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The Coronavirus in Gaza: Insights from a War Game

Noa Shusterman and Udi Dekel

A war game simulating a large scale outbreak of the coronavirus in the Gaza Strip underscored that Israel has no way to prevent a spread of the pandemic in Gaza, but it can take steps to alleviate the situation. Among the principal proposals: Israel should already transfer vital medical aid to the Gaza Strip; work with the World Health Organization and other relief agencies to mobilize medical resources for the area; avoid obstructing any initiative to establish an emergency government by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas; and prepare to set up emergency assistance infrastructure on Israeli territory adjacent to the Strip.

On April 5, 2020, a Zoom-enabled war game was held at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), simulating a large scale outbreak of the coronavirus in the Gaza Strip that resulted in hundreds of fatalities. The goal was to assess the implications of such an event, evaluate responses by the relevant actors, and formulate Israeli policy recommendations. As seen in the game, Israel has no way to prevent a spread of the pandemic in Gaza, but it can take steps to alleviate the situation.

What follows is an account of the war game, the positions and steps taken by the actors, and policy recommendations for Israel. Among the principal proposals: Israel should already transfer vital medical aid to the Gaza Strip; work with the World Health Organization and other relief agencies in order to recruit medical resources for the area; avoid obstructing any initiative to establish an emergency government by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas; and prepare to set up emergency assistance infrastructure, such as field hospitals and dormitories for Palestinians at risk, on Israeli territory adjacent to the Strip.

The Hypothetical Scenario of the War Game

Since mid-April, the coronavirus pandemic spread throughout the Gaza Strip, as well as in the West Bank. By late April, Gaza recorded hundreds of dead among thousands of confirmed cases. According to expert estimates presented to Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader in the Strip, close to 8,000 fatalities are expected by late May. Hamas announces a total lockdown within the Strip, but cannot enforce it as people are looking for food over Ramadan and fear coronavirus infection as a result of congested living conditions. Sinwar meantime announces that the local health system lacks the capacity to contend with the

situation and demands that Israel immediately send 500 ventilators. He threatens an escalation of the security situation if the Gaza “blockade” (closure) is not lifted, in keeping with his threat in early April that “if we will not breathe in Gaza, they will not breathe in Israel.” Given the distress within the Strip, recent days saw hundreds of desperate residents nearing the border fence, including women and children, but they were blocked by Hamas forces and the IDF. On the day of the simulation, Hamas allows them to approach the fence and a group of people who successfully breach the barrier – 23 men, women, and children – are killed by IDF fire. In tandem with the renewal of the grassroots marches, armed factions in the Strip, led by Islamic Jihad, act on Sinwar's message and in the first phase launch sporadic rockets at Israel toward the Gaza periphery. In response to the killing of the civilians, they step up the rate and range of rocket salvos into southern Israel. In parallel, Israel is contending with a second wave of virus infection, with tens of thousands of cases and hundreds of dead. In Palestinian Authority territories, fatalities number around 200. A sharp rise in the spread of the virus is evident, mainly in the area surrounding Jerusalem.

Actor Responses

Hamas sets out two main objectives: a lifting of the closure on the Strip and entry of massive medical and humanitarian assistance, supplied by the international community and Israel. The Hamas leadership strives to prove to the public in the Strip that it is doing everything it can to arrest the spread of the virus and regain control of the situation, while armed factions continue to launch rockets at Israel and even dispatch terror squads with the intent of infiltrating communities in the Gaza periphery, including through tunnels. Such actions are coordinated with Hamas through a joint operations committee, yet at this stage the organization does not join in the attacks so as not to shut the door on aid from Israel, Egypt, and the international community. For now, it uses the armed factions to intensify pressure on Israel to lift the closure, increase the amount of medical equipment to reach the Strip, and stop IDF forces from shooting at those fleeing the Strip for Israeli territory.

The Gaza population is unable to keep up with fatalities and bury them. The public is losing faith in Hamas and blames both their government and Israel. Adherence to social distancing rules weakens: There are spontaneous civilian protests by women and children with demands for assistance, and increased instances of attempted flight toward the Gaza periphery, where the Gazans meet gunfire by IDF forces, as well as toward Egypt, which blocks its border and shoots at every civilian who attempts to cross to Sinai. In the Gazans' view, the risk of exposure to the coronavirus trumps the risk of fire, and a martyrdom mindset grows.

Against this backdrop, and especially Hamas's impotence, there are growing calls within the Strip for the creation of an emergency government with the Palestinian Authority,

which (under Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, who has garnered the public trust in the West Bank) is coping better with the pandemic. Hamas thus faces two options: closing ranks with Islamic Jihad and other armed factions and joining in the shooting at Israel; or setting up a temporary emergency government with the PA in the campaign against the pandemic, and accepting the principle of PA President Mahmoud Abbas of "one authority, one law, one gun," which would entail subordinating Hamas's armed wing to a joint force mechanism.

In face of the dead end, the Hamas leadership agrees to align with the Palestinian Authority under the PA's terms, but the PA is reluctant to take responsibility for the Strip, especially at a time when a public health and humanitarian crisis rages there. While Abbas declares that Gaza and the West Bank are a single national polity, he also says that the PA and Palestinian Health Ministry are doing everything they can for the Gaza population even in the absence of a unity government. And, indeed, a small portion of the medicine and masks in the West Bank are transferred to the Strip. In addition, the PA submits an urgent aid request to Arab countries and the international community and demands that they pressure Israel to step up relief for Gaza and refrain from shooting at civilians who are fleeing the Strip.

International agencies are at a loss for ideas, fiercely censuring Israel's closure policy and shootings, but their appeals and power are weakened by the global crisis preoccupying the superpowers. Efforts to divert resources to the Gaza Strip encounter difficulties given the scope of the pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis.

With Israel maintaining a tight closure policy, and without any Arab or international assistance, Hamas needs to show achievements and offers to return the Israeli civilians and remains of the soldiers it is holding in exchange for the release of older prisoners in Israel. Israel is willing to negotiate through Egyptian mediation but rejects Hamas's preconditions, and then Hamas joins Islamic Jihad and other factions in the rocket launches at Israel.

Egypt takes two courses of action. First, it steps up efforts to achieve an arrangement between Israel and Hamas and pressure Israel to increase assistance and prevent a humanitarian collapse of the Strip. Second, it attempts to mediate between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority with the aim of establishing an emergency government that would serve as the basis for a return of the PA to the Strip. While Egypt increases its assistance to the Strip somewhat, it is preoccupied with onstructing the outbreak in its borders and does not allow any attempted flight toward the Egyptian border – even resorting to gunfire at civilians.

Israel finds itself embroiled in an escalating security and humanitarian crisis, at a time when it itself must contend with the pandemic. In reaction to the security threat, it enhances its defenses along the Gaza border, takes protective measures – reinforcing its aerial defense array to intercept missiles and rockets – and launches precision strikes within the Strip. At the same time, via Egyptian mediation, it tries to coordinate a ceasefire in exchange for possible humanitarian and medical aid for the Strip. Israel places Hamas in a dilemma: on the one hand, continued rocket fire will halt the supply of goods and electricity and is liable to prompt Israel to block the transfer of the Qatari aid, despite the increase in the number of sick and dead in the Strip. On the other hand, should a calm in the situation take hold, Israel would be willing to provide aid, but still the main onus would be on the international community and Gulf countries.

Israeli citizens do not evince much concern for what is happening within the Strip, particularly as the rocket fire continues. While civic appeals have been made by legal NGOs to the Supreme Court in the name of Gazans who have sought asylum in Israel, the Court has decided not to become involved. Meanwhile, residents of the Israeli Gaza periphery communities mobilize on behalf of private initiatives to assist in providing medical equipment and food for the Strip. By contrast, residents of cities that suffer missile and rocket strikes adamantly oppose any relief for Gaza. The upshot: there is no consensus among the Israeli public on how to contend with what is happening in Gaza.

Findings

There are no means available to Israel or to any other party of stopping the spread of the coronavirus in the Gaza Strip, particularly given the high population density, malfunctioning infrastructures, and poor sanitation – even were hundreds of ventilators to be supplied. The existing situation in the Strip, already comparable to an incurable disease, is now compounded by the coronavirus pandemic.

All the actors – Hamas, the armed factions in the Strip, the Palestinian Authority, Israel, Egypt, the international community, the civilian populations on both sides of the border – are hard-pressed to develop new tools to cope with the situation, and therefore resort to the familiar toolbox, each in its own way: evasion of responsibility, blame of Israel, rocket and missile launches, dispatch of incendiary balloons, retaliatory shooting, marches to the fence and attempted incursions beyond it, intensifying the closure, and attempted mediation for a ceasefire in exchange for relaxation of the closure. But without exception, all of these efforts are relevant to a pre-pandemic reality and are insufficient for this crisis.

Israel has no military response that would end missile and rocket launches from Gaza during the pandemic. A ground assault is not practical in the Strip, both due to the risk to IDF troops and because it would signal Israel's responsibility for the area. Hamas and the

armed factions understand this, and thus (during the simulation) did not cease the launches. Israel, for its part, has not freed itself from the closure approach, which it sees as relevant so long as Hamas controls the Strip, and pursued the policy of alternately easing or intensifying the closure in response to the fluctuations in Hamas policy and in order to prod the organization to work to calm the security situation.

As for the possibility of promoting unity between the West Bank and the Strip and establishing a national emergency government, there were two conflicting approaches. One held that for lack of alternatives, the situation would prompt Hamas and the PA to reach some agreement due to pressure from the Palestinian public and to secure broad-based international aid. The second held that with self-interest and separatism prevalent throughout the world, this phenomenon would also characterize the Palestinian arena, mainly in the PA, and the entire region would focus on its own problems. In any event, the unity option would only be relevant when the number of victims in the Strip spirals and Hamas admits its own helplessness and loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinian public.

Recommendations for Israel

Israel contends that it is not responsible for what happens in the Strip, but it itself is threatened that the infection will spill over into its own territory. Israel must therefore craft solutions that are outside the familiar policy toolbox and prepare for an exacerbation of the situation. Therefore, Israel should initiate and enable a widespread entry of medical and humanitarian aid to Gaza, especially as it becomes clear that the pandemic spreads there rapidly. Links to the World Health Organization and other relief agencies should be used to mobilize resources and medical equipment that are required in the Strip. The transfer of widespread relief by Israel can improve its regional and international legitimacy and help it enlist a helping hand from the international community and Arab countries (Egypt is worried about an increased spillover of the pandemic to its turf). Israel's proactive approach should unfold through joint crisis management with the Palestinian Authority and even the health authorities in Gaza.

In the event of a public health and medical crisis in the Strip, Israel should assist the initiative to create a Palestinian unity government – rather than sabotage this effort or exploit the difference between the Strip and the West Bank to prove that "there is no partner" for a political process (a flawed consideration in the reality of the pandemic). Highlighting the effectiveness of the PA's management of the crisis versus Hamas's helplessness could well bolster the PA's standing within Palestinian society, and it is possible that this could compel Hamas to accept the PA's terms for a unity government. In any case, it is better for Israel that a failure of any initiative to establish a Palestinian emergency government not be directed at it. At the same time, Israel's medical and security

cooperation with the PA should be preserved including assistance offered to combat the pandemic in the PA, and similarly Israel should avoid actions that would weaken it, such as unilateral annexation of West Bank territory.

Israel's attitude toward UNRWA should shift, despite Israel's substantive criticism of the agency. Israel should view UNRWA as an actor capable of mitigating the severe consequences of the spread of the virus in the Strip. Today UNRWA constitutes a central medical pillar for the Gaza population and also assists in food distribution, employment, and youth education. Such cooperation – which UNRWA is interested in – would demand that Israel help the organization in achieving international support, including from the United States.

Israel has the capacity to set up emergency relief infrastructures on its territory adjacent to Gaza, for example, in the Karni industrial zone, in order to relieve pressure from the Strip. Inter alia, dormitories of one kind or another could be set up for at-risk residents of the Strip, so as to remove them from the congestion and centers of infection; field hospitals could be set up to treat patients; there could be efforts to finish construction of the American hospital adjoining the Erez crossing.

In the simulation, Israel rejected the Hamas preconditions regarding a swap of Palestinians jailed in Israel for the Israeli citizens and soldiers' remains held by Hamas. Should such a proposal in fact arise, it would be advisable to address the opportunity fully, which could also serve as a basis for coordinating a joint approach to the coronavirus crisis.