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“ISRAEL AND HAMAS: AN INTERIM ASSESSMENT”

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Just over six months ago, on 19 June, Israel and Hamas agreed to a period of calm, a *Tahadiyeh*. On the expiry of that agreement Hamas resumed its rocket attacks on villages and towns in Southern Israel. In response, on Saturday, 27 December, Israel launched operation Cast Lead, which snowballed into a full scale confrontation with Hamas. Since then, Hamas has escalated its rocket attacks on Israel, hitting major cities, such as Beer Sheva and Ashdod—a mere 20 km from Tel-Aviv. Israel responded with the most ferocious attack on the Gaza Strip since the beginning of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The onslaught has so far been in two phases of ongoing air strikes in the first week, followed in the second week by a ground offensive. At the time of writing 13 Israelis and over 1,000 Palestinians (at least a third of them children) have been killed.

The motivation for both sides to resort to military force following the *Tahadiyeh's* expiry is political. After taking control of the Gaza Strip by force in June 2007, in what was effectively a military coup, Hamas has been boycotted by most of the international community, including the secular Fatah-led Palestinian Authority. Israel imposed a blockade on the Strip, closing all border crossings, and keeping the flow of supplies in and out of the Gaza Strip to a minimum. Hamas hoped that its renewal of the rocket attacks on Israel would lead to an agreement that would herald another period of calm, but one that would involve a lifting of the blockade and an easing of the boycott. It seems that Hamas miscalculated and underestimated the extent of the Israeli retaliation. Hence, rather than creating the conditions that might lead to an improved *Tahaydiyeh*, Hamas has provided Israel with a pretext for pursuing three goals—long overdue in the views of the military and the centre-right echelons of the political establishment.

The first is to significantly weaken Hamas's military and political base, which the movement has been steadily consolidating since Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in August 2005. Whilst the Israeli government knows that it cannot eradicate Hamas, it believes it can weaken it by dealing it a significant military blow. Thus, though some Israeli officials, such as deputy Prime Minister Haim Ramon, are calling for Hamas rule in Gaza to be toppled, it is unlikely that Israel would achieve this, at least not in this round. Another – and related – goal is to reduce the strategic threat posed by Iran to Israel through its proxy, Hamas. The third aim is to increase Israel's deterrence regionally, after it was dented by the 2006 Lebanon War, particularly vis-à-vis Hizballah and Syria.

After 20 days of conflict it is still unclear which of the two sides is nearer to achieving its objectives. Hamas's representatives in Cairo, Salah al-Bardwill and Ayman Taha, have responded positively to the Egyptian proposal for ending the conflict. The proposal calls for an immediate ceasefire followed, but not conditioned, by a withdrawal of Israeli forces. This proposal also lays down that negotiations over the reopening of the border crossings should commence, but gives no guarantees about when or if this is likely. It claims only that an end to the violence should be followed by negotiations on this issue. And, finally, the Egyptian initiative seeks to impose on Hamas return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza, in the form of having its forces present on the Rafah border crossing when it reopens. Should Hamas accept the Egyptian proposal without major modifications, it will be impossible for the organization to justify to its constituency the devastation and violence brought about by the ending of the Ta-hadiyah. In other words, it would be conceding defeat to Israel, exacting an extremely heavy political price from Hamas.

It is precisely because of this that Hamas's positive response to the Egyptian proposal should not be interpreted as an acceptance. Indeed, Hamas seems still willing and able to withstand the Israeli military offensive. Whilst the damage sustained by Palestinian civilians in Gaza as a result of the IDF attacks is clear, it is less obvious to what extent Hamas has been affected by the onslaught. The organization has maintained its ability to fire rockets on Israel and, so far, though enfeebled, its political leadership seems in tact. The imminent entry of President Obama into the White House and the growing strength of the voices within Israel, most importantly that of Defence Minister Barak, that the operation has met its goals, might bring the Israeli military offensive to an end. By claiming that it has withstood the Israeli offensive whilst the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority has colluded with the sworn enemy of the Palestinian people, Hamas could yet use the conflict to consolidate its political position. Developments in the next days will determine which way the die is cast.