



Hermes Institute of
International Affairs,
Security & Geoeconomy

“HERMES” Institute of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy

SHORT COMMENTS

The Delicate Balance of Power Between Israel and Hamas

By Adjunct Professor Niccolo Petrelli

Athens, May 2021

“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE

“HERMES” Institute of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy (“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE) is an independent, non – governmental, non – profit organization, consisting of scholars dedicated in the research and analysis of international affairs in regional and global level. The Institute aims at providing objective, scientific, and reliable research analysis through a variety of studies contributing effectively and constructively in the public dialogue and the evolution of scientific knowledge.

Copyright © 2021

“HERMES” Institute for Foreign Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy

All rights reserved

“HERMES” Institute of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy offers a forum for researchers and scholars to express their views freely, thoroughly and well-documented. The views expressed in this occasional paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the “HERMES” Institute. Short comments aim to contribute constructively in public debate in a wide range of international politics, defense, security and geoeconomy topics.

The Delicate Balance of Power between Israel and Hamas

By Niccolò Petrelli, Adjunct Professor, Department of Political Sciences, Roma Tre University

Another border war between Israel and Hamas has ended a few days ago, but “it ain’t over until it’s over,” and nobody can really tell when. In the last 14 years, since the conflict started after Hamas’ takeover in Gaza, the Islamic Resistance Movement has been trying to secure the role of uncontested leader of the Palestinian national movement while pursuing a cumulative strategy of long-term exhaustion in the fight against Israel. For its part, the Jewish state has attempted, at least since Netanyahu’s rise to power in 2009, to slowly strengthen Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem and portions of the West Bank, while also following a cumulative strategy of long-term attrition of Hamas. The delicate and uncertain balance of power that emerges from the last 11 days of fighting, however, might encourage both sides to shift to more aggressive courses of action.

In purely military terms it is safe to say that Israel achieved its intended goals of weakening Hamas (whether or not it will be also deterred is yet to be seen). The Israel Defense Forces severely damaged the organization’s intermediate level of command, and degraded its military infrastructure. Particularly extensive was the damage sustained by Hamas’ network of tunnels, dubbed “the Metro.” The IDF also managed to thwart all of the Islamic Resistance Movement’s tactical innovations. A crack naval commando force equipped with miniature submarines failed to conduct successful special operations. Hamas’ anti-tank missile crews were rapidly identified and a considerable number neutralized in the early days of the fighting. Finally, Hamas was unsuccessful also in attacking Israeli infrastructure with six GPS-guided strike drones loaded with explosives.

And yet, Hamas managed to score some non-negligible successes and to further solidify its hold on power in Gaza, while improving its position in the Palestinian arena. First and foremost, it succeeded in surprising Israel, launching unprecedentedly dense barrages of missiles reaching even the central areas of the country. Secondly, it was able to capitalize on

the “rally around the flag” effect generated in Gaza by the scope of the Israeli response. Third, the Islamic Resistance Movement was able to publicly claim to be fighting in defense of the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem, apparently strengthening its role in the West Bank where it hopes to replace (by election or force) the corrupt and unpopular Palestinian Authority.

The regional balance appears at least as much delicate. In the last ten years, a series of political events, such as the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria, made the Israeli - Palestinian conflict less politically salient in the region. The signing on September 15th 2020, of the Abraham Accords through which Israel reached a peace agreement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, and the ensuing peace deals between the Jewish state and Morocco and Sudan, apparently sanctioned the beginning of a new era of diplomatic relations in the Middle East. The general impression was that the historically-prevailing ideological stance of the Arab world towards the Israeli - Palestinian conflict was in the process of being replaced by a far more pragmatic one, with significant impact on the regional balance of diplomatic power between Israel and Hamas.

And yet, the recent conflict evidenced that this is far from the case. Hamas still enjoys the support of powerful sponsors. The first one is Qatar, which since 2018 has provided huge funds in cash to buy fuel for the Strip’s power plants, to pay salaries for Hamas civil servants, and to provide aid to tens of thousands of impoverished citizens, and has in the course of the conflict publicly reiterated (diplomatic and financial) support for the Palestinians. The second is Iran which for evident geopolitical reasons remains committed to the continuation of its decades-long support for Hamas in the shape of political backing, funding and most importantly, technology, weapons and training. Last but not least, the conflict revealed that Israel’s public standing in the Middle East has far from generally improved. The extensive material and infrastructural damage caused by the Israeli air and artillery attacks and their dire consequences in terms of civilians displaced, outraged public opinions in many countries of the region, with potential repercussions on further normalization of relations with the Jewish state anytime soon.

The international balance of power, decisively tilting in favor of Israel until the beginning of the hostilities, seems to be unraveling as well. During the crisis Israel still enjoyed the firm support of the US. The Biden administration however saw it as an irritating and unwelcome diversion from other priorities at home and abroad and pressurized Netanyahu's government into ending the operations as soon as possible. This impatience is unlikely to subside in the coming years, as future administrations (both democratic and republican) will continue to recalibrate the US role, responsibilities and interventions in world affairs. This risk for Israel is compounded by the rising discontent with support for the Jewish state among progressive democrats, especially the younger generation and declining public approval for unconditional support for the Jewish state among the US public at large, as confirmed by recent polls.

Moreover, the last round of fighting witnessed a shift in the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is seen in the West that is potentially dangerous for Israel. Several observers have pointed out how a significant segment of the public opinion in both the EU and the US has in fact reframed it from a conflict over competing national claims, to an issue of racial justice, a perception reinforced by broadcasts of the intercommunal clashes between Jews and Arabs taking place inside Israel. Framed along the lines of hashtags such "Palestine Can't Breathe," "Palestinian Lives Matter," the conflict might turn, similarly to what happened during the 1970s, into an issue of paramount importance for the global cyber-enabled public opinion.

The recent conflict between Israel and Hamas took place approximately 7 years after the 2014 war. The delicate balance of power emerging from this last round of fighting however makes the next one probably much closer.



Niccolo Petrelli is Adjunct Professor of Strategic Studies at the Department of Political Science - Roma Tre University. He was previously postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), lecturer in Politics at the University of Leeds, Eisenhower Defense Fellow at the NATO Defense College, research fellow at the Military Center for Strategic Studies (Ce.Mi.S.S.) in Roma and visiting scholar at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) in Herzliya. His main research interests are the asymmetric war and Israeli - Palestinian conflict, and the interplay between grand strategy, organization and analysis.