



## Hamas' new policy towards Israel: from restraint and calm to controlled violence, creating escalation

June 25, 2018

### Hamas' policy of controlled violence: risk assessment and possible arrangement

**For the past three months Hamas has employed a policy of controlled violence against Israel, replacing the policy of restraint in force for the three and a half years since Operation Protective Edge.** Instead of the former calm characterizing the Israel-Gaza Strip border area, there are now **mass demonstrations and riots ("return marches") and mass attempts to penetrate into Israeli territory**, especially on Fridays. The marches **have been accompanied by a variety of violent activities**, including shooting at IDF forces; throwing hand grenades, Molotov cocktails and IEDs; vandalizing the border crossings and the security fence; and launching kites and balloons bearing incendiary substances and explosives (arson terrorism).

- ▶ When the mass marches exhausted themselves, mainly because the Gazans got tired of them, **Hamas focused on arson terrorism**, although the marches continue. Launching incendiary and explosive kites and balloons, which began as a small, local initiative, **grew and became organized when Hamas took command**. So far arson terrorism has been responsible for burning more than 6,100 acres of crops and natural forest near the Gaza Strip, and has disrupted the daily lives of Israelis living near the border.
- ▶ When the IDF increased its response to Gazans launching kites and balloons and to Hamas, **Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) fired rockets and mortar shells at the communities near the Gaza Strip and in the western Negev (about 200 rockets and mortar shells were fired in two massive rounds of attacks)**. Hamas and the PIJ publicly announced they were **changing the former "equation of response" to a new equation called "an attack in return for an attack and blood in return for blood."**
- ▶ The rocket and mortar shell fire indicates that **Hamas has increased the dosage of the controlled violence of its new policy. Hamas is apparently determined to prevent a return to the status quo ante**, which it is concerned will be interpreted as a position of weakness both by Israel and in the internal Palestinian arena. **As a result, on the ground a**

**process of escalation has been created that is liable to lead to a broad military confrontation with Israel**, which Hamas has tried to avoid so far. **Hamas is apparently taking that possibility into account, and is not deterred by the risk of a broad military confrontation. Therefore Hamas does not try to stop, or at least moderate, the process of escalation it has ignited.**

► **Hamas seeks to use its new policy to gain a position of strength from which to hold indirect negotiations for an arrangement. In ITIC assessment, its demands will center mainly on the Gaza Strip's economy.** They will include **massive Arab and/or international financial aid**, which will make it possible to rehabilitate the Gaza Strip infrastructure (for example the supply of electricity) and **improve the Gazans' daily lives.**

► Hamas can also be expected **to demand the implementation of practical steps to "lift the siege,"** for example the permanent opening of the Rafah crossing, increasing the amount of merchandise that enters the Gaza Strip through the border crossings with Israel and the creation of exits from the Gaza Strip for Palestinians wishing to leave, either by air, sea or over land. Hamas can also be expected to demand an end to the sanctions imposed on the Gaza Strip by the PA and a renewal of the transfer of funds and salaries from Ramallah.

► **What will Hamas be willing to give in return for having its demands met?** In ITIC assessment, in return Hamas will probably be ready to make **security concessions**, i.e., a commitment to a long-term lull in the fighting along the border and to forcing the other terrorist organizations to restrain themselves (similar to the lull that existed after Operation Protective Edge). On the other hand, however, **Hamas will not agree to any concessions it regards as intolerable**, such as turning effective control of the Gaza Strip over to the Palestinian Authority (PA), disarming, halting its military buildup or stopping support for terrorism in Judea and Samaria. From Hamas' point of view, **that would mean changing its fundamental identity as a radical Islamic jihadist movement striving to destroy the State of Israel through the path of terrorism.**

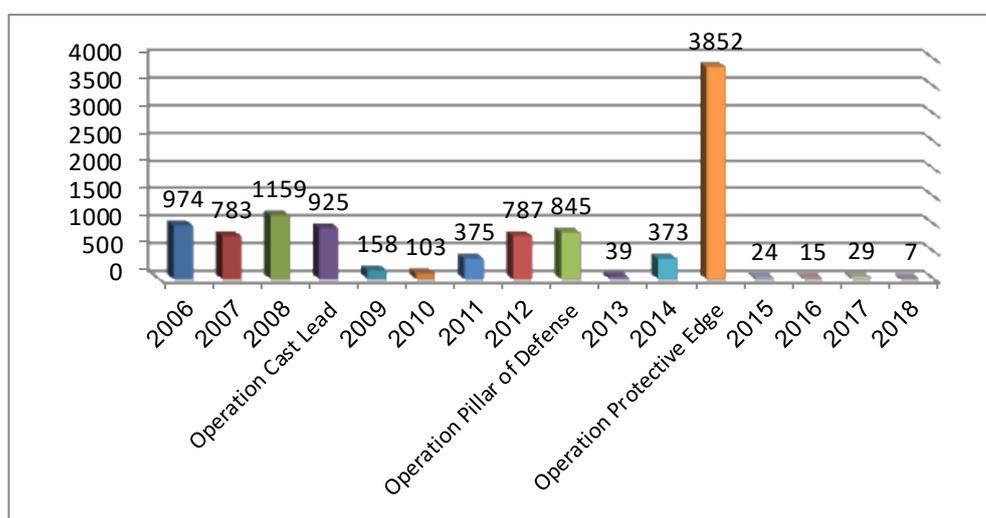
## Contents

- ▶ This report has three sections:
  - ◆ **Section One:** Hamas' policy of restraint, in force since Operation Protective Edge and the reasons for its end
  - ◆ **Section Two:** Article by Hamas activist analyzing alternatives to the policy of restraint (Summer 2017).
  - ◆ **Section Three:** Hamas' policy of controlled violence

## Section One: Hamas' policy of restraint, in force since Operation Protective Edge, and the reasons for its end

On March 30, 2018, the period of three and half years (since Operation Protective Edge) of **relative quiet along the Israel's border with the Gaza Strip came to an end. That period was characterized mainly by a drastic reduction in the scope of rocket fire attacking Israel, unprecedented since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip.** The reduction of rocket fire and Hamas' restraining activities **led to a period of relative calm even when popular terrorism (the "popular resistance") ran rampant in Judea and Samaria** (October 2015 – March 2016). Hamas successfully imposed its policy of restraint on the rogue terrorist organizations, which occasionally carried out sporadic rocket fire. The rogue rocket fire was met with fairly effective preventive activities (although imposing the policy of restraint became somewhat eroded towards the end of December 2017).<sup>1</sup>

### Annual Distribution of Rocket Hits, 2006 – March 30, 2018



► In ITIC assessment, Hamas' policy of restraint was the result of **a series of strategic considerations** which had influenced the Hamas leadership over a long period of time. They included **the strengthening of Israel's deterrence** after Operation Protective Edge; Hamas' desire to rebuild and fortify its military infrastructure without interference (with an emphasis on the construction of a tunnel system penetrating into Israeli territory and

<sup>1</sup> In December 2017 eleven rocket hits were identified in Israeli territory, as opposed to isolated rocket hits in the preceding months.

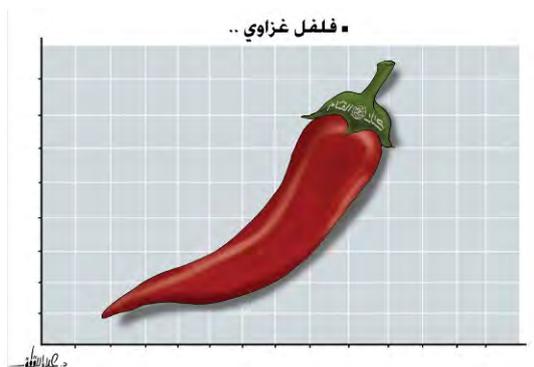
reconstructing its rocket capabilities); and **concern lest a military confrontation worsen the already difficult economic situation in the Gaza Strip**. Two other considerations which had a moderating influence on Hamas' policy towards Israel **were Hamas' desire to promote the reconciliation** with Fatah and the PA, and its **desire to improve relations with Egypt**.

► In retrospect it appears that **during the second half of 2017 and the beginning of 2018 the influence of those considerations on the Hamas leadership lessened**: the **deterrence Israel achieved in Operation Protective Edge** continued to exist, **but eroded over time** (a process that occurred after other large operations in the Gaza Strip); Hamas' motivation to gain time to construct a tunnel system penetrating into Israel weakened in the face of **Israel's operational and technological solutions**; the difficult economic situation in the Gaza Strip, to which the PA sanctions contributed, created the need to find a direction for the Gazans to channel their rage and frustration. In addition, the attempts to effect an internal Palestinian reconciliation failed and the relations between Hamas and Egypt did not significantly improve. Apparently all of the above **led Hamas to the conclusion that its post-Operation Protective Edge policy had exhausted itself and was increasingly less beneficial**.

► At the same time, **the election of Yahya al-Sinwar as Hamas leader** in the Gaza Strip (February 2017) and **the increasing influence of former Hamas military operatives, put into power a group with radical opinions**.<sup>2</sup> At a time when questions began to be asked about Hamas policy, there was a significant internal change in the Hamas leadership. **The figures who came into power were ready to change policy, even if the change was gradual and took more than a year**.

---

<sup>2</sup> For further information, see the February 22, 2017 bulletin "Elections to the Hamas Political Bureau in the Gaza Strip: Overview and Significance."



Postings by Hamas supporters after Yahya al-Sinwar was elected to head the political bureau in the Gaza Strip. Right: "Gazan hot pepper" (the stem is the green Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades headband) (Twitter account of Palinfo, February 14, 2017). Left: Yahya al-Sinwar represented as a threat to Israel (Posting to Hamas' Paldaf forum, February 14, 2017).

## Section Two: Article by Hamas activist analyzing alternatives to the policy of restraint (Summer 2017)

- ▶ In ITIC assessment, during 2017 Hamas examined alternatives to its policy of restraint towards Israel. Concrete information about Hamas' thought processes is not made public. However, an article written by **Dr. Issam Adwan**, head of Hamas' department of refugee affairs and an important middle-leadership figure,<sup>3</sup> **may shed light on the concepts discussed within Hamas at the time.**
- ▶ The article, published on June 7, 2017, was titled "**The Controlled Confrontation.**" **It analyzes the advantages of a Hamas-initiated "controlled confrontation" with Israel in response to the "intensification of the siege" on the Gaza Strip.**<sup>4</sup> In ITIC assessment the concept of "controlled confrontation," as it appears in the article, is similar to Hamas' new policy of controlled violence, and therefore it is worthwhile to examine the reasoning behind it.



**Dr. Issam Adwan, head of Hamas' department of refugee affairs (website of Hamas' department of refugee affairs, June 15, 2017).**

<sup>3</sup> **Dr. Issam Adwan** was born in 1967 and lives in Gaza City. He got a Ph.D. in history from the Institute of Arab Research and Studies in Cairo in 2004 (he received his BA and MA from the Yarmouk University in Jordan and the Islamic University of Gaza). In recent years, **he has headed Hamas's Division of Refugee Affairs.** In addition, he has been a lecturer in modern history at the Islamic University in Gaza and Al-Quds Open University. He has written books and published studies on the issue of refugees and was often interviewed on local and Arab television channels. On his two Facebook pages and in Hamas-affiliated media, he publishes articles and posts about the Palestinian refugees' so-called "right of return."

<sup>4</sup> For further information, see the June 18, 2017 bulletin "An article by a Hamas activist analyzes the advantages of a "controlled confrontation" against Israel and calls on Hamas and the other organizations to consider this option."

- ▶ The article provides two options which he rules out:
  - ◆ **"Unarmed confrontation" along the borders of the Gaza Strip:** A non-violent confrontation by hundreds of young Palestinians along the borders of the Gaza Strip, **which has only limited advantages** (i.e., small-scale confrontations along the border initiated by Hamas at the time, different in size and nature from the "return marches"). In his opinion, until their numbers reach **tens of thousands, their impact on the situation is liable to be very small.**
  - ◆ **Renewal of the broad confrontation with Israel (that is, a comprehensive confrontation, a kind of reiteration of Operation Protective Edge) "will bring the fires of hell" to the Gaza Strip, given the current conditions.**<sup>5</sup> Adwan is of the opinion that given the current conditions, **Hamas and the other terrorist organizations ("the resistance") will not be able to halt Israel, "and therefore everyone avoids raising the subject as a possible option."**
- ▶ **The third option, which he prefers, is a prolonged confrontation controlled by Hamas.** It would give Hamas and the other terrorist organizations **a free hand to inflict very limited blows on Israel.** This option, he says, will provide **"a suitable solution"** for the current situation [i.e., Hamas' situation in June 2017] and will be entirely different from the option of renewing a broad military confrontation with Israel. **The limited confrontation will allow the forces in the Gaza Strip, furious because of the "continuing siege," to let off steam against Israel,** and at the same time, **make clear to the international community what the consequences are of "the continuation of the siege" on the Gaza Strip.**
- ▶ Adwan is aware that **Israel will retaliate harshly to the "controlled blows."** However, **he recommends the "resistance" (the terrorist organizations) refrain from responding in kind.** He says **the reaction of the "resistance" should be "fully controlled and minimal."** That means **firing rockets at open areas in Israel, choosing diversified targets,** and **firing rockets over a relatively long period.** All of the above is to be done while **ignoring the scope of "savage response" expected from Israel ("the enemy")** towards Gaza and its "resistance" (i.e., the terrorist organizations).

---

<sup>5</sup> In Arabic, *muwajaha maftuha*, i.e., an open, borderless confrontation, long and extensive (such as Operation Protective Edge or Operation Cast Lead).

► Those tactics, Adwan is convinced, **will make Israel reduce its attacks within a few days**, understanding “the nature of confrontation desired by the resistance.” Adwan's opinion is that Israel will respond in kind (i.e., by limited attacks against the terrorist organizations). That, he says, is based on his assessment that **Israel wants to avoid escalation, which could cause widespread unrest on Israel’s home front. The Israeli home front, according to Adwan, is capable of accepting a (small) number of rockets fired every day, but not extensive shooting lasting for several months.**

## Section Three: Hamas' policy of controlled violence

**Hamas' policy of controlled violence has been manifested in the "return marches,"** which began on March 30, 2018 and **continue to this day**. The "marches" are represented to the world as popular non-violent activity, but in reality **they are accompanied by acts of violence and terrorism in doses which Hamas considers will not lead to a broad military conflict** (for example, limiting the violent activities to areas near the border area). **The policy was intended to exhaust Israel over a long period with mass penetrations into Israeli territory accompanied by attacks on IDF soldiers and civilians. As far as Hamas is concerned, the explosive situation thus created will help put the Gaza Strip on the Arab and international agendas. That will prepare the ground for an arrangement in which Hamas will be able to argue from a position of strength, leading, in Hamas' opinion, to an improvement in the economic hardships in the Gaza Strip and lifting the so-called "siege."**

► **Hamas' policy of controlled violence has been in force since for close to three months, carried out in two stages.**

◆ **The first stage, March 30 to the end of May 2018:**

- in the first stage the **emphasis was put on the mass "return marches" towards Israel**. The marches were held primarily on Fridays with the objective of **breaking through the fence and carrying out a mass penetration into Israeli territory** (thereby symbolically realizing the so-called "right of return"). **The marches were accompanied by controlled violence** which focused on the area near the border. **It included shooting at IDF soldiers; throwing hand grenades, Molotov cocktails and IEDs; vandalizing the border fence, and launching incendiary and explosive kites and balloons**. Among the marchers were **terrorist operatives, especially Hamas operatives, who played a key role in the activities on the front lines** (and therefore suffered the greatest number of fatalities).
- During the first stage Hamas made propaganda capital in the international area (especially in the UN and in Western countries) **but it did not reap the practical achievements it had hoped for, such as a mass penetration into Israeli territory or the killing of Israeli civilians and IDF soldiers**. On the other

hand, the terrorists on the front lines suffered a large number of fatalities (most of them Hamas operatives or affiliated with Hamas) while **there were no Israeli fatalities**. In addition, Hamas' expectations that the Palestinians in Judea, Samaria and the Arab countries, and Israeli Arabs as well, would join the marches and riots went unfulfilled. **Particularly conspicuous was the non-participation in Hamas-controlled violence of Palestinians in Judea and Samaria**, even after the United States relocated its embassy to Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup>



**Right: Gaza rioters pull barbed wire from the security fence near the security fence in eastern Khan Yunis. Left: A crowd of Palestinians tries to break through the border fence into Israeli territory, hidden by smoke from burning tires (Shehab Facebook page, May 11, 2018).**

◆ **The second stage, end of May 2018 to the present:**

- **In the second stage there has been a decrease in the scope of the marches** (from tens of thousands to several thousand). That is mainly because the residents of the Gaza Strip have become tired of them, making it difficult for Hamas to motivate and transfer masses of Gazans to the border fence. **The marches continue**, and no end has been announced. However, they have lost momentum and **arson terrorism has come to the fore, which includes the launching of incendiary kites and balloons**, some of which have IEDs and explosives attached. The modus operandi which began as a local, fairly limited initiative, **has grown and become more sophisticated under Hamas' leadership and command. So far arson terrorism has destroyed more than 6100 acres of crops and natural forest and severely disrupted the daily lives of Israelis living in communities near the border.**

<sup>6</sup> For further information, see the June 17, 2018 bulletin "Palestinian popular terrorism in Judea and Samaria declined during the first half of 2018, despite both the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem and Hamas' continuous inciting Palestinians to join the violent 'return marches.' "



Crops and beehives burn near the Gaza Strip (Facebook page of the "incendiary kites and balloons unit," the network launching kites and balloons, June 17, 2018).



Right: Hamas notice boasting of the number of fires set caused by the incendiary kites and balloons. The Arabic reads, "24 fires broke out near the Gaza Strip, caused by the incendiary kites and balloons" (Paldf Facebook page, June 18, 2018). Left: Explosive balloon launched from a Hamas post near the fence (IDF spokesman, June 24, 2018).

- The increase in arson terrorism and its place at center stage have led to a **significant increase in the level of violence**. That is because Hamas and the PIJ consider themselves as **committed to protecting those responsible for arson terrorism** and have even said so publicly. Therefore Hamas and the PIJ have begun launching barrages of rockets and mortar shells at Israeli communities. That is done **whenever Israel intensifies its responses against the launchers of kites and balloons, or against Hamas** (for example, aerial attacks on Hamas targets in response to launchings or direct attacks on Palestinians launching kites and balloons).
- ▶ Given the above, Hamas publicly stated that it had **changed its former "equation of response" in favor of a new "equation," called "an attack [in return] for an attack and**

**blood [in return] for blood.**"<sup>7</sup> That means that in the future an attack on Hamas (or PIJ) targets in response to launching kites will be answered with rocket and mortar shell fire at Israel. **That "equation" has so far been manifested by two rounds of escalation: the first**, when PIJ operatives (joined by Hamas operatives) launched about **150 rockets and mortar shells** in response to Israeli Air Force attacks (on the night of May 29, 2018); and **the second**, when Hamas responded by firing **about 45 rockets and mortar shells in reaction to an Israeli Air Force attack on Hamas targets in response to the launching** of kites and balloons (on the night of June 19, 2018). In addition, **three rockets** were fired at the western Negev north of the Gaza Strip in response to an Israeli Air Force attack on Hamas targets (on the night of June 17, 2018).



**Right:** Hamas notice posted after 45 rockets were fired at Israeli territory. The Arabic reads, "45 rockets were launched from the Gaza Strip at the occupied territories until this morning" (Palinfo Twitter account, June 20, 2018). **Left:** Notice in Hebrew posted jointly by the military wings of Hamas and the PIJ emphasizing the "new equation." It reads, "An attack in return for an attack and blood in return for blood" (Twitter account of Adham al-Salmiya, June 20, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> For example, senior Hamas figure **Isma'il Radwan** said in an interview that the "rules of engagement" Hamas adheres to are "an attack will be answered with an attack, blood will be answered with blood, destruction will be answered with destruction." **He claimed that Hamas does to want a new [military] campaign against Israel in the near future.** However, he said, if a campaign is forced on Hamas, it will participate (interviewed by al-Mayadeen in Lebanon, June 21, 2018).