From tense quiet to regional conflagration

By ROAZ GANOR

Since Israel’s decision to unilaterally disengage from the Gaza Strip in 2005, many Israelis have seen their hopes dashed that disengagement would improve Israel’s political-security situation.

The culprit? A massive, sophisticated system of tunnels dug by the Palestinians under the border between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, which has enabled Hamas to turn the Gaza Strip into a giant Islamic fundamentalist army barracks, where Hamas provides a berth to local jihadist organizations (e.g., the Army of Islam, the Popular Resistance Committees and other supporters of al-Qaida).

The relationship between these Palestinian organizations and al-Qaida is evidenced above all by a letter found when Osama bin Laden’s home in Pakistan was raided in 2011. Sent in 2006 by the Army of Islam to a senior al-Qaida activist and religious scholar, the letter posed questions about financing the Army of Islam.

These Palestinian organizations have invested massive effort in developing an extensive capability for high-trajectory rocket fire at Israel, and continue to wage a sophisticated and coordinated battle to delegitimize Israel and its right to defend itself.

These have left Israel, post-disengagement, much more limited than it was in its ability to proactively thwart attacks on itself, and with no genuine capability to absolutely defend its citizens on the home front. The number of Israeli citizens under immediate and constant threat of high-trajectory rocket fire by Palestinian terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip has grown steadily, from a few tens of thousands in the towns and villages proximate to the Gaza Strip, to more than one million in the area south of Tel Aviv.

As the ruler of the Gaza Strip, Hamas is not only responsible for its own actions but also for the actions of other terrorist organizations that operate from the territory under its control.

However, just as Yasser Arafat did during the 1990s, Hamas demands obedience from these organizations but avoids directly confronting or disarming them. Through their terrorist and high-trajectory rocket assaults on Israel from the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, Hamas preserves limited military confrontation with Israel without taking responsibility for it.

Like Arafat in his day, Hamas is trying to ride the tiger, on the principle that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” – a principle proven time and again to be misguided and dangerous.

And indeed, these organizations, which see themselves as part of global jihad, treat Hamas as though it has lost its way, challenging its authority and control of the Gaza Strip. While global jihad organizations in the Gaza Strip usually maintain a balance of deterrence with Hamas, if and when they do decide to disobey Hamas and launch attacks at Israel, they may send the entire region into war, leading Hamas to incur serious damage from Israel.

Ostensibly, the key players in the Middle Eastern theater – Israel, Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas – do not want escalation. Yet analysis of their interests and capabilities and of the historical and political processes taking place in the region indicate that military deterioration is all but deterministic. Local and global jihadist organizations, which suckle at al-Qaida’s breast, are the ones now holding the wick to the bomb that could set off a chain of explosions that would rock the whole region. This should drive sleep from the eyes of all those involved.

Given the incendiary situation of the Middle East in general, and on Israel’s southern border in particular, the distance between tense quiet and regional conflagration may be no longer than the distance traveled by a lone Kassam rocket from its launching pad in the Sinai desert or the Gaza Strip to its point of impact in a crowded Israeli school, hotel or mall. If such a rocket leaves many wounded, Israel will be obligated to embark on a massive military operation against Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip – an operation whose severity will be proportionate to the damage done to Israel, and which we may reasonably assume will then lead Hamas to fire a barrage of missiles deep into Israeli territory. To arrest such massive, continuous rocket fire, Israel would then be forced to undertake an extensive land-based military operation in the Gaza Strip. It’s a hop, skip and a jump from there to regional war.

Israel must therefore make the most judicious use possible of its leverage to pressure Hamas to act responsibly, and avoid a dangerous military adventure. This includes inducing the superpowers to exert their influence to ensure regional stability and security. At the same time, Israel must also improve its relationship with actors that have direct or indirect influence on Hamas, such as Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Even if normalized relations with these nations are not possible under current geopolitical circumstances, Israel must at least strive to use them as mediators who can arrest any deterioration in security or, failing that, bring about a cease-fire. Israel must not let itself be influenced by the provocations of Palestinian organizations, emissaries of Iran and global jihad, which are meant to goad it into a knee-jerk reaction.

Lastly, Israel must be prepared militarily, politically, nationally and internationally for the possibility of being dragged against its will into an extensive land-based operation in the Gaza Strip, which could send the region into war. This requires oiling the military system, establishing international legitimacy and national consensus, preparing the home front to sustain damage and loss, defining feasible aims for a military operation, and setting policy for “the day after.”

All of these will be examined in the war games to be played next week at the 12th annual International Conference of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (IDC).

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