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Dangerous Disarmament

Why Israel Should Stop Pushing Hamas to Give Up Its Weapons

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On August 2, after 26 days of fighting, Israeli troops began to withdraw from Gaza. The move was soon followed by a full redeployment out of the Strip as part of Israel's acceptance of a 72-hour ceasefire brokered by Egypt, which could be a prelude to full ceasefire negotiations. In the past, any talk of scaling back has been met with public calls in Israel for continued military operations to defeat and disarm Hamas. But, these days, it seems that Israel is focusing on a more realistic exit strategy. Indeed, although eventual disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of the combatants in the Gaza Strip would no doubt be a good thing, demanding disarmament and demilitarization without a long-term political solution to the fighting is both unrealistic and unhelpful.

Over the past few weeks, as Hamas and Israel sparred once more, there has been a growing awareness within Israel that the quiet-for-quiet formula -- which is based predominantly on military deterrence and has guided relations between Israel and Hamas -- at least since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 -- has failed to provide Israel with long-term security. In turn, a number of political and security officials have suggested that Israel should settle for nothing less than a fully demilitarized Gaza. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has picked up the call, arguing during a mid-July press conference that, the "most important step for the international community to insist on" is "the demilitarization of Gaza." He reiterated that call again on August 4, insisting that the "rehabilitation of Gaza" should be linked to a process of demilitarization, a hint that this issue might factor into upcoming ceasefire talks.

The international community has followed suit. On July 22, EU foreign ministers issued a statement calling on all terrorist groups in Gaza to disarm. And in a speech last week, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry stated that the group's post-war disarmament would be a key element in creating stable peace. Although "disarmament" and "demilitarization" are quickly becoming buzzwords in debates about how to end the conflict between Israel and Hamas, the notions are still vague and poorly defined. And

that raises doubts about the purpose -- and suitability -- of disarmament as a goal in this conflict or as a pre-condition for a ceasefire.

For one, Netanyahu's repeated references to Hamas' future disarmament could just be good domestic politics, meant to help him win support from an Israeli public that has been demanding a forceful response and long-term resolution to recurrent wars with Hamas. In addition, pushing for disarmament also steps up the pressure on Hamas by signaling that Israel will not be satisfied with yet another temporary lull in the hostilities. Finally, Netanyahu's sudden calls for the international community to get involved in disarming Gaza came as the UN Security council upped its own pressure on Israel to end the war, and again after a ceasefire proposal written by Kerry was leaked on July 28 and was met with a vocal and very public outcry from the Israeli government. The Israeli cabinet interpreted the draft as giving equal weight to Hamas' demands and those of Israel. Cabinet members also believed that the agreement partially met a number of Hamas' core requests while relegating Israel's list of concerns (which included disarmament) to a vague mention of addressing outstanding "security issues." In turn, it seems, Israel upped the ante.

To be sure, disarmament seems unlikely in the absence of a larger and more extensive political process. And the international community and the Palestinian Authority security forces are uninterested, unwilling, or simply unable to enforce Hamas' demobilization. In other words, getting Hamas to give up its guns is probably not really the point. Rather, raising the possibility can be seen as a short-term domestic and international political tool -- much like UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah and endorsed "the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon," despite the fact that it was clear to all parties that neither the Lebanese government nor the UN mission there would have been able to enforce such a requirement.

But what about the long term? First, demanding disarmament as a precondition to a ceasefire agreement or for allowing humanitarian aid to be sent to Gaza complicates the current conflict, increases diplomatic tension, and worsens the humanitarian situation. Despite substantial military losses, Hamas can continue to fight Israel in the short and medium term. After all, as the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah demonstrated, for hybrid militant groups such as Hamas, survival is the same as victory.

For Israel, the rhetoric about disarmament as a military goal can even be counterproductive. Operation Protective Edge had relatively specific tactical goals, including dismantling Hamas' tunnels and weakening its arsenal and military infrastructure. But insisting on "defeat and disarmament" could drag Israel into further military escalation under the ambiguous (and likely unattainable) goal of permanently ridding Gaza of weapons. In the unlikely event that Israel does remove all the weapons from Gaza, moreover, it would have to ready itself for a sustained presence in Gaza to prevent rearmament, an option with prohibitive international and political costs.

Given the perils of the rhetoric of disarmament, it would be well worth it for all parties to take a step back. Instead of pushing to raise the stakes, Israel should remain focused on

its tactical goals and exit strategy. When the guns fall silent, Hamas' military infrastructure will likely be severely damaged. It will also be harder for the group to rearm, unlike after Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012, because of its tense relationship with Egypt. In other words, Israel has already achieved a substantial downgrade of Hamas's arsenal.

As Israel looks toward the exits during the upcoming ceasefire talks, it should also consider agreeing to the deployment of the Palestinian Authority's security forces in Rafah, which could help regulate the flows of weapons into Gaza. It would be a mistake, though, to put too much pressure on the Palestinian Authority and its shaky security services. Given the weakness of Mahmoud Abbas and his government, doing so could be the final nail in the Palestinian Authority's legitimacy coffin. It could also spark renewed internal strife in Palestine. In addition, the parties at the ceasefire talks should address the badly needed reconstruction of Gaza, linking assistance to sustained quiet, rather than to disarmament, and to working with both the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian unity government.

Longer-term disarmament of the armed factions in Gaza has to be seen as part of a broader political process linked to state-building and economic development. Disarmament and demilitarization programs work when the broader population and militants decide that military activity is no longer necessary -- that the political and economic benefits of peace outweigh those of violence. At best, seeking disarmament on the battlefield is an unfeasible political proposition. At worst, it is a path toward further escalation.

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