

Palestine / Israel: Hamas breaks out of its Gaza cage

Friday 28 May 2021, by [BACONI Tareq](#), [IRAQI Amjad](#) (Date first published: 21 May 2021).

The Islamist movement surprised Israel and the international community when it intervened on the back of a popular uprising in Jerusalem. But some Palestinians remain wary of cooptation, says analyst Tareq Baconi.

A ceasefire between Israel and Hamas was finally announced Thursday night after 11 days of devastating bombardment and indiscriminate rocket fire that killed over 240 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and 12 people in Israel. As far as many observers are concerned, this deal — which, if it holds, will undoubtedly prevent [countless more deaths](#), injuries, and [wanton destruction](#) — should finally put an end to the vicious saga.

This desperate return to “calm,” however, remains a fundamental part of the problem.

With their armed confrontations subsiding, Israel and Hamas are set to restore a “very violent” equilibrium that forces the Gaza Strip back “out of sight, out of mind,” warns Tareq Baconi, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group and [author](#) of “Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance.” That status quo ante — [defined](#) by a brutal siege, international indifference, and political and geographic fragmentation — is precisely what needs to be dismantled, he says.

In an interview with +972 the day before the ceasefire was announced, Baconi explained that Hamas had broken many Israeli assumptions when it decided to militarily intervene on the back of a [popular movement](#) that had emerged in Jerusalem this past month, which was mobilizing against the [forcible expulsions](#) of families in Sheikh Jarrah and [Israeli attacks](#) at Al-Aqsa Mosque and Damascus Gate. Although these protests in the holy city were achieving minor Israeli concessions, in Hamas’ view, they were “never going to go to the next level without military power.”

While there is a deep debate among Palestinians about Hamas’ involvement, Baconi added, the same cannot be said about the international community. From what he sees, foreign governments remain “very much frozen” in their perceptions of the Islamist movement as “irrationally attacking Israel for some decontextualized, unknown reason.” Without a reckoning of these misconceptions, he said, the world will simply go back to normalizing the daily oppressive violence imposed by Israeli rule on all Palestinians, of which Gaza is an [illustrative component](#), rather than an exception.

+972 spoke with Baconi about the effects of Hamas’ intervention on Palestinians politics, why Israeli officials were caught off guard by the move, and why the nascent Palestinian popular movement must be vigilant as it challenges both their foreign and national rulers in pursuit of liberation. The interview was edited for clarity.

Amjad Iraqi - The recent “escalations” began with a grassroots popular movement in Jerusalem with Sheikh Jarrah and the Old City, almost without the presence of any political factions. But that drastically changed when Hamas began to launch rockets at Israel last

week. Why did Hamas decide to join the fray? What was their calculus?

Hamas has a national goal for Palestinians writ large, and specific motivations as a movement currently contained in the Gaza Strip.

For a long time, even under [former political chief] Khaled Meshaal, Hamas has flirted with the idea of popular protest. The movement was not always exclusively committed to armed struggle; it had thought about the power of popular demonstrations and of international law. However, there's a streak of cynicism within the movement that popular protests are never going to garner the level of international pressure or support like that of the U.S. Civil Rights struggle or the South African anti-Apartheid struggle.

This cynicism was tested in the [Great March of Return](#). Over weeks and weeks of a sustained popular mobilization, there was no adequate response from the international community, even when Israel was sniping off Palestinians. It was only when Hamas came into the fray and started upping the ante of "disturbances" against Israel that the situation started shifting, and negotiations began around concessions such as easing the blockade on Gaza. The lesson for Hamas was very clear: unless Israel feels pressure — usually militarily or other forms of "disturbances" — nothing would give.

This was the calculus that Hamas brought onto these current protests. There was a "victory" in the sense that the Israeli Supreme Court delayed its decision on Sheikh Jarrah, and the Jerusalem Day "Flag March" was re-routed. But as far as Hamas was concerned, these protests were unable to move into forcing actual concessions from Israel, and were never going to go to the next level without military power — because in Hamas' mind, that's the only way Israel responds.

There was a lot of division within the movement. There were those who argued that the world's attention is focused on Israeli desecration of Islamic holy places, and that they should not deflect from that or co-opt the popular protest. On the other hand, mostly [for Hamas members] in Gaza, the sense was that they had seen this film before and they need to have the protesters' backs, otherwise it would turn into a bloodbath. Ultimately, in their eyes, there had to be a defense for Palestinians against lethal Israeli oppression.

The more specific, strategic calculus for the movement itself is that, for the past few months, Hamas has been [hoping for elections](#) to break itself out of the Gaza Strip. With that no longer an option, Hamas was in a situation where it would either return to the status quo or bring about a fundamental shakeup.

Many reports suggest that Israeli officials and military analysts were caught off guard by Hamas' decision to get involved. Was it really that surprising? What does it reveal about Israel's understandings or misunderstandings of Hamas?

It's not surprising to me that Israeli officials were caught off guard. Israeli officials know very well that there is no real strategy for dealing with Gaza specifically, but also no strategy for dealing with the Palestinians writ large, and so they are only focused on managing the conflict.

In that approach, they came to a very sustainable equilibrium with Hamas. I say this with a heavy heart because it's obviously an equilibrium that is, at its core, based on [collective punishment](#) and a very [violent blockade](#) toward Palestinians.

This equilibrium that both sides implicitly maintained was that the blockade would stay in place; when Gaza was pushed to the brink, Hamas would use rocket fire to protest the blockade and the

violence that it inflicts on Palestinians; and through rocket fire, Hamas is able to get concessions from the Israeli government. This back-and-forth is where the negotiations happen. Outside of those cycles however, for Israeli officials, Gaza is out of sight, out of mind. They expect “calm” from Gaza. For them, the blockade isn’t an act of war, it is the rockets that are an act of war.

Rockets fired by Hamas militants in Gaza into Israel, seen over the central Israeli town of Kiryat Gat, May 18, 2021. (Nati Shohat/Flash90)

As part of this equilibrium, Israel saw Hamas as a movement that speaks only on behalf of Palestinians in Gaza, believing it had been effectively contained in the strip. There was so much faith in the idea that Hamas had been neutralized outside of Gaza, and that Hamas only escalated when it wanted concessions on Gaza specifically.

Hamas broke all of those assumptions in this escalation. First of all, it escalated for Jerusalem instead of Gaza — it’s not a reconfiguration historically, but it is a reconfiguration since the blockade. Second, it broke the assumption that Gaza was manageable, and that the containment of Hamas can go on indefinitely. So this “eruption” is indeed a surprise for Israelis. It’s also a testament to Israel’s arrogance in thinking that it can continue to overreach without any pushback from Palestinians.

There seem to be differing views among Palestinians about Hamas’ military intervention. What reactions are you seeing among the public? How is this affecting the party’s relationship/image with the people, especially in Gaza?

There are Palestinians who are committed to the idea of popular demonstrations, believing that iftar sit-ins and prayer protests are going to get Palestinians more attention globally, and that this will force Israel’s hand. They feel very strongly that any kind of military struggle is problematic because, strategically, Palestinians cannot win militarily against Israel. They also believe that a factional cooptation of popular protests is problematic because it takes something that could be national and puts it into a factional lens.

The other side of the debate says that you need a balance of power to be able to change the equation, and this doesn’t come through exclusively popular protests. To think this is how it came about in the Civil Rights or anti-Apartheid struggles is to romanticize those struggles; the South African movement, especially, had an armed wing. So there is a thinking that even if armed force will not liberate Palestine, it has to be used to inflict pain, incur a cost, and deter Israel from further violence against Palestinians. That side hailed Hamas’ attacks as a victory of sorts; even if Gaza paid the price, psychologically it had an incredible effect.

Palestinian protesters clash with Israeli security forces near the Hawara checkpoint, south of the West Bank city of Nablus, May 18, 2021. (Nasser Ishtayeh/Flash90)

How are Hamas’ moves seen beyond that? At some West Bank protests this week, there were people chanting for Mohammed Deif [the chief commander of Hamas’ al-Qassam Brigades] or chanting against Mahmoud Abbas and chanting for Ismail Haniyeh [Hamas’ current political chief]. In the national consciousness, Hamas is being seen as the defender and protector of Palestinian rights.

There are obviously complexities around Hamas’ ideology; many Palestinians may support the victory that Hamas put forward this past week but be against its Islamist ideology. But these are some of the things that need to be disentangled to understand how there can be a multi-faceted Palestinian strategy of liberation, one that might strategically build on different tactics of resistance.

You've mentioned how Hamas had hoped that elections would go through, and how some people are now perceiving it differently next to the PA. How do you see the recent events affecting Hamas-PA relations, or any attempt to restore elections?

There was an interesting shift that happened over the course of the week. When the protests began expanding beyond Sheikh Jarrah, the PA was very active at [repressing protests](#) in the West Bank and putting out any threats of Hamas presence there; the excuse they put forward was that they would lose control of the territory.

After the escalations in Gaza expanded, PLO and PA officials came to understand they cannot be seen to be critics against Hamas in this escalation. This is a lesson they have learned during and after the Second Intifada: whenever Hamas would come out with symbolic victories and the PA would push back (such as during the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange deal), Hamas would position itself as a defender, and the PA would look like the incompetent party.

So over the past week, PA and PLO officials started talking about the need to leverage the space that Hamas had created through this episode to serve the Palestinian struggle. There was an acknowledgement that this is a force that can't be ignored, and that positioning themselves against it will only backfire on Fatah [Mahmoud Abbas' party, the largest in the PA and PLO]. So in some ways, there's been a more united narrative that both factions are being forced into by these broader events, which endless rounds of reconciliation talks were unable to get them to.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas seen during a tour in the West Bank city of Ramallah, May 15, 2020. (Flash90)

Do I think they will have unity or that they should go back [into elections](#)? I don't: both parties are still living in a zero-sum game, and the [crisis is bigger](#) than either faction. But we still need to be talking about elections as a way to [PLO resuscitation](#), rather than to a unity government under the PA. Palestinians still need to rethink how Hamas and Fatah can both sit alongside other parties in a national liberation project.

If the elections were just about institutionally healing the division between Gaza and the West Bank, we're past that rhetoric in some ways, because there is a sense of a shared struggle. The sense in Ramallah is that they're protesting for Gaza — which the PA didn't allow in 2014 — and the sense in Gaza is that this a united Palestinian struggle, though with some resentment that they're the ones paying the price.

International actors, from the EU to the U.S., seemed to immediately fall back into their old lines and habits of prioritizing Israel's "self-defense" the moment the rockets were fired. This seems to suggest that there hasn't been much shift among foreign governments in their perceptions of Hamas or their willingness to try a different approach when these confrontations occur. Do you see any shifts behind the scenes, despite the public positions?

No, there is [no shift](#). The EU and European member states have long said that there needs to be a sense of what would happen if Hamas won the elections, and that there needs to be a way to revise the Quartet conditions to make sure that if Hamas does win, the debacle of 2006 [when international actors sanctioned the Palestinian government and backed Fatah in an effort to oust Hamas] was not going to happen again.

However, despite many well-meaning diplomats pushing for the need to revise the EU's policy toward Hamas, there has been absolutely no movement on this. In my opinion, it's quite irresponsible that they have still been pushing for these elections knowing that if Hamas won, they

still had no way of dealing with the outcome that it could produce.

The *pro forma* language around Israel's "right to self-defense" and "de-escalation on both sides" is a symptom of that inability to grapple with Hamas, showing that the international community is very much frozen when it comes to the movement. They are unable to understand Hamas as a political faction committed to Palestinian liberation and are still focused on a very particular narrative.

IDF Artillery Corps seen firing into Gaza, near the Israeli border with Gaza on May 12, 2021, following heavy rocket barrage fired by militants in Gaza, May 12, 2021. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

It's not just about Hamas, though. What's mind-boggling to me is that by the time the international community started saying "self-defense," there were 500 Palestinians injured by Israeli forces in Jerusalem. The rhetoric of a "right to self-defense" only came out when the first rocket landed in Israel; it is triggered only *for* Israel and is triggered only *by* Hamas. Outside of that, there's no way for the diplomatic community to understand the violence of the occupation or the right of Palestinians to defend themselves.

Until we fix that premise, no form of engagement with Hamas is going to be productive, because it is only going to be seen as a party that is irrationally attacking Israel for some decontextualized, unknown reason.

The Palestinian popular movement has continued to grow these past few weeks, with Palestinians in Israel getting involved and Palestinians in Jerusalem remobilizing. Within it, there seems to be a tension between the decentralized grassroots protesters versus the traditional leaderships, ranging from Fatah to Hamas to the High Follow-Up Committee. How are you seeing these internal dynamics play out?

It's a good question that extends beyond the current moment in time. What gives me solace — and what makes me fearful — is the fact that we've been here several times before, going back to the Great Arab Revolt of 1936-39.

Every time we think about the eruptions that happen on the Palestinian streets, they are almost always *despite* the elite leadership, and because of the elites' failure to fight for the Palestinians in the way that Palestinians are demanding their battle be fought. We can draw this line from the Great Revolt up to Oslo and the First and Second Intifadas. That's what gives me solace — that there is a moral compass on the Palestinian street that is consistently holding the leadership to account and refusing to be dragged into acquiescence.

But at the same time, what makes me fearful is that in the past, the movement got coopted, and the leadership always decides the way forward. That's the dynamic we're seeing on the ground now. We talked about how what Hamas is doing could be seen as coopting; Fatah is also trying to coopt the protests in the West Bank. The leadership is latching onto them to try making itself relevant again. It is going to try funneling that bottom-up uprising into its structures, and to position itself as the responsible party that will figure things out.

However, if history has taught us anything, it is that we shouldn't trust that. Palestinians need to figure out a way to maintain this popular uprising beyond the leadership structures that exist today.

Palestinians attend a Hamas rally marking the 32nd anniversary of its founding in the Nusseirat camp in central Gaza City, Dec. 15, 2019. (Hassan Jedi/Flash90)

That's not to say that there shouldn't be a leadership for the movement. What we've learned from the 2011 Arab Uprisings is that if there is no leadership able to make political and strategic

decisions, the deep state and the status quo win. That leadership cannot be channeled into the same corrupt institutions that have brought us to where we are today. There needs to be a more inclusive leadership that emerges from this grassroots mobilization. What form that takes is still unclear, but we're still in the early days.

What else would you like to highlight in this moment?

One thing I'm always thinking about is how, in the mind of the international community — and in some ways, increasingly in the minds of Palestinians themselves — Gaza has become [exceptional](#).

This episode has both challenged and reinforced that. For Palestinians, there was a heartening embrace of Gaza to bring it back into the fold, even though most Palestinians have never been to Gaza and don't easily understand what it's like to be there. At the same time, there's a sense that even in this escalation, armed struggle and Gaza became a conjoined thing — that because Hamas is launching its attacks from Gaza, Gaza always does armed struggle, while popular protests happen elsewhere.

The de-exceptionalization of Gaza is therefore very important. We need to start thinking not just about the fact that a Palestinian in Gaza and a Palestinian in the West Bank are [fighting the same regime](#), but that there are also different tactics of fighting that regime. Those could be divisive, but that doesn't mean that the division of opinion are on different parts of that battle.

Palestinians need a more holistic narrative that's able to hold all of these complexities and nuances, and which is able to push against the idea that there is the Gaza-Israel escalation, and then there is everything else. The narrative that's been coming out now is very powerful because it is fighting back against this, and it's one that we need to keep reiterating.

P.S.

- 972 Mag. May 21, 2021:
<https://www.972mag.com/hamas-gaza-jerusalem-protests/>
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