

THE UNDERSIDE OF A NEW CRISIS IN GAZA

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The resumption of intensive shelling of rockets and mortar shells into southern Israel has caused the most serious escalation of violence in Gaza since Operation "Cast Lead" in 2008/2009. In response to the increasing attacks against its territory, the civil and military authorities ordered the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to carry out targeted strikes against Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and destroy their launch sites. On Wednesday, November 14, Ahmad Jaabari, head of Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigade (the military branch of Hamas), was killed, along with his driver, after an ambush on his car in Gaza City. The IDF quickly confirmed the death of the terrorist leader, adding that he was directly responsible for several bombings in Israel in recent years. The Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigade, for their part towards Israel rejected any responsibility for past events and declared "total war," saying in a statement that "the occupation has opened the gates of hell on itself" by killing Ahmad Jaabari.

Since the announcement of his death, Islamist fighters fired hundreds of rockets into southern Israel. The Israeli press also reported that terrorists have repeatedly aimed the border town of Bnei Netzarim from the Egyptian province of Sinai. From the human point of view, three Israeli civilians were killed when a rocket landed on a residential building in the town of Kyriat Malachi, in the district of Eshkol, and 16 others were also wounded across the country. On the Palestinian side, 15 armed fighters were killed and nearly 150 people have been injured since the start of the operation "Pillar of Defence" by the IDF. At the same time, drones destroyed more than hundred targets, which continue to fall from Gaza. On Thursday evening, Hamas rejected any discussion of a truce. Terrorist cells have also tried several times to target Tel Aviv with rockets which have been manufactured in Iran. Anti-missile alarms thus sounded for the first time since the Gulf War in 1991.

The hand of Syria and Iran

The outbreak of a new crisis in Gaza at this time is not due to chance, the hand of Syria and Iran is visible behind the actions of the myriad of terrorist groups active in the coastal strip. Damascus has already unsuccessfully tried to drag Israel into turmoil by launching several destabilizing actions toward Golan. On Thursday, November 15, an Israeli soldier was wounded by a "stray bullet" fired from the demilitarized zone. As we noted in our briefing on November 14, however, this strategy is unlikely to succeed because of the military balance on the ground and the geographic conditions which are unique to the region. For Damascus, to reactivate a

conflict between Israel and Hamas would therefore constitute a new option to divert the eyes of the world, and particularly the eyes of the Arab populations, to the ongoing slaughter in its own territory.

Iran, another traditional supporter of terrorists in Gaza, has many reasons to support a war of attrition. Protected by a tacit agreement reached before the U.S. elections between Barack Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu, Tehran must now create a new diversion to delay military action against its nuclear facilities. Syria and Iran will once again have to demonstrate the power of nuisance by using terrorist organizations to target an enemy unattainable by conventional means. Tsahal will thus have to demonstrate its ability to quickly destroy terrorist facilities scattered in Gaza to put this strategy into failure. In case of stalemate on the ground, civilian deaths and the inevitable destruction in both camps would indeed only benefit external actors.

International support for Israel

The interweaving of events in Gaza with the Syrian civil war and the Iranian nuclear stalemate partly explains the very measured response of key international actors, who held an emergency meeting of the Security Council of the United Nations on Wednesday. If Russia has unsurprisingly distanced itself from the Israeli intervention, the United States and its British ally affirmed their support for Israel in this new event. The U.S. ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, said that "there is no justification for the violence that Hamas and other terrorist organizations are employing against the people of Israel," adding that "Israel, like any nation, has the right to defend itself against such vicious attacks ". France has also recognized Israel's right to defend itself, while deploring this new escalation of violence.

The White House also said President Barack Obama had personally met with Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday and with his Egyptian counterpart Mohamed Morsi, signifying the need for "de-escalation." Several observers watching with concern the reaction of Egypt, where supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas have held several public anti-Israeli rallies. Egypt has also recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv and announced that Prime Minister Hisham Qandil would travel to Gaza to negotiate a cease-fire. The situation represents a major challenge for the Egyptian Islamist power, which should demonstrate its ability to control its ally Hamas and leave Gaza in the hands of militias near Damascus and Tehran. Recall that it is the inability among those in Cairo to ensure security in the Sinai Peninsula that has allowed these groups to equip themselves with heavy weaponry.

Short-term outlook

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel would "continue to take whatever action is necessary to defend our people". With less than two months to the legislative elections of January 22nd, 2013, its government is committed more than ever to ensure the credibility of Israel's security in an extremely unstable regional environment. "All options are on the table. If necessary, the IDF is ready to initiate a ground operation in Gaza" a spokesman for the Israeli military assured on its official Twitter account on Thursday, suggesting the probable result of events if the rockets do not stop.

The next 48 hours will certainly be crucial. If the Hamas leadership manages to convince its military wing and other terrorist organizations in Gaza a return to "normal", it is likely that we will witness a rapid escalation of the intensity of the conflict. Otherwise, it is very likely that the situation will worsen quickly. Mobilization by the IDF of 16,000 reservists on Friday November 16 is an obvious evidence of the Israeli determination.

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