

LFI Briefing: The next Gaza war? February 2015

Introduction: a recurring spiral of violence

Last summer's war caused a tremendous loss of life, fear and suffering in both Gaza and Israel.

The consequences of the war for both Israelis and Palestinians were terrible. Ongoing research by the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre [suggests](#) that 2,140 Palestinians died in Operation Protective Edge, 52 per cent of whom have thus far been identified as terrorist operatives, and 48 per cent as non-involved civilians. Some 66 Israeli soldiers were killed and 469 wounded in the fighting. In addition, six civilians were killed, including one Thai national, and 250 wounded. Israeli civilian fatalities were kept low due to the effectiveness of its Iron Dome missile defence system, and the use of early warning air raid sirens and bomb shelters.

The causes of the war are clear: repeated and indiscriminate rocket attacks against Israeli civilians.

From the beginning of 2014 until the start of Operation Protective Edge on 8 July, terrorists in Gaza fired more than 500 rockets into Israel. Most landed in civilian areas. On 12 June 2014, the day that three Israeli teenagers were abducted and murdered, a new round of rocket fire against Israel commenced, with the salvo of rockets escalating significantly from 30 June. During the 50 days of the conflict from the start of Operation Protective Edge on 8 July, 4,594 rockets and mortars were fired at Israeli civilian targets. For the first time, rockets fired by armed groups in the Gaza Strip had become powerful enough to target every major city in Israel.

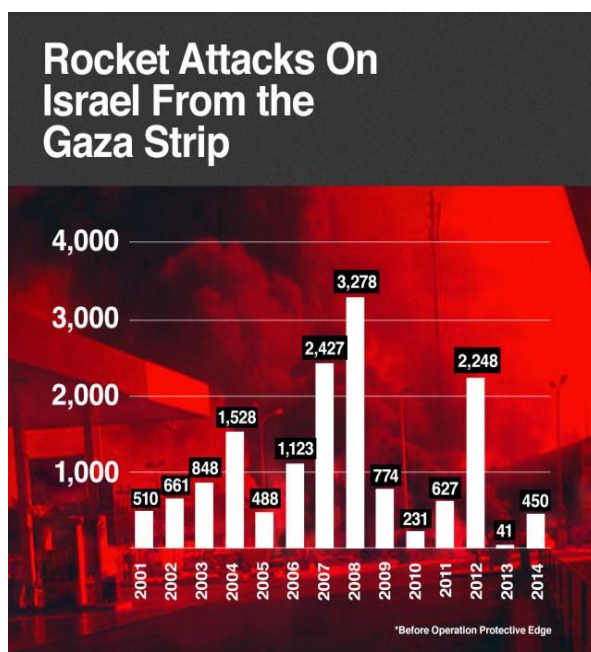
Following 10 days of air operations to try and stop Hamas attacks against Israel, and after repeated rejections of offers to deescalate the situation, Israel launched a major ground operation in the Gaza Strip. The mission's stated aim was to stop the firing of rockets and target Hamas' tunnels that cross under the Israel-Gaza border and which enabled terrorists to infiltrate Israel and carry out attacks. In all, the IDF uncovered 32 Hamas tunnels. Fourteen of these tunnels had openings in Israeli communities near the border, enabling terrorists to infiltrate, kidnap or attack Israeli civilians. An extensive network of underground tunnels was uncovered during the conflict filled with ammunition, weaponry, IDF uniforms to be used as disguises, tranquilisers and motorbikes. Hamas made repeated attempts to launch attacks through these tunnels, with one attack killing two IDF soldiers. Israel suspected plans to launch large-scale killing and abduction raids against kibbutzim and towns near the border. Hamas also attempted infiltrations using naval commandos and aerial drones.

In an effort to avoid civilian casualties the IDF made phone calls and sent text messages to civilians residing in buildings designated for attack. The IAF also utilised a tactic known as

“roof knocking,” whereby buildings were targeted with a loud but non-lethal bomb which warns civilians that they are in the vicinity of a weapons cache or other target. This was used to allow residents to leave the area before the site was targeted with live ammunition. In addition, the IDF aborted several aerial strikes seconds before they were to be carried out, due to the presence of civilians near the target area.

In contrast, Hamas placed civilians in the line of fire. Mosques, schools, hospitals and homes were used by Hamas as a base for firing at IDF soldiers. For instance, between 8 July and 5 August 260 rockets were fired from schools, 160 rockets from religious sites and 50 rockets from hospitals. Hamas and other armed groups deliberately embedded themselves underground and among the civilian population, while calling for civilians to gather around targeted buildings and explicitly to ignore IDF warnings to leave. At the end of the conflict, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas accused Hamas of killing more than 120 youths for violating “curfew and house arrest orders” and 30 to 40 Palestinians on suspicion of “collaboration” with Israel. The Fatah Central Committee recently accused Hamas of placing more than 300 Fatah members under house arrest during the war and claimed that Hamas shot dozens of Fatah men in the leg for violating the house arrest orders.

Sadly, however, last summer’s war was simply the latest in a recurring spiral of violence. Hamas began firing rockets from Gaza into Israel in 2001 but these attacks intensified following Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, and again following Hamas’ seizure of the territory in 2007. Between 2005 and 2007, Palestinian groups in Gaza fired about 2,700 locally made Qassam rockets into Israel, killing four Israeli civilians and injuring 75 others. Since 2001, and prior to last summer’s war, more than 15,200 rockets and mortars, an average of over 3 rocket attacks every single day, have [targeted](#) Israel.



In the space of just over five years, Israel and Hamas have now gone to war on three occasions. In late December 2008, Israel initiated Operation Cast Lead, a three-week military operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip in response to an escalation of rocket fire on Israeli civilians. The conflict followed an uneasy “lull” in hostilities between Hamas and Israel which was brokered by Egypt in June 2008. Despite occasional violations (rocket and mortar fire into Israel from Gaza never entirely ceased, although it had fallen to a single incident of each by November 2008) that held until Israel launched a military incursion into Gaza to destroy a tunnel on the Gaza-Israel border. A resulting gunfight between Hamas and the IDF was followed by a barrage of mortar and rocket fire into Israel. Despite Israeli offers to renew the ceasefire, in the period between the start of November and mid-December, more than 200 Qassam rockets and mortar shells landed in the western Negev region.

During the space of the three-week conflict, over 750 rockets were fired into Israel. The number of Palestinian deaths is disputed, but is believed to range between 1,166 and 1,440, with the number of civilian deaths between 295 and 926. Col Richard Kemp, the former British commander in Afghanistan, later [told](#) the UN Human Rights Council: “During Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli Defence Forces did more to safeguard the rights of civilians in a combat zone than any other army in the history of warfare. Israel did so while facing an enemy that deliberately positioned its military capability behind the human shield of the civilian population.”

In the aftermath of Israel’s declaration of a unilateral ceasefire in mid-January 2009, Hamas began rearming, rebuilding its tunnels, and upgrading the quantity and quality of its weaponry.

Four years later, in November 2012, Israel launched “Pillar of Defence” in response to rocket fire from Gaza on Israel’s southern communities and, increasingly, its central population centres, via the use of Iranian advanced missiles. The defensive action was focused on targeting Hamas’ weapons stores, rocket-launching sites and its command and control centres. During the conflict over 1,300 missiles landed in Israel, including Iranian made longer-range Fajr missiles. Approximately 170 Palestinians were killed, including around 120 militants, despite the efforts of the Israeli military to reduce civilian casualties by use of precision targeting and leaflet drops. On 21 November 2012, a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas was agreed to, following mediation from the Egyptian government, effectively ending the conflict.

The pattern is clear: in every lull, Hamas invests enormous energies in preparing to enter the next round with even more potent threats to Israeli civilians. This briefing documents how Hamas is now remilitarising: rebuilding its terror tunnels; recruiting a ‘popular army’; and restocking its rocket and mortar firepower. It outlines the role of Iran in supporting Hamas’ efforts. It goes on to warn that, as on previous occasions, Hamas’ actions are simply laying the groundwork for another bloody and violent conflict between it and Israel, in which the

victims will be Israeli and Palestinian civilians. Finally, it offers some potential routes towards demilitarisation and thus reconstruction.

Hamas bides its time

Four months after a ceasefire brought Operation Protective Edge to a close, Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas' leader in Gaza, said that the group would continue to abide by the terms of the agreement which brought the conflict to a close so long as Israel did too. "It is clear we are committed to [the] calm as long as the Israeli occupier is committed as well," he [said](#).

Haniyeh's remarks followed a series of incidents which had, once again, increased tensions between Israel and Hamas. On 19 December, a Qassam rocket was [fired](#) from Gaza into the Eshkol region, the third time that Gazan terrorists had fired rockets at Israel since the end of the war in the summer. Less than a week [later](#), an Israeli soldier patrolling the border was shot and seriously injured by a sniper, sparking a cross-border firefight between the IDF and Gaza militants.

Hamas [reportedly](#) communicated to Israel via Egyptian mediators that it was not behind the Eshkol rocket attack and would crack-down on the perpetrators. The reality, however, is that Hamas is preparing for another war against Israel. It is now waiting for the right moment to provoke one – just as it has done on three previous occasions.

Hamas prepares for war

Rebuilding its terror tunnel network

Both Israel and Egypt blockaded Gaza in the years after Hamas' violent coup in 2007 in part because terrorists were using materials to construct tunnels under the border. In June 2006, Palestinian terrorists crossed into Israel from Gaza via an underground tunnel near the Kerem Shalom crossing, attacked an Israeli army position, killed two soldiers and captured a third, Gilad Shalit. He was held captive by Hamas for more than five years and released in a prisoner exchange in October 2011 under which Israel freed more than 1,000 Palestinian security prisoners. In November 2012, the [discovery](#) of a tunnel packed with explosives led the IDF to launch a brief incursion across the border, while 2013 saw the discovery of at least three tunnels.

Nonetheless, the sheer extent of Hamas' terror tunnels was largely unknown to Israeli intelligence. By wiring the longer ones with cables unconnected to the local telephone grid, Hamas were able to defy the eavesdropping through which Israel gains much of its intelligence. Undetectable from the air and with their routes and exit places impossible to gauge, Israel was thus forced to launch a ground incursion into Gaza during Operation Protective Edge in order to destroy this threat to its security and lives of its citizens.

One of the key lessons Hamas took from last summer's war was the military utility and psychological impact its tunnel network had on Israelis. For its next war against Israel,

Hamas aims to ensure large groups of terrorists can penetrate Israeli defences via a renewed tunnel network, with the aim of hitting both the army and civilian targets from behind the frontline.

Less than a month after last August's ceasefire, Hamas co-founder and former foreign minister Mahmoud al-Zahar [pledged](#) the group would "build new tunnels" into Israel to replace those destroyed by the IDF.

In October 2014, the Hamas weekly Al-Risalah [reported](#) that the organisation had begun work on one of its attack tunnels. A reporter for the paper accompanied members of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military wing, who, it was claimed, work in shifts around the clock digging the tunnels. The al-Qassam cell commander, Abu Khaled, explained to the reporter: "Over the last eight years, the al-Qassam Brigades have constructed a network of tunnels of several kinds. Some of them are strategic attack tunnels and others are tactical tunnels for the purposes of defence. All of them serve the purpose of operating far from the eyes of the Israeli pilots and delivering painful blows to the occupation."

Al-Risalah's reporter explained that the tunnels were used for "several military missions" and was clear that the targets were both civilian and military: "firing rockets on Israeli cities; firing massive barrages of hundreds of mortars on the settlements around the Gaza Strip, and carrying out quality operations behind enemy lines that have resulted in the killing and capture of soldiers and terrorised millions of Israelis."

The reporter also made clear that repairs to the tunnel were a priority for Hamas even during the humanitarian ceasefire called while the conflict went on: "Abu Khaled did not hide the fact that the tunnel was bombed during the recent aggression against Gaza, after spy drones followed a cell of [al-Qassam] Brigades fighters as it set out to attack an Israeli infantry unit, but this did not affect the activity in the tunnel. It was repaired during one of the humanitarian ceasefires during the war."

Hamas' boasts appear to be corroborated from reports inside Israel. In late December, Israeli media [reported](#) "sightings of what appear to be massive excavation operations along the Gaza Strip border fence". Residents of Netiv Ha'asara, a kibbutz 50 metres from the border, reported a number of instances where bulldozers and trucks were seen conducting what was said to be "heavy excavation activity" close to the security fence. A 200-metre dirt mound had also been raised in the area with residents suggesting the digging was the first such instance since the end of the war in August.

In late December, the IDF confirmed it believed tunnel reconstruction was underway, [stating](#): "Four months after the end of Operation Protective Edge, Hamas is back on track creating terror. As it commemorates 27 years since its inception, Hamas has begun to reconstruct the destroyed underground tunnels in Gaza and rebuild their weapons arsenal."

In mid-January, the Times [reported](#) Israeli intelligence assessments that Hamas was rebuilding cross-border tunnels.

The Israeli military has [estimated](#) that the cost of the 32 tunnels it uncovered during Operation Protective Edge was £59m. The tunnels required, on average, 350 truckloads of construction supplies. The cement used on the tunnels, [claimed](#) Israel, could have built two hospitals, 20 clinics, 20 schools, and 100 kindergartens. There is clear [evidence](#) that, in the wake of Operation Cast Lead in 2008-9, Hamas prioritised the rebuilding of its military infrastructure – including tunnels and launch sites for rockets and missiles – over reconstruction. Indeed, Hamas Political Bureau chief Khaled Mash'al admitted that this was the case at a conference in Damascus in November 2009: "On the surface, [statements in the Gaza Strip] refer to reconciliation [between Hamas and Fatah] and rebuilding, however, what is not revealed is that most of Hamas' funds and efforts are invested in the resistance and military preparations."

In October 2013, the [discovery](#) of a tunnel which ran 300 metres into Israel and exited near Kibbutz Ein Hashlosha in the western Negev, led to an immediate halt to construction materials entering Gaza. The tunnel used some 500 tons of cement which was supposed to have been used for civilian building.

In recent months, there have been some media reports suggesting that, once again, Hamas are diverting materials intended for the reconstruction of Gaza into rebuilding their terror tunnel network. In December, sources in Gaza [told](#) Ynet that Hamas had been commandeering for its tunnels building materials from Israel transferred into Gaza for the purposes of reconstruction. According to the report, once Israel allowed a limited number of goods and materials into Gaza a black market emerged which allowed Hamas to renew construction of concrete slabs used to line the inside of the tunnels. In December, a reporter for the Guardian [witnessed](#) first hand the manner in which the UN-led reconstruction scheme is open to abuse. Under the scheme, householders are assessed to see if they qualify for rebuilding materials, registered and issued with a coupon to allow them to buy a specified amount of materials at warehouses monitored by UN-administered inspection rules. "During a recent visit to cement warehouses in Gaza, however, the Guardian [saw] cement being resold a few feet outside the warehouse doors at up to four times the cost within minutes of being handed over to householders with coupons," the paper reported.

Israel Radio has also [reported](#) that while a majority of construction materials had reached their intended destination, Hamas has also obtained a share.

Boosting rocket and mortar capability

Alongside its effort to rebuild its terror tunnels, Hamas is also engaged in an attempt to renew its depleted arsenal of rockets and mortars and to construct a new generation of home-produced rockets. Hamas' rocket capability has grown considerably over the course

of the last three conflicts: in 2009, its rockets had a range of 40km; by 2012, they were able to target Tel Aviv; by 2014, they were able to regularly menace Tel Aviv, as well as Haifa in northern Israel. Some Israeli estimates [suggested](#) Hamas was left with one-third of its rockets at the time of last August's ceasefire.

Hamas' strategy is now shaped by two factors.

First, the need to develop a larger indigenous capacity to build rockets stems from the fact that Egypt has been attempting to destroy the estimated 1,800 cross-border tunnels from Sinai into Gaza through which weapons were previously smuggled. In January, Egypt [commenced](#) plans to extend the buffer zone between itself and Gaza to 5km and forcibly relocate over 2,000 families whose homes lie in the extended buffer zone. The move followed the discovery of a 1,700-metre tunnel in December that reached beyond the existing buffer zone. In January, the Egyptian armed forces reported they discovered and blew up a 1,200 metre tunnel containing weapons and explosives.

Second, according to the IDF, Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system shot down 90 per cent of the rockets destined for populated areas during last summer's war. As a result, Hamas is [believed](#) to have decided that short-range mortars which fall under the system's radar are a more useful way of terrorising Israeli civilians than medium-range missiles fired at cities such as Tel Aviv which are then shot down in mid-air.

As a result of these developments, Israeli media reports in December [suggested](#) that Hamas is attempting to exploit 'dual-use' materials, such as iron, as part of its effort to develop home-produced rockets. Testing is now underway: in mid-December Hamas' military wing [fired rockets](#) at the Mediterranean for three consecutive days. This was not an isolated incident with the al-Qassam Brigades reported to have launched dozens of rockets towards the sea as part of its experiments. One Israeli resident living near to the Gaza border said:

In recent weeks I have heard rockets being launched every morning – it sounds like shrieking. Although they shoot towards the west, at the sea, they could easily turn their launchers around towards our directions and shoot. It is a very worrying situation, because it only proves to us that we are already on track towards escalation in the near future. I don't think that the IDF needs to occupy the Strip for every rocket experiment, but it should definitely give it attention.

As Eli Soholitski, the outgoing commander of Israel's navy Squadron 916, which is responsible for defending the sector from Ashdod to the Gaza Strip, [stated](#) in a media interview last October: "They are doing experiments and checking their rockets. This is a part of their domestic weapons production. We did not doubt, at the end of the war, that their focus would be on building more weapons. We monitor every such launch, noting the quality of the rocket and its range."

Hamas is unapologetic about its actions, with officials [claiming](#) that rocket testing does not breach the terms of the ceasefire because, it claims, the agreement did not mention or prohibit such tests.

Hamas' tests – particularly the firing of a large volley of rockets – suggest that, as they did last summer, they are experimenting with ways to cheat the Iron Dome's ability to fire interceptors in rapid succession. The rocket tests over the Mediterranean over recent weeks are [believed](#) to be an attempt to enhance or refine strategies to beat Iron Dome.

Egypt's attempts to destroy the tunnels between Sinai and Gaza has led Hamas to attempt to smuggle rocket-making materials by sea. On 11 February, Israel [disclosed](#) that in January it had successfully intercepted a boat carrying liquid fiberglass as it attempted to sail from Sinai to Gaza. According to media reports, during questioning, the three suspects on board told the Shin Bet that their smuggling attempt was aimed at assisting Hamas's military wing, by providing it with raw material for building rockets and mortar shells. Shin Bet stated: "Recently, Hamas has invested much in exploiting naval smuggling routes, partly due to Egypt's efforts to prevent smuggling tunnels that linked Sinai and Gaza."

In his October media interview, Soholitski, the former commander of Squadron 916, said: "We continue to see attempts to smuggle weapons or material to build them. The sea is a very convenient platform for smuggling. The terrorists still have one big smuggling tunnel, and it's called the Mediterranean."

Building a 'popular army'

In November, Hamas [announced](#) the formation of a new "popular army" at the Jabaliya refugee camp in northern Gaza. The Hamas campaign – entitled "Vanguards of Liberation" – is aimed at recruiting young men aged between 15 and 21. Hamas spokesman Mushir al-Masri described its principal goal as preparing for another war against Israel: "The main purpose of these training camps is to prepare an army for the liberation of Palestine and its holy sites in the near future." New recruits are said to be trained by the al-Qassam Brigades. It claims the 2,500 recruits would form "the first section of the popular army for the liberation of al-Aksa and of Palestine". The effort is believed to be intended to both replenish the ranks of Hamas' military wing following last summer's fighting, to shore up support among the Gazan population, and to propagate the notion of "armed resistance" and thereby indoctrinate children and teenagers.

Hamas' efforts to militarise the young Gazan population were further [evident](#) in the "vanguard of liberation camps" which ran during January's one-week midterm holiday. Some 15,000 Gazan teenagers and young men [graduated](#) from the camps, at which they were drilled in weapons training and exercises simulating kidnapping IDF soldiers and launching attacks on Israel via tunnels. The training was organised by, and took place at the facilities of, the al-Qassam Brigades. Al-Monitor [suggested](#) the training camps "witnessed

for the first time a large number of young men participating”. According to [reports](#), religious indoctrination also took place.

In December, the al-Qassam Brigades [issued](#) a video designed, believes the Meir Amit Intelligence and Information Center, to show the rehabilitation of its military capabilities. In it, dozens of armed men wearing uniforms and bulletproof vests are seen training for attacks on mock IDF border posts. In one, they destroy a defensive post and leave with the ‘bodies’ of IDF soldiers. In another, they attack a post and abduct a soldier. Four days before the release of the video, the national security forces in Gaza, a Hamas-run internal security body mainly responsible for overseeing borders and crossings, held a military exercise in which they also simulated the attack and takeover of an IDF post. They detonated IEDs and used live mortar and light arms fire. The exercises were part of graduation ceremonies and took place at the al-Qassam Brigades training facility.

A diversionary technique

Hamas may be preparing for war, but does it want one? Despite its rhetoric, last summer’s war appeared to be defeat for Hamas: it lost around 1,000 fighters and much of its tunnel infrastructure and rocket and mortar arsenal as a result of Israeli military action; that is aside from the death and destruction which its actions inflicted upon the Palestinian civilian population. At the same time, however, Hamas’ rocket and tunnel attacks proved psychologically terrifying for Israelis, while its ability to show that it could target – if only occasionally, thanks to Iron Dome, actually hit – almost all parts of the country, together with winning symbolic victories, like forcing the closure of Ben Gurion airport, highlighted Israel’s vulnerabilities.

But such calculations would be to misread Hamas’ motivations. Its decision to provoke a war with Israel – the decision to kidnap and kill three Israeli teenagers and to ramp up the cross-border rocket and mortar attacks – was a function of the organisation’s weakness. Over the past five years it has found itself abandoned by old allies: the counter-revolution in Egypt saw the removal of the pro-Hamas Muslim Brotherhood government and its replacement by a regime determined to stop smuggling and destroy the tunnels between Gaza and Sinai which facilitated it, and crackdown on terrorism. Meanwhile, relations between Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran – once an invaluable source of funding and arms – were strained to breaking point by their opposing positions on the Syrian civil war, with Hezbollah and Iran offering unstinting support and military assistance to the regime of Bashar al-Assad while Hamas backed the rebel forces.

Hamas’ position in Gaza was also deteriorating as a reduction in smuggling and foreign money left the cash-strapped organisation unable to pay salaries of its 40,000 employees. In part, the spring 2014 reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah was an attempt by Hamas to get the Palestinian Authority to cover its payroll. But, as Neri Zilber’s [analysis](#) for the Washington Institute recalls, although only signed in April, the reconciliation deal,

which led to the formation of a unity government and was supposed to bring both Gaza and the West Bank back under the control of the Palestinian Authority, was already under severe strain by mid-June, with the PA unwilling to pick up its salary bill.

The failure of the PA to re-establish its control has left Gaza in a state of chaotic limbo. The victims of this state are the people of Gaza. Four months after a mechanism for the reconstruction of Gaza was agreed between the UN, Egypt, Israel and the PA, little has been achieved and at the end of January, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees [announced](#) a lack of money meant it was suspending its efforts to rebuild homes damaged or destroyed in the summer's war. At root, this reflects the failure of the reconciliation deal which, by bringing an end to Hamas rule in Gaza, would allow reconstruction to begin, international aid to flow, and Israel and Egypt's 'blockade' of Gaza to be lifted. At the end of December, ministers from the Palestinian 'national unity' government – formed in June – had visited Gaza on only two occasions. The PA was supposed to take control of border crossings and of government ministries in the territory. Neither has happened. PA officials accuse Hamas of wanting them to take responsibility for borders, reconstruction and paying salaries, whilst Hamas retains all the real power in the Gaza Strip – a position the PA is unwilling to accept.

Hamas may have nominally dissolved its government in Gaza, but has continued to operate what Mahmood Abbas [terms](#) a "shadow government": its personnel still mainly occupy government positions up to the deputy ministerial level, taxes local merchants and operates checkpoints near official border crossings.

One senior official from the PA's Preventative Security agency told Zilber that the PA would "not repeat the model of [Lebanon's] Hezbollah in Gaza" which allowed for the maintenance of a large unofficial militia beyond the control of the central government. At the end of November, Abbas [stated](#) simply: "The Palestinian Authority does not exist in the Gaza Strip. Hamas is responsible for the Gaza Strip."

At the same time, Fatah has reneged on promises in the original reconciliation agreement last April to reconvene the Palestinian Legislative Council, where Hamas has a majority. The council was suspended in 2007, but, absent Fatah, a rump assembly has since met under Hamas' auspicious in Gaza. In the wake of the reconciliation deal those assembly sessions were suspended. In January, to signal its frustrations, Hamas [reconvened](#) the council in Gaza, despite a boycott from other parliamentary blocks. Elections, not held since 2006, which were supposed to have taken place within six months of the agreement, seem an increasingly unlikely prospect. Meanwhile, there have been protests by Hamas-affiliated government workers, many of whom have not been paid for months, outside the Gaza-based ministries of the unity government, as well as staging a sit-in at Abbas' long-abandoned residence in the territory. Fear of losing international aid from the likes of the United States means the Palestinian Authority refuses to pay workers who are affiliated to Hamas.

The tensions between the two sides have grown over the months. In August, a Hamas plot – orchestrated by Turkey-based members of the organisation – to rebuild the organisation’s infrastructure in Jerusalem and the West Bank, launch a series of terrorist attacks, and use the resulting instability to topple Abbas’ government – was [uncovered](#). In November, there were a series of bombings outside the homes of Fatah leaders in Gaza, for which Hamas’ military wing has been [blamed](#). During the last three months of 2014, the PA [arrested](#) an estimated 300 Hamas members in the West Bank.

The situation is complicated by signs of growing internal tensions within Hamas. Hamas is [said](#) to be split, with a more hardline faction, associated with former interior minister Fathi Hamad, linked with the attacks on Fatah leaders’ homes. He is believed to have established a network of armed cells and is opposed to reconciliation with Fatah or Hamas ceding power in Gaza. The hardliners are buttressed by those in Hamas’ military and political wings who wish to heal the rift with Iran and Hezbollah. In late December, a meeting took place between one of the hardliners and the speaker of the Iranian parliament, Ali Larijani. At it, Hamas political bureau member Mohammad Nasr [suggested](#) that Palestinians could not win their fight without Iranian assistance.

Another faction, associated with former prime minister Ismail Haniyeh and the Doha-based head of the organisation’s political bureau, Khaled Mashaal, is reported to take a more moderate line. They support reconciliation with Fatah and adopt a more pragmatic line about giving up their Gaza power base, as well as what analyst [terms](#) “a reconsideration, although not abandonment, of the ‘resistance policies’ of the organisation”. The ‘moderates’ also wants to convene Hamas’ ruling Shura Council in order to shift its policies and facilitate a reconciliation with Egypt. Egypt’s terms for such a deal are tough ones: they demand Hamas give up terrorists sheltering in Gaza who are wanted in Egypt, including those involved in the recent attacks in Sinai. While Iran is close to the hardliners, Turkey – which has [provided](#) a home to a number of Hamas leaders – backs the moderates. So too does Qatar, which stepped in to provide Hamas with political, although not military, support when Syria threw Hamas out of Damascus.

As Zilber suggests, the stand-off between Hamas and Fatah over Gaza may propel the former and Israel into another war. “Last time Palestinian reconciliation wasn’t going well, this past June,” he writes, “Hamas responded by kidnapping and murdering the three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank, and by escalating into a wider war with Israel in Gaza. Hamas had already fired the latter bullet (literally), but that doesn’t mean it won’t try to again deflect attention from its own shortcomings via military action.”

The Iranian connection

Added to this incendiary mix are the growing signs of a rapprochement between, on the one side, Hamas, and, on the other, Hezbollah and Iran.

A series of meetings in 2013 between Hamas and Hezbollah in Beirut are [reported](#) to have seen a thaw in relations between the two terrorist organisations, with them 'agreeing to disagree' about the situation in Syria. Last summer's war [saw](#) a further coming together of the two as Hezbollah moved to show its solidarity with Hamas. While Assad's antipathy to Mashaal remains a complicating factor, there have been further developments this year suggesting the two are closer to resuming their old alliance. On 15 January, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah [gave](#) a three-hour long television interview in which he underlined that the breach between the old allies was being healed, even if relations between Hamas and Syria remained difficult. Hamas, according to Nasrallah, has its own view on Syria, and "even if Hamas chooses to mend its relationship with the Syrian regime, Syria might have some difficulty accepting this due to past events and developments," he said. As *Al-Monitor* [suggested](#), Nasrallah's words appeared to show that, "the bloc — mainly Hezbollah and Iran — is becoming flexible with those who disagree with them on Syria, meaning that once again these parties started viewing developments and alliances from a different angle, not only related to the crisis in Syria."

Nasrallah's sentiments were confirmed on 18 January when Mohammed al-Deif, leader of the al-Qassam Brigades, [wrote](#) to him expressing his condolences for the deaths of several of Hezbollah's operatives, as well as Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps members, in an airstrike widely attributed to Israel. In it, he called for revenge attacks on Israel and unity among all of its opponents, [writing](#): "The true enemy of the nation is the Zionist enemy and all rifles must be directed against it. All forces of resistance must direct their coming battle as one."

Iran is now [believed](#) to have agreed to resume financial aid to Hamas, with Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar appealing to the Islamic republic to provide additional funds to "destroy the Israeli occupation". At the beginning of January Iran's deputy foreign minister for Arab and African affairs, Hussein Amir Abdollahian, [called](#) Tehran's relations with Hamas "good" and "strong" after meeting with a delegation from the group, who were visiting the Iranian capital for an International Islamic Unity conference. His remarks followed an [announcement](#) in Tehran that Mashaal would visit Iran shortly. Nasser Al Sudani, head of the Majlis' Palestine committee, [said](#) that Iran regards Hamas as the "first line of defence" in confronting Israel: "Destroying Israel will only be possible by arming Palestinians, including in the occupied West Bank ... The death of the occupation is near and Tehran supports this."

Hamas has reciprocated the warm words. At a rally in December to mark the founding of the organisation, Hamas spokesman Abu Obeida [thanked](#) those who had aided the organisation during Operation Protective Edge: "first and foremost Iran, which was unsparing in its financial and military and other assistance and provided us with missiles that pulverised the defence of the Zionist enemy and with antitank weapons that shattered the myth of the Merkava tank." At the rally, Hamas also showed off an Iranian-developed *Ababil* drone, as well as advanced sniper rifles it received from Iran.

Iran's malign intentions towards Israel are well-known. It is, moreover, open about its determination to step-up support for both Hezbollah and Hamas. In November, Ayatollah Khamenei, the country's supreme leader, told a meeting of the International Congress on "Extremist and Takfiri Orientations from the Viewpoint of Islamic Scholars" of his aim to "arm" both the West Bank and Gaza:

We have passed through the barrier of denominational discord. We helped Hezbollah of Lebanon – which is a Shia group – in the same way that we helped [Sunni groups] Hamas and Islamic Jihad [PIJ] and we will continue to do that. We did not become a prisoner of denominational limits. We did not differentiate between Shia, Sunni, Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi'i and Zaidi denominations. *All Palestinian areas have to become armed....* We looked at our main goal and we offered help. We managed to strengthen the fists of our Palestinian brothers in Gaza and by Allah's favour we will continue to do that. I announced – and this will definitely happen – that *the West Bank should be armed like Gaza and be prepared for defence* (emphasis added)

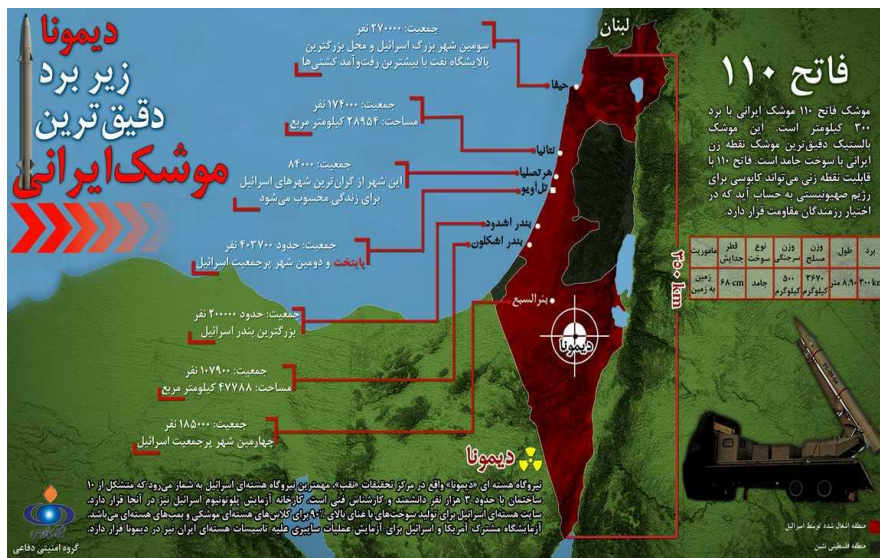
To ensure his pledge received the widest possible audience, it was then [Tweeted](#) from Khamenei's Twitter account.



Khamenei's threat has been [repeated](#) by leaders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Its deputy commander, General Hussein Salami, argued: "It is not long before the day when the Palestinians in Gaza and on the West Bank will join hands and the West Bank will become a hell for Israeli security."

Iran’s resumed support for Hamas is driven by a mix of ideology and realpolitik. In terms of the former, as a recent report by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs [suggests](#): “In Iran’s view, the steadily developing rocket capabilities of both Hezbollah and the Palestinians – capabilities that Iran, with Khamenei’s encouragement, is striving to extend to the West Bank as well – constitute a main element of the deterrence against Israel that Iran seeks to develop. The aim is to deter Israel from attacking Iran’s nuclear facilities – or, if Israel nonetheless decides to attack, to use these rocket capabilities as a key part of its retaliatory response. In this context, under Khamenei’s direction, Iran views the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank as a single unit under Hamas’ leadership.”

This assessment is endorsed by senior Iranians with links to the regime. As Hussein Sheikholeslam, a former ambassador to Damascus, and secretary-general of the Committee for Support for the Palestinian Intifada, has [suggested](#): “The use of missiles and rockets enables Iran to create a balance of terror and a defensive shield against a possible attack by Israel.”



Iran’s plan, notes the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs report, is to complete the “encirclement of Israel” – via Hezbollah in the north, Hamas in the south and the arming of the West Bank to the east – thus guaranteeing that no part of the country is safe from its rockets and missiles. As the report notes, Iranian media have [published](#) maps and details of the ranges of rockets deployed by Hamas and Hezbollah. These include: solid-fuel, surface-to-surface, 300-km Fateh-110 missiles with a 500-kg warhead, and Khalij-e Fars solid-fuel, surface-to-sea, 300-km missiles with a 450-kg warhead. As the illustration above demonstrates, these maps show that the nuclear reactor in Dimona is within range (from Gaza) of the Fateh-110.

While the west edges closer to an agreement on Iran’s nuclear aspirations, it is worth noting that the Islamic republic’s supply of rockets and weapons to Hamas and Hezbollah, and its role in stoking and facilitating conflicts between them and Israel, is not deemed an

appropriate topic for inclusion in the talks. Moreover, it is a source of major concern in Israel that the strong desire of the US and other western powers to get a nuclear deal with Iran will reduce its motivation and its capacity to confront it over its other destabilising policies in the region.

Preventing the next war

The prevention of terrorism emanating from the West Bank and Gaza formed one of the core principles of the 1993 Oslo Accords, the 1994 Gaza-Jericho Agreement and Oslo II, the 1995 Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The 1995 deal between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat [stated](#) explicitly: “Except for the Palestinian Police and Israeli military forces, no other armed forces shall be established or operate in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.”

The idea that any future Palestinian state be ‘demilitarised’, or ‘non-militarised’ is a principle which has rested at the heart of diplomatic initiatives – including Bill Clinton’s Camp David talks in 2000 and the 2003 Geneva Accords – and has been accepted by Mahmoud Abbas as serving the interests of both sides.ⁱ Last year, for instance, he [told](#) the New York Times: “We will be demilitarised. Do you think we have any illusion that we can have any security if the Israelis do not feel they have security?”

During last summer’s conflict, both the EU and the Obama administration made clear that demilitarisation of the Gaza Strip rested at the heart of ending the violence. “All terrorist groups in Gaza must disarm,” asserted the EU on 22 July, while secretary of state John Kerry argued that any solution “must lead to the disarmament of Hamas and all terrorist groups”.

It is, of course, Hamas – and other terrorist organisations which operate in Gaza such as Islamic Jihad – which are in violation of this principle. Despite the complexities of achieving it, the end result – endorsed by the Palestinian Authority, Israel, Egypt, the EU and the United States – is a simple one: “one authority, one gun”, as Abbas puts it.

Without disarming armed groups in the Gaza Strip, efforts at reconstruction will continue to be hampered, while the ‘blockade’ of Gaza by Israel and Egypt restricts not only the movement of people and goods in and out of the territory, but with it any prospect of much-needed economic development, prosperity and the alleviation of poverty.

It was never Israel’s intention on leaving Gaza in 2005 that it should be cut off, and IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz has [stated](#) explicitly that having Gazans able to live normal lives is an important part of stopping the next round of violence. After the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the Rafah crossing with Egypt was opened, and for the first time in history the Palestinians controlled their own border, with, on average, 1,500 people passing through it each day. The crossings between Gaza and Israel were also functioning at expanding rates for movement of people and goods. Hamas’ election victory and subsequent violent ousting of Fatah from Gaza,

however, led to a considerable tightening on movement through the crossings with Israel and through Rafah as the European Union Border Assistance Mission monitors (who had been working with the PA to oversee goods) were withdrawn.

It is clear that recently – even in the absence of demilitarisation – Israel has shown a willingness to increase freedom of movement between itself and Gaza according to the security situation. Prior to the kidnapping and murder of three of its teenagers and the increase of rocket attacks last June, Israel was issuing three times the number of exit permits at the Erez pedestrian crossing as it granted in 2010. Since the end of the fighting in the summer Israel has [allowed](#) some limited exports, and even work permits for Gazans to work in Israel. As Oren Kessler [suggests](#):

The pattern is clear: a reduction in Hamas terrorism allows Israel greater flexibility in allowing Gazans freedom of movement. A demilitarised Gaza Strip, by extension, is one in which Palestinians would enjoy significantly greater movement into Israel and the West Bank than they do today.

As previously stated, reconstruction, ending the ‘blockade’ of Gaza by Israel and Egypt and demilitarisation are all intimately linked: the first two are contingent on the last. This formulation has been recognised in proposals put forward by a number of Israeli politicians, such as former defence minister [Shaul Mofaz](#) and Labour MK Omer Barlevⁱⁱ; diplomats such as Israel’s former ambassador to the US, [Michael Oren](#); and retired members of the armed forces, such as [Shlomo Bron](#), a former IDF brigadier general who participated in the 1990s peace negotiations with the Palestinians, Jordan and Syria during the 1990s.

What steps might be taken to begin moving forward on all three fronts?

First, an initial step towards demilitarisation comes in the form of preventing Hamas’ rearmament. It is clear, however, that this is a goal that Iran has committed itself to. Indeed, it has pledged that the West Bank “will be armed just like Gaza”. It is crucial, therefore, that the strong desire of the US and other western powers to get a nuclear deal does not reduce pressure on Iran over its other destabilising policies in the region.

Second, the UN security council should pass a resolution aiming to both prevent the rearmament of Hamas and to begin the process of demilitarisation. In 2006, UN security council resolution 1701 which brought to an end the war between Israel and Hezbollah stated that “there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese state” and banned the transfer of weapons to those who were not legal elements of the Lebanese government. This resolution proved largely ineffective: Syria, which shares a border with Lebanon, was allied to, and determined to continue to supply, Hezbollah, and the UN forces present have proven unwilling or unable to take the action required to fulfil their mandate and stop Hezbollah rearming.

However, the situation in Gaza is very different, given both Israel and Egypt's shared interest in, and determination to prevent, the rearmament of Hamas, and their control of the borders of Gaza. Such a resolution should also include sanctions against countries which violate it by attempting to transfer weapons to Hamas and other militant groups. In doing so, it will build on UN security council resolutions 1747 and 1929 which, respectively, bar arms exports by Iran and provide for the interdiction of any such shipments.

The resolution should go further and provide for international disarmament inspectors who would oversee the destruction of rockets, mortars and other heavy weaponry in Gaza.

Such a resolution would provide a clear signal of the international community's commitment to preventing a return to hostilities in Gaza, backed up by practical measures to achieve it.

The British Government should make every effort to pass and support the implementation of this resolution and inspection regime.

Third, a more extensive disarmament of Gaza could not, however, take place without the cooperation of Hamas. It should, therefore, be faced with a clear choice: disarmament in return for a staged lifting of the Israeli and Egyptian 'blockade'. Moreover, that choice should be presented to it not simply by Israel and Egypt, but by the Quartet, Arab League and Palestinian Authority. The responsibility for a failure to lift the blockade would be shown, therefore, to be its alone. The British Government should work with our international partners to support this offer.

As Omer Barlev has proposed, in return for disarmament, Israel would agree to the building of an airport in Gaza and the opening of a seaport, thus allowing for the territory's economic development and freeing it from a dependence on Israel for the provision of energy, water and food. Together with the World Bank, the Arab League would provide the financial support for these further reconstruction efforts. Because the process would be occur over a two-year period, Israel could be assured that rocket, mortars and anti-tank missiles had been dismantled before the airport or seaport opened, although work could commence immediately on preparations such as international fundraising and the preparation of tender documents. As Barlev suggests:

This plan is predicated on completion of the disarmament simultaneously with the execution of the international planning phase and monitoring of the disarmament throughout the projects phase. These checks and balances will provide assurance that the conditions of the agreement will be honored. Only if the disarmament is deemed effective by the monitors will the economic projects proceed to execution phases.

In the meantime, moreover, Israel and Egypt could consider increasing and easing the movement of goods into Gaza by allowing naval vessels to enter the territory which have been checked and cleared by an internationally supervised monitoring process in Cyprus.

This mechanism would have to be outside Gaza for so long as Hamas remains in effective control, given that it cannot be trusted to allow monitors the freedoms and independence they would need to carry out their work effectively.

The disarmament process is crucial to preventing another war between Hamas and Israel. But, as Brom has argued, so, too, are the reconstruction proposals detailed above. “a seaport, maybe an airport, and economic reconstruction of the Gaza Strip can all be assets which will make Hamas calculate whether it is worth starting a new conflict with Israel and losing all these assets.”

The demilitarisation and rehabilitation of Gaza is not an alternative to reaching a comprehensive agreement for Palestinian statehood, but an essential prerequisite. The Palestinian Authority is right to insist on “one authority, one gun”; that is one of the most basic definitions of statehood. As Kessler argues, for the Palestinians “it need not be seen as concession to Israel, but as fulfillment of a commitment to the international community that leads to their long-sought independence.”

ⁱ An excellent summary of the background to demilitarisation and proposals for it, which this paper draws heavily upon, is provided by Oren Kessler, *Demilitarising Gaza: Principles, Pitfalls and Implementation*, Henry Jackson Society, 2014 <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2014/10/13/demilitarising-gaza-principles-pitfalls-and-implementation/> *Fathom* magazine’s symposium on reconstruction for disarmament featuring Shlomo Brom was also heavily utilised. <http://fathomjournal.org/gaza-symposium-is-reconstruction-for-demilitarisation-the-way-forward/>

ⁱⁱ A copy of this plan is attached to this briefing