



Crisis in Gaza: Implications for Egypt & the Arab World

*Dr. Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui**

The escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip between Hamas and Israel in November 2012 caught many observers by surprise. The confrontation intensified when Ahmed Al-Jabari, the Hamas military chief, was assassinated in an Israeli air strike. The subsequent spate of Israel's air assault and Hamas rocket-attacks on Israel led to the death of more than hundred people. A truce has been called and, as expected, Egypt played a pivotal role in it and is receiving a lot of applause both from Israel and the United States. Nevertheless, there is least scope to contemplate about the durability of this deescalating measure in terms of bringing a more "robust" solution to the vexed problem.

The incident has taken place when tempers in the region were already rising against the siege of Gaza. There has been a deadlock in the peace process for years and political factionalism inside Palestine has deterred chance of any negotiation in the near future. Perhaps it was a move on the part of Israel to assess the strategic environment in the region and fix the future political course either in order to preserve the status quo or initiate a new strategic move eyeing the forthcoming national election in the beginning of the next year.

This is the first major conflict that the region is witnessing in the wake of the Arab Spring, bearing a lot of implication for Egypt and the region. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan very aptly noted this in his indirect address to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu when he said, “we were living in 2012 and not in 2008 and the circumstance of 2012 were not like of 2008”. In an unprecedented move, Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi recalled the Egyptian ambassador from Israel. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan paid an emergency visit to Egypt to take stock of the situation. Egyptian Prime Minister Hisham Kandil visited Gaza to sympathize with the victims. The visit of the members of Organisation of Islamic Congress (OIC), Arab League General-Secretary and a team of European Foreign Ministers is reflective of the changing strategic and diplomatic scenario in the Arab world. The renewed concerns of several players in the current Israeli-Hamas confrontation highlight the major strategic shift in the political matrix of the Arab world.

This Gaza violence may be described as a political adversity for the new Egyptian government, which is still amidst a deep political turmoil and region itself as a whole is only half way to political stability. To bring political harmony and economic stability, Egypt needs a breathing space to order itself internally but Gaza crisis might induce further instability derailing the political course in the country. Egypt, a country that long prided itself as being the central arbiter of diplomatic and political power, is in deep dilemma. Nevertheless, it cannot escape its obligation to safeguard the cause of the Palestinian masses and help resolve the crisis to keep its promises.

A series of diplomatic initiatives with several European leaders and the Arab League on the part of President Morsi accounts for Egypt’s over-burdened role in the region which has put the Egyptian government to test too early when its own political stability is at risk and situation is in a flux.

It would be an uphill task for the new Egyptian government to prove its primacy in the regional political affairs. US President Barack Obama himself had called upon President Morsi and Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan to call a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. Egypt, at the moment, would not wish to see any further escalation because it would unnecessarily engage it with external involvement. It would also bring other regional countries such as Turkey and Iran to enhance their clout which, of course, would lead to a different set of political and ideological tensions with Teheran and Ankara.

The crisis has not only disrupted the political template of Egypt but the region as a whole would suffer its impact. This will put Turkey to a litmus test, which as a new rival in the region could avail this moment to enhance its influence and particularly when Iran is mired in its own economic and nuclear crisis. The Turkish rebuttal of any idea of the United Nations or the Arab League's role in present circumstances indicates its political ambition and subsequent rift in the region. A new set of interests in the region would arise and that might change its strategy altogether. The air strike on the Gaza Strip was also a latent message to Iran that nothing in the region would dissuade Israel from its long term security concern. The instant crisis would deflect the public eyes from the incessant killing in Syria which might bring to halt the resolution of the Syrian crisis.

The Gaza fiasco has its long term effect on the new political process of the region and undermines the democratic course which was recovering after a stint of two years of political uncertainty and economic instability. It may likely jeopardise the democratic project of the West Asian and North African region aimed at political and economic transformation. The over-enthusiasm and hopes of the Arab people for an early change have been, if not ruined, put to halt. It would not be wrong, perhaps, to say that the development has put to rest all the speculation that the Arab Spring might usher in some changes in Israel's policy towards the Arab nations.

Time will tell whether the masses that removed the despotic regimes in the region will succeed in changing the trajectory of Arab-Israeli conflict or they are destined to live under the shadow of fear and terror. No doubt, the political upsurge of the past has done great service by removing the despots, but the real success of the mass movement would be judged by the level in de-escalation of the conflict. The big question at the moment is to what extent the new rulers, in their attempts to resolve the Arab-Israel conflicts, will enjoy the support from the international community, in particular from the US which remains a pivotal actor on the horizon of the Israel-Palestine crisis.

**Dr. Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui, Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*