



Insight

Gaza Crisis 2.0

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Today's crisis involving Israel and the Gaza Strip has much in common with a similar skirmish four years ago. Dramatic changes in the region since then, however, complicate the picture and increase the stakes.

Both crises began with a spike in rocket attacks launched from Gaza into Israel. Claiming credit for these terrorist attacks were not just resistance groups like the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, but also the military wing of Hamas itself, whose political arm has run Gaza since 2007.

In 2008, as today, the Israeli government determined that it needed to respond to these attacks in order to protect its people and deter future strikes. Four years ago, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) launched a ground invasion into Gaza. So far this year, Israel has operated from the air, though Defense Minister Ehud Barak has authorized the call-up of 30,000 reservists just in case. Another feature of this year's action, which highlights Hamas' operational role in the rocket fire, is the targeted killing of Hamas military commander Ahmad Jabari (though a number of Hamas officials also were killed during the 2008-2009 operation).

The 2008-2009 war was mercifully brief. Israel declared a unilateral cease-fire after three weeks, and Hamas followed suit a week later. The war was a tactical victory for Israel: the IDF hit their targets, Israel suffered few casualties, and the operation succeeded in reducing rocket attacks into Israel. Israel took a PR hit, though, as a UN panel found Israel to have engaged in war crimes. (The report's leading author, Richard Goldstone, later reversed his position on the matter.)

Still, the world has changed a great deal since 2008.

For one thing, rockets fired out of Gaza are now hitting Tel Aviv and its suburbs, an ominous development that could escalate the crisis. Militants have broadened their reach by adding Iranian Fajr-5 rockets to their usual arsenal. Tel Aviv hasn't faced this danger since the 1991 Gulf War.

At the same time, advances have been made in Israel's missile defense systems. The joint U.S.-Israel Iron Dome system successfully intercepted more than 90 inbound rockets. While unable to provide complete

protection, the system has saved scores of lives.

The most consequential change since 2008 could be the new government in Egypt. Relations between Egypt and Israel were never particularly warm, but former President Mubarak successfully brokered a number of ceasefires between Israel and the Palestinians, and worked for stability in Gaza. In today's democratic Egypt, President Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood is under pressure to be tougher towards Israel. Much has been made of his decision to recall Egypt's Ambassador to Israel, though Mubarak had done likewise to protest Israeli actions. At the same time, Morsi is working on a ceasefire, which could be a welcome sign of continuity.

The Gaza crisis is a key test of the new government in Egypt and could set a precedent for the future. If Morsi can play a constructive role, the U.S. should help him. At the same time, Egypt must crack down on the smuggling across its border that allowed Iranian rockets into Gaza.

The flip side, of course, is that this crisis could give Egypt a pretext for breaking its long-standing treaty with Israel. The Obama Administration must work diligently against such an outcome.

For Israel, the operation against Gaza risks distracting world attention from Iran's nuclear program. Any backlash along the lines of the Goldstone Report could color the global reaction to an Israeli strike against Iran.

The Gaza crisis also could factor into Syria. President Assad will likely try to stir up anti-Israel sentiment in order to distract from his own problems. His meddling in Lebanon could make things even worse for Israel.

Finally, the crisis unfolds on the eve of another attempt by the Palestinians to gain recognition at the United Nations. On November 29, the UN General Assembly may vote to upgrade the status of the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority from observer entity to a nonmember state. Especially if Israel is blamed for the Gaza crisis, other countries may use the UN vote to further isolate Israel.

President Obama rightly is working to resolve the crisis. The best path appears to be working with Egypt on a ceasefire. A swift resolution could reduce the risk that the Gaza crisis will stoke the flames of a Middle East already in turmoil.

But the U.S. also must be clear that there is no moral equivalency between Israel's actions and those of the Gaza militants. Israel ended its occupation of Gaza in 2005. Rather than focusing on governance, economic growth, or even peace talks, Hamas is seeking legitimacy through terror attacks on Israeli civilians, and they are using Palestinian civilians as human shields. Israel is responding in self-defense. It is targeting not civilians, but weapons sites and key belligerents.

If history is any guide, Israel's operation in Gaza will be fairly limited, precise, and tactically successful, at least in the short run. Yet perversely, Israel could be raked over the coals internationally.

With reelection behind him, President Obama has the chance to prove his support for Israel, both in how he helps resolve the immediate crisis and in how he defends Israel to the international community.