

Gaza quiet as regional powers trade agendas for peace

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Israel and Hamas seem to have reached a ceasefire to end over a week of fighting in Gaza and rocket attacks on Israel.

The details of the agreement are unclear at this stage, as is whether it will hold, but one thing is certain: if it merely returns the situation to the status quo ante then the sides have simply reset the countdown to another round of fighting in weeks or months or years to come.

We saw this after the Gaza war in 2008. Israel and Hamas reached an uneasy truce that preserved a degree of peace. But because it did not deal with core issues, like the economic blockade of Gaza and arms smuggling by Hamas and other militant groups, it was never going to endure.

The lack of economic relief in Gaza from either the Israeli blockade or from an opening of Gaza's border with Egypt always meant that pressure would eventually build towards a new confrontation. Months before this latest escalation rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel had once again been on the rise.

Hamas and other militant groups had rebuilt and expanded their stocks of weapons, much of it coming through the smuggling tunnels that link Gaza with the Egyptian side of the border in Sinai.

In the background, the inability to re-start meaningful negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians doomed virtually everything to short term failure.

There have been indications that some of these deeper issues around Gaza, like the opening of the border crossing with Egypt, may be discussed once this new ceasefire is implemented.

This has been promised before without anything ever changing. But now the risks of leaving them unresolved are growing.

A cold-hearted analysis might argue that the ceasefire after the 2008 war at least a few years of relative calm and this new ceasefire might provide the same. The problem is that the situation in Gaza and the region has changed and continues to change.

The political and economic blockade of Gaza has helped turn the strip into an incubator for extremist groups, some of which make even the radical Hamas seem relatively moderate. Moreover, many of the militant groups are being armed with increasingly sophisticated weapons smuggled into Gaza.

Some are coming from Libyan armouries, looted after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, including man portable surface-to-air missiles. Iran also claimed this week that it has supplied groups in Gaza with technology for rockets capable of reaching Tel Aviv.

But it is the changes in the region that really highlight the danger of simply returning to the status quo ante. The new Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt has responded to this latest conflict much as its predecessor, the Mubarak regime, did.

It engaged in some harsh public criticism of Israel, but behind the scenes worked for a ceasefire. It has no interest in fighting a war with Israel over Gaza. It does have an interest in shutting down the tunnels that link Sinai with Gaza, which have become a magnet for criminals and jihadist groups that are causing as many security problems on the Egyptian side of the border as they are on the Israeli side.

Nevertheless, there is a much greater risk in the future that both Israel and Egypt will be drawn into a conflict that neither really wants, driven there by events that neither can really control.

Contacts between the two governments are still tentative and suspicions of each other are still high. This is not going to change quickly or easily, especially with a Muslim Brotherhood-led government whose predisposition is to confront Israel rather than cooperate with it, and which must be more responsive to popular demands than its autocratic predecessor was.

Israel and Egypt, two of the most powerful states in the region, simply can't afford to allow their agendas to be set by extremists in Gaza, or in some cases, their patrons in Tehran.

Finally, we must also remember the human side of the equation. Unless the status quo is shifted Gazans will continue to be locked in a three-way vice between a long-term economic blockade, short-term outbursts of war and an oppressive Hamas-led government running their lives day-to-day.

Meanwhile Israeli communities bordering Gaza will continue to face a nerve-wracking game of rocket roulette every time they go to bed at night.

There are, however, signs that people recognise that new approaches are needed. Amidst the recent fighting a group calling itself [Gaza Youth Breaks Out](#), which was founded two years ago, re-issued its 'Manifesto for change' that has gone viral on Facebook and captures some of that mood:

"...we are sick and tired of living a shitty life, being kept in jail by Israel, beaten up by Hamas and completely ignored by the rest of the world. There is a revolution growing inside of us, an immense dissatisfaction and frustration that will destroy us unless we find a way of canalizing this energy into something that can challenge the status quo and give us some kind of hope."

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