

In mid-March this year Jared Kushner told the Wall Street Journal that ‘We are witnessing the last vestiges of what has been known as the Arab-Israeli conflict’. His claim proved premature.

In the latest eruption of a longstanding conflict, from 10 to 21 May Hamas fired 3,440 rockets from Gaza into Israel and towards Jerusalem, most of which were brought down by Israel’s Iron Dome air defence system. Over the same period 248 Gazans were killed in IDF attacks. Nearly all were civilians, including the medical doctor in charge of Gaza’s anti-Covid programme, and the death toll included 66 children. The Israelis inflicted at least \$500 million of damage on Gaza’s housing and infrastructure, including electricity and water systems, leaving upwards of 40,000 Gazans homeless. 12 Israelis were killed by Hamas rockets, two of whom were children. Accusations of war crimes have been levied against both sides.

The two sides each claim victory, or ‘mission accomplished’. Both claims are to be approached with caution: truth has been described as the first casualty of war. What is indisputable is that there were clear losers: namely the many innocent civilians on both sides who have been traumatised or worse. Here’s how a preliminary score card looks to me.

Who started it?

Hamas fired the first rockets. The indiscriminate firing of rockets against a civilian population is a war crime. The initial round followed what Hamas views as sustained provocation: namely attempts by extreme right wing settler organisations to force Palestinians in strongly Arab areas of East Jerusalem such as Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan out of their homes, as part of a longstanding effort to change the ethnic balance in Jerusalem. The settlers use legislation which allows Israelis to reclaim property that was owned by Jews pre-1948. Such legislation is plainly discriminatory: Palestinians have no corresponding right.

Tensions were already high. But clumsy and aggressive actions by the Israeli police and security forces, notably when they entered the Haram e Sharif (the Temple Mount) on the most sacred night of the holy month of Ramadan and fired teargas into the al Aqsa Mosque, put a match to the tinder.

Hamas grossly miscalculated. They assumed that events would follow a well-established pattern: a limited Palestinian attack, to be met by a proportionate Israeli response. However, their first round of rockets was aimed towards Jerusalem, and this crossed an Israeli red line, triggering a major retaliatory onslaught by the IDF, an intensified Hamas response, and escalation to 11 days of all out warfare.

Hamas gains

Hamas do genuinely consider that they won, in that Israel blinked first. To the extent that the Israeli security cabinet are reported at one stage to have offered a unilateral ceasefire, via the Egyptian mediators, this may be true. Since the ceasefire Hamas have warned repeatedly that they are ready to resume rocket attacks if Israel carries out further provocations in Jerusalem.

Other gains they claim include the following:

- Hamas have been able to present themselves as the only defenders of Arab Jerusalem and the Haram e Sharif, in marked contrast to the passivity of the Palestinian Authority and its 85 year old President, Mahmoud Abbas;
- they have thereby extended their range of effective influence beyond their traditional stronghold of Gaza to Jerusalem, the West Bank, and even to Arab areas of Israel proper;

Dragoman

- despite 11 days and nights of intense Israeli air and artillery bombardment, Hamas claim that the bulk of their military infrastructure, including a network of tunnels (known as the Metro), remains intact. The same applies both to their leadership, civil and military, as well as to their stocks of rockets;
- following intense Egyptian mediation throughout the mini war, Hamas's relations with Egypt appear to be on an improving trend, to the intense discomfort of the PA.

A Pyrrhic victory for Hamas?

Although they appear unaware, there is a huge mismatch between Hamas's perception of where they are and reality. They enjoy virtually no support in the region. Egypt is the only country with whom Hamas has a substantive engagement. Turkey offers strident rhetoric but little more. Qatar gives money, invaluable in propping up public services: but there is no real input on policy issues. The Europeans are harshly critical of Hamas's rocket campaign; any idea of diplomatic contact or dialogue is further away than ever. Notwithstanding a degree of disquiet in American universities, think tanks and civil society, concerned at the disproportionate toll of destruction and civilian casualties in Gaza, support for Israel has never been higher in the Democratic Party, the Biden Administration and US Congress.

Moreover, it seems clear that most or all of the funds needed to rebuild Gaza will be disbursed through the Palestinian Authority, rescuing President Abbas from irrelevance. There will be difficulties anyway: the PA have almost no capability to operate in Gaza, and the Israelis are going to be even more reserved about allowing the supply of materials that might be used to repair infrastructure such as the tunnel system or to rebuild Hamas's military capacity.

As one seasoned Western observer put it to me: "okay, yes Hamas won: but what are they going to do with their 'victory'." Nevertheless, there are no signs of second thoughts on the part of Hamas's military leadership. They still have large stocks of rockets. Mid-level cadres can be easily replaced. They appear to be in indirect negotiation with Israel on a prisoner exchange, and have rejected Israeli attempts to link humanitarian access to this issue. And Hamas retain their core capacity, which is to be in a position to inflict civilian casualties inside Israel.

Pluses and minuses for Israel

As noted above, support for Israel in the US Administration and Congress has never been stronger. Israeli requests for further military aid, including to replenish depleted stocks for Iron Dome, seem likely to sail through Congress largely unchallenged. Criticism by European governments of the severity and punitive nature of the Israeli military campaign has been muted, limited largely to lip service support for a two-state solution.

The weak and divided nature of the Palestinian Authority means that Israel is under even less pressure than ever to engage seriously – or at all – in negotiations for a settlement of the Arab/Israeli conflict. Plus, Hamas is even more of an international pariah.

These are major pluses. However, Operation Guardian of the Walls has raised questions about Israeli preparations and overall strategy.

Israeli objectives were described to me as being to:

- destroy Hamas military capability;
- destroy their capacity to rebuild it;
- restore the credibility of the Israeli deterrent.

The official line is 'mission accomplished' and that more was achieved in the 11 day campaign than in all the previous rounds (2008-9, 2012, 2014) combined. However, it's open to question whether Israel fully achieved any of its objectives. The IDF have been accused by Israeli

Dragoman

commentators of being caught by surprise and unprepared. How was it that, with its hugely powerful military and IT capability and constant overhead coverage from drones etc.. the IDF failed to notice that Hamas had managed to build a rocket arsenal and tunnel network in the small and confined space of Gaza, under its very nose? The editor in chief of Haaretz, Aluf Benn, encapsulated such criticism in a long and detailed analysis entitled 'Israel's most failed and pointless Gaza operation ever'.

The other accusation is that Israel has no strategy for managing asymmetric warfare with an insurgency group such as Hamas. On the one hand, Israel has no interest in bringing down Hamas. Hamas serve a useful purpose. For long periods they control the border and prevent attacks across into Israel under the policy of 'quiet for quiet'. Moreover, the only way to destroy their military capacity would be through a major and sustained ground incursion, which Israel doesn't want to undertake, as it would incur significant IDF casualties and international opprobrium.

On the other hand, Israel can't engage with Hamas politically: that would cause the collapse of any conceivable coalition government, because of opposition from the right-wing parties. Similar constraints prevent Israel from developing an effective counter insurgency policy, by lifting the economic blockade of Gaza and improving significantly the living conditions of its inhabitants. Instead, successive Israeli governments have for decades employed a policy of what is known as 'mowing the grass'. It served Israel well enough in the past without tackling the underlying issues. But the cost and the suffering have become progressively higher with each major outbreak of fighting.

A new factor in this round is the emergence of a distinct and growing Palestinian identity among Israeli Arabs. The conventional wisdom had been that despite their second class status and the structural discrimination against them – now enshrined in the Nation State Law of 2018 – the Arab minority were steadily becoming more 'Israeli' and less 'Arab'. However, the planned evictions in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan, the steady erosion of the Arab presence in Jerusalem, and the excesses of the police on the Temple Mount seem to have acted as a catalyst for an emerging, 'Palestinian' (as opposed to 'Arab') identity.

A by-product of this awakening was an outbreak of ethnic violence between Arabs and Jews in mixed areas of Israel proper. Neighbours who had lived together peacefully for decades stood by when their neighbours' houses were destroyed. Arab gangs burned synagogues, Jewish mobs beat up Arabs and burned commercial properties owned by Arabs. All very ugly. It may be difficult to put the genie back in the bottle. For sure, a lasting legacy is likely to be reluctance on the part of Israeli Arabs to put up with their second class status and neglect by the State. If so, some good may come of it.

As noted above, the standing and legitimacy of the PA and its decrepit President have taken a hit. Abbas's earlier decision to postpone sine die the elections to the Palestine Legislative Council had already inflicted serious damage to thoughts of reconciliation with Hamas and a government of national unity. But, paradoxically, the eruption of conflict did nevertheless benefit Abbas in some respects. For example, he received a visit from the US Secretary of State when Blinken paid an emergency visit to the region, and the Administration have made clear that US aid for reconstruction of Gaza will be delivered through the PA. To that extent, Hamas have rescued Abbas from irrelevance and diverted international criticism from his lamentable decision to abandon elections (the last were held as long ago as 2006).

Egypt has come out well. Their role as mediator has been front and centre. Their key position is unchallenged.

The Biden Administration attached low priority to the Israel/Palestine issue. They certainly had no intention of launching a fresh mediation effort on the central issue of a two state solution.

Dragoman

However, the US was forced by the sheer scale of the conflict to engage in high level crisis management. But this does not portend a wider initiative any time soon.

The future

There is a Groundhog Day aspect to these mini wars. They recur every few years, and are likely to continue to do so as long as the central issue of Israel/Palestine remains unresolved. The Abraham Accords are no substitute: they are peace agreements between Israel and states who were anyway not at war with Israel. But if a two state solution is further away than ever – off the table, really – the focus is likely to shift to issues such as equality before the law for Palestinians, human rights and justice. President Biden himself declared that Israelis and Palestinians deserve “equal measures of freedom, prosperity and democracy”, to which Secretary of State added the word ‘dignity’. Such a shift of emphasis would be present very uncomfortable issues for Israel, against a background in which the Jewish state has already been accused of apartheid by the leading Israeli human rights organisation B’Tselem as well as by Human Rights Watch.



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Sir Kieran Prendergast KCVO, CMG led a distinguished career in the British Foreign Office, serving as British Ambassador to Turkey and High Commissioner to Zimbabwe and Kenya. Sir Kieran remains active in the field of conflict management and resolution through his role at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.