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The "War of Many Rounds" in Gaza: Hamas/Islamic Jihad vs. Israel

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Palestinian "protesters" trying to dismantle the Gaza-Israel border fence, April 27, 2018. (AFP Photo/Mahmud Hams)

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- Since the end of the 2014 Gaza war, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza have launched rockets against Israeli civilian targets and provoked Israeli air strikes in retaliation in eight rounds of escalation that are part of one long war. Both sides realize that this kind of war cannot lead to a significant change in the reality concerning Gaza.
- Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad believe that the rounds of escalation serve their interests



and are important in their own merit as they help demonstrate their commitment to the struggle against Israel. The escalations enable them to boast of their military capabilities, mobilize the population to the cause of fighting Zionism, distract the Gaza population from their daily miseries, and gain economic assistance from Qatar, while blaming Mahmoud Abbas for the difficulties in Gaza and pressuring the PA, Egypt, Qatar and Israel to improve living conditions in Gaza.

- Israel remains committed to a policy of trying to maintain a balance in which Hamas serves as the Gaza entity strong enough to maintain a monopoly over the use of force from the territory it governs, and at the same time remains weak and deterred enough to be restrained from firing on Israel.
- The continuing rounds of conflict raise doubts regarding the ability of Hamas to fulfill this role. It appears that PIJ and militant elements within Hamas are emboldened enough to challenge the Hamas leadership from time to time. Yet Hamas is always able to restore discipline and restraint, which means that the Israeli policy has not lost its relevance. The alternative to this policy is regarded as very costly both in the short and long term, and this is why Israel prefers to stick to its current path.
- In the latest round, Israel raised the price for the Palestinians, while also showing greater readiness to improve their living conditions. If this strategy convinces the Palestinians in Gaza to reach an agreement that will guarantee an extended period of calm, then the policy will have been successful. But if it fails and there is

another round of the war, and if the harassment of the Israeli population along the Gaza border continues, Israel may be forced to consider other options.

- The fundamental problem is that the population of Gaza is comprised primarily of descendants of Palestinian refugees who have been indoctrinated by their leadership to believe that they are duty-bound to fight against Zionism until they can return to their ancestral homes in Israel. This narrative perpetuates the conflict and makes a political solution nearly impossible.
- This means that the slogans that call for Israel to reach a political solution to the conflict are, unfortunately, detached from reality. Palestinians in Gaza truly desire and deserve to live better lives. Regrettably, they and their leadership do not see this goal as more vital than the struggle against the State of Israel.

Characteristics of the Many-Round War

Since *Operation Protective Edge* ended in 2014, there have been eight instances of escalated rocket fire from the Gaza Strip into Israel all resulting in fierce Israeli retaliation. All eight rounds of escalation occurred following the beginning of the “March of Return” in March 2018 (figure 1) and the decision of the Palestinian Authority to stop delivering funds to Gaza that it used to transfer as part of the long-standing arrangement between the PA and the de facto government of Hamas in Gaza.¹ Most of the incidents were brief, usually ending with renewed commitments to implement a ceasefire agreement and a show of commitment to reach a lasting agreement. These

ceasefires are usually attained following an increase in the severity of the IDF response that causes significant damage to Hamas' personnel and infrastructure.

However, the specifics of these ceasefires are not always agreed upon, or are either not fully implemented, or not implemented at all. Indeed, the Palestinian leadership in Gaza did not pledge to stop the protests along the Gaza fence altogether, but rather to prevent Gazans from nearing the fence sporadically. In reality, this commitment is simply another facet of Hamas' strategy of maintaining "controlled violence" along the border where it tries to dictate the exact beginning and end of each violent encounter.

When observing the eight rounds of escalation in their entirety, it is apparent that Israel is actually engaged in one prolonged episodic war, which has its own goals and modus operandi. Each round of fighting is simply a part of a larger protracted "confrontation" in which there are repetitive patterns. Information compiled by the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ITIC), the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and various other news resources provides the approximate toll of this continuous confrontation, which began with the "Gaza March of Return" on March 30, 2018. [A further breakdown of statistical data and information regarding each round of escalation can be found in Appendix 2 and 3.]

- Total Israeli dead due to rocket fire: 4
- Total Israeli dead from directly aimed fire: 2 (an Israeli soldier killed by sniper fire from Gaza in July 2018, and a civilian killed in May 2019)^{2 3}
- Total Israelis wounded from rockets, mortars, and direct fire emanating from the Gaza Strip (as of May 5, 2019): 282⁴

- Total Palestinians dead from airstrikes: 42 (27 of whom were terrorist operatives, with one case of a targeted killing)
- Total Palestinians wounded from airstrikes: approximately 280.
- According to the *Ma'an News Agency*, 305 Palestinians were killed [by rifle fire at the fence], and over 17,000 were injured since the onset of the March of Return (as of May 15, 2019).⁵ Based on available ITIC data that summarized the March of Return between March 30, 2018 – March 25, 2019, as well as data on the escalation in early May 2019, it is evident that at least 167 of the individuals killed in the March of Return were involved in terrorist activity.^{6, 7} Given the lack of clear and concrete data for the dates of March 26, 2019 – May 3, 2019, it is likely that the number of terrorists is even higher than this.
- Total targets in Gaza Strip hit by Israeli airstrikes: 923 (including three buildings with more than five stories, eight terror tunnels and four offices and houses of key terror operatives)
- The total amount of Gaza rockets fired at Israel: 1,835
- Over 8,600 acres of land damaged by over 2,000 incendiary kites and balloons launched from Gaza (as of November 2018).⁸



Palestinian obituary notices for some of the "civilians" killed along the Gaza-Israel fence. The officer circled was identified in the press as a "civilian medic."

An analysis of each escalation has found this repetitive pattern: there is an event that triggers the escalation. Israel then reacts to the trigger in a restricted manner, striking Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) positions. Then, the various factions in Gaza begin intensifying rocket fire to Israel's entire southern civilian region, which gives way to forceful Israeli retaliatory strikes. The Palestinians will try to negotiate ceasefires under their own conditions (brokered primarily by Egypt) while simultaneously escalating rocket fire, reaching deeper into Israeli territory. Israel does not agree to the initial Palestinian conditions for a ceasefire, and adds an additional level to their response, targeting major Hamas and PIJ infrastructure. Hamas has no choice at that point but to agree to the Israeli ceasefire conditions and everyone returns to "life as normal" – until the start of the next round.

The Logic of Both Sides

Unfortunately, it seems that despite the heavy cost each side suffers in this confrontation, not much has changed on the ground since it began in May 2018, roughly two months after the March of Return commenced. To some extent, this is a result of the assessment by Hamas that rocket fire towards Israel is not in its favor, and therefore it must formulate new ideas to maintain its commitment to the ongoing struggle against Zionism without suffering too much damage.

Israel has no intention to open the Gaza closure (thereby lifting restrictions for the entry into Gaza of dual-purpose goods that may help terror groups operating there improve their military capabilities). However, it is willing to soften some limitations on the economic activity in Gaza and ease the process of investment in the infrastructure of the Strip. Egypt still closely monitors Gaza, allowing limited movement of Palestinians from the Strip into Egypt's territory and vice versa. Hamas, on the other hand, remains wholly determined to continue the riots along the Gaza fence. Qatar, for its part, shows a reluctant readiness to front some of the bills necessary to aid the Gazans.

Last but not least, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas remains steadfast in his refusal to supply PA funds to Hamas. The only things which have truly changed due to this "War of Many Rounds" are the damage to the infrastructure in Gaza and Israel (which can be repaired to an extent), and more importantly, the lives of the families of the five dead and 282 injured Israelis, and the 42 dead and approximately 280 injured Palestinians.

Given the information provided above, it is imperative to assess why the Palestinians continue to perpetrate these atrocities which do not tangibly accomplish anything and incur enormous suffering on both sides, knowing that nothing significantly changes on the ground?

Firstly, they appear to genuinely fear Israel's military might and the possibility that it will renege on its promises outlined in any agreement. Secondly, Hamas and the PIJ seemingly feel the need to prove to themselves, their constituency, and their Iranian patrons that they are not becoming complacent. They must show that they are not solely focused on running the daily lives of the Gazan residents, and have not lost their revolutionary and Jihadi identities. Thirdly, it is possible that they feel obligated from time to time to serve the interest of Iran, their chief patron, and provoke an escalation to convey a message to Israel and the United States that they can cause substantial harm to the main U.S. ally in the Middle East. This service to Iran comes within the context of the growing tension between Washington and Tehran, which has exacerbated in recent weeks. Fourthly, the escalations aim to distract the population of the Gaza Strip from the economic and humanitarian crisis unfolding there and mobilize them for the "higher" purpose of fighting the evil Zionists.

Finally, it appears that Hamas believes that through these rounds they can ease the closure of Gaza a little bit, and gain economic assistance from Qatar while blaming Mahmoud Abbas for the difficulties in Gaza, and trying to pressure Mahmoud Abbas, Egypt, Qatar, and Israel to improve the living conditions in Gaza.

In other words, this many-round war is not being waged so much to change the situation on the ground. Rather, the purpose of these escalations is the escalation itself. The rounds are used, akin to how the March of Return is used, to strengthen the spirit of struggle against Israel among the Palestinians in Gaza and beyond.

This War of Many Rounds, from Israel's point of view, raises major questions regarding its long-term policy towards Gaza. Currently, its strategy is predicated on the notion of "quiet in return for quiet," reflecting Israel's interest in avoiding escalation and readiness to live with the status quo. The components of this strategy are as follows:⁹

1. Israel's acceptance of living with a terrorist organization running the lives of two million people adjacent to its territory stems from the lack of any feasible alternative to Hamas. Israel is capable of constraining and containing this threat, so it has very limited incentive to pay the price of removing Hamas from power for the time being.
2. Israel uses a combination of tools (military prowess and operations, security blockade, economic pressure and incentives, cooperation with other Arab states) that are meant to keep Hamas powerful enough so that it can stymie the more extreme elements in Gaza from executing terror attacks; allows Hamas a monopoly on the use of force from Gaza and hence serves as an accountable address for Israel; and simultaneously keeps Hamas weak enough that it is deterred from launching attacks on Israel.
3. Israel is interested in improving the wellbeing of the Gazan population. It strives to facilitate this by

encouraging foreign Arab investment in the Gazan economy and the delivery of humanitarian aid. Israel has repeatedly shown its willingness to entertain procedures that would help Gazans improve their quality of life, despite the complicated relationship between Israel and Gaza. This is why Israel supports the efforts to develop a "regularization" of civilian life in Gaza.

4. Israel's strategy is contingent on coordination with Egypt since it shares a border with Gaza and has a considerable impact on Israel's ability to achieve the goals above. Egypt is happy to coordinate with Israel on this matter due to their overlapping interests, specifically the quelling of radical Islamic elements in Gaza to prevent them from strengthening similar radical elements in Egypt, especially in the Sinai.
5. It is advantageous for Israel to have the PA and Hamas separated. That being said, Israel would not place obstacles in front of potential Palestinian reconciliation, though this event seems unlikely at the moment.
6. Israel is resolute in minimizing collateral damage to the residents of Gaza, as it contradicts Israel's moral values, interests, and commitment to international law in addition to damaging Israel's international legitimacy.
7. Israel wishes to ensure that second tier conflicts like the ones with Gaza do not hinder its ability to focus on first tier threats such as Iran, which has enlarged its presence on Israel's northern front.
8. Israel is well aware that as long as Hamas' patrons like Turkey, Qatar, and Iran are preoccupied with more urgent problems, Hamas is unable to drastically alter its current situation without conceding to some of Israel's demands.

Re-assessing Israel’s Policy

The problem with Israel’s Gaza strategy is that it is no longer clear to what extent Hamas is capable of preserving a monopoly over the use of force in Gaza, controlling PIJ (Iran’s main proxy in the Strip) and controlling militant elements within its own military wing. Hamas is more powerful than PIJ by several orders of magnitude and enjoys relatively good coordination with it. However, some of the more recent rounds of escalation have indicated that PIJ maintains a level of independence in its firing policy. If Hamas is ill-equipped to control PIJ, as well as its military wing – as was the impression in previous rounds – then is it still in Israel’s interest to keep Hamas in power in a way that causes the residents of southern Israel to suffer?



Hamas and Islamic Jihad snipers equipped with Iranian sniper rifles.

Israel’s objective in each round is to hit Hamas with such force that they are incentivized to check the growing boldness of the other factions and keep their own military wing in check. As each round came to a close, Israel believed it had accomplished this task. Yet it soon realized that it had erred in its judgment. Hamas cannot or does not wish to curtail the other factions’ “errant” barrages.

As a result of this recurrent mistake, Israel must conduct a deep reassessment of its strategy concerning Gaza. If Hamas cannot deliver long-lasting calm and stability, regardless of whether it wants to or not, then it is illogical to continue with the present strategy.

Israel has two options in the face of this dilemma. One option is to toughen its response to rocket fire from Gaza and be more forthcoming to Hamas' economic demands and to convince Hamas to maintain calm similar to that experienced between 2015-2018 when a relatively few (68) rockets were fired collectively over three years (figure 4).¹⁰ Alternatively, it must take the undesirable step of removing Hamas from power once and for all.

The price of removing Hamas from power would be severe. In the short-term, and probably in the long-term as well, the price would be greater than almost any other alternative. However, while grave, the price would be of a different kind than the one it currently pays: namely, allowing vast swaths of the Israeli public to live under the enduring physical and psychological threat of rocket fire.

Conclusion:

None of the possible strategies can solve the fundamental issue, which is that the population of Gaza is comprised primarily of descendants of Palestinian refugees who have been indoctrinated by their leadership to believe that they are duty bound to fight against Zionism until they can return to their ancestral homes in Israel. This narrative perpetuates the conflict and makes a political solution nigh impossible. The slogans that call for Israel to reach a political solution to

Until Israel conducts such a strategy reassessment the “War of Many Rounds” will probably continue.

Round	Israeli casualties		Palestinian casualties		Number of targets hit by Israel	Palestinian rockets fired
	Dead	Wounded	Dead	Wounded		
1 (May 29, 2018) ^{11, 12}	0	5	0	0	60	150
2 (June 19, 2018) ^{13, 14, 15}	0	0	0	4	25	67
3 (July 13-14, 2018) ¹⁶	0	4	2	25	40	214
4 (August 8-9, 2018) ¹⁷	0	8	3 (1 Hamas operative)	58	150	180
5 (October 25-28, 2018) ^{18, 19, 20}	0	0	3 (youths who were placing explosives by the fence)	9	80	40
6 (November 12-13, 2018) ^{21, 22}	1 (Palestinian from Halhul)	100	7 (all Hamas operatives)	25	160	470
7 (March 25-26, 2019) ^{23, 24}	0	7	0	7	58	89

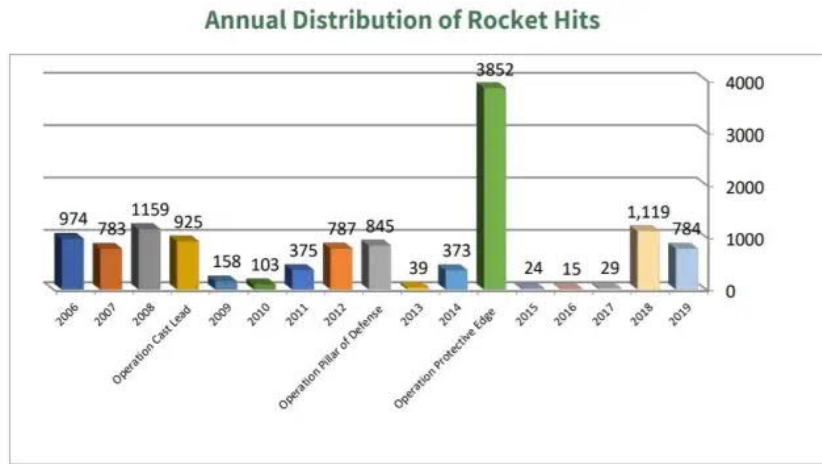
Round	Israeli casualties		Palestinian casualties		Number of targets hit by Israel	Palestinian rockets fired
	Dead	Wounded	Dead	Wounded		
8 (May 4-5, 2019) ²⁵	4	141 ²⁶	27 (16 terrorist operatives, half from PIJ)	154	350	691
Total:	5	247	42 (27 of which were terrorist operatives or engaging in acts of terror)	282	923	1835

Figure 3

Round	Trigger that started escalation	Location rockets landed in Israel	Noteworthy Israeli strikes in Gaza
1 ²⁷	Rocket fired by PIJ in retaliation for the death of three operatives on May 27	Netivot, western Negev	
2 ²⁸	Retaliation against Israel for striking incendiary balloon launching site	Eshkol region, western Negev	
3 ²⁹	Israeli response to wounding of IDF officer by a grenade thrown on July 13	Ashqelon, Sderot, Netivot, Gaza border towns	Destruction of 5-story building (alKatiba-training ground for urban warfare)

Round	Trigger that started escalation	Location rockets landed in Israel	Noteworthy Israeli strikes in Gaza
4 ³⁰	Gunfire from Hamas position near Beit Lahia	Ashqelon, Netivot, Beersheba, Gaza border towns	Destruction of 5-story building used by Hamas
5 ³¹	PIJ response to deaths of 5 Gazans killed in recent demonstration	Sderot, western Negev, south of Ashqelon	Missile strike on the four-story new headquarters of Hamas' general security apparatus
6 ³²	Botched Israeli Special Forces operation near Khan Yunis and shooting at an Israeli bus near Gaza that was used by the IDF	Gaza border towns, Ashqelon, Sderot, Netivot	Destruction of al-Aqsa TV building, Hamas' most important media outlet
7 ³³	Hamas rocket fire towards Mishmeret in central Israel	Gaza border towns, Sderot	
8 ³⁴	PIJ sniper attack that wounded two IDF soldiers	Ashqelon, Ashdod, Qiryat Gat, Qiryat Malachi, Beersheba, Rehovot, Gedera, Gaza border towns	Destruction of 7 story building, targeted killing of Hamed Ahmed Abd al- Khoudary

Figure 4



* * *

Notes

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