United States Policy toward the Gaza Strip

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The stated United States goal in its approach to the Palestinian territories is to promote a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which the West Bank and Gaza would form two non-contiguous parts of the future Palestinian state. Toward that end the United States has refrained from crafting an explicit policy on Gaza. In practice, however, over the last decade its policies vis-à-vis the West Bank and Gaza have differed entirely. Since the 2006 Palestinian elections, while working toward a two-state solution, the United States has been relatively disengaged from Gaza, seeking to weaken Hamas while strengthening the PA. Of the international community, the United States is second only to Israel in its tough approach toward Hamas. This is not only a formal constraint, but one that hinders its ability to deliver aid to Gaza and have a leading role – and leverage – on developments in the Strip. This challenge is compounded by the absence of US official personnel on the ground in Gaza who are not local staff, a limitation posed before the elections, after three Americans were killed in an explosion of a diplomatic convoy in 2003.[1] Nevertheless, periodical flare-ups and a series of humanitarian crises in recent years have forced the United States to become more involved in Gaza and adopt a reactive, and recently a more proactive approach toward the Strip, focusing mostly on stabilization efforts.

This paper reviews the evolution of US policy toward Gaza following Israel's disengagement in 2005. It discusses the effectiveness of the current US approach toward Gaza, and analyzes the key US interests, leverage, and limitations that pertain to the Strip. Finally, based on open-source materials and off the record conversations with former US officials across administrations, experts, and NGO staff working on Gaza, the paper recommends concrete short and long term policy options for the United States in Gaza.

US Gaza Policy since 2005

In April 2004, President George W. Bush embraced then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan for unilateral Israeli disengagement from Gaza and wrote that "the United States will lead efforts, working together with Jordan, Egypt, and others in the international community, to build the capacity and will of Palestinian institutions to fight terrorism, dismantle terrorist organizations, and prevent the areas from which Israel has withdrawn from posing a threat that would have to be addressed by any other means."[2] As part of this effort, however, the United States also demanded that Israel carry out a similar disengagement move in the West Bank, eventually agreeing on the northern West Bank, to maintain the perception of handling Gaza and the West Bank as one territorial and political unit. At the time, former US ambassador to Israel and Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Martin Indyk warned that in writing this letter President Bush has committed the United States in "ensuring that the Gaza mini-state created by Israel's withdrawal does not turn into a failed terrorist state." Further, he warned that the United States would be responsible for both a possible emergence of Hamas's control over Gaza as well as an Israeli incursion to stop terrorist attacks emanating from the Strip.[3] While Indyk was correct in his projections on future developments in Gaza, his assertion that "the United States will end up inheriting the problems of Gaza" was wrong. Instead, US involvement in Gaza since the Israeli disengagement has for the most part been quite limited.

Response to Hamas's Rise to Power

As part of the attempt by the Bush administration to bring democracy to the Arab world, the United States urged the Palestinians to hold free elections. After Mahmoud Abbas won the presidential election in February 2005, the United States pushed him to hold elections for a Palestinian Legislative Council. The relative importance of the Legislative Council was also a product of previous US policies in the Arafat era, when the United States pushed the PA to shift power from the President's office to the Prime Minister's. Although Israel was worried about Hamas's participation in the elections, the Bush administration believed that Fatah would win.[4] The elections were scheduled for August 2005, the time of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, but later postponed to January 2006. Hamas won 74 out of 132 Legislative Council seats, while Fatah won 45. This victory in the Legislative Council

elections meant that Hamas was to appoint the prime minister, who was now responsible for financial and security affairs in the Palestinian territories.

In the aftermath of the elections, the United States, along with the other members of the Middle East Quartet (the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations) and Israel refused to legitimize Hamas's victory. The Quartet conditioned continued assistance to the PA on Hamas's renunciation of violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous Israeli-Palestinian interim agreements. Hamas refused to accept these conditions. In March 2006, Hamas formed a new government without Fatah (which refused to join a Hamas-led coalition or hand over PA security forces to Hamas). Subsequently, the United States and the EU announced that they were halting assistance to the newly-formed Hamas-led PA government. While this new policy was not applicable to aid transferred through international and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), cutting funds to the PA created a severe fiscal crisis. Compounding the situation was Israel's withholding of some $50 million in monthly tax and customs revenues that it collects for the PA as agreed in the Oslo Accords, and the PA's loss of access to banks that feared anti-terrorism laws.[5] Thus, the Hamas government was left unable to pay salaries, creating substantial domestic pressures. While the United States and its allies had hoped that sanctions would weaken Hamas and drive it from power, in practice it created space for Iranian influence. Iran reportedly provided Hamas leaders with much needed cash that they brought into the territories.[6] Despite the injection of some cash, though, living standards deteriorated in the Palestinian territories, exacerbating existing friction between Fatah and Hamas.

Efforts to Isolate and Weaken Hamas

Throughout the years, various attempts were made to reconcile between Fatah and Hamas and help the two sides build a unity government. The goal of these efforts was twofold: end the Fatah-Hamas rivalry and the aid embargo on the PA since the elections. The first such serious attempt known as the Mecca Agreement was made by Saudi Arabia in February 2007 and resulted in a new government that included Fatah and Hamas officials, as well as independents, including Salam Fayyad. Under the agreement Hamas was to handle domestic affairs and Fatah and the technocrats would deal with international affairs. The new government committed to respect previous

agreements signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) but did not commit to the renunciation of violence. President Bush said he was "disappointed" with the new government, but the United States kept the option open of meeting non-Hamas members of the government. After more than a year with no formal diplomatic US-Palestinian interaction, the US Consul General in Jerusalem met with then-Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. A month later, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Fayyad in Washington. According to reports at the time, the United States was examining ways to allow European and Arab funds (but not American) to flow into PA accounts without violating US laws.[7] By taking these steps the US approach deviated from Israel's, which remained steadfastly resistant to any contact with the Palestinian government that included Hamas as long as it refused to abide by the Quartet conditions. Israel also continued to withhold Palestinian tax and customs revenue.[8]

Despite talks about removing some US obstacles to aid provision to the new PA, the United States continued its post-2006 elections pursuit of redirecting assistance to President Mahmoud Abbas. In November 2006, when tensions between Hamas and Fatah were already high, then-US security coordinator for the Palestinians Lieutenant General Keith Dayton reportedly urged Muhammad Dahlan, a Gaza-based Fatah politician who was head of the Palestinian National Security Council and at odds with Hamas, to "build up your forces in order to take on Hamas," and promised $86 million in aid.[9] Two months later, an administration spokesman reported, President Bush instructed Secretary Rice to transfer "about $86.4 million in aid to help Palestinian security forces under President Mahmoud Abbas's direct control…to help provide law and order in Gaza and the West Bank, fight terror, and to facilitate movement and access especially in Gaza."[10]

Congress did not approve the full aid package but agreed to $59 million in non-lethal aid consisting of uniforms with protective gear, operational equipment, such as riot shields, handcuffs, and batons, and first aid kits, but not weapons and ammunitions.[11] The administration tried to bypass Congress and urged Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates to provide military aid. Egypt for example equipped Fatah with arms and trained its fighters. Hamas deepened its ties with Iran for military assistance.[12] In arming Fatah to defeat Hamas, the United States helped fuel the tensions

that would eventually spark the June 2007 fighting that ended with Hamas driving Fatah forces out of Gaza and taking over the government.[13]

In the following year and a half until the end of its term, the Bush administration continued its policy of isolating and attempting to defeat Hamas, and this approach dictated a disengaged US policy toward Gaza and its population. While the intended goal was to isolate Hamas and remove it from power, US policy toward Gaza in 2005-2007 inadvertently helped Hamas consolidate its power in Gaza and created an opening for Iran to fill the gap created in the US absence. While the United States at the time was far from singularly at fault and was rather one of many actors that devised flawed policies toward Gaza, its mistakes, most notably pushing for elections despite Palestinian and Israeli reservations, played a significant role in enabling Hamas to seize power in Gaza.

Impact of the Three Israel-Hamas Wars

When President Obama came to office he continued his predecessor's policy – actively pushing for a two-state solution and at the same time boycotting Hamas until it met the Quartet conditions. This strategy remained unsuccessful, and US ability, and will, to support Gaza remained limited, especially initially. However, events on the ground eventually forced the Obama administration to pay somewhat closer attention to Gaza.

The biggest challenges the Obama administration faced in the Strip had to do with three Israel-Hamas wars in five years. The first was Operation Cast Lead, which took place during the transition into office (December 2008-January 2009), followed by Operations Pillar of Defense in 2012 and Protective Edge in 2014. While Operation Cast Lead had already ended by the time President Obama came into office, the administration played a central role in organizing a donor conference in Egypt for reconstruction of Gaza, where donors pledged $5 billion. Most of the aid, however, never materialized. In addition, in the aftermath of the operation, a central component of US strategy became working with international partners to prevent smuggling of arms that were coming from Iran into Sudan and then up through Egypt into Gaza.

In 2012, the Obama administration was instrumental in mediating an end to the week-long Operation Pillar of Defense. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton conducted shuttle diplomacy with Israel as well as with Egypt. At

the time, the Muslim Brotherhood-led Egyptian government had strong ties with Hamas, which it leveraged to achieve a rapid ceasefire.

In 2013, the Obama administration successfully mediated an initial rapprochement between Israel and Turkey. The two countries downgraded their diplomatic relations in 2011 after the *Mavi Marmara* incident, in which Israeli Defense Forces intercepted a flotilla from Turkey to Gaza, resulting in the death of 10 Turkish nationals, one of whom was a dual US-Turkish citizen. The United States worked actively as a mediator, and during President Obama's 2013 visit to Israel, PM Netanyahu called President Erdogan and the countries agreed to begin negotiations on an arrangement to resume relations. The reconciliation, which was only concluded in 2016, has allowed Turkey to play a greater role in providing aid to Gaza.

When Operation Protective Edge broke out in 2014, the circumstances were more complicated. The Egyptian government, now led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, had a much more confrontational approach toward Hamas. It attempted to negotiate an initial ceasefire, which was rejected by Hamas. The United States and Israel disagreed over which external party was most capable of playing a facilitating role with Hamas, with the United States engaging with Qatar and Turkey while Israel insisted that Egypt be the only conduit. Israel saw US preference toward Qatar and Turkey over Egypt as granting Hamas a victory, while the United States believed that Israel's focus on Egypt was unrealistic given the bad relations between Hamas and the el-Sisi government. Further, strained relations between the United States and Egypt meant less leverage over Cairo to open the Rafah crossing to the movement of people and goods. Ultimately, a ceasefire was reached, but only after a prolonged 50-day conflict that ended in a very high number of fatalities and massive destruction in Gaza.

Following the war, the United States, with Israel's backing, became more involved in stabilizing the Strip. The first step was another high profile international donor conference hosted in Egypt that resulted in substantial financial commitments, followed again by poor follow-through. At the same time, the United States took a more focused approach on channeling aid to Gaza, concentrating on pushing Israel, the PA, and Egypt to provide Gaza with three foundations of development – power, water, and access and movement. Specific examples include encouraging actors to double Gaza's electricity supply, promoting the gas for Gaza project, extending the fishing

zone, and increasing exports from Gaza. Meanwhile, the United States also started to play a greater role in encouraging coexistence between Israel, Turkey, and Qatar and allowing these countries to play a role in providing some aid into Gaza. Despite these efforts, US involvement remained quite limited, especially given its unwillingness to challenge Israeli and PA policies toward Gaza.

During its tenure, the Obama administration struggled with how to respond to Palestinian reconciliation. On two separate occasions, in 2011 and 2014, Fatah and Hamas attempted to pursue unity governments. In both cases US policy was that it would work with a unity government led by technocratic cabinet ministers if it respected the Quartet conditions. This approach led to some tensions with Israel, which wanted the United States to take a harder line and ban any government that included Hamas. Ultimately, however, neither of these unity efforts succeeded, as disagreements between Hamas and Fatah were too deep to make real progress on implementation.

Current US Policy

As of the early fall of 2017, it is too early to speak about a comprehensive Trump administration approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Trump committed himself publicly to resume the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians to reach the "ultimate deal."[14] In a stark departure from his predecessors Trump did not vow to bring a two-state solution, but rather said that "I'm looking at two-state, one-state, and I like the one that both parties like."[15] In reality, however, the only solution that "both parties like" keeps him committed to a two-state solution.

Regarding policy toward Gaza, early on it was apparent that Trump's staff is aware of the importance of improving the living conditions in the Strip, as well as in the West Bank. According to former Obama administration officials, upon entering office, Trump's staff sought a continuation of his predecessor's policies to address Gaza's three core developmental issues – the absence of electricity, the water shortage and poor water quality, and extremely limited freedom of movement in and out of the Strip of both people and goods.[16]

Trump's special envoy to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Jason Greenblatt, paid special attention to Gaza in his first meetings with Israeli officials and Arab ministers, asking them to help improve the economic and

humanitarian situation in Gaza. During his first visit to Israel and the PA, Greenblatt met with a group of Palestinians from Gaza, and in his subsequent meetings with IDF officials reportedly raised the issue of the hardships faced by Gazans who need to receive medical treatment in Israel.[17] Greenblatt now takes pride in helping to broker an important water agreement between Israel and the Palestinians enabling the PA to buy 33 mcm of water per year from Israel, of which 10 mcm would be delivered to the Gaza Strip (limited capacity of the existing pipelines enable the transfer of only 5 mcm of water at this stage until a new pipeline is built).[18]

Despite these reports, however, representatives of humanitarian groups who met with Greenblatt voiced concerns earlier in the summer that in fact since Trump took office, his team has not done more to help Gaza, and that US policy toward Gaza has remained unchanged. Even more troubling was the de facto US backing of President Abbas' decision to cut electricity funding for Gaza, which exacerbated an already dire humanitarian crisis in the Strip. Some analysts have suggested that Abbas opted for this move knowing the United States would not oppose it and the PA would not be blamed for the situation.[19] Not only did this approach contribute to further deterioration of living conditions in Gaza; it also initially supported further Fatah-Hamas escalation, which could have led to a more significant wedge between the West Bank and Gaza, making the concept of one Palestinian state that includes the West Bank and Gaza nonviable. Finally, the rising intra-Palestinian tensions and the deteriorating conditions in Gaza over the summer of 2017 raised fears that another Israeli-Hamas conflict was in the making. If there is one lesson from the three last wars in Gaza, it is that pressure on Hamas beyond a certain point leads to fighting with Israel.[20] Another war in Gaza would have torpedoed any US effort to restart the peace process.

Developments since the summer signal a more positive turn. Thanks to efforts by Egyptian President el-Sisi, the two rival Palestinian factions embarked on a reconciliation process that began in October 2017. Although the process is more likely to fail than succeed, this endeavor seems more promising than previous failed attempts.[21] The Trump administration's response to the reconciliation resembled that of previous administrations. Ahead of the October 3 visit by PA officials to Gaza, the first such visit in a decade, Greenblatt stated that "the United States stresses that any Palestinian

government must unambiguously and explicitly commit to nonviolence, recognition of the State of Israel, acceptance of previous agreements and obligations between the parties, and peaceful negotiations."[22] In addition, however, he also said that "the United States welcomes efforts to create the conditions for the Palestinian Authority to fully assume its responsibilities in Gaza."[23] This statement was deemed vague enough to indicate US acquiescence to continued Palestinian unity efforts. Reports also suggest that while the administration still demands the disarmament of Hamas, it would not pressure the PA on this demand early on.[24]

While the Palestinian reconciliation is still a work in progress, the US administration is determined reportedly to bring meaningful breakthroughs related to the peace process in the near future.[25] There is even a possibility that the administration may try to restart peace negotiations between Israel and the PA, although not include Hamas in the talks.[26]

Key US Interests, Limitations, and Leverage in Gaza

As the review of US policy shows, the United States has for the most part remained relatively disengaged from Gaza, seeking to weaken the Hamas government while strengthening the PA, and continuing to regard the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in a single context. Yet recent developments, including punitive measures over the summer by the PA to pressure Hamas and the subsequent PA-Hamas reconciliation process supported strongly by Egypt, may change the picture. President Abbas's uncompromising approach to Gaza and his strategy of trying to squeeze Hamas to the extreme initially complicated any efforts by the United States to improve the situation on the ground. One concern was that by backing Abbas, the United States may shift to a policy of separation between the West Bank and Gaza, seeing Gaza as a spoiler to possible Israeli-Palestinian peace. This could still be the case if the reconciliation process fails. If it succeeds, however, the reconciliation could possibly enable more effective US involvement in stabilizing and developing Gaza.

Notwithstanding developments on the ground in Gaza, domestic political considerations in the United States pose hurdles to an effective US approach toward Gaza. Political engagement with Hamas is considered a non-starter on Capitol Hill and would incur severe political fallout for any administration that even met with Hamas' political representatives. There have likewise been

new legislative efforts to limit US aid to the PA. The highest profile bill is the Taylor Force Act, named after an American veteran killed in a stabbing attack in Tel Aviv in 2016, which seeks to end the PA's support for terror by withholding US funds to the Palestinians until the PA ceases its practice of giving stipends to individuals or families of individuals convicted of terrorism against US or Israeli citizens. While ending support for terrorism is a non-controversial measure, such an act would not only punish the PA but could also hurt Israel. It would diminish the low chances of the peace process and could undermine stabilization efforts in Gaza.

Currently US assistance to the PA consists of economic and security assistance. From 2008 to 2016, the annual economic assistance to the West Bank and Gaza has averaged some $400 million (figure 1), with that funding divided between the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and budget support for the PA. Assistance for PA security forces has averaged $100 million per year during this period. Both types of assistance declined since 2013 under the Obama administration, and the requested annual assistance in 2017 was $327 million for economic support and $35 million for security aid.[27] Additionally, the United States is the largest single donor to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which among its activities provides health, education, housing, and other assistance for over 1.2 million Palestinian refugees in Gaza.[28]

The Taylor Force Act would cut mostly the economic side, which is the lion's share of US aid to the Palestinians. The economic assistance supports the survival of the PA, which is Israel's security and peace partner. In the context of Gaza, it enables USAID to help administer key electricity and water projects in Gaza, all of which would be at risk under this legislation.

Moving Forward: US Policy Options in Gaza

Despite domestic political limitations, the United States is a crucial player for Gaza's stabilization and development in the long term. Should the United States choose to change its policies, given political constraints at home, it can have strong leverage, both economic and political, on all the major actors engaged in Gaza – Israel, the PA, Egypt, and the Gulf states. It is still seen as a global leader and a singular actor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which gives it at least some influence over all the key actors – both those directly involved in the conflict as well as the broader international

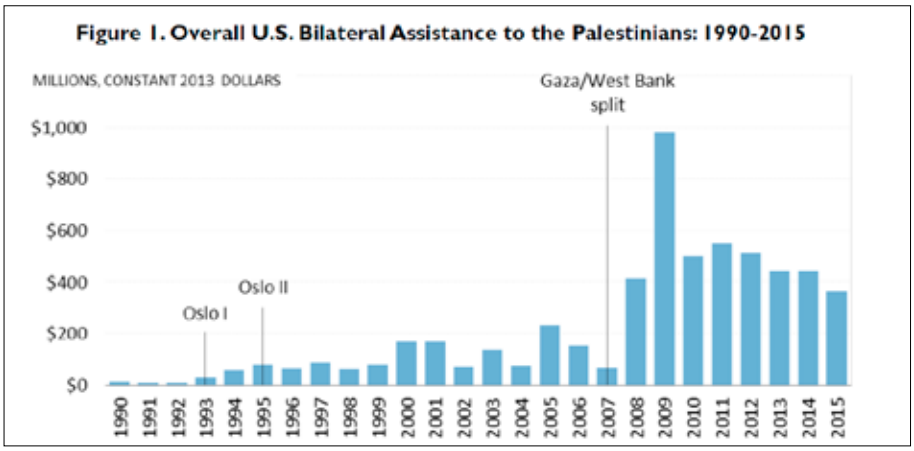

Figure 1. US Assistance to the Palestinians, 1990-2015
Source: Congressional Research Service, 2016[29]

community, e.g., Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and others. While not engaged with the group directly, the United States also has strong leverage on Hamas, mainly through the other actors. And even though the United States has no explicit expectations of Hamas, the operating assumption in Washington is that Hamas behaves as a rational actor seeking primarily self-preservation and thus is not likely to impede the rehabilitation of Gaza if it works in its interest.

At the same time that the United States leverages its unique global position to help advance political and economic progress in Gaza, it should try to remove or at least loosen some of the constraints that have traditionally weakened its ability to have positive effects inside the Strip. As the policy recommendations below suggest, this leverage is both economic and political and if applied wisely can lead to significant changes in Gaza. In that regard, Palestinian reconciliation is an opportunity for the United States to develop more effective policies toward Gaza and help stabilize the Strip.

In devising such a policy, the United States should distinguish between short and long term interventions. In addition, while seeking to stabilize Gaza, it is critical to continue investing in the West Bank as well. Similarly, policy measures in Gaza should be compatible with a two-state solution with Israel and Palestine – composed of both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – living side-by-side in peace and security. Finally, the United States should prepare for what it can do if the PA-Hamas reconciliation fails, as well as if Israel

and Hamas clash again. What follows are various policy recommendations for the United States to develop its policy toward the Gaza Strip:

a. *The United States should develop a more coherent policy toward Gaza* assuming present trends continue, and alternatively, if the vision of a two-state solution materializes. The United States would do well to evaluate the success of its policies so far (banning Hamas until it abides by the Quartet conditions) and decide whether it supports Palestinian reconciliation. For now the Trump administration has maintained a slightly more flexible position, but this approach has not yet been put to a practical test. The United States should continue its current policy of engaging both Israel and Egypt in this strategic discussion to better understand each state's respective concerns and interests.
b. *Leverage ties with Israel and Egypt to enable greater access of goods and people*: The Trump administration has forged better ties with both Israel and Egypt than the Obama administration. These improved relations are already manifesting themselves in the US backing of el-Sisi's efforts to reconcile the PA and Hamas and in the close working ties with Israel. It should use these relationships to press the Egyptians and the Israelis to allow entry of more humanitarian aid and materials to support economic development. Israel is now looking for funding for another cargo terminal at the Erez border crossing. The United States is well-positioned to help with this funding while pushing Israel to revise its dual-use list that imposes strict limitations on goods allowed into the Strip. Israeli security has vetted thousands of Gaza's residents that can enter Israel, although their permits have not been yet been granted. The United States can urge Israel to extend these permits and allow these vetted Palestinians to work in Israel. In addition, the United States should ensure that Israel and Egypt allow more exports to leave Gaza, primarily to Israel and the West Bank but globally as well.
c. *Do not forget about Gaza when dealing with the PA*: When US administrations are engaged in high profile peace initiatives with Israelis and Palestinians, Gaza often is neglected, as American policymakers become much more deferential to President Abbas. As the Trump team's effort proceeds there is a danger that this phenomenon will recur. The summer reduction in electricity supply to Gaza is a product of PA actions, which seemed at the time to be resisted little by the United States. Similarly,

the PA now approves only a fraction of requests by Gaza's residents requesting medical treatment in Israel. The Trump administration should make clear to the PA that regardless of the political infighting between Fatah and Hamas, keeping Gaza stable and improving the situation on the ground remains an American priority. Even if not in charge of security in the short term, the PA can have a greater role in Gaza's stabilization, and steps taken to improve the West Bank's economy should be leveraged to ensure this role is assumed.

d. *Prioritize water, electricity, and access and movement*: The United States has correctly identified the three pillars of development – water, electricity, and access and movement. These elements, however, are critically absent in Gaza. The United States should work with its allies to devise means that afford Gaza's residents clean water and sanitation services, have sustained power supply of more than a mere few hours per day, and work to allow more people and goods to flow in and out.
e. *Exhibit leadership on reconstruction and aid*: America's most important role is to mobilize others through its leadership. The Trump administration seems determined to pursue a significant initiative in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. It has emphasized Palestinian economic development as part of that effort, and even while draft budgets have seen huge reductions in aid across the globe, aid to the Palestinians may be spurred. It is important that this effort not just focus on the West Bank, but that economic and humanitarian support for Gaza are also a central component of this initiative. The United States should work with its allies both in Europe and in the Middle East, including Israel and Egypt, to identify needs and push them to invest in Gaza. At the Cairo conference, which was held in October 2014 after Operation Protective Edge, some $5.4 billion was pledged for the Palestinians, with about half earmarked for reconstructing Gaza. However, most of these pledges have still not been fulfilled. The administration has invested heavily in its relationships with the Gulf states – especially Saudi Arabia – and should use its leverage to fulfill some of their pledges and provide more aid to Gaza.
f. *Improve on aid follow-through*: The United States should ensure that in the future international aid conferences are not structured as public spectacles that pressure countries to increase their financial commitments for political gains only to not meet them later. One problem that plagues

Gaza is that countries have consistently failed on their promises, finding different excuses, including double counting commitments previously made, commitments that may not come for several years, or commitments that will never materialize. This harms planning and sets unrealistic expectations. What is needed instead is meaningful and effective work to improve the situation – not political symbolism devoid of follow up.

g. *Increase US presence in Gaza:* Right now, no American government officials can go into Gaza, as security and political considerations limit the US ability to operate in Gaza. European diplomats enter Gaza but do not engage with Hamas. The United States does have some eyes on the ground and now conducts video conferences with business leaders in Gaza and employs non-US nationals as staff. The United States does not need to have a large presence, but it should be able to send officials in from time to time. It need not open an office but can rather use its allies' offices, e.g., Norway's. Such a change would both help gain better situational awareness to inform policies, and demonstrate interest and will to help Gaza. The return of the PA to Gaza would pave the way for a more regular US presence in the Strip.
h. *Design mechanisms for maintaining the Israel-Hamas ceasefire*: US policy on Gaza has been reactive and responsive to clashes between Israel and Hamas. Rather than embarking on a flurry of diplomatic activity when there is war, the United States could help create a mechanism that would help Israel and Hamas maintain the ceasefire by sustaining in peacetime the high level of engagement the international community exhibits during wartime. The United States should do so without sidelining Egypt but in full coordination with it, as Egypt is best positioned to play this role, especially now with its improving relations with Hamas.
i. *Manage Israel-Hamas escalation*: after three wars between Israel and Hamas in five years (2009-2014), a new round of fighting is considered only a matter of time. There are several steps that the United States can take to mitigate the costs of the next conflict:
    i. A cardinal principle of US support for Israel has been standing up for Israel's right of self-defense. At the same time, the public support can be accompanied by private diplomacy aimed at encouraging Israel to redouble its efforts to avoid civilian casualties.

ii. Depending on the outcome of the Palestinian reconciliation process, the United States should take steps to dissuade Israel from conducting a full re-conquest of the Gaza Strip and toppling Hamas, as such a move would be extraordinarily costly for Israel and extremely difficult to manage in terms of international perceptions. This may not be needed on the part of the United States, though. Recent analysis found that despite repeated threats, this has not been Israel's goal in the last few years.[30] A senior Israeli defense official said explicitly in late August that "Israel is interested in the stability of the Hamas rule in Gaza, because the alternative is far worse."[31]

iii. Once a conflict has begun, the United States should work with Israel, Egypt, and the international community to provide humanitarian assistance to Gaza during the conflict, not only when the fighting ends. This approach, which was also seen in Operation Protective Edge, is required to ensure food supply and prevent outbreaks of disease.

iv. One of the frustrations voiced by international donors is that their investment in infrastructure is often destroyed in military operations. In Protective Edge, for example, Israeli fire hit the fuel depot of Gaza's only power plant, cutting electricity to Gaza City and many other parts of the Strip. The United States could work with its allies and urge Israel – and Hamas – to create sanctuary or safe zones to protect critical infrastructure funded by the international community. This should be done while minimizing all security risks and Hamas's temptation to exploit protected sites to launch attacks at Israel.

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