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Israel-Gaza Conflict 2012: Prospects for Broader Resolution

By Damien D. Cheong

Synopsis

The recent hostilities between Israel and Hamas raise two important questions: Why did fighting recur? How can recurrence be prevented?

Commentary

THE EXCHANGE of rocket fire and aerial bombardments that claimed the lives of over a hundred people, inflicted numerous casualties and caused massive damage to infrastructure, finally came to a halt on 22 November 2012. The ceasefire agreement between the Government of Israel (GOI) and Hamas in Gaza, while shaky, has, nevertheless, brought about a state of calm to the region for the moment.

The escalation of attacks between the GOI and Hamas is not new, and has occurred many times before. The most significant was in 2008-2009 when Israel carried out airstrikes and a ground incursion into Gaza known as Operation Cast Lead. The devastation and loss of lives as well as the lessons from past encounters should have served to deter or at least compel decision-makers on both sides to refrain from pursuing the path of violence. Moreover, the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit by Hamas last year underscored that cooperation between the seemingly bitter enemies was possible.

Two important questions

The recent hostilities raise two important questions: Why did fighting recur? How can recurrence be prevented? The answer to the first question lies in the potential of the actors to extract political capital from the conflict; however, it is argued that such gains are negligible. The answer to the second question is premised on whether actors want a resolution of the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict or simply maintain the conflict at a manageable level.

The Netanyahu government's bid for re-election is, arguably, a major factor that has driven the GOI to confront Hamas at this time. If Netanyahu can show that he is taking active steps to protect residents in the South and now Tel Aviv from rocket and other attacks from the Palestinian militant groups in Gaza, his credibility among the electorate would rise, boosting his bid for re-election.

However, the conflict with Hamas cannot be protracted; it must be decisive, in that the capabilities of Hamas, its armed wing and other militant groups must be completely neutralised. A partial neutralisation of the threat, as in

the current situation, would be hard to justify. The Netanyahu government may actually suffer political losses rather than make political gains from the confrontation. It is for this reason that Netanyahu has been actively trying, though not very successfully, to sell the ceasefire as a victory against Hamas.

The Netanyahu government is fully aware that it cannot completely eradicate Hamas as this could result in the emergence of a more violent and radical entity (such as the salafi-jihadi groups). Also, even if it decimated Hamas it cannot simply invite Fatah to become the governing authority in Gaza since Fatah would be severely discredited and perceived as an Israeli plant that gained power through the 'back-door'.

Hence, its stated purpose of this confrontation was to paralyse Hamas, in particular its offensive capabilities, for strategic advantages. Should Netanyahu attack Iran, it does not want to find itself fighting on three possible fronts: Hezbollah in Lebanon to the north; Hamas in Gaza to the south; and Iran to the east. By incapacitating Hamas, Israeli forces would be able to focus on Iran and Hezbollah.

Hamas resilience

Hamas was in a conundrum from the outset. Its seeming reluctance to rein in its Islamist rivals in the Gaza Strip, due in part to strategic and tactical considerations, meant that there was always a danger that it could be drawn into a conflict with Israel by the actions of other groups. The current round of hostilities was, arguably, proof of that. The initial border attack was carried out by militants from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Israel responded to the border attack with airstrikes, to which the Palestinian militants responded by firing rockets at Israeli cities. This tit-for-tat exchange subsequently escalated.

Palestinian fatalities and casualties from the airstrikes meant that Hamas could not refrain from entering the fray lest its credibility be adversely affected; hence, it too, began firing rockets at Israel. In addition, following Israel's assassination of the commander of Hamas' military wing, Ahmed Jabari, the movement's ability to restrain its armed wing as well as the other Palestinian factions became difficult.

Although popular support for Hamas grew as a result of its participation in the fighting, it is only for the short-term. This is because the Palestinians in Gaza would not be able to endure more fatalities and destruction from a protracted conflict with Israel, unless it brought about tangible benefits (political or otherwise). Hamas still needs to work towards permanently ending Israel's blockade of Gaza, ensuring that all border crossings are open, improving the economic and social situation in the enclave and realising Palestinian nationalist aspirations for an independent state.

Resolving the Israel-Hamas or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

The Israel-Hamas conflict is likely to continue even if new long-term ceasefire agreements are reached. There are of course many impediments (religious, ideological and so on) to resolving this conflict. However, maintaining the Israel-Hamas conflict at this manageable level implies that future flare ups will certainly occur as the root causes of the animosity between the two parties have not been addressed.

If there is to be a lasting end to the fighting between the GOI and Hamas, the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be resolved. Now that Palestine has won observer state status at the UN, Palestinian officials in the West Bank will have their argument strengthened that had their bid failed, violence would be seen as the only way to solve the conflict, which in turn, would empower Hamas and other militant groups.

Hamas' use of Iranian-made Fajr-5 rockets that can target Tel Aviv and Jerusalem as well Israeli airstrikes have hardened the positions of many Israelis and Palestinians on making peace with each other. However, this does not mean that conflict resolution is beyond reach even though many actors have grown frustrated and fatigued by the stalemate. This state of affairs is untenable.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become an international problem because it fuels the ideology of global Jihadi terrorism that has affected many countries around the world. Hence, it is time for the international community to play a more active and perhaps a more assertive role to resolve this conflict.

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