

Analysis Netanyahu Vows Unprecedented Response if Gaza Flares Up - but It's the Last Thing He Wants

Unlike the April election, the security situation along the Gaza border has taken a back seat this time, thanks in part to Netanyahu's restraint.



Palestinians burning tires near Rafah along the Gaza border fence, July 2019. AFP

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- **Iran, Hamas to open Gaza front if war breaks out in Israeli north, defense officials believe**
- **Palestinian dies of a gunshot wound sustained by live Israeli fire in Gaza border clashes**

For the last month, the agenda in Israel has been entirely political. In advance of the repeat election, and under a real threat of not passing the electoral vote threshold, the negotiations to bring together the various parties have received most of the media attention before the final party slates of Knesset candidates were filed officially by Thursday night.

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Security matters have received only a limited amount of attention, at least when we're talking about newspaper headlines. This summer (and here the diagnosis requires putting the words "for now" before it as a preface) has been exceptionally quiet in military terms. It is doubtful whether even the incident

along the border with the Gaza Strip early Thursday morning, in which an IDF officer and two soldiers were wounded by fire from a Hamas militant who crossed the fence into Israel, will change this picture fundamentally.

The political shake-up has not reduced the military missions or worries of the security establishment, where most of the work is conducted behind the scenes and is concentrated at the professional level. Benjamin Netanyahu's attention, in his double role as prime minister and defense minister, is limited both in time and depth.

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Netanyahu is very knowledgeable and experienced in these issues, but he is very busy and worried about his political and legal survival. Most of the security issues, certainly those in which a long-term decision is required, are in deep freeze. The IDF has learned this the hard way, with the understanding in the General Staff that the budgetary and multiyear plan discussions will take place only in preparation for next year – after a new government coalition is finally formed.

As opposed to most election campaigns in the past decades, the security disputes and fears have not taken central stage in the present campaign, which is really still in its earliest stages. The relative quiet that has lasted for a few weeks, until Thursday, in the Gaza Strip, has blunted the force of the criticism of Netanyahu's policies there.

In the previous election campaign, in April, which ended in political paralysis, the main threat to Netanyahu's status in the area of security came from the Gaza Strip. A few rounds of escalation in Gaza, alongside a number of harsh terrorist attacks in the West Bank, aroused – for a few minutes – the fear of a general uprising. But it didn't happen, mostly because Netanyahu bit his tongue, restrained himself and limited the strength of the IDF's response.

His approach to the Gaza Strip brought him heavy criticism from Yisrael Beiteinu, Hayamin Hehadash, Kahol Lavan and even at times from Labor, which blamed

him for military impotence against Hamas. But the alternative – a war that it is possible to know how it starts but not how it ends – looked even more problematic to Netanyahu. He showed similar restraint in the latest round of fighting at the beginning of May, in which four Israelis were killed.

Politicians who spoke with Netanyahu only a few weeks ago had the impression that a military campaign in Gaza, in spite of his clear lack of desire, looked to him to be an almost unavoidable scenario that could take place even before the September 17 election.

Last week, at the annual memorial ceremony for the fallen of Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, the largest military operation of his 13 years in power, Netanyahu said that his government is working to achieve calm in the Gaza Strip, but at the same time “we are preparing for a widescale operation that will strike a blow against Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, a military strike that they have never suffered before. I can’t give details but this is not just talk. We want calm; we are preparing for a [military] campaign.”

This week the IDF made sure to publicize, with Netanyahu’s encouragement, details of a broad divisional military exercise held along the border with the Gaza Strip in which they trained for a large conflict in Gaza. Netanyahu knows the commander of the Gaza Division very well; he is Brig. Gen. Eliezer Toledano, the prime minister’s former military aide.

Still, we must read between the lines. The IDF briefing for journalists does not speak about conquering the Gaza Strip but about “a large-scale ground maneuver” that will “cause heavy damage” to Hamas’ military arm – far from the ideas voiced by former Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, for example, who fell out with Netanyahu and resigned in November 2018.

For now, Netanyahu, too, has moderated his tone, including behind closed doors. First, because it seems he thinks – fervently – that a military imbroglio in Gaza would put him in real danger of losing the election. And second, because the other parties involved – Hamas and the mediators from Qatar, Egypt and the United Nations – are singing a new song, a more optimistic one.

A certain amount of hope exists that the process of transferring money from Qatar to the Gaza Strip will be conducted this month in a more organized manner. In light of the expectations of launching infrastructure projects that have been

talked about for many months, calming messages from Hamas and the Muslim Eid al-Adha holiday coming in 10 days, it is possible that a miracle will happen once again and Gaza will remain calm until the Israeli election, and even later.

On Thursday the IDF rushed to explain that the Hamas operative who opened fire on Golani infantry soldiers along the border with the Gaza Strip, and who was shot and killed after the initial, hesitant response by the forces in the field, acted on his own initiative. For now, it looks like another way to say that this time too, the Israeli response will be restrained, with the goal of not being dragged into another escalation.



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