

To begin to make sense of the escalating conflict in Gaza, we need to go back to the night of Oct. 23 in Khartoum. Around 11 p.m. that night, the Yarmouk weapons facility in the Sudanese capital was attacked, presumably by the Israeli air force. There were indications that Iran had been using this facility to stockpile and possibly assemble weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles, guided anti-tank missiles and long-range Fajr-5 rockets capable of reaching Tel Aviv and Jerusalem from Gaza.

One of the major drivers behind Israel's latest air and assassination campaign is its belief that Hamas has a large cache of long-range Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 rockets in its possession. Israel's primary intent in this military campaign is to deny Hamas the ability to use these rockets or keep them as a constant threat to Israel's population centers. This likely explains why in early October, when short-range rocket attacks from Gaza were still at a low level, Israeli officials began conditioning the public to the idea of an "inevitable" Israeli intervention in Gaza. Israel knew Hamas had these weapons in its possession and that it could require a war to eliminate the Fajr rocket threat. It began with the strike on the facility in Sudan, extended to the assassination of Hamas military commander Ahmad Jabari (the architect of the Fajr rocket program) and now has the potential to develop into an Israeli ground incursion in Gaza.

Oct. 23 was not the first time Israel allegedly attacked weapons caches in Sudanese territory that were destined for Gaza. In January 2009, Israel allegedly carried out an airstrike against a weapons convoy northwest of Port Sudan heading to Gaza. The convoy included Fajr-3 rockets and was unusually large, with more than 20 trucks traveling north toward Gaza. The rushed shipment was allegedly arranged by Iran to reinforce Hamas during Operation Cast Lead. Iran was also exposed trying to smuggle weapons to Gaza through the Red Sea.

Though efforts were likely made to conceal the weapons cache at Yarmouk, it obviously did not escape Israeli detection. Hamas therefore took a major risk in smuggling the weapons to Gaza in the first place, perhaps thinking they could get away with it since they have been able to with less sophisticated weapons systems. Before Hamas responded to the Nov. 14 Jabari assassination, there were two major spates of rocket and mortar attacks over the past month. The first was Oct. 8-10 and the second was Oct. 22-24. When the decision was made to carry out these attacks, Hamas may not have known that Israel had detected the long-range Fajrs. Launching Grad and Qassam mortars may have been Hamas' attempt at misleading Israel into thinking that Hamas did not even have the Fajr rockets, because otherwise it would have used them. Hamas may have also erroneously assumed that launching mortars and short-range rockets, as it periodically does when the situation gets tense with Israel, would not lead to a major Israeli response.

By the time Israel attacked the Yarmouk facility, Hamas had to assume that Israel knew of the weapons transfer to Gaza. Hamas then quickly agreed to an Egyptian-mediated ceasefire Oct. 25. When attacks against Israel began picking up again around Nov. 10 -- including an anti-tank

attack on an Israeli military jeep claimed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and several dozen more rocket attacks claimed by Palestinian Islamic Jihad and smaller Salafist-jihadist groups -- Hamas appeared more cautious, calling the main Gaza militant groups together on Nov. 12 to seek out another truce. By then, it was too late. They had already inadvertently provided the Israelis with the justification they needed to get public relations cover for their campaign to destroy Hamas' long-range rocket program.

On Nov. 14, Jabari was assassinated, and Hamas had to work under the assumption that Israel would do whatever it took to launch a comprehensive military campaign to eliminate the Fajr threat. It is at this point that Hamas likely resigned to a "use it or lose it" strategy and launched Fajr rockets toward Tel Aviv, knowing that they would be targeted anyway and potentially using the threat as leverage in an eventual attempt at another truce with Israel. A strong Hamas response would also boost Hamas' credibility among Palestinians. Hamas essentially tried to make the most out of an already difficult situation and will now likely work through Egypt to try to reach a truce to avoid an Israeli ground campaign in Gaza that could further undermine its authority in the territory.

In Tehran, Iranian officials are likely quite content with these developments. Iran needed a distraction from the conflict in Syria. It now has that, at least temporarily. Iran also needed to revise its relationship with Hamas and demonstrate that it retains leverage through militant groups in the Palestinian territories as part of its deterrence strategy against a potential strike on its nuclear program. Hamas decided in the past year that it was better off aligning itself with its ascendant parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, than remaining tethered to an ideological rival like Iran that was being put on the defensive in the region. Iran could still capture Hamas' attention through weapons sales, however, and may have even expected that Israel would detect the Fajr shipments.

The result is an Israeli military campaign in Gaza that places Hamas' credibility in question and could create more space for a group like the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which has close ties to Iran. The conflict will also likely create tension in Hamas' relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan and Syria, since the Brotherhood, particularly in Egypt, is not prepared or willing to confront Israel beyond rhetoric and does not want to face the public backlash for not doing enough to defend the Palestinians from Israel Defense Forces. All in all, this may turn out to be a relatively low-cost, high payoff maneuver by Iran.

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