

## **Implications of Gaza Conflict**

The streets of Gaza are coming back to life after a truce ended eight days of bloodshed, with both sides claiming victory while remaining wary of each other. Both sides were seeking to identify and wherever possible, shape the rules of the game. The truce brokered by Egypt working with the United States, prevented - at least for now - an Israeli invasion of Gaza. Nevertheless, this conflict would have far-reaching consequences for the region.

### **Background**

Gaza, a coastal region at the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean bordering Israel and Egypt was vacated by Israeli forces after 1993 Oslo Accord, for Palestinian National Authority (PNA) to police and administer. Following the 2006 election, conflict broke out as the Fatah party seemed unwilling to transfer power to Hamas, who had won the elections with overwhelming majority, resulting in Hamas assuming power in Gaza by force.

At that time, Hamas was contending with numerous challenges; its taking over in Gaza had earned the group severe political and economic isolation, and the group's appeals to open Gaza's border, and for neighbors to recognize Hamas as a legitimate political actor, went mostly unheeded. Nevertheless, Hamas did take careful note of Hezbollah's example: a militant organization that had flagged its resistance credentials against Israel could maintain strong popular support among its constituents and had made its way into Lebanon's political mainstream.

### **Current Setting**

The current conflict is rooted in Israeli government's oft repeated posture to contain Hamas as a political and military force in its neighbourhood by invoking its right to have safety of its citizens and security of its borders. The current administration in Tal-Aviv wish to carry muscle flexing soon after the completion of the US election process and set the stage for its own upcoming election campaign. On the Palestinian side, Hamas wants to show that despite the fact that it gets hit hard by Israel, it will not bow to the pressure being exerted on them. Interestingly, four years ago, right after US

elections, Israel launched 'Operation Cast Lead' in Gaza as this time 'Operation Pillar of Defence' and then too a peace deal was brokered by Egypt and US.

However, more than 150 Palestinians including 37 children had been killed and over 1000 injured, while six people, including a soldier and a reserve officer, were killed in Israel and over 200 injured in eight days.

### **Appraisal**

A number of unintended consequences have emerged from the conflict, ranging from boosting Hamas' prominence, undermining its isolation, further weakening the Palestinian Authority [Mahmoud Abbas], and diverting regional attention from Syria.

- Firstly, as in the 2009 Cast Lead operation, Israel's goal now is not to destroy Hamas, but to compel it to behave more responsibly and keep order in Gaza. Much of the mortar fire over the past year against southern Israel has been launched by groups more radical than Hamas. By holding Hamas responsible, Israel inadvertently bolsters Hamas' standing and legitimacy as the ultimate power-broker and arbiter in Gaza.
- Secondly, yet this objective of forcing Hamas' responsibility has contributed to undermining Israel's longstanding objective of keeping Hamas isolated internationally, if not regionally. With the United States, Israel, and other countries urging Egypt to rein in the Gaza leaders, Hamas' centrality as the locus of decision-making grows rather than diminishes. This then encourages other Middle East leaders to accelerate their rush to Gaza, while skipping Ramallah, to court Hamas' leadership.
- Thirdly, courting of Hamas by Qatar, Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt has the consequence of further eroding the stature of the Palestinian Authority under Mahmoud Abbas, a Palestinian leader avowedly committed to the non-violent path. By bypassing Ramallah and President Abbas, they further marginalize the moderate leaders as the proper address for resolving problems. In Palestinian eyes right now, it is Hamas that is seen to be taking action, not Abbas. Abbas thus no doubt feels all the more compelled to carry out his threat to resume his U.N. gambit (upgradation of representation), despite strong American, Israeli and other international opposition.

- Fourthly, this conflict has eclipsed the regional and international focus from Syrian issue.
- Fifthly, meanwhile, Iran is working feverishly to stem the decline of its regional influence. At the time of Operation Cast Lead, Iran was steadily expanding its sphere of influence, from western Afghanistan to the Mediterranean. A subsequent U.S. military buildup in the Persian Gulf and an intensifying U.S.-led economic warfare campaign slowed Iran down, but it was the decline of the al Assad regime that put Iran on the defensive. An emboldened Sunni opposition in Syria, backed by the West, Turkey and the Arab Gulf states, could spill into Lebanon to threaten Hezbollah's position and eventually threaten Iran's position in Iraq. With each faction looking to protect itself, Iran can no longer rely as heavily on militant proxies in the Levant, especially Palestinian groups that see an alignment with Iran as a liability in the face of a Sunni rebellion. But Iran is also not without options in trying to maintain a Palestinian lever against Israel. Hamas would not be able to strike Tel Aviv and Jerusalem with long-range rockets had it not been for Iran.

To sum up, the Gaza-specific conflict would end most sustainably if all the stakeholders proceed on a three-fold plank:

- First, acknowledge Hamas as a political reality that has gained legitimacy in the electoral process, and to engage it in the negotiations process (as was done with Fatah decades back);
- Second, promote emergence of a viable Palestinian state as against the measures to Balkanize the Palestinian territory, and to allow a common democratic regime to emerge in West Bank and Gaza; and
- Third, set the stage for a regional agreement to respond to the regional challenges.

There cannot be any security for the state of Israel without acknowledging Palestinian rights to a viable and sustainable state.