

Hamas Seeks a Major Conflict With Israel, Defense Officials Warn

Israel believes that Hamas sees another round of conflict as a possible fix for the crisis in Gaza, but the group is also afraid of the implications of a full-scale war.



Palestinians trying to damage the border fence with Israel on Friday.SAID KHATIB/AFP

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Israeli defense officials are seeing in recent weeks signs that Hamas is willing to enter another round of fighting with Israel as a possible path to a solution to Gaza's humanitarian crisis.

Hamas believes that a prolonged and intense confrontation will promote the rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip and investment in infrastructure projects, according to these assessments.

For now, it appears that the organization is still concerned with the consequences of full-scale warfare, and therefore seeks to maintain the present tensions on the Gaza border while seeing how far they can test Israel. Still, the Israeli assessment is that Hamas has made a decision to confront Israel, and therefore a broad military operation is only a matter of time.

Defense sources believe that Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar is determined to

speed up the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip. Sinwar has indicated that he would be willing to compromise for this purpose, but disarming the organization was not on the agenda at any stage. Although Hamas understands that Israel and other countries involved in the crisis will not accept this position, it appears Sinwar is unwilling to consider disarmament, even if this refusal leads to war.

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A fire caused by Palestinian arson near the border in the Eshkol region on Friday.\ Eliyahu Hershkovitz

The Israel Defense Forces and Israeli politicians are seeking to avoid any escalation and want to postpone a confrontation for as long as possible, so it will not take place until after the construction of the underground barrier along the border with the Gaza Strip is completed in about a year and a half. So as not to risk a flare-up, Israel is prepared to accept some violent actions that do not put lives at risk. However, over the past few weeks top officers in the Southern Command have been calling on the politicians to make progress in the rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip, based on the assumption that this would calm the atmosphere and delay the anticipated round of fighting. But the cabinet's discussions on the Gaza Strip have not yet led to any decisions, and the northern front has remained the focus of most of Israel's attention.

During the first weeks of confrontations on the Gaza border, the feeling in Israel was that Hamas was not scoring any real achievements. Recently, however, other voices have been heard in the defense establishment. They say that the organization has succeeded in restoring the situation in the Gaza Strip to the center of the public discussion in Israel and that the continued arson attacks in the south, which the Israeli military has deliberately not responded to with force, has become embarrassing.

On Sunday, the army released documentation of the launching of incendiary balloons from a Hamas position, thereby pointing out Hamas'

direct responsibility for the arson attacks. The military believes that the organization's involvement in what began as a popular struggle has brought Israel to the limits of its restraint, and has warned that the response to the arson will include attacks on Hamas targets.

In recent months Hamas has sought to galvanize the residents of the West Bank, with the understanding that their support is needed for the success of the struggle against Israel, but the organization has not succeeded in translating sympathy for it into mass demonstrations. Hamas' attempts to promote military activity in the region have encountered logistical obstacles it hadn't previously encountered. An example is the capture of a cell in Nablus last week whose members sought to carry out terrorist attacks in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

This is why the defense establishment has recently identified a willingness to create new coalitions in the Gaza Strip. The most worrisome development for Israel is the apparent cooperation between Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which has been manifested in recent rocket and mortar fire by the latter group. It is believed the two organizations have joined together to prepare for a possible confrontation with Israel soon.

The initiatives to rehabilitate Gaza, including the Trump administration's plan to raise hundreds of millions of dollars from the Gulf States to invest in infrastructure projects in the Gaza Strip, has provoked resistance in the Palestinian Authority because this has been seen as an attempt to cut off the Gaza Strip from the West Bank. The American intention to include Qatar in the initiative has generated opposition from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates because of Qatar's close relationship with Iran.



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