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## Immediate Intelligence Bulletin

### Kites, Flames and Soccer: Is an Israeli-Palestinian Massive Collision in Gaza Around the Corner?

#### Information:

The Palestinian Great March of Return Campaign, which was launched at the end of March 2018, has primarily taken place in the Gaza Strip near the Israeli-Gaza border.

From the onset of the Campaign, in addition to attempts to storm the Israeli-Gaza border fence, Palestinians from the Gaza Strip attached Molotov cocktails, containers of burning fuel, explosive devices, etc. to kites, helium filled balloons, etc. and launched them into Israeli territory - setting fire to neighboring Israeli agricultural fields, destroying crops, and damaging wildlife and the environment.

Since March, thousands of incendiary kites, balloons, condoms, etc. have been launched – dozens every day, causing – according to unofficial estimates more than 500 fires in the past month, burning over 7,000 acres, and causing more than \$2 million in damage.

The growing scale of this phenomenon has resulted in an escalating Israeli response, targeting Hamas military assets in the Gaza Strip, yet avoiding collateral damage.

In response to the Israeli attacks on Hamas military targets - rockets and mortar shells were launched from Gaza into Israeli cities, villages, towns, and communities. This shooting reached its pinnacle on the night between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of June.

The deteriorating situation is accompanied by escalating rhetoric on both sides.

To date, incendiary kites, balloons, condoms, etc. – some booby trapped, others with explosive devices attached, or filled with chemicals, continue to land in Israeli territory causing fires and damage.

On June 21<sup>st</sup>, a Hamas Spokesperson described the launching of the incendiary balloons and kites as “civil resistance” which will continue.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine (IJI) announced that any Israeli attacks on Gaza will result in attacks on Israel.

Israel announced that it will not tolerate the continuation of terror attacks from Gaza and is determined to put an end to the threat - even at the cost of a massive military confrontation.

#### Evaluation:

Since the 2014 war, the camp within Hamas which opposes a military confrontation with Israel has had the upper hand. That line has also dominated Hamas' policy throughout the March of Return Campaign. Despite the death toll on the Palestinian side - most of whom were Hamas' militants, Hamas has conducted a policy of self-restraint. (On that matter read my article *The Palestinian March of Return: The Boxers Cautious Dance* ~ April 2018).

Hamas' inner debate at the moment is - will a war with Israel now, more likely offer Hamas a way out of its many challenges - or will it further deepen its crises to the point that its rule will be jeopardized?

One camp within Hamas believes that the time is right for Hamas to engage in a war with Israel:

The major reason for that is the following logic: “We are in such a deep crisis, we have nothing to lose, thus war can only improve our situation.”

The other camp, that opposes a war with Israel at his juncture, has some good reasons to oppose a war at this point in time:

It remembers that the logic that guided Hamas' decision to initiate the 2014 war was "War will enable Hamas to exit its crisis." As a fact, Hamas exited the 2014 war in a deeper crisis. To date, four years later, the Gaza Strip has not yet recovered from the destruction that war caused.

The combination of the FIFA World Cup and the official beginning of summer on June 21<sup>st</sup>, means increased economic and commercial activity in Gaza. In that context, on June 20<sup>th</sup> a Senior Fatah leader, 'Azzam al-Ahmad, announced that the Palestinian Authority will soon pay the salaries of the PA officials in Gaza. The combination of these three things offers an opportunity for the people of Gaza to breathe, have a break from the challenges of their daily lives, ventilate, and have some fun.

Egypt announced that the Rafah Crossing, which they opened during the month of Ramadan - will remain open round the clock until further notice. The Egyptian gesture alleviates the pressure on the people of Gaza. In case of a war, Egypt is likely to close the Crossing.

Egypt's need for stability. The Egyptian interest in stability is further emphasized due to two events which are happening right now. One, is the fact that Egypt raised the price on commodities like cooking gas and gasoline. The other is the FIFA World Cup tournament in Russia. Egypt's decision to raise commodity prices during the World Cup – at the time when the Egyptian street's attention was solely focused on the Egyptian National soccer team's performance in the World Cup was not coincidental. The expected public outcry over the increase in prices was softened and neutralized thanks to the tournament. However, Egypt's participation in the World Cup ended on June 19<sup>th</sup>, following their defeat by the Russian team. Frustrated with the failure of its team, and with the rising price of commodities - the Egyptian street, is highly flammable. A war in the Gaza Strip might ignite the streets, resulting in a severe burst of violence in Egypt – a scenario the Egyptian government wants to avoid. Thus, it is very likely that an intensive Egyptian mediation process is taking place behind the scenes.

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Hamas' inner debate is further complicated due to the role of the group, the Islamic Jihad in Palestine (IJIP) - Iran's proxy, and the second most militarily powerful organization in Gaza after Hamas.

Hamas and IJIP – both proxies of Iran, are committed to the concept of *al-Muqawama al-Musalaha* ("Armed Resistance") which means eliminating Israel through the use of violence. Hamas and IJIP cooperate militarily, and ideologically belong to the Radical Islamic school of thought.

However, there are differences in the agenda and priorities of the two.

Hamas who rules the Gaza Strip since 2007, wants to keep itself in power. Therefore, its military policy is subdued to that interest. Given Hamas' challenges in the Gaza Strip: the inner political struggle between the pro-Arab and pro-Iranian factions within Hamas, Hamas' financial challenges; the growing criticism within Palestinian society as well as across the Arab world regarding Hamas' policies and the abysmal results of its eleven-year rule over Gaza; and the fact that Hamas must be tuned to Egypt's interest in stability - Hamas' military policy in the context of the armed struggle against Israel, has been one of restraint since the last war in 2014.

IJIP, is not the ruling power in Gaza, and does not have to be very concerned about the ramifications of its actions. IJIP is much more subdued to the interest of its major sponsor – Iran. And Iran would very much like to see the breakout of another military confrontation in the Gaza Strip. The fact that IJIP is the second most powerful military power in

Gaza, presents a potential threat to Hamas' rule. Given this, there is always the potential for friction between the two organizations.

The tension between Hamas and IJIP has significantly increased due to the fact that for the past few years Iran has favored IJIP over Hamas. Iran has increased its financial and military support for IJIP, while reducing its financial support for Hamas. This is Iran's way of punishing Hamas for distancing itself from the Iran-Assad axis in Syria in 2012. The Iranian punishment, and the reduction in funds coming from the Mullah regime, is one of the major reasons for Hamas' deepening crisis. (On that matter read my article [Tasting the Bitter pill of Reality: Hamas' New Political Pact](#) ~ June 2017).

IJIP - in the service of Iran, is pushing for an immediate and wide escalation. On May 29, 2018 IJIP - in response to the killing of three of its militants earlier that day, launched massive rocket and mortar shell attacks on Israeli cities, towns and communities surrounding the Gaza Strip. The Israeli retaliation caused Hamas to join the intense fight which lasted for one day.

In the deterrence equation between Israel and Hamas, IJIP has been able to impose a new equation upon Hamas; Any Israeli attack in Gaza will be retaliated by shooting into Israel. By dictating that equation, IJIP - i.e. Iran - can therefore mark an achievement - which further intensifies Hamas' inner debate.

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The fact that Hamas - to date, refuses to stop the launching of the fire kites and balloons, does not necessarily reflect its decision to escalate the situation to a war. Rather, it may indicate that Hamas is currently guided by two assumptions:

1. That the relevant regional players - Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority - want to avoid a new war between Israel and Hamas.
2. That the challenge of the incendiary kites and balloons harms Israel - yet it is not too harmful to the point that Israeli public opinion will force the government to react more forcefully.

Therefore, it seems as if in the eyes of Hamas - the fire kites and balloons are a valuable and useful tool to address some challenges Hamas is facing – and at the top of the list, the painful sanctions the Palestinian Authority has applied on the Gaza Strip. Particularly the PA's refusal to pay the salaries of Hamas officials and their refusal to pay Hamas' electricity bill which will improve the electricity supply to Gaza.

To date Hamas is playing a very dangerous game - and is walking on the edge. Hamas is - literary speaking - playing with fire.

The Israeli government – for now – is containing the political and public discontent and criticism.

However, Hamas should be aware of the following aspects:

1. The accumulating damage caused by these incendiary kites, balloons, condoms, etc. kite increases discontent and criticism within the Israeli public opinion as well as in political circles. The Israeli government's ability to contain that challenge is eroding with time.
2. International public opinion will find it more and more difficult to remain indifferent or ignore – let alone support – the continued torching of agricultural fields, forests, and wildlife. Like other methods employed by Hamas, the fire kites and balloons have limited expediency. Crossing those limits is counter-productive to Hamas.

## **Prediction:**

The fact that Hamas has been pushed into a corner by IJIP, together with the assumptions which are seemingly guiding Hamas' modus operandi at this point are resulting in a process of deterioration which might be accelerated in a relatively short period of time.

This deterioration could result in an exchange of fire which could spin out of control and evolve into a massive military collision.

That being said - and although the current climate is the most flammable phase in the Israeli-Gaza arena since the war in 2014, the deterioration – as of now – has yet not reached the point of no return.

Thus, I tend to predict that a massive military collision is less likely to take place in the foreseeable future.

**Avi Melamed**

**Middle East Strategic Intelligence Analyst -**

*A New Middle East Requires a New Understanding*

Avi Melamed, an expert on the Current Affairs in the Arab and Muslim World Arab and their impact on Israel and the Middle East, is the [Salisbury Fellow of Intelligence and Middle East Affairs](#) for the [Eisenhower Institute](#) with offices at Gettysburg College and in Washington, DC.

He is the Founder and Director of the Eisenhower Institute's "[Inside the Middle East – Intelligence Perspectives](#)" (ITME). ITME transforms current and future leaders into knowledgeable media literate critical thinkers with the professional ability to successfully navigate a complex and challenging global reality. The goal of ITME is to ensure that the next generation of policy influencers will have the knowledge and the tools to accurately decipher the Middle East, predict the future direction of events, and effect policy which will positively serve the United States' strategic interests.

Avi is a former Israeli Intelligence Official and Senior Official on Arab Affairs. An Israeli Jew, fluent in Arabic, English and Hebrew, he has a unique understanding of Arab society and culture. In his decades of public service, he has held high-risk Government, Senior Advisory, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorist intelligence positions in Arab cities and communities throughout the region – often in very sensitive times - on behalf of the Israeli government agencies.

He has co-authored [Separate and Unequal: Israel's Rule in East Jerusalem](#) in 1999, and wrote *Ubrusi: The Novel* in 2010. His newest book [Inside the Middle East: Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth](#), (also [available as an audio book](#)) - a GPS to help you navigate the dramatically changing Middle East offers a unique insight into the Arab world, challenges widely-accepted perceptions, provides a guide to make sense of the events unfolding in the region, and offers an out of the box idea that could lead to a positive breakthrough in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict.

Avi provides intelligence analysis, briefings and tours to diplomats, Israeli and foreign policy makers, international media outlets and a wide variety of organizations and private clients on a range of Israel and Middle East affairs.

In the private sector, he facilitates relationships between Israeli and international firms and potential partners in the Arab world. He is also the founder and creator of Feenjan – Israel speaks Arabic, a non-profit initiative which presents contemporary Israeli society and culture to the Arab world in Arabic and serves as an online platform for Israelis and Arabs to discover and discuss issues of common interest.

Avi has his finger on the pulse on the Arab world. With a proven record of foreseeing the evolution of events in the Middle East and their impact on a local and regional level.

Through all of his efforts, as an analyst, educator, entrepreneur, and writer, he is a bridge builder, dedicating himself to enhancing the Arabic, English and Hebrew speaking audience's comprehensive understanding of the Middle East and of each other.

His website is [www.avimelamed.com](http://www.avimelamed.com) and I can be reached at [avi@avimelamed.com](mailto:avi@avimelamed.com)