

GAZA ON THE BRINK

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The sudden flare-up in Gaza between Palestinian militant groups and Israel is another grim reminder that the situation in the blockaded Mediterranean strip remains precarious. The latest violence was triggered by a botched spy operation by Israeli commandos inside Gaza that killed seven Palestinians, including a Hamas military commander. Hamas, which controls the territory, and Islamic Jihad fired hundreds of rockets and mortar shells into Israel in retaliation. Israel responded with airstrikes and artillery fire, hitting scores of military posts and weapons depots across Gaza. They levelled television and radio stations as well as Hamas's military intelligence headquarters. It was the heaviest Israeli attack since the 2014 war on the impoverished enclave of 1.82 million people. Now, Gaza is staring at the prospect of a fourth war in a decade. The territory has been on the brink for years. In past wars, Israel inflicted enormous havoc on the enclave's public infrastructure and caused high human casualties, while in retaliation Hamas fired rockets into Israel's civilian areas. Israel has also imposed a land, sea and air blockade on the region in a bid to stop Hamas from amassing more weapons and to weaken its hold over the strip. But Hamas continues to control Gaza, having found multiple ways to smuggle in weapons, while ordinary Gazans bear the brunt of the blockade. Joblessness is 40%. The administration has no control on exports or imports, and is not even paying full salaries to government employees. Due to scarcity of diesel, there are extended power cuts. Sewage plants are not operational. In effect, Israel has imposed collective punishment.

The situation has been particularly tense in recent months. In March, thousands of Palestinians marched towards the border, demanding their right to return to the homes and lands their families were expelled from in the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, immediately after the creation of the state of Israel. About 750,000 Palestinians were estimated to have been forced out of their homes during the war. The March of Return protests continued on the border since then, and have often been met with live bullets fired by Israeli soldiers. Since March, at least 200 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli soldiers and thousands of others wounded. It was against this background that Egypt and Qatar stepped in, offering to mediate talks and provide much-needed resources to the enclave. Israel initially responded positively, letting fuel tanks and Qatari money into Gaza. That should have set the stage for further dialogue, but Israel's undercover mission inside the enclave sabotaged it, triggering the current crisis. After both sides announced a ceasefire, violence on the border continued, underscoring how dangerous the situation is. They should restrain themselves, allowing peace efforts led by Egypt to continue. Gaza needs aid, not another war.

Firm intervention is needed to end the unsavoury controversy in the CBI

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