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Looking at the Gaza Strip: From Short Term to Long Term

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In the most recent escalation between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the message conveyed by both parties was that they are not interested in paying the price of a war that will ultimately return them to square one. At the same time, neither wants to allow the other to score success or to appear as if it is conducting negotiations with the enemy. Thus, in the Palestinian arena, Israel should give priority to its long term interests at the expense of its short term interests that focus on achieving calm in the area. It is preferable for Israel that the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip be conducted by means of the Palestinian Authority, so that the PA, and not Hamas, reaps the fruits of reconstruction in the eyes of the Palestinian public. It should therefore formulate a joint objective with the PA, Egypt, and relevant parties in the international arena, who have made aid to Gaza conditional upon its going through the Palestinian Authority. The objective must be to ease the humanitarian plight in the Gaza Strip and develop infrastructure under conditions of restored PA rule in the Strip. Joint action would serve as significant leverage over Hamas and would limit its room to maneuver. Israel has an interest in integrating the international community in this endeavor, as the involvement of an international taskforce in the Gaza Strip would serve to restrain Hamas and raise the price it pays if it chooses to return to violent resistance.

The most recent escalation between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip (November 11-12, 2018) erupted as progress was underway in the ongoing efforts to reach a ceasefire agreement between the parties. The behavior of Israel and Hamas during this episode attests to a mutual desire to reach understandings (both parties reject the notion of a “settlement,” as it would be interpreted as mutual recognition) that include a ceasefire and a significant easing of the closure of the Gaza Strip. The current sense is that both Israel and Hamas are not interested in paying the price of a war that will ultimately return them to square one.

The clash between Hamas and an IDF force operating in Khan Yunis was exploited effectively by Yahya Sinwar, Hamas’s leader in the Gaza Strip, in an effort to prove to his critics that he has not abandoned the path of armed resistance. He likewise was eager to demonstrate to Israel that Hamas will not exercise restraint in response to IDF operations in the Gaza Strip conducted under the cover of ceasefire understandings.

Hamas's decision to fire a massive barrage of some 500 rockets at Israel over two days reflected Hamas's assessment that what was required was a painful blow to Israel, but limited in rocket range so as to retain the ability to return to the ceasefire understandings. In turn, Israel's response was strong yet measured, reflected in the relatively low number of people killed in the Gaza Strip as a result of the IDF attacks (and the "roof knocking" practice to provide advance warning of attacks in residential areas).

For a number of months, Egypt, in conjunction with UN emissary Nickolay Mladenov, has tried to promote a settlement in the Gaza Strip through mediation between Israel, Hamas, and the Palestinian Authority (PA). A settlement between Israel and Hamas will undermine the status of the PA as the sole representative of the Palestinians and will perpetuate Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip. On the other hand, an internal Palestinian reconciliation agreement between the PA and Hamas would harm Israel's ability to separate the Gaza Strip from the West Bank. Therefore, and despite Israel's and Hamas's refusal to engage in mutual recognition, negotiations – albeit indirect – are underway between these parties, without the involvement of the PA. Since the onset on March 30 of the mass demonstrations along the border fence between the Gaza Strip and Israel (the "Marches of Return"), Hamas has tried to achieve a settlement with the aim of providing "calm in exchange for lifting the blockade" on the Strip and beginning significant reconstruction in the area. For its part, Israel has presented a clear equation of "calm in exchange for calm" and has conditioned progress on the return of the missing individuals and the bodies of the soldiers held by Hamas. It is also unwilling to allow Hamas to score successes that would strengthen it in the domestic arena and validate the violence it exercised along the border. At the same time, the PA has refused to help promote a settlement that will give Hamas legitimacy and strengthen its rule in the Strip, and has made all progress toward a settlement conditional upon internal Palestinian reconciliation and restoration of all of its authorities, including security powers, to administer the Strip.

The understandings-based settlement that Egypt is attempting to promote consists of three primary stages: 1) an ongoing ceasefire in exchange for measures to ease the closure; 2) reconstruction of the Gaza Strip; and 3) the gradual return of the PA's rule to the Gaza Strip. The most recent escalation erupted during the execution of Stage 1: Hamas has reduced the violence along the fence; Israel expanded the fishing area and allowed the entry of fuel funded by Qatar and measures to ease the passage of goods into the Strip; Qatar, with Israeli authorization, streamed \$15 million into the Strip to pay the salaries of Hamas personnel; and Egypt kept the Rafah crossing open for both people and goods. Implementation of a deal for the return of soldiers and missing individuals will most likely be the condition for progress from Stage 1 – a ceasefire and measures aimed at easing the closure – to Stage 2, which was supposed to include infrastructure projects

aimed at reconstructing Gaza and creating tens of thousands of jobs funded by the international community, and possibly also maritime passage between Gaza and Cyprus.

There is still no way of knowing how far these understandings will go and whether they will evolve into a settlement that will be implemented in all its stages. Still, this is a delicate process, and presumably, without progress over time and significant change in the Gazan reality, the arena will sooner or later deteriorate into a violent clash between Hamas and Israel. Hamas's leadership, which promised residents of the Strip no less than the lifting of the "blockade," will not be able to withstand the numerous elements pressuring it and contend with the criticism of the price in blood that hundreds of Palestinians have paid during the demonstrations along the border in recent months. On the other hand, in the domestic Israeli political arena, some voices reject all ideas for understandings, which can be interpreted as a settlement with Hamas, and call for a large scale military operation against Hamas. This criticism peaked with the resignation of Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman against the background of what he referred to as "surrendering to terrorism."

Significance for the Palestinian Arena

Over the last year, Hamas has improved its strategic situation vis-à-vis Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the international community, as a result of the policy that has guided Sinwar since his selection as chairman of the Political Bureau in the Gaza Strip. Sinwar presented a political plan and, for the time being, has changed the nature of the struggle, from a focus on the religious-nationalist aspect to progress in the humanitarian-civil realm. In an interview to Yediot Ahronot in October 2018, he said, "What I want is an end to the blockade," indicating a desire to tend to the welfare of the Gaza population in order to maintain Hamas's political power in the Strip in particular and in the Palestinian arena overall. With this change in approach, the means of resistance has also changed. Rocket fire was replaced with mass marches along the fence and incendiary balloons and kites sent into Israeli territory. At the same time, to protect its image as the leader of the Palestinian resistance, Hamas has taken care to clarify that its successes are not the result of dialogue with Israel but rather the willingness to use force, in part based on understandings reached with Egypt, Qatar, and the international community stemming from the pressure of the demonstrations along the fence.

The PA itself is trapped and at this point is alone in its campaign to topple Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip. President Mahmoud Abbas has sought to take advantage of Hamas's hardship and its inability to bring about improvement in the living conditions in Gaza in order to pressure Hamas to sign a reconciliation agreement as a condition for moving forward with the reconstruction of the Strip. Under the reconciliation agreement, the PA demanded that Hamas hand over civil and security authority in the Strip and place its

arms under PA auspices. Abbas is concerned by the prospect of finding himself in a situation like that of the Lebanese government vis-à-vis Hezbollah in Lebanon: civil and humanitarian responsibility alongside the loss of its monopoly over power/force. Against this background, Abbas in recent months has imposed far reaching sanctions on the Gaza Strip, which have led to a freeze on the payment of salaries to tens of thousands of Gaza public service employees and to a severe shortage of electricity in the Strip.

Although Israel and Egypt share a basic interest in toppling the Hamas regime and restoring PA rule in the Gaza Strip, they have decided to protect the short term ceasefire and are unwilling to expose themselves to the dangers resulting from escalation and deterioration into a confrontation stemming from continued pressure on Hamas. There are signs that unlike in the past, Egypt does not currently regard reconciliation in the Palestinian arena as an essential condition for improving the situation in the Gaza Strip, and that Egypt is also willing to reach understandings with Hamas even without the involvement of the PA. Still, Egypt recognizes that to implement civil projects in the Gaza Strip, it will need the PA in its capacity as a channel for transferring aid and donations from the international community, and will therefore strive in parallel to promote internal Palestinian reconciliation. In its willingness to reach understandings with Hamas by bypassing the PA, Israel is confirming that it does not regard the PA as a partner for any political settlement. This likewise indicates that Israel strives for calm in the Gazan arena at almost any price, on the grounds that Gaza is a secondary arena and that forces and efforts should be focused on the primary arena, i.e., the northern arena of Syria and Lebanon. With reports of the impending release of the US political plan that the Palestinians have already announced they will reject, and rumors that this plan will initially focus on solving the Gaza issue, the PA is currently in the midst of a simultaneous struggle over its power and status in a number of arenas: vis-à-vis Israel, Hamas, Egypt and the Arab world, and the international community.

Recommendations for Israeli Policy

The Gaza Strip, a region currently in the throes of a humanitarian crisis, is governed by a terror organization that is hostile to Israel. This conundrum has no solution in sight, and thus Israel's current policy is to prevent Hamas's military buildup and exert pressure on it. The goal is to create deterrence that will prevent Hamas from using force, while at the same time designating it as the responsible address for actions in the Gaza Strip – i.e., de-facto recognition of its rule in the area. Israel has adhered to a policy of differentiation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, in order to minimize Gaza's negative influence on the West Bank; this policy is based inter alia on the assessment that the PA is unable to renew its presence, let alone its rule in the Strip. This approach serves Israel's current position that it has no Palestinian partner to reach, and more important, to implement an overall political agreement.

Israel has stated openly that it has no interest in a war in Gaza and that it is interested in a long term ceasefire. In remarks in Paris just prior to the most recent escalation, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that he “does not fear war, but seeks to prevent it when it is not necessary,” and estimated that another war would bring Israel back to where it was following Operation Protective Edge. On the other hand, senior officials in the Israeli political system and many figures throughout the Israeli public maintain that Israel should embark on a large scale military operation against Hamas and strengthen Israeli deterrence. In practice, Israel and Hamas are in a similar trap – on the one hand, neither is interested in a new round of fighting that will demand a high price from both of them. At the same time, neither wants to allow the other to score success or to appear as if it is conducting negotiations with the enemy.

In the Palestinian arena, Israel should give priority to its long term interests at the expense of its short term interests that focus on achieving calm. Israel should strive for a more stable settlement in Gaza over time. It is preferable for Israel that the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip be conducted by means of the PA, so that the PA, and not Hamas, reaps the fruits of reconstruction in the eyes of the Palestinian public. It should therefore formulate a joint objective with the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, and relevant parties in the international community, who have made aid to Gaza conditional upon its going through the PA. The joint objective must be to ease the humanitarian plight in the Gaza Strip and develop infrastructure under conditions of restored PA rule in the Strip. Joint action would serve as significant leverage over Hamas and would limit its room to maneuver. The international community still appears willing to assist in Gaza’s reconstruction, build infrastructure, create jobs, and secure economic welfare for its residents. Israel has an interest in integrating the international community in the Gaza Strip reconstruction project, as the involvement of an international taskforce would serve to restrain Hamas and raise the price it pays if it chooses to return to violent resistance. Israel must assist Egypt in its efforts to achieve internal Palestinian reconciliation, with the aim of strengthening the PA’s role in the Gaza Strip as the responsible party there, and of designating it as the party to advance the political process.