of Jerusalem.** Hamas is already gaining ground. The name given to the present conflict in Israel - "Guardian of the Walls" - plays to Hamas's favor, as do statements from international bodies and institutions, including the US administration, which has tied events in Jerusalem to the current campaign in Gaza.
 - **be portrayed as the leader of the entire Palestinian people.** Hamas has managed to create a connection between the present hostilities and the Arab citizens of Israel, as well as inciting Palestinians in the West Bank under the PA's control.
 - **to achieve international recognition of its status.** In Hamas's assessment, EU nations and other countries that designate the group as a terrorist organization may change their stance and regard the organization as a reliable representative of the Palestinian people.
6. **Despite reports of an impending ceasefire and a reduction of missiles launched from Gaza, it is possible that the current military campaign may not be coming to a close because:**
- **this current bout of fighting is different from preceding rounds because it does not solely deal with "tactical" issues related to the Gaza Strip, but also takes places within the wider context of a struggle over the image of the Palestinian national movement.** Contrary to the assessment of various Israeli sources, Reut does not believe that Hamas was surprised by Israel's unrestrained response to the first rocket barrage on Jerusalem. Hamas is ready to pay a heavy price to achieve its goals and **the organization's breathing space is closely tied to its ability to launch its steep trajectory missiles over a period of time.**
 - **As long as Hamas's rocket launching capabilities are maintained, and despite the heavy military pressure it is subject to, Hamas may insist on addressing the issue of Jerusalem within the context of a ceasefire.** This is not merely a tactical position that Hamas would be willing to easily concede. Hence, it will be more difficult in this round of fighting to reach a ceasefire based on the exchange of "quiet for quiet".

- **Hamas estimates that Israel's bargaining power over the ceasefire conditions is diminishing over time.** As the military campaign continues: 1) international pressure on Israel mounts; 2) the chances of the campaign expanding to Lebanon and the West Bank increases; 3) unrest among Israeli Arabs is taking a heavy toll on Israel; and 4) Israel's range of targets is decreasing and the chances of harming uninvolved Palestinians is growing. All of these developments are taking place in the background of an investigation against Israel by the International Court of Justice in The Hague concerning the 2014 Gaza War.

Policy Options

7. **Israel's policy towards Hamas has failed. Hamas strengthens itself from one confrontation to the next and the challenge that it poses to Israel in the present conflict is even greater than that of Hezbollah during the 2006 Lebanon War.** So far, the Israeli approach has, in practice, reflected a perception that the PA is threatening Israel's interests, often more than the military threat of Hamas. It was easier for Israel to reach various tactical arrangements with Hamas based on a balance of deterrence and without a political agenda, rather than to advance policies with the PA and PLO. Israel's policies accordingly allowed the transfer of funds from Qatar and the smooth passage of goods, in exchange for temporary quiet. This reality enabled Hamas to recover and strengthen itself between the rounds of fighting, even after painful blows and damage to its infrastructure. Hamas has developed impressive capabilities for self-producing weaponry, which makes Israeli control over the Gaza Strip less relevant.
8. **Without a clear resolution, the issue of Gaza will continue to pose a strategic challenge that will only intensify over time.**
 - Although sometimes it is better with the devil you know, **Israel must examine whether the alternative price it may pay if it chooses to change the rules of the game is indeed greater than the price of a terrorist army positioned on its border.** Hamas's enhanced capabilities, e.g. suicide drones, anti-tank capabilities, and naval activity, have effectively rendered the organization a first-grade military threat.
 - **While Hezbollah is embroiled in domestic troubles and Iran is striving to return to the nuclear deal, it is possible that Israel will be granted a unique opportunity to change the rules of the game vis-à-vis Hamas with a relatively low probability of being dragged into an all-out war.**
9. **Israel must prepare for the possibility of a "war routine" with Gaza if Hamas stands by its demands regarding Jerusalem.** Hamas ignited hostilities with tens of thousands of missiles in its arsenal and is expected to transition to a lower intensity form of combat, which will enable it to "drizzle down" missiles over many months towards Israeli population centers, including Gush Dan. **At a time of combining a COVID-19 routine with a war routine, Israel's social resilience may face its greatest test to date.**
10. **Restoring cooperation between Israel and the PA, and creating a sustainable political horizon, which focuses on the West Bank, are the key to breaking through the political trap with the Palestinians in the long term:**
 - **The PA demonstrates hostility towards Israel** and is even behind the "diplomatic intifada" against Israel at The Hague. Moreover, the aging PA leadership is losing its internal legitimacy, especially following the cancellation of the Palestinian elections.
 - **However, Israel's political and diplomatic maneuvering space in relation to the PA is much wider than its space vis-à-vis Hamas.** Israel has more tools at its disposal to contain threats stemming from the PA, as much as it has the ability to take advantage of political opportunities. The existence of the PA fulfills a vital security need that cannot be taken for granted.

- **Hamas’s effective challenge to the PLO’s legitimacy neutralizes any significant political move that does not focus on the West Bank under the control of the PA.**
11. **It is important to note that both Iran and Hezbollah are intensely watching the present hostilities and how they will end.** Iran has invested significant efforts to build the missile and munition capabilities of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as part of a wider effort to build a “ring of fire” around Israel in the form of a missile array aimed at Israel from a vast geographical area that includes Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. The Gaza Strip is the smallest and seemingly most fragile geographic region from which there is a threat to Israel stemming from Iran. The lessons from the end of this current round of fighting concerning the ring of fire with which Iran is trying to surround Israel will be studied and analyzed in Tehran and Beirut.
 12. **Although it seems like a secondary problem, the potential for an entanglement and clash between Israel and Turkey must be followed and monitored.** In recent years, Turkey has changed its approach and is intervening militarily in the conflicts of its regional allies. Turkey aspires to carry the banner of the Palestinian struggle and has even granted Turkish citizenship to Hamas leaders in the diaspora. In the current campaign, Turkish President Erdogan has stated that Turkey stands with the Palestinians just as “it defended Azerbaijan against the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh (credit: Facebook page of Assa Ophir, Turkish expert).
 13. **Finally, the current military campaign emphasizes the importance of the social, economic, and political integration challenges facing Arab citizens of Israel,** both because it may delay trends of separatism and alienation of the population from the state, as well as because it is a necessary condition for maintaining Israel’s economic resilience. Although in recent years, many programs have been put forward to close the gaps between Jewish and Arab society, as well as government action in this direction, the exclusion of Arab Israeli citizens from political and social spaces resonates and contributes to the mistrust between them and state institutions.

End.