



Hamas Wants War

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Will Israel be provoked into another war this summer? Hamas in Gaza is desperately trying to start a fight. In mid-April, Hamas ended a six-month pause and resumed firing rockets into southern Israel. Three thousand rockets have landed in the past month; 80 in just the past three days. (Video of the attacks can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/sderot2007>)

So far, damage from the rockets has been relatively light: 18 Israelis wounded, property damaged. But twice, Hamas nearly got lucky: on Thursday, a rocket exploded in a high school classroom; another hit a day-care centre on May 7. Both facilities happened to be empty at the time. What if they had been in use?

Israel hit back with five air strikes on Thursday and Friday. But few imagine that these strikes will stop the rockets.

Israel desperately wants not to invade Gaza. Over the past year, Hamas has fortified the region: building bunkers, digging ditches, planting mines. Israelis can recognize a military trap when they see one.

Israelis can also recognize a political trap. For months, Gaza's political factions have waged war on each other. Some 45 Palestinians have died in the fighting in just the past week. Hamas hopes that an Israeli invasion would unite the Gazans against Israel--and under Hamas.

In hope of avoiding the trap, Israel has relied on indirect tactics.

This week, for example, Israel allowed 500 U.S.-trained Palestinian militiamen to enter Gaza from Egypt, to reinforce Fatah against Hamas. Israeli intelligence may also have helped foil a Hamas assassination plot against Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, although details on that story remain murky and not entirely convincing.

But will these indirect methods succeed? There seems little reason for optimism.

- The U.S. has trained Fatah troops before, without much improving their ability to defeat Hamas's more highly motivated forces.
- It's not clear that "Fatah" still exists as a political organization. Yasser Arafat's old terror gang has collapsed into factionalism and warlordism. The troops and arms shipped into Gaza today--for whom are they really working?
- Even if the new Fatah forces do take orders from Abbas, will he really command them to shed blood to stop Hamas's rocketing of Israel? Fatah and Hamas are competing politically as well as militarily. Would Hamas not score a huge propaganda triumph if it could accuse Fatah of fighting for Israel?
- Even if Fatah fights well and loyally, even if it sincerely seeks to shut down Hamas's rockets, will Fatah fight fast?

The rocket that finally reaches an Israeli day-care centre may be fired tomorrow. Or the next day. And then it will be very difficult for any Israeli government to restrain itself.

The whole world shares an interest in avoiding a summer war in Gaza.

Which means the whole world shares an interest in suppressing Hamas rockets. But if aiding Fatah will not do the job, what will? Here's one suggestion.

It is a little-known fact that international aid to the Palestinian territories has actually risen since Palestinians elected a Hamas government in January, 2006. According to International Monetary Fund and UN figures, the Palestinian areas received a total of \$1.2 billion in official aid in 2006, up from \$1 billion in 2005.

America's contribution rose from \$400 million in 2005 to \$468 million in 2006. Aid from the European Union and other international organizations also increased handsomely, and the UN has called for still greater increases in aid in 2007.

Look at the incentives that have been created for the Palestinians: vote for terrorism, get an increase in your foreign aid. The Palestinian areas now receive more than \$300 per person, per year, making them the most aid-dependent population on Earth. (The people of sub-Saharan Africa receive only \$44 per person per year.)

These incentives allow Hamas to present itself both as the unyielding enemy of the Jewish state--and also as a provider of generous social welfare benefits to the Palestinian people.

What if those incentives changed?
What if Hamas's misconduct produced a loss rather than a profit?

Suppose that each Hamas rocket cost the Palestinian Authority \$1 million in reduced U.S. and EU aid? The 80 rockets fired over recent days would mean \$80 million less in salaries, food, aid, subsidies of all kinds. The next 80 rockets--another \$80 million gone.

For the first time, Hamas's adventurism would exact a serious and predictable cost. Such a cost would do more than any number of U.S.-trained Fatah gunmen to restrain Hamas.

But if the aid continues--if the world continues a policy of sending money to the Palestinian territories, no matter what the Palestinian government does--Israel, Gaza and the world stand just one well-aimed rocket away from war.

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