



Israel and Hamas Three Questions on The Current Conflict

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The first violent clash between Arabs and Jewish immigrants in Palestine can be traced back to the 1920 Nebi Musa riots in Jerusalem. Ever since there has never actually been peace in the region, neither has there been constant war. Every now and then, the conflict escalates and we now face the third outbreak of violence between Israel and Hamas in the last five years.

Yet, compared to the clashes of the last couple of years, this one seems to be more complex. At least three questions bother the international community that is watching powerlessly. Why does Israel use disproportionate violence? Why

does Hamas seem to be its own worst enemy by continuing to provoke Israel and thus exposing the Palestinians to that violence? And why is it this time so difficult to stop it? This e-note attempts to provide an answer to these three questions.

Israel's Disproportionate Violence

It looks as if the current course of violence in the region started with the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers. Although one can always invoke an earlier incident on the other side, everyone in the region knows that Israeli responses to such incidents will be hard-boiled, also often seemingly disproportionate. Why?

Throughout history, Jewish communities have constantly been threatened in their existence. This brought the first Zionists in the nineteenth century to the conviction that the Jewish people can only protect itself from its enemies by having its own country. The worst, however, was to come. Eventually, it was shortly after the Holocaust that modern Israel was created. This marked the beginning of a new era for the Jewish people, even though it did not start smoothly. One day after its independence, Israel was

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attacked by the armies of neighbouring Arab powers (Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon...). Just like in the Diaspora, Jews were once again in a strong numerical minority. And what can be a proportionate response, when one is extremely underrepresented in a large region that wants to wipe away your country off the map? Israel has plenty of enemies. What if every one of them launched an assault every now and then? The trauma of nineteen centuries of persecution in the Diaspora, combined with the subsequent joy of achieving their own state, triggered a historical turning point in the way Jews – especially Israeli Jews – respond to the threats to which they have always been subjected. For many centuries, Jews in the Diaspora underwent their persecutions in a striking peaceful way, without hardly any example of retaliation. However, at the creation of the Jewish state they seemed to pass from one extremity to another. It was one of the defining facts of the Israeli spirit that from then on they would defend themselves, at any price or proportion. Under no circumstances the Israeli Jews wanted to lose again their age-old dream of having their own state. Another idea that lived strongly in the young Jewish state was that the Arab enemy could lose a hundred wars without disappearing, yet as soon as Israel would lose one war, it would be wiped away off the map. Rightly or not, but many Israelis are strongly convinced of this idea that once again complicates the notion of proportionality.

There is also a geographical argument. Most Israelis live today concentrated on a strip of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean that is hardly 40 to 60 kilometres wide, although it used to be originally narrower by an important Palestinian stretch of land (the West Bank) from which Israel could be attacked as well. In other words, the country has hardly any strategic depth. Therefore, any threat from within its borders is considered as being existential. This was also one of the main reasons why Israel was so keen to invade the West Bank and the Golan Heights (and even the Suez Canal) at the time; the Jordan River was an appreciated anti-tank trench against the Jordanian army and the Golan protected Israel against Syria. After the invasion of these natural borders, a ground offensive from these countries became practically impossible. Israel has always tried to conduct its wars outside its borders and it is the first time that rocket attacks strike so deep in that small strip of land.

On top of that, there is a cultural-religious reason why Israel tends to retaliate so strongly to any threat. To most outsiders it seems irrelevant, but it plays a role in the field. The Jewish religion and culture are more down-to-earth than Islam. In very general terms, earthly life enjoys a higher esteem to a Jew than to a Muslim. In the Torah, the oldest and holiest Jewish book, the hereafter is not even mentioned. In contrast, several Islamic doctrines conceive earthly life as an irritating antechamber for heavenly life and, as we all know, Islamic martyrs expect fabulous rewards in Paradise. Therefore, the loss of one life is simply a catastrophe for Jews. The Holocaust cult within Judaism has nothing to do with martyrdom for a cause. It is the intense remembrance of an absolutely meaningless mass murder that on no account can be repeated. It cannot be a justification for a loose use of human life, but in general, a Hamas fighter cares less for his life than an Israeli soldier does. This finds expression, for instance, in the fighting procedures of the Israeli Defence Forces. Extreme measures are put into place to reduce casualties at their side to an absolute minimum.² It is also part of the Israeli war doctrine that military leaders are loom large for the soldiers at the front line. By exposing themselves to war, they will always keep in mind

² In 2011 the Netanyahu administration made an agreement with Hamas to exchange 1027 (!) Palestinian prisoners for only one Israeli hostage, the kidnapped reserve corporal Gilad Shalit. Earlier, the government already freed 19 Palestinian prisoners just to watch a video that made obvious that Gilad was still alive. Back in 2006 Israel also conducted a heavy war campaign in southern Lebanon, in order to free only two of its soldiers.

to what danger they expose their troops. In contrast to that, there is an entire cult of glorification of martyrdom on the side of radical Islam.

Finally, a more recent explanation for Israel's excessive violence is that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for years a renowned hawk, is now under pressure of his even more radical coalition partners Israel Our Home (*Yisrael Beiteinu*) and The Jewish Home (*HaBayit HaYehudi*) to lash out harder at the Palestinians than he wanted himself.

Nevertheless, when we see how dramatically the fatalities on the enemy's side outnumber the own losses³, one can wonder how long that victimisation of the Jewish state can last. And with respect to the problem of strategic depth, there is in the meantime a sustainable peace with Egypt and Jordan. One can also wonder whether the aggressive attitude of Israel is an effective long-term security policy. By giving back the Sinai desert to Egypt, Israel obtained enduring peace with that country (although Hamas constructed a network of tunnels towards that border). Such questions are more difficult to answer than most Europeans think, but more important to consider than many Israeli think.

Hamas Under Pressure

Immediately after the murder of three Israeli citizens, Netanyahu pointed to Hamas as being the indisputable culprit. Although the organisation promptly denied any responsibility for the act, its adherents were nonetheless fast to applaud the kidnapping. On television, Muhammad Nazal of Hamas' political bureau even called it an act of heroism. Earlier the ruling faction in Gaza had spread clips in which kidnapping of Israelis was encouraged. Then, a large arsenal of rockets was immediately put into place to respond to Israel's retaliation. At last, Saleh al-Arouri, a Hamas Official who has been living in exile in Turkey for 37 years, admitted that his group was somehow involved in the kidnapping. We might never know the whole truth about this incident. However, almost every Palestinian family underwent so much suffering as a result of previous retaliatory actions that no-one believes that this incident happened just like that. Subsequently, Hamas immediately took up the leading role in confronting Israel, even though its followers were aware that they do not possess the means to defeat their enemy on the battlefield, as they knew how relentlessly the response to their rain of rockets would be. It is even more striking that Hamas seems to be unstoppable, even after the killing of hundreds of innocent Palestinian due to Israeli retaliatory actions.

In order to understand Hamas' attitude in this conflict, one has to realise how many blows the organisation suffered in the last couple of years. Though it still has today a majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council (76 of the 132 seats), the last elections go back as far as 2006, thus even long before the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Ever since, the situation has taken such a dramatic turn for Hamas that the organisation has started to lose its relevance. With the current fights against Israel, the followers of Hamas try to create an image that whoever wants to support the Palestinian case should still support *them*.

For a long time, the organisation had its headquarters in Damascus and the Syrian Baathist regime used to be its major arms supplier. Yet, with civil war raging in the country, the Syrian regime obviously cannot

³ According to a situation report of United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Palestinian death toll mounts up to 2,104, including 495 children and only 69 fatalities on the Israeli side, including 4 civilians.

afford to be as generous when it comes to transferring weapons much needed at home. Moreover, due to this war, religious differences between Hamas and the Syrian regime only became more important. The organisation is actually a ramification of the Muslim Brotherhood and after the ousting from power, followed by the repression of the movement in neighbouring Egypt, Hamas has lost precious financial, logistic and organisational support. For years, Shiite theocratic Iran used to entitle Sunni fundamentalist Hamas with a tidy sum of \$20 million on a monthly basis. The shared aversion of Israel apparently transcended the religious opposition. The Iranians also cut off those funds, because in Syria Hamas supported the Sunni rebels, while Iran supported the Alawite Bashar al-Assad and its Shiite backing. Nevertheless, this is the kind of alliances the followers of Hamas are aiming at; they want to create a setting in which it becomes obvious that anyone who is ready to invest in the destruction of Israel, should invest in *them*.

To make matters worse, the network of tunnels between Gaza and Egypt has been dismantled to a large extent. Along that way not only weapons came into Gaza, but also many food products on which Hamas levied taxes. Ever since their emergence in 1928, the Muslim Brothers adopted a strategy of armed resistance on the one hand, while offering many forms of welfare on the other. From a historical point of view, this explains to a large degree the popularity of both the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. However, because of Hamas' dramatic financial losses, there was hardly any budget left for welfare and, as a result, Hamas' popularity decreased.

The only thing Hamas still has is plenty of rockets. Some of them are produced in Palestinian garages, while the more advanced materials come from Syria and Iran. According to Israeli intelligence services' estimates, Hamas possessed about 10,000 rockets at the beginning of the conflict. With that large amount, Hamas tries to challenge Israel's famous Iron Dome's interception capacity. Hardly 20% of that arsenal has been fired so far and Israel has no clue of the long-distance rockets cache's whereabouts.

Finally, Hamas is trying to avoid another blow. The organisation started to grow after taking over the role of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (the forerunner of the moderate party, Fatah), when it was *soiled* by making agreements with Israel that did not gain many tangible results for Palestinian civilians.⁴ Radical organisations that suddenly grow often come under a lot of diplomatic pressure to make compromises, which are rarely backed by their support basis. In such a case, other organisations quickly rise up to take over the role of the uncompromising freedom fighters. What if the Islamic State started meddling in this conflict? Besides, shooting rockets on Israel is for Hamas a means to emphasise its ideological distinction with its main political opponent, Fatah.

Why does the Current Conflict Seem to be Unstoppable?

The major victim is by far the Palestinian people and to a much lesser degree, the Israeli people as well, all that because of political strategies of both the Israeli government and Hamas. Yet, many Palestinians and Israelis continue to support their respective leaders, despite the inhumane practices they pursue. At the same time, it only seems to be a human reaction to lose rationality when people have been living for decades in highly tense conditions. Many Palestinians and Israelis prefer a war they know to an unknown peace with a bleak future.

⁴ Hamas' first suicide attack took place in April 1993, i.e. during the negotiations that resulted in the Oslo Accords that the PLO concluded with the Israeli government and which were strongly rejected by Hamas.

Nevertheless, Netanyahu's administration finds itself in a situation that is far from comfortable. Israel is becoming excessively unpopular with the international public opinion because of daily images of innocent Palestinian victims. Gaza, as one of the most densely populated places on earth, is impossible to bomb intensively without hitting innocent people. Israel blames Hamas for using women and children as human shields⁵, but still, the organisation simply does not have enough space to operate from places remote from civilian populations anyway. On the other hand, Hamas deliberately provoked Israeli violence in Gaza. And it was as deliberately that Israel complied with it. Israel aims to eradicate the threatening root and branch. Besides, even though the country remains responsible for its own actions, Hamas wants to reap profit from it in order to gain international support for the Palestinian people and for itself. Consequently, both parties think they can benefit from the destruction of people and buildings in Gaza, yet none of them seems to know how to stop it.

Israel felt the need to put boots on Gaza ground, because cutting out the Palestinian rocket arsenal and dismantling Hamas tunnels only from the air would cause much more collateral damage than there is already. But then on what scale should such a ground offensive be conducted? Commando raids would be insufficient and a large-scale ground offensive would imply enormous responsibilities, an increased risk of own casualties and, once again, more innocent civilian fatalities. At the start of the conflict, the Israeli government made out a case for putting a final end to the rocket attacks, instead of aiming for another short-lived ceasefire. Meanwhile that decision has implicitly been reconsidered, but in order to actually eliminate every rocket threat, one should act with even more effrontery. Regardless, Israel started a ground offensive that is neither a series of specific actions nor a general invasion, and without knowing how to exit the hornet's nest. In the meantime, Navi Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, asked for an investigation on war crimes possibly committed by Israel in the Gaza strip.

One can wonder whether Hamas' and Israel's strategies are well-considered, because no-one seems to know how to put an end to it. Hamas tries to show the Palestinians that its battle is fought for their benefit. Obviously, Israel tries to prove the opposite. Yet it is difficult to measure Hamas' benefit so far. If it suddenly agreed to stop fighting, with so many losses on its own side and so few Israeli losses, the organisation might find itself in a position that is hardly stronger than before the outburst of the conflict.

Another problem is the shortage of credible negotiators. The United States of America usually tend to show partiality in favour of Israel, but just because of that it is one of the few countries that have some leverage on Israel when asking for concessions to the Palestinians. Yet, for political reasons, Obama is not keen to get involved in another Middle East adventure. Washington's position is that any country has the right to defend itself from arbitrary rocket attacks.⁶ Therefore, the US Senate decided to increase its financial support to the Israeli Iron Dome by 50%, which corresponds to a total budget of \$251 million for 2015. That will not bring peace any closer, whereas John Kerry made a diplomatic trip in the region with little ambition and few results.

⁵ Recently, the Israeli military claimed to have captured a Hamas manual on urban warfare – called *Introduction to the City War* – that extols the benefits of civilian deaths and openly admits that Israel tries to avoid them.

⁶ According to international law, that position is correct but one-sided, since official American sources rarely, if ever, stress the right of Palestinians to armed resistance against the occupation of their territory. UN resolution 33/24 §2 (1978) affirmed *the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for independence, territorial integrity, national unity and liberation from (...) foreign occupation by all available means, particularly armed struggle*. And resolution 3246 (1974) *strongly condemns all Governments which do not recognize the right to self-determination and independence of peoples under colonial and foreign domination (...), notably (...) the Palestinian people*.

In Europe, politicians as Tony Blair, Laurent Fabius and others put themselves forward for negotiators, but on both Palestinian and Israeli sides, Europeans lack credibility. Apart from the Norwegians during the Oslo Accords, European negotiators have never showed decisiveness so far in the Middle East. On top of that, the roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lie largely in Europe. British policy in its former Mandatory Palestine was so unfortunate that all the germs of the current conflict were already there when the UN agreed on the partition of the land.⁷ And it is only a euphemism to state that throughout the centuries, Europe has shown little respect for both Jews and Arabs. Up until this day, both parties remain highly sensitive for any European form of paternalism or judgment. Finally, it is probably unnecessary to remind that the EU is not able to speak with one voice with respect to this conflict.

To the great annoyance of the current leaders in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood (along with the United States) mediated an agreement with Hamas and Israel in a previous clash in 2012, but those Egyptian negotiators are now behind bars. The al-Sisi administration is very keen to reach a diplomatic success due to its tarnished image, having been the only effective negotiator so far. However, a major handicap, which that country should bear in mind, is that heavy demands are made on Hamas when being requested to make important concessions to the arch-enemy of their dearest allies, the Muslim Brothers. Qatar at first seemed to be in a better position to negotiate. Khaled Mashal, Hamas' political leader, lives in exile in this country that has the means to buy peace. It is also renowned for its diplomacy that is as silent as efficient. No matter how ambitious the Qataris are, this conflict is probably not very high on their agenda, since a peace agreement with Israel could provide them with new enemies again.

Then, how could the conflict stop? Both Israel and Hamas are tired of concluding every eruption of violence with a Pyrrhic victory, which would consist in Hamas gaining some relevance as a representative of the Palestinian case, and Israel enforcing another year of uncertain peace. ~~But~~ However, all parties concerned are currently *peace-weary*. This time they both want to settle the problem for once and for all, instead of ending up once again in a situation that differs little from the situation at the beginning of the fight. Waiting until Hamas fired all its rockets could take a while.

Given the persistence of both parties, as well as the lack of strong negotiators and credible alternatives, there seems to be but one yet classic exit scenario, i.e. many losses in both camps, but still a Pyrrhic victory for everyone. We only have to wait until both parties become more war-weary than peace-weary.

In the Middle East, cynicism is just around the corner, always and everywhere.

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⁷ Israel accepted at that time the initial partition whereas the entire Arab world rejected it.