

ARTICLE DATED SATURDAY 23 JUNE:

RE THE WEEK FOLLOWING OUR

ARRIVAL INTO ASHKELON, SUNDAY 17 JUNE

Latest clash in south winds down as Cairo brokers a cease-fire

Hamas rocket squads show surprising skill, discipline over four days of attacks

The last round of hostilities between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip seems to have ended yesterday, following four days of mutual attacks during which some 130 rockets were fired and one Israeli and six Palestinians were killed.

Yesterday saw a significant reduction in the attacks - only seven rockets were launched at the western Negev - stemming mainly from Hamas' efforts to stop the firing following the Egyptian-brokered cease fire.

After letting off steam, Israel and Hamas are both interested in avoiding a large-

scale confrontation which would involve a heavier price than the parties are willing to pay. Israel is preoccupied with several security prob-

lems, from Iran to the situation in Syria. It would rather not risk a large military operation in Gaza, which would necessarily lead to rocket fire on the country's center.

Hamas' major interest, despite the periodic lip service it pays to the "resistance"

against Israel, is preserving its control in Gaza. Every time its government there is at risk, Hamas carries out a tactical withdrawal.

The escalation began on Monday morning when two militants approached the Israeli-Egyptian border from Sinai and killed an Israeli civilian. Later it transpired that a radical group from Gaza identified with Al-Qaida was responsible for the attack. But

Israel, in response, launched air attacks on Hamas targets, among others.

Hamas responded with rocket fire for the first time in about a year and, in a rare move, took responsibility for it. But this time Hamas chose to target Israel Defense Forces bases and restrict its retaliation to Qassam rockets and short-range mortar fire from the Strip. Apparently its decision to act was triggered mainly by the critical public opinion in Gaza over Hamas' refusal to take part in the previous escalation between Israel and Islamic Jihad last March.

Despite its threatening rhetoric, Israel also took care not to let the violence spiral out of control. This enabled Egyptian intelligence to broker the truce in the spirit of the former unwritten agreements between the two sides. These agreements included a mutual halt in attacks with no explicit public commitments and no direct talks.

So far the confrontation's basic pattern has not changed. Yet two characteristics are worth noting. The more important one is the southern front's growing connection to the goings-on in Egypt. Cairo, even in the transition

period after the presidential elections, played a major role in the chain of events. Its involvement has a restraining effect on both sides, due to its influence on Hamas and because Jerusalem does not want to aggravate its relations with Cairo.

However, the complete anarchy in Sinai enables Palestinian organizations, from Hamas to the most radical factions, to use the region as they see fit and launch attacks on Israel.

The second disturbing aspect is the relatively high level of skill and discipline displayed by Hamas' rocket

squads this time. The daily shelling, concentrated mostly on areas around the Strip, reflected advance planning, command and control. The high number of rockets fired will not empty Hamas or Islamic Jihad's arsenals. The organizations have amassed many thousands of rockets, a considerable number of which are capable of hitting targets in the center of the country. This is Israel's main source of concern. In the future, under certain circumstances and despite the price, this could lead to a more significant escalation between Israel and Hamas.

See MATH, Page A2

a book by its cover

Plam esteries revolt

MAN REAL ESTATE