



The Institute for National Security Studies
Strategic, Innovative, Policy-Oriented Research

INSS Insight No. 950, July 6, 2017

The Gaza Strip: An Opportunity for Change?

Kobi Michael

Events of recent weeks in both nearby and distant arenas have reshuffled the cards vis-à-vis the state of affairs in the Gaza Strip. The result has been the emergence of possible conditions for change – that is, if Israel takes effective advantage of them and leverages them through cooperation with Egypt and the Gulf states. Yahya Sinwar's election as the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip was followed by Hamas's issuing of a new policy document, and the decision of the pragmatic Sunni camp, led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to sever ties with Qatar and impose sanctions on it. In addition, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas decided to reduce the Palestinian Authority's payments for fuel destined for the power station in the Gaza Strip (a measure that has exacerbated the electricity crisis in Gaza), and Sinwar and a Hamas delegation went to Egypt for meetings with senior Egyptian intelligence officials and long-time Abbas rival Mohammed Dahlan.

The developments within Hamas itself can be understood as further manifestations of the movement's institutionalization, as well as the effort to maneuver between its identity as a religious ideological movement that sanctifies armed resistance against Israel on the one hand, and a sovereign governing force that needs to consolidate its rule in order to ensure effective control over its population and territory on the other. This process is similar to other cases of institutionalization of non-state organizations that seized control of territory and populations and were subsequently required to make changes in their behavior in order to strengthen their control. Such developments have often resulted in a gradual transition among actors from a non-state phase to a sub-state or semi-state phase. With the passage of time, and subject to the surrounding dynamics, some also become state actors.

Even if Hamas's institutionalization does not reflect fundamental moderation, and even though the movement's new policy document does not annul its original charter and maintains both its refusal to recognize the State of Israel and its adherence to armed resistance, changes have nonetheless occurred in Hamas's array of considerations and

interests, as well as its conduct. These changes have created new areas of flexibility for Hamas, Israel, Egypt, and other actors, including the Gulf states, the United States, the European Union, the UN, and international relief organizations. These areas of flexibility facilitate the development of creative ideas and a more diverse range of possible measures with the potential for change, as well as the reshaping of the Gazan reality in a manner that will make it possible to move forward and serve the vital interests of the involved actors, including Israel.

President Abbas's decision to cut salary payments of Palestinian Authority personnel in the Gaza Strip, and reduce the payments to Israel for fuel for the power station in the Strip, is a tool in the internal Palestinian struggle. It is an attempt by the Palestinian Authority and Fatah, under Abbas's leadership, to increase the burden on Hamas, strike at its financial sources, damage its status among the Gazan population, and ultimately lead it to change its behavior, relinquish its control over the Gaza Strip (even if only partially), allow the Palestinian Authority's return to the Strip (even if only partial), and enable Abbas to portray the Palestinian Authority as one political entity under his control.

Israel's public announcement agreeing to Abbas's demand to cut the payment for fuel caused panic in Gaza due to the already difficult humanitarian situation in the Strip. This development coincides with Qatar's isolation in the Arab world following a decision by the pragmatic Sunni camp, under Saudi and Egyptian leadership, to sever its diplomatic ties with Doha and saddle it with severe sanctions, due in part to its support of Hamas. For years, Qatar was one of Hamas's most prominent supporters, and since Operation Protective Edge has been the largest donor to Gaza's reconstruction.

Now, in this reality, Hamas finds itself at a strategic low point. The humanitarian plight in Gaza is liable to intensify as a result of the actions by the Palestinian Authority. Due to the immense pressure exerted from Arab states, Qatar is liable to significantly reduce its support of Hamas. A number of Hamas military figures who were operating comfortably in Qatar have been expelled from the country, and more may be deported in the future, including political leaders who run Hamas's political bureau in Doha. Iran is finding it difficult to translate its willingness to provide assistance into practice, due to the physical distance from the Gaza Strip and Egypt's improved, more effective control over the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt is pressuring Hamas to cease its cooperation with Wilayat Sina'a and has demanded that it hand over a number of wanted individuals who have taken refuge in the Gaza Strip - joining its familiar demand that Hamas cease all expressions of solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Finally, Salafist groups are challenging Hamas at home, threatening to drag it into a violent confrontation with Israel at a time that for Hamas would be a decidedly unfavorable development.

The Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip, with Sinwar at the helm, has sought a way out of the dead end before it, and the changing regional circumstances provide it with a number

of possibilities. Sinwar managed to put aside, at least for the moment, his bitter rivalry with Dahlan (which dates back to Dahlan's tenure as the head of the PA's preventive security forces in Gaza and his fierce and bloody struggle against Hamas). The new leader of Hamas in Gaza understood the possibility of making a change vis-à-vis Egypt and identified the willingness of the Gulf states, particularly the United Arab Emirates, to invest political capital and resources in the rebuilding of the Strip as part of its strategy of struggle against Qatar and its goal to wield regional influence. Furious with the Palestinian Authority and with Abbas, and determined to preserve Hamas's status as the sovereign in the Gaza Strip, Sinwar headed a Hamas delegation to Egypt. In the course of the one-week visit, he met with senior Egyptian intelligence officials and with Dahlan, who is backed by the United Arab Emirates and Egypt and who has emerged as a possible mediator between Egypt and Hamas regarding the electricity crisis. It is unclear what was decided during the meetings between Hamas and the Egyptian authorities, but Hamas presumably agreed to make some concessions vis-à-vis Egypt's demands (upon Sinwar's return to Gaza, for example, Hamas forces began setting up lookout positions along the border with Egypt, conducting clearing operations that left an empty, controlled strip, and improved its control mechanism along the border in order to prevent smuggling) to ensure the frequent and regular operation of the Rafah border crossing for civilians and for goods. It is also clear that a solution has been found – albeit temporary and limited, but nonetheless significant □ for the fuel crisis. Through Dahlan's mediation, Egypt has agreed to allow the entry of gas tankers to improve the continued operation of the power station in the Gaza Strip.

This Egyptian-Hamas maneuver, with Dahlan's participation, is a slap in the face to Abbas, making his actions redundant and making him ineffective within the Palestinian arena and elsewhere. It has also strengthened the status of Hamas as a governing force in the Gaza Strip and as a regional force with maneuverability and influence. It may likewise upgrade Dahlan's status as a potential challenger of Abbas as head of the Palestinian Authority, and perhaps also hasten the battle for succession within the Palestinian leadership. However, beyond the power struggles within the Palestinian arena, the situation has resulted in a unique convergence of interests between Hamas, Egypt, the Gulf states, Israel, and Mohammed Dahlan as a possible mediator between Israel and Hamas.

The cards that have been reshuffled have created circumstances and constraints for the actors in the arena that can potentially be leveraged as strategic opportunities to reshape the Gaza arena. Cooperation between Israel, Egypt, and the Gulf states, alongside Hamas's strategic weakness and Dahlan's possible mediating role in the Gaza arena, allow a reframing of the rules of the game. Exerting pressure on Hamas to stop its efforts at military buildup (particularly by means of limitations on smuggling) is now more feasible, in exchange for the regular operation of the Rafah border crossing, an easing of

the Israeli closure of the Strip, and an acceleration of the reconstruction process through increased efforts on the part of the Gulf states – particularly the construction of essential infrastructure facilities, with an emphasis on power stations, water desalination plants, and employment centers, perhaps in the Egyptian Rafah area and as sanctuaries within Israeli territory. Locating infrastructure facilities outside the Gaza Strip, in conjunction with Hamas's commitment to refrain from damaging them, will free up essential land from the already crowded Gaza Strip and make it easier for Arab and international parties to decide to invest in the establishment of such facilities. Reconstruction in Israeli and Egyptian territory can also progress relatively quickly, without disruptions related to the Gaza Strip and the influence of Hamas.

Ensuring that the potential within this opportunity is realized to the maximum possible extent – which could also make it possible to accelerate the normalization of life in the Gaza Strip and improve the local economic and infrastructure realities, perhaps even including the construction of a maritime port on an artificial island (as proposed by Israeli Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz) – will require a paradigm shift on the part of Israel. Israel must understand the process of institutionalization currently underway within Hamas and discover the potential of change. In doing so, it must also distance itself as much as possible from the power struggles within the Palestinian arena.

Leveraging this emerging opportunity will likely deepen the separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and perhaps even accelerate Gaza's establishment as a state entity independent of the Palestinian Authority. This might also disrupt resumption of the political process between Israel and the Palestinians. Nonetheless, Israel must therefore identify the option that represents the least problematic of available alternatives, assuming that the reality that unfolds will create better conditions that are more conducive to favorable possibilities in the future.