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Battle of the Ceasefires: Israel, Hamas Struggle for Moral High Ground

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

If Israel came close to destroying Hamas in two earlier confrontations in 2008/9 and 2012, it has succeeded in the latest round of fighting to rescue the group from potential demise. Hamas is emerging as the key player capable of cornering Israel politically and diplomatically despite its military superiority.

Commentary

THE EFFORT to achieve a ceasefire in the Israeli-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip resembles a see-saw with at times Israel and at other times Hamas rejecting a halt to hostilities or violating a brief silencing of the guns in a bid to ensure its collapse. The back and forth reflects in the first instance a battle between Israel and Hamas to occupy the moral high ground.

But more importantly it highlights a growing realisation that Hamas is emerging politically strengthened from the death and destruction in Gaza while Israel is fighting a rear guard battle to turn military success into political victory.

Hamas forcing Israel into a corner

Israeli spokesmen have projected the acceptance by Hamas and other militant Palestinian groups of a United Nations call for another 24-hour ceasefire as an indication that Hamas had been seriously damaged by the three-week old Israeli assault. More likely is that Hamas hoped to force Israel into a corner after Israel had rejected US Secretary of State John Kerry's proposal for a seven-day halt to hostilities because it would have legitimised Hamas' demands for a lifting of the seven-year-old Israeli-Egyptian blockade of Gaza, the opening of all the territories border crossings, the free flow of goods and services into the strip and the release of funds for payment of Gazan public sector salaries.

A Hamas spokesman, hours before the group's acceptance of the UN ceasefire proposal, left little doubt that the Islamist militia had ensured the collapse of an earlier 12-hour ceasefire negotiated by the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, Qatar, Turkey and Egypt. The spokesman charged that the ceasefire would only allow Israel to prepare its military and intelligence resources for a second round in Gaza.

High stakes

The stakes for both Israel and Hamas are high: Israel cannot afford a halt to hostilities that opens the door to acceptance of Hamas' demands. Otherwise this would invite questioning of its refusal to deal with Hamas, undercut its effort to undermine the recently agreed Palestinian national unity government supported by Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas as well as Hamas, and derail its determination to choke Hamas by blockading Gaza. Hamas for its part needs to demonstrate even if the current conflagration was engineered by Israel that the terrible toll in terms of human life and physical destruction ultimately produced a significant improvement in the lives of the 1.8 million inhabitants of Gaza.

With pictures of utter destruction and bodies being pulled out of rubble where once home stood dominating television news, Hamas is gaining the upper hand. Mr. Kerry's emphasis on Hamas' demands while referring in his ceasefire plan to Israeli security concerns in only the most general of terms reflects the swing of public empathy towards the Palestinians even if the Obama administration continues to officially uphold Israel's right to defend itself.

Nonetheless, the realisation that Israel could emerge the real loser from the latest fighting is beginning to take root in Israeli government circles as well as the country's political and security establishment. Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon has effectively called for an end to Israeli attempts to undermine the Palestinian national unity government by suggesting that Abbas, who until now controls only the West Bank, extend his writ to Gaza as part of what he termed a reconciliation government.

Senior Israeli officials have suggested in recent days that they were never opposed to a Hamas-backed unity government even though Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu broke off US-sponsored peace talks after Abbas reached agreement with Hamas. Yaalon was echoing a plan drafted by the Economic Co-operation Foundation, an Israeli think tank.

Hamas' instrument

Hamas' demand for a lifting of the blockade of Gaza is also garnering support from senior Israeli figures such as Yuval Diskin, the former head of Shabak, the internal security service, who has become a dove since retiring.

"Israel is now an instrument in the hands of Hamas, not the opposite. Hamas doesn't care if its population suffers under the attacks or not, because the population is suffering anyway. Hamas doesn't really care about their own casualties either. They want to achieve something that will change the situation in Gaza. This is a really complicated situation for Israel.

"It would take one to two years to take over the Gaza Strip and get rid of the tunnels, the weapons depots and the ammunition stashes step-by-step. It would take time, but from the military point of view, it is possible. But then we would have 2 million people, most of them refugees, under our control and would be faced with criticism from the international community," Diskin told German magazine Der Spiegel.

Israel's dilemma is evident. Its definition of ensuring security exclusively through military superiority and heavy-handed repression rather than political compromise is increasingly costing it international support, particularly in the United States, its major ally, and strengthening calls for boycotts and sanctions.

"I think the government may bring this problem onto the country. We are losing legitimacy and the room to operate is no longer great, not even when danger looms... There are plenty of people within Shin Bet (another name for Shabak, the Israeli internal security service), Mossad (Israel external security service), and the army who think like I do.

"But in another five years, we will be very lonely people. Because the number of religious Zionists in positions of political power and in the military is continually growing," Diskin said referring to the

growing influence in the military of more religious segments of Israeli society as well as the right-wing drift among Israelis.

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