

PolicyWatch #1648

Gaza Border Tensions: A Drift toward War?

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March 30, 2010

The March 26 clash between elements of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Golani Brigade and Palestinian operatives near the Gaza border was the most serious since the end of Operation Cast Lead in January 2009. The incident has exacerbated tensions -- already on the rise due to increased rocket attacks on southern Israel -- and added to concerns that another Gaza war is looming. Neither Hamas nor Israel has a clear interest in renewing large-scale hostilities, but the dynamics of the border conflict point toward escalation. The two sides did not necessarily want a war in December 2008 either, but it came anyway.

The Incident

The clash began as a routine IDF response to Palestinian activity near the border security fence. IDF personnel observed what appear to have been Palestinian Islamic Jihad operatives planting explosives near the fence (also a routine activity). A force from the Golani Brigade's 12th Battalion responded by crossing the fence and penetrating some distance into Gaza near Khan Yunis to investigate the activity. A firefight ensued, resulting in the deaths of two IDF soldiers (including the battalion's deputy commander) and the wounding of two other Israeli personnel. Two Palestinian operatives were killed as well. Several other incidents reportedly followed, with other Palestinian operatives attempting to plant explosives along the fence.

Rising Tensions

The clash occurred against a backdrop of escalating tensions with Palestinian demonstrations in Jerusalem, incitement by Hamas, rocket attacks on southern Israel by other organizations, and Israeli airstrikes on Gaza targets accompanied by official statements of warning. From March 17 to March 24, Palestinian operatives in Gaza fired eleven rockets into southern Israel. None were attributed to Hamas, but the preceding several weeks had been very quiet, with no rocket strikes reported amid Hamas efforts to actively discourage them. The increase in rocket firing has led some to question whether Hamas has altered its policy and is permitting, or at least not discouraging, such attacks. Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak publicly raised this possibility on March 27, in the wake of retaliatory airstrikes on March 19, 20, 23, and 24.

The ongoing clashes along or near the border are also adding to the tensions. These clashes are part of a contest between Palestinian factions and the IDF over control of the fence and parallel buffer zone. Palestinian forces seek to extend their control up to the fence itself, likely as a preliminary step for launching terrorist attacks into Israel, while the IDF seeks to dominate the buffer zone within Gaza to thwart these intentions. This struggle has led to a steady toll of casualties, mostly on the Palestinian side.

The Israeli doctrine for responding to such incidents is aggressive. Commanders are expected to react strongly, making direct contact with Palestinian operatives inside the buffer zone even at the risk of taking casualties. Just two days before the March 26 clash, an IDF soldier was killed in a "friendly fire" incident during an aggressive Golani Brigade response to Palestinian activity. Similarly, Hamas's Qassam Brigades have been directed to actively oppose Israeli incursions into the buffer zone. The group established an observation network that alerts commanders to such incursions, permitting a rapid reaction. This network played a role in

the March 26 clash, alerting Qassam combat forces that fired on the Golani element inside Gaza, according to Qassam accounts.

Palestinian political disputes seem to be driving tensions as well. Such disputes are evident on several fronts: the internal Hamas debate between hardliners and pragmatists over the role of violent action against Israel in the current environment; Hamas's efforts to contain jihadist elements in Gaza; and Hamas's contest with the Palestinian Authority over who leads the "resistance" against Israel. Hamas leaders are having difficulty presenting the movement as the vanguard of resistance while at the same time suppressing attacks on Israel out of concern over another invasion. Domestic Hamas opponents have scored points by highlighting this contradiction, which helps explain why the group has devoted so much effort to promoting its March 26 "victory." Egypt's continued progress on a smuggling barrier along the Gaza border has only added to the pressure on Hamas. The barrier threatens the group's tunnel system, through which it imports not only weapons, but also consumer goods vital to maintaining political support.

All of these developments are occurring within a context of continued military preparations by both sides for what many believe will be another major conflict. Although the IDF does not seek such a war, it has effectively been preparing for the next round since the end of Operation Cast Lead. Earlier this month, the IDF Southern Command completed a major headquarters exercise focusing on renewed conflict in Gaza. And after the March 26 incident, Israel deployed additional artillery batteries near the border. For its part, Hamas has continued its own buildup since Cast Lead, importing weapons (including new long-range rockets), fortifying its positions, and expanding its military tunnel network under Gaza. Both sides are sensitive to and closely monitoring each other's activity.

Gaza Conflict Dynamics

The current situation is complex and shifting. Increased Israeli-Palestinian tensions in the West Bank have produced increased rocket firing from Gaza as Palestinian factions there show support for those in the West Bank. Palestinian political competition both inside and outside Gaza could push Hamas, however reluctantly, to a more adventurous policy regarding attacks on Israel -- if not directly via Hamas strikes, then by giving other organizations a freer hand. Hamas may or may not have already relaxed suppression on such groups due to various pressures. Whatever the case, when rockets are fired into Israel, the IDF often responds by hitting Hamas targets, and when Palestinian operatives approach the border fence, the IDF responds aggressively.

Israel is attempting to reinforce the level of deterrence it established with Cast Lead via airstrikes and warnings, but there is a sense that this is not enough -- that deterrence is eroding under current conditions. Israeli civilians in the south are also increasingly uneasy about the spike in rocket attacks and border incidents, adding to the pressure on the government and military to respond strongly. Senior Israeli officials have mostly been cautious about the situation, although Likud minister Yuval Steinitz stated on March 28 that Israel might have to reoccupy Gaza to destroy the Hamas regime. In addition, some Southern Command officers have taken a tougher public line than IDF chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi, who has been very cautious.

What Is Next?

Israel has enjoyed the relative quiet in the south since Cast Lead and lacks sufficient justification for a major operation in Gaza. It is also in the midst of a difficult political wrangle with Washington, one that could be exacerbated by another war. Hamas appears to have learned from the uncontrolled escalation that it abetted prior to Cast Lead and also needs quiet for its own reasons. Accordingly, it has spent substantial political capital to prevent attacks on Israel. On March 20, one of Hamas's senior officials in Gaza, Mahmoud al-Zahar, made a public statement basically condemning rocket fire against Israel as helpful to the enemy. And even while crowing about the March 26 clash, the group was at pains to point out that it was acting defensively and that it had not changed the rules of the game. The group's concerns were also reflected in reports that its Gaza leadership went to underground shelters during that incident.

Despite these reservations on both sides, the dynamics of the Gaza situation are tending toward increased violence and larger military operations. Managing these dynamics and preventing a major conflict will be a challenge for both Israel and Hamas.

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