

Israel :

The Risk of a New War with Arab Countries



In the 18th of August an attack launched by military commandos against buses in some Israeli towns north of Eilat in the Negev desert resulted in many victims, including some of the attackers and several Egyptian soldiers. The attackers are claimed to have crossed into Israel from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, though Egyptian officials deny this.

The attack triggered a series of countermeasures, which created strong tension between Tel Aviv and Cairo. Israeli reprisals in the Gaza Strip were followed by continuous launches of Qassam rockets from Gaza towards the Israeli towns of Ashkelon, Ashdod and Be'er Sheeva by Palestinians. The Sinai Peninsula is now once again turning into a flashpoint and could see a new round of socio-political clashes. Tel Aviv's prospects could be further complicated by its internal problems – such as massive protests over rising rents and economic crisis – as well as external – the new regional scenario resulting from the “Arab Spring.”

Also, a vote at the United Nations (UN) on Palestinian statehood was held on November 11. It was rejected after the Palestinians failed to muster enough votes support in the U.N. Security Council. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas made a bid for full UN membership for the state of Palestine on September 23. The Palestinian application is opposed by Israel and the United States. The latter say that the recognition of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital, is a step aimed at de-legitimizing Israel. For Tel Aviv and Washington, an engagement in peace talks with Israel is the only way Palestine can achieve statehood. Since that day the Israelis are preparing for the worst case scenario, as they fear a rise of tension in Israel and in the Middle East following the vote and the determination of Palestinian authorities to pursue their bid for a full United Nations membership.

Faced with this array of political variables, it is highly likely that Israel could lose control of “fast moving” events and find itself in the midst of a new Arab-Israeli crisis. ▶

The bombings in Eilat and the Israeli reaction

The terrorist attack in the Negev (on the Israeli side of the Sinai desert demarcation line) triggered a triangle of tension between Israel, Egypt and Hamas, the radical Palestinian political organization which runs Gaza. According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, the attack occurred on the road connecting Be'er Sheeva with Eilat, near Ein Netafim, where two armed groups attacked two Israeli buses and a private car, leaving seven people dead and a dozen wounded. The perpetrators of the attacks were members of the Popular Resistance Committees, a Palestinian group sometimes referred to as a "cartel" which has a galaxy of acronyms of affiliates, including groups representing the former militants of Hamas, Fatah, the Islamic Jihad and the Brigades of the Martyrs of the al-Aqsa. Israel's response was swift, and targeted against the Gaza Strip. Israeli Air Force (IAF) sorties resulted in the deaths of at least 15 people, including 5 Egyptians. Hamas, despite not having claimed responsibility for the attacks, justified them, and hoped that other actions would be carried out against the enemy. The breaking of the ceasefire between Hamas and Tel Aviv, agreed in 2009, which was confirmed by Abu Obeida, spokesman for the armed wing of Hamas, the Ezzedim al-Qassam Brigade, was the first political causality of this action. In turn, Israeli Defence

Minister Ehud Barak, in an interview with Israeli newspaper Maariv, accused Egypt of not operating in an effective manner and not controlling its Sinai border, assigning to it responsibility for the commando attack. This accusation drew a dry and resentful denial from Cairo, and the Egyptian Ambassador in Tel Aviv, Yasser Rida, was recalled.

Israel then launched a massive military operation against Gaza dubbed "Operation Eagle," which aimed to stop the continuous firing of Qassam rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel proper and root out other terrorist cells and armed gangs operating in Sinai. It also tried to find a notorious figure, Ramzi Mahmud al-Muwafi, a physician and chemical weapons expert who has worked for Osama bin Laden. He escaped from an Egyptian prison last January.

At the same time, the Israeli Government sought to protect the civilian population from the rockets. Some have criticized Israel for stepping up its use of the majestic "Iron Dome" anti-missile defense system, which cost \$205 million and has already been actively deployed in fending off attacks on Jerusalem and subsequent Israeli retaliation against the Gaza Strip in March of this year. Iron Dome launches mobile weapons and is capable of intercepting short-range threats at distances ranging from 30 and 70 km. It is versatile and effective in all weather conditions.

Egypt and Sinai: new threats to Israel?

Sinai and southern Israel had been free of such incidents for almost two years; however, since the fall of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak Egypt's territory appears to have become a fertile ground for terrorist activities, which will create new "realities" in this region of the Middle East. It is clear to the Israelis that dangerous terrorist cells are present there, as well as a flourishing illegal arms traffic in both the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. Even major Egyptian newspapers, such as al-Ahram and al-Wafd, have discussed these



concerns and raised the possibility that al-Qaeda agents, members of Hamas and Hezbollah mercenaries are active in the peninsula, allegations vehemently denied by Khaled Fuad, the Governor of Sinai. The fall of former President Mubarak has aided the proliferation of such trafficking and movement of armed groups as the previous state controls have now lapsed. This has led to attacks on police posts at el-Arish and the Arab Gas Pipeline, which in addition to supplying Jordan is designed to meet 40% of Egypt's energy requirements.

The security of the peninsula is regulated by the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt signed at Camp David in Maryland in 1979. These agreements set the number of Egyptian soldiers allowed in Sinai and expected their ultimate reduction. Sinai is now recognized as an integral part of Egyptian territory. It was captured by Israel during the Six-day War (1967), occupied for many years, partially returned to Cairo under the Camp David Accords and then officially returned in its entirety to Egypt in 1982, although this actually happened only in 1989 when the Taba agreements were sealed. These agreements confirmed the full recognition from the Israeli side of the international border between the two States. The agreements of 1979 divided the peninsula into three zones of military deployment. In area C, the one closest to Israel, any deployment of the Egyptian military must be minor in comparison to the other zones and be by garrisoned troops serving in conjunction with those of the Israeli Defense Forces.

Cairo has recently concurred with the request of Tel Aviv to increase the military deployment in this zone to 1,000 troops, seeking to restore security in the area, which is highly strategic for both sides. As reported by Haaretz, those responsible for latest attacks were not all Palestinians, some being Egyptians (at least three were identified) and al-Qaeda supporting militiamen from Afghanistan and Pakistan could also have been part of the commando squad. The death of five Egyptian soldiers who were accidentally killed by the IDF in the days following the attacks in Eilat has further damaged relations between the Israel and Egypt.

In addition, the military command in Cairo has understood that the situation is not acceptable to the Egyptian population and it is therefore necessary to bring about a conclusion to prevent the situation spinning out of control, and turning the border into one as dangerous as Israel's border with Lebanon, where Hezbollah, a Syrian-Iranian backed terrorist organization is active.

In Egypt there are in fact three actors: the Bedouins, the Salafists and the Palestinians. Cairo has long discriminated against the first, and this has given rise to an armed movement which has largely escaped any governmental control. The presence of these Bedouin tribes, who are under pressure due to the militarization of the area and the government's desire to develop tourism in their tribal areas, has created the conditions which could fuel a rebellion against the central authorities and illegal activities such as the smuggling of weapons and the boycotting and destruction of oil and gas pipelines, especially those supplying Israel.

Cairo has recently concurred with the request of Tel Aviv to increase the military deployment in this zone to 1,000 troops, seeking to restore security in the area, which is highly strategic for both sides.

The Salafi threat comes from local populations, mixed with extremist factions, which adopt tactics similar to those of al-Qaeda. The Middle East News Agency (MENA), Egypt's state news agency, has already reported the birth of a cell of al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula. Safwat Abdel Ghani, leader of the al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, an Islamist movement outlawed by the Egyptian government and deemed a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union, confirmed the existence of this still very small cell to the Egyptian newspaper al-Youm al-Sabaa. Finally, the Pal-▶

estinian faction uses the Sinai as a rearguard to support its activities in the Gaza Strip. Hamas and other Palestinian radical groups have fully exploited their ingrained links with local smugglers as they bring weapons and explosives in through underground tunnels all along the Sinai border which end up in the hands of terrorists. These “factions” are not united and carry out their own independent actions. However, they all have the immediate goal of weakening normal relations between Israel and Egypt. All these elements combined lead observers to think that the attack in Israel was linked to the ongoing events in Egypt and the efforts being made to disrupt the unity of that country as well as Israel.

Palestinian divisions and instability in Israel

While Hamas makes no claims concerning the attacks in Eilat, it is seeking to counter internal threats to its organization as well as those from the more extreme and radical Salafi “cause-related” factions and other jihadist groups. Those who take the more hard-line positions in the prosecution of grievances against Hamas fear that the Islamic movement has far too moderate a position against Israel and is guilty of not implementing a form of Orthodox Sharia law in Palestine. Rafah, the Hamas political leader in Gaza, has ad-

mitted that the movement has not been able to control the tide of groups which make up the Jihadist galaxy. Hamas does not seem able to control even its own dissidents, who have managed to launch rockets into Israel and take part in actions such as the assassination of the Italian activist and journalist Vittorio Arrigoni.

In fact, the greatest Israeli fear is the perceived threat from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and, above all, the strong bond between it and Hamas. In Egypt Islamist-inspired parties and nationalists support the Palestinian cause, as do the majority of Egyptians, as evidenced by a survey conducted by the Egyptian government five years ago, in which the vast majority (92%) of respondents saw Israel as an enemy and the peace treaty with the Jewish state as a betrayal of the Palestinian people. If the composition of the new Egyptian government is contingent on popular support, then Hamas could gain ground and be better positioned to inflict attacks on Israel, thanks in large part to the re-opening of the Egyptian border with Gaza. In fact, the opening of the border crossings will bring about significant improvement in local living conditions. On the other hand, it would ensure Hamas more opportunity to regain the consensus of support, which was lost in the last year and also create an easier flow of

weapons and other war materials at the expense of the already fragile Israeli security situation in the nearby Gaza Strip. Therefore, the Gaza Strip, though now relatively quiet after operation “Cast Lead” (2009), is likely to become a theatre for the escalation of tension. The internal dynamics of the parties to the conflict, heavily influenced by regional events will be the overriding force.

Moreover, should internal conditions in Gaza become even more chaotic the situation in Israel will certainly deteriorate, and not in the quietest way. The pending conflict will also be exacerbated by the current economic crisis and the social unrest which broke out in July. Israelis came out into the street to protest about the rising costs of living and the overall shortage of affordable housing. In



addition, much more can be added, as there currently exists a great deal of confusion and acute instability in the Israeli government and the country as a whole.

Protesters have demanded that the Netanyahu government make economic interventions to reduce the cost of living indicators and to generate employment for young people. A possible backlash to this creates an ever present threat of a possible new military operation in the Gaza Strip as a diversion. The shrinking of the Jewish population in Israel based on low birthrates and the government not being able to close ranks to form a common front against a Palestinian terrorist threat further compounds an already difficult situation on the ground

New regional scenario and greater Israeli isolation

The Israeli scenario involves more than the simple issues with Egypt and Hamas: it involves the whole Middle East. The attack in the Negev desert could open up problems which could haunt the country, especially in light of on-going Arab revolutions. Israel might see an enlargement of an Arab front as, for example, the Golan Heights could be impacted by the revolt in Syria. Syria's sectarian divisions could bring into play the main allies of Damascus, Iran and Hezbollah, which are also the main enemies of Israel. Despite the presence of the ruling Alawite clan in Syria and the consequent high degree of border tension over the disputed Golan Heights, relations between Israel and Syria have actually been quite stable since the Yom Kippur war (1973). Therefore the fall of Assad's regime would, paradoxically, be a political and social disaster for Israel, opening up a new problem to the north-east in an area that is already strongly affected by constant and heated standoff with Hezbollah.

Moreover, the fall of the Assad regime would be a strategic defeat for Iran, which would lose its influence in the Arabic Levant and with other allies in the region. This would not be convenient at a

time when Tehran is strengthening its position in the region following Washington's decision to withdraw all military forces from Iraq by the end of 2011. Meanwhile, a possible regime change in Syria would leave Hezbollah – which is very dependent politically on the Syrian regime – highly vulnerable. Hezbollah, at this point, might find it strategically advantageous to form a political-military alliance with Hamas to breathe new life into a confrontation with Israel which has the potential to greatly increase its standing and prestige in the Arab world.

... a possible regime change in Syria would leave Hezbollah – which is very dependent politically on the Syrian regime – highly vulnerable. Hezbollah, at this point, might find it strategically advantageous to form a political-military alliance with Hamas to breathe new life into a confrontation with Israel which has the potential to greatly increase its standing and prestige in the Arab world.

The fears of Israel stretch beyond the Jordan River, as Jordan has its own internal strife. Riots against the Hashemite dynasty and the new wave activism of Jabhat al-' Amal al-Islami, better known as the Islamic Action Front (IAF), which represents the political soul and heart of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, are not encouraging news for Tel Aviv. The IAF has always disapproved of the openings to the West and the normalization of relations with Israel undertaken by the Jordanian monarchy. It is clear that any possible instability in Amman would be a danger to the national security of Israel. The loss of its last "ally" in the area and the consequent expansion of hostilities along all Israel's borders would upset the political balance of the West Bank. ▶

In addition, the Obama administration's recent positions on Israel, over the borders of pre 1967, and the recognition of its support for a two-state solution with Palestine has not helped Tel Aviv in the international scene. It is necessary to recall that the Jewish state is isolated from various sides by regimes which do not agree with its very existence. Its diplomatic relations with Turkey, led by a former Israel supporter, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have been severely damaged in the last year as a result of the "Freedom Flotilla" affair, which has in turn brought about a new level of anxiety about the political rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas, the two main Palestinian political movements, and fear over the September UN vote on recognition of an independent Palestinian state.

Political and institutional changes underway in North Africa and the Middle East could still bear significant surprises for Israel. The uncertainty over future relations with Egypt, the upheavals taking place in Syria and a possible escalation of tensions with Hamas are all factors contributing to the growth of Israeli worries and nurturing the so-called "Jewish syndrome of encirclement." With Israel preparing to face a series of economic uncertainties in the region, no conventional military action can be encouraged as such an action would not necessarily restore order in the Levant,

engender the establishment of al-Qaeda cells in a region historically receptive to political terrorism.

Despite what happened on the 22nd of August, a ceasefire proposal has been put forth. It is necessary to reduce clashes between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza Strip, as all sides would benefit from a negotiated truce. Tel Aviv might be best advised to lower the intensity and tone of its own rhetoric about possible a military confrontation to avert the possibility of further radicalization. This is essential in preventing new scenarios of war in a region that is very sensitive to sudden changes.

In the final analysis, the most plausible scenarios on the horizon are either a full-scale armed conflict or more rockets being launched from the Gaza Strip. In the first case, a new "Cast Lead"-type operation would risk provoking war on three fronts, with Hezbollah in the North and East and Egypt and Hamas in the South. This could also trigger a wider Arab-Israeli conflict. In the second scenario Israel must demonstrate an ability to passively withstand Hamas attacks, present the Jewish state as the victim and convey the plight of the country to the international community. This would ensure that the Palestinians were labeled as the hardcore perpetrators of terrorism.

at least in the short term. A more pressing risk, however, is that Tel Aviv could become involved in a new and expanded anti-terrorist campaign, no longer dealing with a merely homegrown Palestinian one. Such a complex matrix has the potential to

However, the recent reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah and the possible recognition by the United Nations of the occupied Palestinian territories as an independent state bring about yet even more complications. Although the situation is not yet clear, Israel must choose the most plausible way to prevent new and even more troublesome regional war scenarios from emerging.

Note:

* **Richard Rousseau** is Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Khazar University in Baku, Azerbaijan and a contributor to Global Brief, World Affairs in the 21st Century (www.globalbrief.ca) and The Jamestown Foundation.

