

Israelis Brace for Major War with Hamas

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TEL AVIV, Israel, April 14 (UPI) — Israeli military chiefs say a large-scale conflict is inevitable despite a shaky cease-fire since Monday in their current confrontation with Palestinian fundamentalists of Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

But the consequences of such an operation are likely to be far more perilous for Israel than the torrent of international condemnation it faced over its last offensive against Hamas, a 22-day invasion known as Operation Cast Lead, launched Dec. 27, 2008.

A new invasion, which would likely be far more pulverizing than Cast Lead, could stir support for Hamas in Egypt now that Hosni Mubarak is no longer around to back Israel and keep Gaza blockaded.

Monday's cease-fire ended three weeks of escalating fighting, including hundreds of rockets and mortar shells fired into southern Israel that drew retaliatory airstrikes. More than a score of Hamas militants, including three senior commanders, were killed.

The Jerusalem Post reported Israeli military sources doubted the cease-fire would last.

“We succeeded in postponing a large-scale conflict with Hamas, but that conflict is likely inevitable,” a senior officer observed.

Israelis say the cease-fire emerged because of differences within the Hamas leadership.

The political component, the Israelis say, wants to cool things down to avert a new Israeli offensive. But, so the assessment goes, Hamas' military wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, favors continuing attacks on Israel.

That may be somewhat off the mark. But the plan appears to be to whip up anti-Israeli support among Egypt's 80 million people, who overwhelmingly oppose the landmark 1979 peace treaty with Israel.

That would not have been possible while Mubarak, who fervently supported the peace treaty because of the economic benefits it brought, was in power.

But since he was forced to step down Feb. 11 after an 18-day pro-democracy uprising supported by the army, there have been signs that the interim military council that's running Egypt is more inclined to heed the mood of the street.

Ephraim Halevy, a former head of the Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence service, has cautioned that recent protests outside the Israeli Embassy in Cairo against Israeli airstrikes in Gaza signal an “undeniable change” in Israel's strategic environment.

Writing in the Yediot Ahronot newspaper Monday, Halevy said the protests marked a shift in Egyptian policy toward Israel that underlined Israel's freedom of action in Gaza has been curtailed.

This meant Israel has to come up with a political blueprint for handling Gaza, which some commentators maintain Israel has been lacking, rather than just resorting to military action every time trouble breaks out — and one that might convince Hamas to stop rocketing Israel.

Mubarak's downfall “represented a tremendous opportunity for Hamas as it promised to create a new reality in Gaza,” global security consultancy Stratfor observed.

Those expectations have not been fulfilled — yet. True regime change has not taken place in Egypt, and perhaps it never will.

But the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest and best organized of the anti-Mubarak political groups, appears to be gathering itself to take advantage of the new reality in Egypt, and its ideology puts it firmly behind Hamas.

The arrest of Mubarak and his two sons and the possibility they will be put on trial on charges of plundering the state indicates the military, who wanted Mubarak out for their own reasons, may be moving toward more radical policies, such as an overtly anti-Israeli position.

Hamas' key objective is breaking the Israeli-Egyptian blockade of Gaza and ending its isolation.

Amid the unprecedented political upheaval across the Middle East, another Israeli invasion might be just the ticket to generate support for Hamas — not just in Egypt, but on a regional scale.

“In Cast Lead, the Egyptian government was able to deflect calls to stop its blockade of Gaza and break relations with Israel,” Stratfor founder George Friedman wrote in an analysis.

“In 2011, it might not be as easy for them to resist in the event of another war. ... Egypt is key for Hamas. Linked to an anti-Israel, pro-Hamas Cairo, the Gaza Strip returns to its old status as a bayonet pointed at Tel Aviv ...

“Hamas is creating the circumstances under which the Israelis have no choice but to attack Gaza. ... A war would hurt, but a defeat could be turned into a political victory.”