Between Jerusalem and Gaza – 2021

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The events leading to Hamas’s missile barrage on Jerusalem began during a week with the potential for trouble in the Muslim world. Five different dates or events, each in its own right a potential cause of tension, all coincided in one week ­— all the makings of a “perfect storm.”

1. The previous week (on April 30th), Abu Mazen canceled the Palestinian parliamentary and presidential elections that had been scheduled for May and July. Hamas, which had anticipated an achievement in these elections, possibly even realizing its aspiration of replacing Abu Mazen as the chairman of the Palestinian Authority by gaining a majority in the Palestinian Parliament, was frustrated and bitter as a result. Canceling the elections wiped out this hope, which was based on Abu Mazen’s and his party’s (or more precisely, parties) unpopularity and the anticipated election returns that would result from it. Hamas’s frustration was in no way related to the events in Jerusalem but became a catalyst and perhaps even a decisive factor in determining Hamas’s behavior in Gaza in the wake of the tension in Jerusalem.
2. For some time now, property disputes in Jerusalem have contributed to a volatile atmosphere in the city. These disputes involve suits by Jews to evict Palestinian families from their homes, where they have been living since before the 1967 war. The Jews claim that the properties in question were bought by Jews before the War of Independence (1948). Israel's Supreme Court was scheduled to publicize its decision about the eviction of a number of families in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood on Thursday, May 13th. This dispute is a mundane property dispute that is commonplace everywhere and ought to be resolved, as appropriate in a country subject to the rule of law, by the courts.
3. No one seemed to notice that Thursday of this week was the end of the month of Ramadan and the beginning of the important Muslim holiday, Eid el-Fitr. The concluding week of Ramadan is a sensitive time in the entire Muslim world and every year, religious sensitivities cause violent outbursts. In Israel, this sensitivity is particularly manifest in places that are already fraught, especially Jerusalem’s Temple Mount. The high attendance at public prayers during this week (which includes Laylat al-Qadr), annually results in violent events in the entire region of Judea and Samaria, especially in Jerusalem.
4. Jerusalem Day occurred at the beginning of the week (Monday, May 10th). This holiday is celebrated on the Hebrew date of Jerusalem’s liberation by the IDF. This year it fell out in the last week of Ramadan (a convergence that occurs once in a dozen years). On this day, thousands participate in a colorful procession with flags and songs that passes through both sides of the city, reminding the Palestinian residents and the Arab world in general of their failure in 1967 and of Israel’s continuing possession of united Jerusalem, including the eastern side of the city, where some of the celebrations take place.
5. Completing the coincidental insanity of this week, Saturday marked the annual “Nakba Day” (meaning (“Day of Calamity”). This is the day on which the Palestinians mourn the results of the 1948 war. It is commemorated on the 15th of May, the date of the termination of the British Mandate in Palestine and the day the State of Israel came into existence.

The Israeli police’s questionable decisions, especially in limiting access to the area of the Damascus Gate and in preventing Israeli Arabs from entering the Temple Mount for prayers, apparently contributed to the tension among the locals and may also have been used by others as an excuse to fan the flames.

Only a few months before these events, Hamas emerged from a complex internal election in which Yahya Sinwar, who is regarded as a relative moderate who is willing to reach agreements with Israel in exchange for Gaza’s development and prosperity, won by one vote. They now looked despairingly at how Abu Mazen had canceled the elections through which they had hoped to take control of the PA and of Judea and Samaria. Under these circumstances, the leaders of Hamas decided to prove to Palestinian society and perhaps the entire Arab world that they are the ones who set the Palestinian agenda. They set an ultimatum to the Israeli government, stating that they would respond with rocket fire if Israel would not change its behavior in Jerusalem.

Hamas tried to present itself as “the defender of Jerusalem” from Gaza, and by doing so to change its status among the Palestinians and perhaps in the entire Islamic world.

As expected, the ultimatum was rejected.

True to their word, Hamas broke all the understandings with Israel that had been created in the wake of previous operations and fired rockets at Jerusalem. This action resulted in the Israelis beginning operation “Guardians of the Walls.”

Israel faced three areas of conflict:

1. Jerusalem – where local unrest was harsher and on a larger scale than in the past.
2. Gaza – With Hamas firing around 4400 rockets and missiles, along with mortar fire, and Israel responding by destroying the organization’s infrastructure, targeting its commanders, and collaterally damaging civilian structures that served the organization or were adjacent to its facilities.
3. Within Israel – Israeli Arabs tore the fabric of coexistence that had existed across the country in riots in which Jews were murdered, synagogues burned, Jewish homes vandalized, and a great deal of Jewish property destroyed. In response, there were a few (yet very dangerous to Israeli society) incidents of fringe groups of Jews who violently attacked Israeli Arabs.

The attempts to incite mass protest marches in the West Bank or to instigate a confrontation by firing a few Katyusha rockets from Lebanon and the piloting of an (apparently Iranian) drone from Jordan did not achieve their desired outcomes. Judea and Samaria remained relatively calm and no serious confrontation ensued at Israel’s borders.

On the other hand, the events in Jerusalem and Gaza did manage to incite Israel's Arabs to lash out violently against their Jewish neighbors. Even though it is still unclear to what degree Hamas was directly involved, there is no doubt that the rocket fire from Gaza and Israel's response had an impact on the eruption of the unrest.

Now that a ceasefire has been reached and the riots and protests in Israel have abated, the relationship between the state and its Arab citizens must be examined anew. It is likely that Israel's Jews will not rush to return to their previous relationship with the Arab minority, which had appeared to be moving decisively in the direction of economic integration, even if there were bumps along the way. For example, the health system has many Arab professionals (25% of the doctors and 30% of the nurses), an Arab heads Israel's oldest and second-largest bank, and many large shopping centers are staffed by Arab saleswomen in traditional dress with no one complaining. In the political arena as well, there is expanded acceptance of Arab involvement. These riots began just as the Israeli political system showed unprecedented willingness to bring an Arab party into the government, even if this was the result of their lacking other options.

Arab society was hit hard during the Corona crisis, in part due to relatively limited governmental economic aid as a result of its relatively high proportion of unreported income. At the end of the day, Israel is apparently also paying the price of its failure to rid Arab society of its high rates of crime and violence. The majority of this violence is perpetrated by and plays into the hands of organized crime families who have taken control of Arab neighborhoods; another part of the violence is cultural in the sense that some issues, such as clan disputes or improper sexual behavior, are resolved violently – meaning murder for revenge or as a means of restoring family honor. (In this respect, Israeli Arabs are not different from other Arab societies in the Middle East – they are all violent in one way or another.)

This does not excuse the failure of Israel's police to eliminate the crime families’ influence on the Arab street; the police must confiscate the multitude of weapons that have accumulated in the homes of Arab citizens as part of a culture in which possession of weapons is viewed as honorable. Unfortunately, the failure to overcome the crime families and gangs stems in part from Arab society’s lack of cooperation with the police and its political leaders’ insistence upon defending violence directed at Jews or the state’s institutions. The claims by Arab citizens that the police are not doing enough are correct, but the police’s claim that Arab leaders, in their unwillingness to be part of the solution, are part of the problem, is even more justified.

It appears that the correct approach to the problem involves both the investment of resources to improve the living conditions of Israeli Arabs and significant bolstering of the police force in order to address the relevant issues in Israeli Arab society. Without a doubt, this undertaking will increase the friction between the Arab population and the state, with all the problems associated with that friction. However, this must not deter the police from collecting the vast amounts of weapons that are to be found in Arab areas, and from eradicating the criminal organizations threatening Arab citizens, and, as it has turned out, Jewish citizens as well. That being said, it is important not to make the common mistake that improving the Arabs’ quality of life and overcoming the rampant crime will cause them to look favorably upon the existence of the nation-state of the Jewish people in which they live. It is best to be modest in our expectations. Achieving these goals may render it easier to live in such a state without internal violence and in coexistence with their Jewish surroundings, but in light of the recent events, it is difficult to envision a significant change in the near future regarding the Arabs’ acceptance of the Jewish state’s existence as an undisputed fact.

The challenge of forming good relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel is difficult and complex, and apparently will be with us for a long time to come. The Israeli Arabs’ riots were the biggest surprise of operation Guardians of the Walls, in which Hamas failed in all its attempts to surprise Israel. It appears that rising nationalistic emotions, religious sensitivities over Jerusalem, and Israel's lack of ability to deal with lawless groups in Arab society are a combination that has precipitated and will precipitate violence between Jews and Arabs. One must recognize the fact that many of Israel's Arab citizens are very uncomfortable with the very existence of a Jewish sovereign state. It is a state that provides them with a higher quality of life than any Arab country, yet it is not theirs and it is difficult for them to identify with it.

While the challenge presented by the actions of Israel's Arabs is clear, even if the solution to it is complicated, the results of the operation in Gaza are more complicated and it is difficult to determine where they will lead since they depend upon the future actions of Israel and Hamas. One of the reasons these results are unclear is because the two parties can be said to have conducted different operations, each striving for different goals. In terms of each side’s reasoning, this conflict can be understood as two campaigns taking place in parallel.

Hamas conducted an operation on the strategic/diplomatic level. Its purpose was to elevate Hamas’s standing by taking advantage of the sensitivity of Jerusalem and by claiming the role of defender of Jerusalem through indiscriminate fire against Israel. This was battle conducted in the realm of public relations, unrelated to battlefield achievements. The operational goal was to promote an image by killing innocent Israeli and Palestinian civilians. (It is important to realize that Hamas benefits from the death of Palestinian civilians no less, and perhaps even more so, than from the death of Israeli civilians).

Israel conducted itself based on operative objectives with strategic hopes. The mission was to weaken the military capabilities of Hamas and its ability to regain these capabilities after the operation, with the hope that the damage incurred would suffice to deter the organization from acting against Israel in the future. The purpose of the operation was measured quantitatively: the destruction of infrastructure and capabilities and eliminating Hamas commanders and operatives.

Since the two sides were fighting different wars, it is unsurprising that both sides claimed victory, and there is no contradiction between the feelings and statements of both sides.

As a result of the operation, Hamas indeed is viewed by the Palestinians and the Arab world as a group that sacrificed a great deal to defend Jerusalem. Israel is seen as a failure because it had no public relations achievement. After all, Hamas leaders walk freely in Gaza’s streets and large numbers of rockets were still being fired at Israel until the very last moment.

Israel is justifiably satisfied with the operation as the IDF succeeded in foiling all of Hamas’s attacks besides the rockets, and over 90% of the rockets were downed by Israel's Iron Dome anti-missile system, minimizing the damage to Israel. Moreover, Israel severely damaged Hamas’s infrastructure and its ability to produce rockets and missiles while killing many Hamas operatives, including mid-level commanders. It is clear to the Gazans that Hamas may claim to be the defender of Jerusalem, but they lack the ability to protect Gaza.

In light of this strange situation where both parties consider themselves victors and ostensibly are satisfied with the operation’s results, Israel must act to restore its aura of invincibility, which has great influence upon its stature in the region. Israel lost some of this stature as a result of the operation’s visible results. But in the Middle East, based on long experience, it is prudent to distinguish between visible results and hidden results that may come into view in the future. In this case, for example, Hamas leadership may conclude that in the future they cannot allow themselves to pay the price of such extensive damage to the organization and its abilities. This is the main lesson to be learned from the Second Lebanon War of 2006, where Nasrallah publicly declared a “divine victory” for Hezbollah but ultimately made known that if he had known in advance how the operation would end, he would not have initiated it. In this respect, Israel has the advantage over Hamas since Hamas cannot change the tangible results that the IDF achieved on the ground. In contrast, Israel can (and in my opinion, must) change the attitudes and feelings of the Palestinians and the Arab world.

Israel should not wait for the Hamas leadership to realize it made a mistake and admit as much in public, which may never happen. Israel must act to make its victory clear on both levels – the diplomatic and the military.

1. Israel must demonstrate that Hamas did not succeed in changing the status quo in Jerusalem at all. To achieve this, Israel must return to its previous routine on the Temple Mount, including the admittance of Jews (which has already resumed), maintaining its police presence, and even using force on the Temple Mount against any Palestinian aggression. At the same time, it must prepare for difficult scenarios that may arise as a result of court verdicts to evict Palestinians in the Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighborhoods. To this end, Israel must significantly strengthen the police force – who must not antagonize local residents and cause unrest but must also be ready to respond forcefully to any disturbance of the peace. Experience teaches us that the presence of large forces before trouble begins significantly reduces the risk of a situation deteriorating to the point of necessitating the use of live fire, which results in even more tension. Israel can nullify Hamas’s ostensible strategic success through a series of relatively simple actions in Jerusalem (with the understanding that they could potentially lead to a local crisis with the potential to extend itself outwards, as both Sinwar and Nasrallah have publicly threatened). It must become clear very soon that Hamas has achieved nothing in Jerusalem. If not, Hamas’s appetite will only grow.
2. Israel must take pains to actualize its deterrence in Gaza by responding forcefully to any instance of Hamas aggression, even those that previously have been ignored by the IDF or resulted in inconsequential IDF fire. Hamas must not be allowed to harass the Israeli citizens of the area adjacent to Gaza with incendiary balloons and protests that cross the border. If Hamas does carry out such actions, they must be met with significant strikes at elements of Hamas’s infrastructure and its leaders. Israel must detach itself from the principle of ‘proportional response,’ with the knowledge that breaking this pattern of behavior that plays into Hamas’s hands may cause Hamas to respond with rocket fire for an extended period, and perhaps even long-distance fire toward Ashdod and Beersheba. Israel must make clear in its responses that it is willing to pay this price to achieve real deterrence, deterrence that will be manifest in complete quiet around Gaza. It is important to emphasize that the deterrence that Israel ought to seek involves taking risks (even risking another operation) for Hamas to understand Israel's determination to establish new rules for the interaction between Israel and Hamas.

In the negotiations towards an arrangement with Gaza that are taking place with Egypt’s help, Israel must make clear that it will not allow Hamas’s rearmament. Otherwise, Israel will encounter a much stronger enemy in the next operation a few years from now. In a long-term settlement, Israel must bring about the return of the remains of IDF soldiers as well as the two living civilians apparently held by Hamas. These demands will complicate the negotiations and will likely cause them to drag on, but Israel must stand firm so that the humanitarian achievement important to Hamas, in the form of opening up of Gaza to allow rebuilding, will be balanced by a humanitarian achievement that is important in Israel. If Hamas demands the release of over one thousand terrorists imprisoned in Israel, Israel must calculate the advantages and disadvantages, and possibly refrain from a long-term settlement. It is important to remember: any such arrangement will not solve the basic problems in Gaza. It will remain overpopulated (over two million residents in less than four hundred square kilometers), and its residents will still be dominated by a terror organization seeking to rebuild its power to harm Israel in the future instead of focusing on providing a better life for their compatriots who live in difficult conditions. An arrangement’s only advantage will be in lengthening the time frame until the next operation which will take place as soon as Hamas feels it is strong enough to fight Israel or when the organization needs to prove its significance in the region. Quiet on the Gaza front will allow Israel to focus on preparations for the real challenge: the combination of the Iranian nuclear threat along with the ongoing increase of accurate long-range weaponry possessed by Iran and Hezbollah. Gaza will remain an open wound that will one day bleed more profusely than during this recent operation.

If, either after the ceasefire or a negotiated arrangement, Israel has an opportunity to eliminate senior Hamas or Islamic Jihad officials or munition manufacturing facilities in Gaza, then the decision-makers will face a difficult choice. The question will be whether to be the first to break the ceasefire in order to either eliminate the leaders of these terrorist organizations or to prevent their rearmament. This will be a difficult question because deciding to do so will most likely bring about another long round of violence with attendant difficulties relating to the legitimacy of Israeli actions in the international arena. However, deciding not to take action will enable Hamas’s rearmament and place Israel in a difficult position the next time fighting breaks out. This question of a preventative attack was and will be the most difficult decision for Israeli leadership because of the negative repercussions of both restraint and taking initiative.