

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Conflict in Gaza

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Q1: What provoked the current war?

A1: A confluence of factors in both Gaza and Israel sparked the current war. Both sides were increasingly frustrated with the informal cease-fire or lull brokered by Egypt in the summer of 2008, and both sides believed that the other had violated the unwritten terms of the arrangement. Though not perfect, the arrangement was relatively successful until November 2008 when Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza began unleashing rockets into Israel, which totaled in the hundreds by mid-December. Israel became increasingly concerned that Hamas was upgrading the range and lethality of its missile arsenal, which would soon bring major Israeli population centers into range of Hamas rockets, posing a significant political and security threat. Hamas, meanwhile, internally debated whether it should continue to honor the cease-fire, with the most vocal and powerful factions advocating a resumption of rocket attacks. Those who advocated military escalation argued that the cease-fire had not paid sufficient dividends and did not end Israeli military operations. Most importantly, it did not end the blockade of Gaza, which was a key Hamas objective in agreeing to the lull in the first place. They sought to use increased rocket fire to pressure Israel into reopening the borders but badly miscalculated the influence of Israeli domestic factors, such as upcoming February parliamentary elections and the U.S. presidential transition.

Q2: What are Israel's objectives in pursuing the military campaign against Hamas?

A2: From the beginning of the military campaign, Israel's objective has been vaguely defined as strengthening the security of southern Israel, which has been plagued by rocket fire for the last several years. Yet the intensity of the military operation led to speculation that it sought to topple the Hamas government or reoccupy the Gaza Strip. While there are certainly those in both the political and military spheres who advocated this position, both options are fraught with danger and are politically unviable. Instead, what has evolved over the course of the campaign is an effort to use Israel's military gains as leverage to force Hamas into a longer-term cease-fire that would limit its capability to fire rockets into Israel and smuggle weapons and rocket technology into Gaza. Whether such an arrangement can be reached and whether it could effectively limit Hamas's military capability in the future remains unclear at the moment.

Q3: How will the war affect Hamas's rule in Gaza?

A3: Despite the heavy blow that Israel has inflicted on Hamas's military and political infrastructure, the movement will survive the onslaught. How the war will affect the internal balance of power between hard-liners and pragmatists within Hamas remains to be seen. In the short term, Hamas's calculations in firing rockets could become more politically constrained, though Hamas will actively seek to rearm. Militant factions within Hamas and Gaza will likely seek to maintain some low-level confrontation with Israel. Still, with few successes in its year-and-half rule, Hamas will likely face growing public discontent and will need to focus on rebuilding Gaza. The lifting of the international boycott on Gaza, as part of a wider cease-fire agreement, will also play a factor, as will any effort to reach an accommodation with the West Bank Palestinian Authority (PA). The opening of Gaza, a key Hamas demand, could come with a price of agreeing to international monitors and some kind of PA security presence on the border area. Regardless, Hamas will continue to be a potent political and military force that will be either directly or indirectly involved in any future political-security arrangement.

Q4: How likely is it that a cease-fire will be reached?

A4: Current diplomatic efforts now focus on brokering a cease-fire that will end Israel's military operations in Gaza in exchange for an end to Hamas rocket fire. A cease-fire will either come about through an agreement that includes currently undefined international guarantees or a looser understanding between Israel and Hamas that returns the situation to the status quo before the escalation. The key issue as well as Israeli demand is to create a mechanism that will effectively monitor the border area and prevent Hamas from smuggling military equipment and rocket technology into Gaza through its extensive tunnel network. Egypt will have to play a key role in any such effort to combat smuggling. There are also

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discussions of a monitoring force for the border area. Any such force would need a significantly more robust mandate to stop smuggling than any other monitoring force currently deployed in the region, including the UN force in southern Lebanon, which has been largely ineffective in implementing UN Security Council resolutions and preventing the rearmament of Hezbollah since the 2006 war. The specific mandate, rules of engagement, size of force, and which countries would participate are all questions that have not yet been sufficiently answered but will have a major impact on the sustainability of any cease-fire arrangement.

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