

Strategic Overview – The Reconstruction of the Gaza Strip: A Critical Imperative

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Situation Assessment

The current situation in the Gaza Strip is marked by several primary phenomena, led by Gaza's severe economic plight and deteriorated infrastructure. These hardships aggravate humanitarian distress, which in turn motivates belligerent tendencies and heightens the danger of security escalation between Israel and Hamas and other terrorist forces operating in the Strip. Additional parameters include Hamas's comprehensive and stable control of the region; the organization's proven capacity for destructive activity, both in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and vis-à-vis Israel's regional and international standing; and the limitations stemming from reconstruction of the Strip that hinges on concrete progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, including "reconstruction in exchange for demilitarization," which would strip Hamas and the other factions of their military capabilities, particularly the rocket arsenal and the capacity for high trajectory weapons fire.

The Gaza Strip on the Verge of Humanitarian Disaster

In the decade of Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip, the recurring distribution of resources relegated the welfare and economic future of the local population to a secondary position on the agenda, below military buildup. This has undermined the economic and social foundations of the region, which were already weak on the global scale and were well below those in the West Bank. Three rounds of military hostilities between Israel and Hamas (2008-9, 2012, and 2014) resulted in widespread destruction to the Gaza Strip

civil infrastructure, and since then the collapse has continued, bringing the region to the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe. In addition, the closure of the Strip effected by Israel and Egypt, the ensuing severe restrictions on the passage of goods and people to and from the Strip, and the Palestinian Authority's consistent resistance to cooperation on reconstruction continue to make it difficult to launch development plans that over time could halt the trend of collapse and perhaps even extricate the Strip from its current desperate situation.

The Plight in Gaza and the Escalation between Hamas and Israel

On the one hand, the severe conditions and the absence of hope for a better life, particularly a political settlement that would address (even if only partially) the Palestinian national yearnings for independence, have made it easier for Hamas to mobilize support for its political platform, which is based on the rejection of a political solution to the conflict with Israel. On the other hand, escalation in the struggle with Israel has been used by Hamas time and time again to try to force Israel and international parties to ease the pressure on the Strip, and to place blame on Israel for the Strip's current hardship.

In 2017, the projected date when life will no longer be possible in the Gaza Strip due to the total collapse of infrastructure in the region appeared increasingly imminent. Some in Israel's security community maintain that this breaking point will be reached in 2020, and predict that the distinct acceleration of the process of collapse will result in a humanitarian crisis. This in turn would likely prompt the Hamas leadership to initiate a renewed military confrontation with Israel.

The Stability of Hamas's Rule in the Strip

In 2007, Hamas seized control over the Gaza Strip through a military coup against local Fatah forces. In actuality, the Strip is a "natural" geographical stronghold for Hamas: it constituted the base of the organization's strength even before Hamas's expanding influence was proven in the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, and it is located in close geographical proximity to the parent movement – the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The takeover followed Hamas's victory in the 2006 elections, and Fatah's subsequent refusal to join a unity government, due to Hamas's rejection of

the three demands stipulated by the international community as conditions for recognition of the organization: recognition of Israel; acceptance of the agreements that Israel had signed with the PLO and the Palestinian Authority; and a commitment to refrain from engaging in terrorism and violence. Attempts over the past decade to reach understandings regarding a division of power between the Hamas and Fatah camps have ended in failure due to the bitter organizational-political and ideological rivalry between them. The organizations/parties have not even been able to reach agreement regarding measures that could have slowed the collapse of Gaza's economy and infrastructure. Based on its policy of separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Israel has supported the demands of the Palestinian Authority, which sought to complicate the situation for Hamas and thereby accelerate the organization's weakening and loss of power.

The sole chance the Palestinian Authority has to regain control of the Strip is if the reconciliation agreement, signed between Fatah and Hamas on October 12, 2017, is fully implemented. Even then, however, its control of the Strip will not be complete, because Hamas will almost certainly not agree to give up its military capability. More generally, full implementation of the agreement is highly in doubt. Alternatively, toppling Hamas rule will only be possible if Israel implements a broad resource-intensive measure under the assumption that the PA would be willing to assume responsibility for the area.

In practice, Israel has faced three possible courses of action: toppling Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip; engaging in ongoing activity to weaken Hamas's rule and facilitate the restoration of PA control in the Gaza Strip; and de facto recognition of Hamas's rule. Israel chose a combination of options two and three: striving to weaken Hamas in military terms, and at the same time, designating it as the party responsible for actions taken in the Gaza Strip, or in other words, recognizing its rule. This is reflected first and foremost in Israel's demand that Hamas maintain security calm in the Strip and implement a policy of restraint as to its own capabilities and forces and those of the other militant factions there. Presumably any attempt at a transition of power between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip will be neither direct nor smooth, and also stands to involve a phase of violent chaos.

Hamas as a “Spoiler”

For years, Hamas was considered an element that would seek to disrupt every attempt to promote political dialogue between Israel and the Palestinian Authority aimed at reaching a settlement. This view of Hamas was borne out when negotiations were on the agenda, and the attacks perpetrated by Hamas played a key role in disrupting Israeli-Palestinian relations during the years following the signing of the Oslo Accords. However, against the background of ongoing political stagnation, and due to the deterioration of the economic and infrastructure situation in the Strip, the organization's role as a “spoiler” expanded beyond the ability to thwart a political process, as the organization came to demonstrate the ability to pose a direct threat to the security of the State of Israel and its international and regional standing. The rounds of hostilities, which demonstrated Hamas's military buildup, exacted a heavy price of Israel in terms of blood and treasure, and generated much political criticism of Israel in the international community, which accused Israel of responding in disproportionate fashion to Hamas's military provocations. Hamas's role as a “spoiler” in recent years, therefore, has been its proven ability to force Israel into an impossible situation, in which responding firmly to Hamas's military provocations results in criticism due to the unavoidable injury to human life and infrastructure in the Strip, whereas restraint results in the public criticism of decision makers within Israel itself.

Additional destructive potential, beyond its being an essential part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, lies in Gaza's remaining a bone of contention between Israel and various key parties in the Middle East. This has been particularly prominent during the rounds of military confrontation between Israel and Hamas, when Israel's ability to inflict damage on a significant scale has been proven time and time again, yet at a cost of weakening Israel's already fragile relations with countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey – that are willing to have relations of some kind with Israel – and inciting criticism of Israel on the Arab and Muslim street.

The issue of security tension and/or calm in the Gaza Strip holds particular relevance for Israel's relations with Egypt. Egypt fears being held responsible for what transpires in the Strip. It also seeks to prevent escalation in the region that could spill over and spark unrest in the internal Egyptian arena, against the background of popular support for the Gaza population; this could easily be translated into pressure on the regime to scale back its security relations

with Israel. The prevailing hardship in the Strip likewise plays a role in facilitating relations between terrorist factions and radical Islamic elements in the Strip, and Islamic State elements operating in the Sinai Peninsula. At the same time, in light of its rivalry with Qatar and Turkey, Egypt has limited the investments of these countries in Gaza's reconstruction (and as a result, their ability to consolidate their status in the Palestinian arena and the region as a whole). In tandem, while leading the reconciliation process between Fatah and Hamas, Egypt strives to lay most of the responsibility for the region at Israel's doorstep and expects Israel to deal decisively with Hamas, which in essence is a wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, Hamas's ideological ties to the Muslim Brotherhood have not prevented the group's leadership and Iran from reestablishing ties. Relations between Tehran and Hamas, despite the fluctuations they have experienced over the years, are seen by the organization's leadership as an insurance policy and a foundation for continued military buildup, and by Tehran as an actual and potentially larger channel for exercising influence in the Palestinian arena, and therefore as an additional arena in which to challenge Israel.

Limitations of the Systemic Approach

In 2005, Israel withdrew its civilian settlements and its military forces from the Gaza Strip, and has no territorial claims there. In addition, Israel has no legal obligation to maintain civil and economic relations with an enemy entity (Hamas proclaims itself to be a bitter enemy of the State of Israel, although since its seizure of the Strip, its leadership has advanced a number of proposals for a *hudna*, a long term ceasefire, in exchange for a comprehensive Israeli withdrawal to 1967 borders). Nonetheless, ties exist between Israel and the Gaza Strip. Israel is held at least morally responsible for the situation in the Strip, not only because of the closure it imposed on the region but also in light of the Oslo Accords, which specified that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are one territorial unit. The ties between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are strong, despite Israel's policy of separation between the regions and the bitter rivalry between Hamas and Fatah/PA/ PLO.

Still, attempts to advance the "policy of separation," pursued by both Israel and the PA – i.e., to further understandings between Israel and the Palestinians while taking advantage of the internal Palestinian rift in the hopes that political progress will weaken Hamas – have been a dismal failure.

With the Annapolis process, for example, Hamas proved its ability to set the agenda when talks, which might have reached a dead end in any event, were cut off by a round of fighting between Israel and Hamas (Operation Cast Lead, 2008-2009). Against this background, from a principal Israeli perspective, it is appropriate not only to desist from active opposition to Fatah-Hamas accommodation, reached in October 2017 under Egyptian auspices – particularly as Israel continued to insist on the previous conditions for dialogue with Hamas. Rather, it is in Israel's interest to encourage a thawing of the relations between Hamas and the PA, as a functioning Palestinian Authority with a broad foundation of national legitimacy is a distinct Israeli interest, primarily if Israel desires a political-territorial settlement with the Palestinians.

While the administrative agreement signed by Hamas and Fatah has been dubbed a “reconciliation agreement,” the rivalry between Hamas and Fatah is far from exhausted. Even a concrete political process, accompanied by measures demonstrating Israel's intention to allow a Palestinian entity a reasonable independent existence and perhaps also to mitigate belligerent tendencies in the Palestinian arena, is not on the agenda. Indeed, the thawed relations between the parties, which enabled the understandings regarding management of the Strip, was not intended to facilitate the PA's return to the negotiating table, although the PA retained its existing ability to engage in political contacts with Israel. The goal of the PA in accepting responsibility for the Kerem Shalom and Erez crossings and for the civilian security apparatuses, and in agreeing to lift some of the sanctions on the Strip, was to entrench itself in the region in the hope of ultimately regaining power there. For its part, Hamas, along with its resolute refusal to dismantle the military infrastructure it built over the years, accepted the agreement given its understanding that the humanitarian plight has eroded its stature in the Strip, and due to the pressure from Egypt.

Israel would do well to recognize the failure of the strategy that harms the population's civil conditions based on the premise that they will then turn their anger and frustration against their leadership – in this case, Hamas – and exert pressure on it to accede to Israel's demands, or to channel its activity into the realm of social services, thereby reducing the burden on and security threat to Israel. This strategy has thus far failed to achieve its goal. On the contrary, the opposite has proven to be true.

The Task: Reconstructing Gaza while Preventing Hamas Buildup

Developing and launching a reconstruction project for the Gaza Strip necessitates several conditions, including: security calm in the Strip; the ability to prevent the military buildup of Hamas under the cover of reconstruction measures; mobilization of the international community for reconstruction; the cooperation of the Palestinian Authority; and Egypt's commitment to the plan. As the intended effort described below is an Israeli initiative, to be implemented in a coordinated manner under regional and international leadership, a change in Israeli policy regarding the Strip is necessary, as well as a shift regarding Hamas's rule in the region.

A Change in Israel's Approach to the Gaza Strip

Changes in Israel's policy toward the Gaza Strip in recent years point to the closure that is weakened after each severe round of fighting. This suggests that Hamas's policy of escalating the conflict in order to cause Israel to take measures to ease the closure has proven effective, even if escalation took a heavy toll on the local population and relaxed conditions did not change the fundamentally dismal situation in the Strip. Moreover, from round to round, Israeli officials have come to recognize that the Hamas government is the sole responsible party in the Strip and has demonstrated a greater willingness to reach understandings and arrangements with it, albeit through the mediation of a third party, primarily Egypt.

It can be argued that Hamas will consider progress on reconstruction of the Gaza Strip as a prize for its provocation and violent activity over the years, and as encouragement of what it considers "resolute steadfastness" against Israel. This suggests that momentum in reconstruction will intensify aggressiveness in the ranks of the organization. However, a reconstruction drive that achieves concrete results will presumably restrain belligerent tendencies among the Hamas leadership, albeit over time. The welfare of the inhabitants of the Strip is not what guided the organization's leadership in recent years when it chose the route of escalation. Yet given the severe humanitarian distress in the region, and in the absence of hope regarding efforts to compel Israel and Egypt to make a fundamental policy change by military means, a shift in the considerations guiding the organization is possible.

In light of this assumption, which reflects measured and calculated optimism, Israel would do well to consider moderating its policy regarding the Strip, specifically in terms of measured reconstruction initiatives, to be implemented under conditions of (relative) security calm, while awaiting a political development that would allow dialogue with the Palestinian Authority on reconstruction. At the same time, the approach of making political progress with the Palestinians conditional upon continued calm in the Gaza Strip and the establishment of a unified Palestinian Authority should be abandoned. After all, this approach gives Hamas veto power over the political process and narrows the range of Israeli flexibility. Hamas must be denied this ability.

By providing assistance to the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip without receiving any political recompense or a commitment on the part of Hamas to stop its military buildup, Israel will be doing some harm to the standing of the PA. The reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, however, must be recognized as a critical and immediate imperative, in light of the threats and dangers – to Israel and to the inhabitants of the Strip itself – posed by the situation in the region, which are likely to intensify if mitigating action is not taken. The increasing hardship in the region stands to intensify belligerent tendencies, which will be manifested in high trajectory weapons fire into Israel and attempts to infiltrate Israeli territory via tunnels with the aim of carrying out attacks. It is also possible that spontaneous or Hamas-organized mass marches will be held with the aim of crossing the border into Israel. It is not inconceivable that some of those taking part in these marches will do so based on the belief that it is preferable to be under arrest in Israel than to live in the unbearable conditions prevailing in the Gaza Strip. Therefore, the restoration of civilian authority in the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian Authority is an opportunity to advance the reconstruction project and to bolster the PA and President Abbas. This will make it possible to demonstrate to the Palestinian public that political activity benefits it far more than violent resistance, and only the PA can mobilize the regional and international support necessary for reconstruction. Egypt, which brokered the reconciliation agreement, should be recruited to jumpstart the reconstruction process that was approved by the donor states in Cairo in 2014 after Operation Protective Edge and invite these same states to a follow-up conference, likewise in

Cairo. Egypt's involvement will add an important legitimacy component to the regional and international framework of the overall effort.

Security Calm

Any practical plan for rebuilding the Gaza Strip will be conditional on a commitment by Hamas to ongoing security calm and a halt to its military buildup. Stopping the smuggling and infiltration from the Sinai Peninsula into the Gaza Strip will require resolute Egyptian participation. Israel will need to give up its demand for immediate disarmament as a condition for beginning the reconstruction project for two reasons. The first is recognition of the slim prospects of persuading Hamas to relinquish its military apparatus, which for Hamas constitutes protection against Israeli attempts to strip it of power. The second is the set of difficulties that can be expected in establishing an effective international mechanism for stripping Hamas of the capabilities that are a threat to Israel.

Broad Regional and International Involvement

The reconstruction of the Gaza Strip will require immense resources that can only be acquired through long term international commitment (previous commitments, primarily by the Arab countries, were only partially fulfilled). To translate plans into action and ensure the coordination of specific initiatives and a correct distribution of resources, a multinational taskforce is necessary, comprising senior well-connected representatives of the countries and institutions that are officially committed to the project.

This taskforce will also need to include an inspection and supervision mechanism at the Gaza Strip's land and maritime border crossings that will be responsible for preventing the infiltration of weapons and dual-use materials used in Hamas's tunnels, fortifications, and weapons industry. A major component that will provide the foundation for international involvement in the reconstruction project will be an itemization of the sanctions to be imposed on Hamas in the event that it deviates from understandings regarding security calm, attempts to breach the security inspection wall, or takes advantage of dual-use building materials and products (for example, agricultural fertilizer) for the development of weapons.

A taskforce that includes parties from the Middle East and the international community will also be of added value in convincing Hamas to allow the

reconstruction project to proceed, given the restrictions that will be imposed on it and the increased price it will be required to pay if it violates the security calm. Without a doubt, the restraint that Hamas will be compelled to exercise will spark criticism in the ranks of the organization, as well as practical attempts to undermine the security calm itself, without which the project will not be able to move forward. However, presenting this restraint as a gesture to the international community that will benefit the local population will help the Hamas leadership contend with the anticipated charges of surrender to Israeli dictates.

The international involvement will necessarily reflect only part of Israel's responsibility for the situation in the Strip and the reconstruction. However, there are measures that can be taken by Israel – subject to the decision of the Israeli government and the recommendations of the Israeli security establishment – independent of the formation of the multinational taskforce and the definition of its mandate, even if the attempt to establish it bears no fruit. The relevance of these measures is explained below as part of the reconstruction actions that in principle can be implemented during the first phase.

Incorporating the PA into the Reconstruction Project

As the address for political arrangements between Israel and the Palestinians, the Palestinian Authority's involvement in the reconstruction effort is critical. Incorporating the PA will ease the entry of resources into the Strip – as a function of its international status and as a means of bypassing regulations barring direct relations with Hamas. In tandem, PA involvement will erode Hamas's image as the primary party benefiting from the reconstruction, will counterbalance the strengthening of the Hamas government as a result of the reconstruction, and will temper the PA's protest that reconstruction is tantamount to recognition of Hamas's control over the Strip. From Israel's perspective, a more comfortable political situation for promoting the reconstruction project would be internal Palestinian reconciliation and the establishment of an "agreement government" in the Palestinian arena, as long as it recognizes existing agreements between Israel and the PLO/Palestinian Authority and commits to preventing terrorism and violence. However, even if Hamas does not meet the demands made by Israel and the

Quartet as conditions for dialogue, the accommodation process launched by Hamas and Fatah in October 2017 should not be obstructed.

The Egyptian Role

Egypt must be incorporated into the reconstruction project. Cairo's sponsorship of the agreement reached between Fatah and Hamas in October 2017, and the willingness to demonstrate greater openness regarding the passage of people and goods from the Gaza Strip into Egyptian territory confirm its central role as a mediator vis-à-vis Hamas and as an element preventing the smuggling of weapons into the Strip. Beyond the level of direct practical effects, Israel will derive political and security benefits from coordination with Cairo, even in the specific context of contending with the acute distress in the Strip, and from the effort to restrain Hamas while attempting to moderate its behavior in the political and military arena.

The Components of the Initiative

Urgent humanitarian undertakings pertain to improvement of the basic living conditions in the Strip. This requires financial investment, but even more, depends on willingness, an organizational framework, skilled human resources, and security preparations. Improvement in these humanitarian realms will provide the reconstruction project with a critical element of visibility, which will help convince skeptics that the actions underway are taken in genuine good faith. This will make it possible to mobilize the patience necessary to support the security calm, critical for completing the long term undertakings.

Medium and long term undertakings will require the construction of a resource-intensive physical and technological infrastructure that will take several years to complete. For this reason, implementation will have to begin as soon as possible following the achievement of regional and international agreements. Presumably the commencement of infrastructure work will involve at least partially visible measures, which will convey hope to the Gaza population and the promise of a better future.

Urgent Undertakings: The Civil-Humanitarian Realm

- a. Relaxation of the closure: allowing the regular passage of goods and people in and out of the Gaza Strip is a necessary condition for easing

the pressure that has built up in the region. It is also necessary for promoting specific projects as part of the overall reconstruction project. More specifically:

- i. The activity at the Erez and Kerem Shalom border crossings must be expanded. Supervision and security inspections will be conducted in cooperation with Israel, Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, and perhaps also the representatives of international parties. In exchange for this measure, Hamas will commit to close the tunnels and cease using them altogether.
 - ii. Israel will allow the export of goods from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank and elsewhere via the Ashdod Port.
 - iii. Israel will allow workers from the Gaza Strip to work in Israeli communities in the Gaza envelope, and work will begin on the construction of employment zones and light industry zones along the border of the Strip. This will improve the economic situation of the Gaza population, and at the same time, will serve to restrain attempts by Hamas and other terrorist factions to infiltrate Israel.
- b. Health services: The hospitals and clinics throughout Gaza will be repaired, supplied, and equipped, including with the assistance of medical teams from Israel's Arab sector. Until the completion of the electrical infrastructure, rebuilt to supply the civilian and industrial needs of the Strip, hospitals will be given preference among the institutions that are in need of electricity. The same goes for the supply of potable running water. Restrictions will be eased on the provision of entry permits into Israel for the purpose of receiving medical treatment, especially in the case of children and their parents.
 - c. Energy: The supply of electricity from Israel to the Gaza Strip will be expanded, paid for by the Palestinian Authority and international parties.
 - d. Water supply: First and foremost, action must be taken regarding sewage treatment and the provision of potable water. This situation will improve immediately with a resumption of regular electricity supply.
 - e. Education: A regular supply of electricity and water will be guaranteed for schools and preschools. The international organizations that operate schools in the Gaza Strip, especially UNRWA, will be expected to delete inciting material from textbooks and replace them with educational content in the spirit of peace and coexistence with the State of Israel.

- f. Initial economic development:
 - i. Gaza's fishing zone in the Mediterranean Sea will be expanded.
 - ii. An international task force will be permitted to operate in the sea to prevent the smuggling of weapons and civilian products that bypass the ground inspection mechanisms.
 - iii. Activity to rehabilitate the agricultural realm in Gaza will be launched, possibly with the assistance of advisors from Israel. Agricultural experts from the Gaza envelope are promising candidates for such positions. Israel will share advanced technologies with the Gaza Strip farmers in order to accelerate development in this realm. Quotas will be set for the export of agricultural products from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank and to Israel, and perhaps also to other countries.
 - iv. Contractors from the Strip will be engaged to work on the repair and reconstruction of buildings. Their work will be closely supervised by a multinational taskforce with regard to the supply and use of materials, the proper use of funding, and progress in construction.
- g. Protected zones: Specified areas in the Gaza Strip and Israel next to the border will be defined as non-aggression areas in order to ensure the reasonable progress of the reconstruction project and the effective use of the international investment.

Long Term Undertakings

- a. Water and energy infrastructure: Water and electrical infrastructures must be constructed in the Gaza Strip with an eye toward current and future demand, in accordance with estimates for natural reproduction and economic development. As part of this endeavor, the natural gas supply infrastructure will be completed. A desalination plant should be constructed. Careful consideration should be given to the possibility of building the facility within Egyptian territory close to the border, so that the inhabitants of Rafah and the northeastern Sinai Peninsula, which are in Egyptian territory, can also benefit from its output.
- b. Green energy: Infrastructure for the provision of green energy will be constructed in the Strip and in Israeli territory, based on technology developed in Israel
- c. Sources of employment: An international loan and grant fund for small and medium size businesses will be established, and a tender will be

issued to international companies to build factories in the Gaza Strip and establish employee training tracks – hi-tech and low-tech (agriculture, small industry, textiles) alike. The drive will be to minimize unemployment and create a local basis for an economy that will develop ties to the West Bank economy, the Israeli economy, and markets in the Middle East and the international arena, yet still have the foundations necessary to encourage investment, development, and security calm.

- d. Maritime access: A railway will be constructed between the Ashdod Port and the Gaza Strip. This railway will be used to transport goods to and from the region. At the same time, a project will be launched for the construction of an island off the coast of the Gaza Strip, including a port (and perhaps also a landing strip), and then operated under the supervision of an international force that will engage in meticulous security inspections. This supervision, like the supervision exercised at the land border crossings, will be committed to prevent weapons and dual-use materials from entering the Strip.
- e. Natural gas field: British Gas will be authorized to develop a natural gas field off the Gaza Coast. This plan will be coordinated with the Palestinian Authority, which will be able to sell gas to Egypt and Jordan and profit from the sales.

Conclusion

To make it possible to formulate and guarantee the principles, understandings, and commitments required for a broad resource-intensive reconstruction project in the Gaza Strip, it is necessary to strike a balance between various and at times contradictory interests. The tension between requirements and interests is evident in all areas of reconstruction:

- a. The urgent need to launch a project to extricate the Gaza Strip from its current hardship and its accelerated slide into humanitarian catastrophe, versus the need to prevent the strengthening of Hamas.
- b. The interest in preventing a stronger Hamas foothold in the Gaza Strip, and the interest in bolstering the PA in the Palestinian arena, both the West Bank and Gaza, and preserving its relevance as a future partner for negotiations with Israel for interim settlements, especially pertaining to dialogue regarding an overall settlement.

- c. The need to ease restrictions at the border crossings, versus the security needs of Israel (and Egypt) and the related need to implement close supervision of the Strip's land and maritime border crossings.
- d. The Israeli policy of formal non-recognition of Hamas, versus Israel's de facto recognition of the organization as the governing force in the Strip and therefore as the party responsible for action in the region, with whom coordination is essential for making progress in any reconstruction project.
- e. The need to include the PA in the reconstruction project, versus the policy of separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank that is embraced by both Israel and the Palestinian Authority.
- f. International awareness regarding the problematic situation in the Gaza Strip, versus the sense of futility regarding investment in the region due to the constant risk of security escalation and the lack of political hope regarding the Strip in particular and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general.

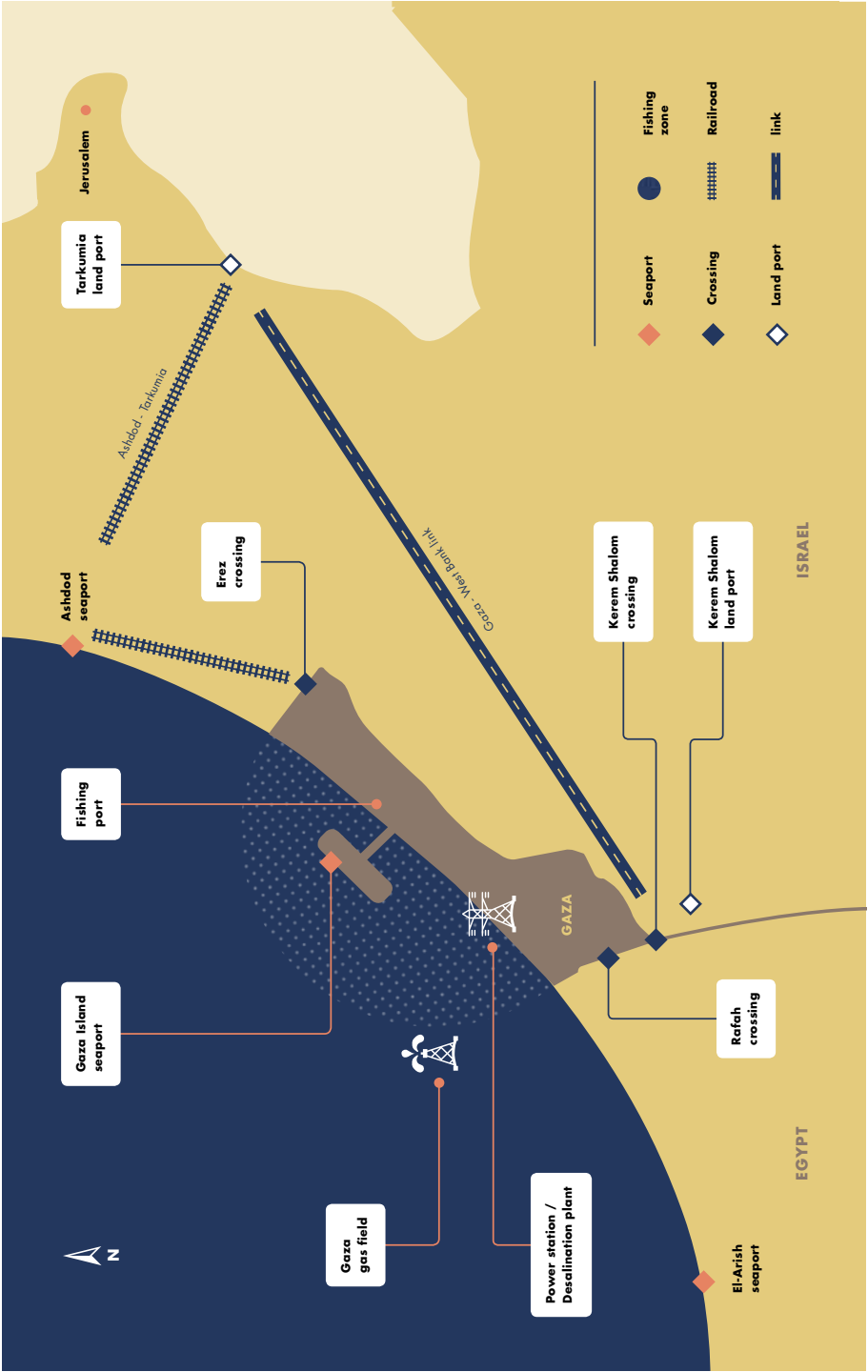
Prominent among these sources of tension and conflicts of interest is Israel's policy of formal non-recognition of Hamas. Israeli policy in this context emphasizes the separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and on this basis calls for opposition to Palestinian reconciliation out of fear that this could make it easier for Hamas to take control of the Palestinian Authority. Moreover, there is concern in Israel regarding an undermining of the Palestinian Authority as a result of the inevitable upgraded relations between Israel and Hamas during the advancement of the reconstruction project in the Gaza Strip. However, Hamas is already acceptable to Israel as a designated party for security dialogue, even if only indirectly through Egyptian mediation. The day-to-day administrative contact between Israel and officials in the Gaza Strip, who are necessarily linked to Hamas, constitutes a foundation for the expansion of dialogue on civilian matters. Reminding the public and decision makers in Israel that the closure of the Gaza Strip is not complete in any event would help sell the principle of coordination, and as such, help overcome the political, public, and emotional opposition that can be expected to emerge vis-à-vis a reconstruction initiative.

Another dilemma is the political volte-face that Israel will need to make in order to promote the initiative of a multinational reconstruction project for the Gaza Strip. After years of diplomatic, economic, and military effort aimed at limiting Hamas's activity and weakening its rule, and in light of the

ongoing stagnation in the political process with the Palestinians, Israel will need to raise awareness about the severe and still worsening situation in the Strip in order to mobilize assistance. This comes after years when regional and global attention has been focused on other places in the throes of crisis – the civil war in Syria, the spread of jihadist terrorism in the Middle East and the international arena, and the subsequent severe refugee problem that has swept over Europe. Israel and Hamas have not engaged in a large scale military altercation since 2014, and this has also played a role in removing the Gaza issue from the top of the regional and international agenda. If Israel wants to launch an international initiative for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, it will first need to breach the wall of relative apathy, and in so doing risk being blamed for the harsh conditions in the region. At the same time, a comprehensive reconstruction initiative would be an appropriate response to criticism in this spirit.

In conclusion, the Gaza Strip reconstruction project requires the fulfillment of four conditions, all of which are essential and none of which in itself is sufficient:

- a. Mutual commitment by both Hamas and Israel to ongoing security calm, which will provide a basis for building an atmosphere that supports reconstruction and prevents further destruction in the Strip. Also necessary will be a mutual commitment to establish protected areas containing water, energy, and economic infrastructure, and to prevent these areas from being attacked or used for an attack, even in the event of a breakdown of the security calm.
- b. The Palestinian Authority's incorporation into the reconstruction project. To this end, Israel will need to refrain from disrupting the reconciliation process between Fatah and Hamas and the establishment of a Palestinian unity government that will focus on the reconstruction project.
- c. Prominent Egyptian involvement in advancing reconstruction that takes the form of mediation vis-à-vis Hamas regarding all aspects of the project, as well as an effort to restrain Hamas and prevent the smuggling of weapons into the Gaza Strip. An Egyptian commitment to the regular opening of the Rafah border crossing for human and commercial transit, and participation in the international supervision and inspection mechanism, will also help further reconstruction. In exchange, Egypt can be offered



the opportunity to establish desalination facilities and employment infrastructure in its territory.

- d. Regional and international involvement in the establishment of a multinational taskforce to be responsible for the reconstruction project, including planning, management, implementation, and maintenance conditions that facilitate its continuation. This task force will also need to encompass an effective supervision mechanism to prevent resources designated for reconstruction from being used to further Hamas's military buildup.

An Israeli decision to initiate a reconstruction framework for the Gaza Strip and conduct a determined campaign to mobilize regional and international support and involvement in the project must be the product of a cost-benefit analysis. One cannot ignore the risks involved in the gradual success of the process in terms of the consolidation of Hamas's rule in the region, a decline in the status of the Palestinian Authority, the restrictions that will apply to Israel's use of force in the Strip in the event of escalation, and future difficulties in stimulating and concluding a political process toward an overall Israeli-Palestinian settlement. However, at the present time, the situation is as follows: Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip is a fact; the Palestinian Authority contends with the ongoing erosion of its status; and Israel and the PA have not agreed on the conditions that would facilitate a return to the negotiating table, even if only to further interim settlements on the way to a comprehensive settlement. These political aspects of the Gaza issue must be considered in conjunction with the severe humanitarian situation currently prevailing in the Strip, the resulting danger of deterioration of the security realm, and the difficulty of remaining on the sidelines in view of the increasing hardships of the inhabitants of the region.

The conclusion is clear: a change in approach is required. This call is directed toward the Israeli government, the institutions and states in the international arena, the Palestinian Authority, the pragmatic Arab states, and the Hamas leadership itself.