

CEASEFIRE AGREEMENTS WILL NOT WORK: ACTIVATION OF THE PEACE PROCESS IS THE SOLUTION

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Recent Escalation But Not the Last

The recent ceasefire agreement signed on Wednesday evening, 22nd November 2012 in Cairo between Hamas and Israel, which ended eight days of fighting between the two sides, was certainly not the first ceasefire since the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, and unfortunately will not be the last. There are many indicators that warn that the cycle of violence may start not after years but after months. The last escalation, which Israel called a “Pillar of Defence” and Hamas a “Stone Shale”, began when the Israeli aircraft assassinated Ahmed Ja’abari, the head of the military wing of Hamas, on Wednesday 14th November. Israel and Hamas exchanged fire and rockets over eight days, killing 165 and injuring more than one thousand people on the Palestinian side, most of them women and children, and 18 Israelis, most of them civilians, according to neutral international reports. During the eight days of escalation, the Israeli Air Force carried out more than 1,200 air raid strikes, dropping nearly a thousand tons of explosives, while Hamas and other military organizations responded by launching more than 1,500 rockets on Israeli cities. Some of these rockets were locally produced while others were smuggled from other regions, such as Libya, across the Sinai desert. So the recent escalation brought new elements to the ongoing escalation between the two sides. It could indicate that the next round of escalations would be cruel and devastating in an unprecedented way. In this battle of rockets, Hamas reached areas 80 kilometres away inside Israel, bombing the cities of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and other Israeli towns. On the other side, Israeli carried out unprecedented heavy bombardment of tens of civilian buildings, including the football stadium and

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the premises of the population registry, which led to the destruction of thousands of historical documents more than a hundred years old.

There are many reasons to believe that the ceasefire agreed in Cairo would not be sustained, including: 1) Hamas' ongoing development of its military capacity; 2) Hamas control of the Gaza Strip since June 2007 after its defeat of the Palestinian Authority, which is confined to the West Bank; 3) arms smuggling through the underground tunnels between the Gaza Strip and Egypt; and 4) the growth of other Salafi and jihadist groups and their cooperation with their counterparts in the Sinai desert undermining the recent truce. Meanwhile, the continued Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, which started on the eve of its takeover by Hamas, the suspension of the peace talks and the continuation of Israeli settlement in the West Bank add to this situation.

Since the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 and until the recent escalation several truces and ceasefires have been signed between the two sides. All were brokered by Egypt and did not prevent the explosion of the cycle of violence again.

In 2008, Egypt mediated between Hamas and Israel to reach a ceasefire agreement, which began in June and ended in November 2008. One month later, Israel carried out Operation Cast Lead in order to achieve three objectives, namely: 1) to destroy the tunnels; 2) to end Hamas rule in Gaza; and 3) to stop rocket fire into Israel. After three weeks of the Israeli air, sea and land offensive, none of those goals were achieved, despite Operation Cast Lead causing the death of 1,300 Palestinians and destroying 5,000 homes and damaging another 17,000. It is worth mentioning that during the period 2002-2008, homemade Hamas rockets had a range of below eight kilometres, while this increased to 30 kilometres during Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009. During the Pillar of Defence escalation, Hamas rockets had a range of 80 kilometres, reaching the cities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem for the first time.

We can easily expect that Hamas rockets in the year 2015, for example, might reach more than a hundred kilometres based on the level of improvement of Hamas military capacity in the past decade.

So the next escalation would be much more brutal, devastating and fatal compared to previous rounds. All truce or ceasefire agreements between Hamas and Israel reached over the past six years have not stopped the explosion of the situation or prevented the Palestinian resistance movement from developing their military capacities. On the other hand, it has not convinced Israel that the military escalation policy and the Gaza Strip siege, which has caused catastrophic humanitarian crises for the people living there, is the solution. Here we must consider other more sustainable and less costly solutions. There is no doubt that the reactivation of the peace process and negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel is the best solution to confront the dangers that threaten security in the region and bring permanent peace.

A Modified Roadmap toward Permanent Peace

There is a Palestinian split between Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Hamas has controlled the Gaza Strip since June 2007 after winning parliamentary elections in January 2006. Israel and the United States and most European Union states have boycotted the Hamas government in response to its refusal to abide by the three conditions, namely: 1) recognition of Israel; 2) denouncing violence; and 3) recognition of previously signed agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. Also, the Palestinian Authority, which confined its presence in the West Bank, no longer represents all Palestinians. These elements gave sufficient justification to Israel to reverse its commitment to the peace terms involving a settlement freeze, ceasing to build the wall and withdrawing from the territories occupied in 1967.

To get out of the cycle of violence continued for decades, a modified roadmap for peace should be considered based on the following:

1. End the intra-Palestinian divide and achieve national reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. Israel and the United States of America should support the reconciliation process in order to achieve the unification of the Palestinian representation.
2. Formulate a Palestinian Unity Government temporarily for a period of six months working on the preparation of presidential and legislative elections. The last elections took place in January 2006, which means that the presidential and legislative bodies expired in January 2010.
3. Legislative and new presidential elections should be held six months after the formulation of the Palestinian Unity Government. The international community must be involved and support this process.
4. Organizations, parties and individuals who wish to participate in the legislative elections must abide by the terms of the peace agreement and the conditions of the international community.
5. The newly elected leadership in Palestine, who have already recognized the prior agreements and the terms of the peace process, should enter into a process of peace talks with Israel. The peace talks between Israel and the newly elected Palestinian leadership must have a specific timeframe and should be carried out under the auspices of international actors.

Auspices of the International Community

The United States has monopolized the peace process in the Middle East over the last seven years, excluding other key actors, namely the European Union, Russia and the United Nations. The United States cannot achieve any progress in the peace process because of its totally biased position with Israel, thus losing the confidence of the other parties and reducing its ability to exert pressure on Israel.

There is no doubt that the peace process in the Middle East is in bad need of US intervention due to its power and influence. The US can use this influence to persuade and pressure Israel if necessary.

US monopoly of the peace process was one of the reasons that led to failure to achieve any progress, so we should activate the role of other powers in the world, most importantly the role of the European Union and Russia. We should even encourage new powers to join the peace process, such as China, Brazil, India, South Africa and Turkey, and benefit significantly from Egypt as a key player in the Middle East and its special ties with Hamas.

Simultaneously published as a Focus article at the Observatory of Euro-Mediterranean policies, www.iemed.org