

# Operation Cast Lead: Regional Implications

Ephraim Kam

"The Arab situation is in very big chaos."  
(Amr Moussa, Secretary General of the Arab League, January 16, 2009)

The most prominent characteristic of the Arab world's response to Operation Cast Lead was division and weakness. The Arab states did not join forces and agree on a joint program that would influence developments in the Gaza Strip, and it was only at the end of the campaign that a decision was made at the economic summit in Kuwait to allocate a package of \$2 billion for the rehabilitation of Gaza. Even then it was not decided who on the Palestinian side should receive the assistance. The radical parties demanded that it be given to Hamas; Egypt and Saudi Arabia opposed this motion. The hurried convening of the emergency summit of Arab leaders in Doha, Qatar, which was designed to formulate a joint policy on the crisis, accentuated the split: close to half of the Arab states, notably leading countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, did not attend the summit. No less important, Abu Mazen avoided representing the Palestinians at the summit, and instead they were represented there by Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders. Saudi Arabia's efforts to bring the Gulf states together in order to formulate a joint position on aid to Gaza also failed.

Expressions of the Arab world's weakness are not new. For over a generation the Arab world has witnessed differences of opinion and conflicting interests and has struggled to formulate a common platform on major issues. In the Gaza episode, the line crossing the Arab world follows the position on Hamas. Most of the Arab states, and certainly

Dr. Ephraim Kam, deputy director and senior research associate at INSS

most of the moderate Arab states, have reservations over Hamas' conduct and its rule of Gaza. They see it as a dangerous radical element that is connected to Iran and the radical Shiite axis that threatens them, ignites the Palestinian arena, and prevents progress towards an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Most – though without confessing this publicly – were eager for Israel to strike Hamas with a heavy blow and weaken it, just as they were looking for heavy damage to be inflicted on Hizbollah in 2006. At the same time, they identify with the distress of the Palestinians in Gaza, are influenced by the mood of the Arab street, and consider it their duty to help alleviate the Palestinians' suffering.

Regarding Hamas, the moderate camp is led by Egypt, which sought at this point to emphasize the leadership role it once enjoyed that has deteriorated over time in the face of the radical Arab camp. More than any other Arab government, the Egyptian regime sees Hamas as an enemy and a rival, in part because of its linkage to the Muslim Brotherhood, which poses the greatest threat to the regime. It considers Hamas an emissary of Iran that is looking to establish a second stronghold on the Mediterranean coast following the one it established in Lebanon. Egypt is apprehensive about the creation of an Iran and Hizbollah-linked Hamas entity on the Egyptian border that also sparks friction between Egypt and Israel. It opposes the uncontrolled entry of Palestinians and Hamas activists from the Gaza Strip to Sinai, where there is already a problematic security vacuum that can be used to launch terror attacks. For these reasons, Egypt's leaders made unprecedented sharp comments on Hamas' conduct, and ascribed responsibility for the deterioration in Gaza to it, as well as to Israel. Egypt rejected the Hamas demand to open the Rafah crossing, unless it would be controlled by Palestinian Authority and European observers, as per the crossings agreement from 2005. Thus, Egypt tried to undermine Hamas' position as a legitimate government and its position in the Strip as a separate political entity from the Palestinian Authority. To this end Egypt was willing to take overt measures that entailed cooperation with Israel against Hamas.

On the other side there are Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah, which support Hamas fully. This group is lead by Iran whose involvement in the Gaza Strip has increased since the start of the intifada, with the goal of wielding influence in the Palestinian arena, binding the

Palestinian organizations – particularly the Islamic ones – to it, and fueling the armed struggle against Israel. To this end, Iran provides the Palestinian organizations with much financial assistance, arms, military equipment, and training, while exploiting its dependence on outside aid. The military and financial link between Iran and Hamas strengthened greatly after the organization took control of the Gaza Strip, as the partially isolated Hamas needed ways to arm and raise finances, and Iran rose to the occasion.

During Operation Cast Lead the Iran-Syria-Hizbollah axis tried to expand its influence in the Palestinian arena in general and in Gaza in particular by boosting Hamas' ability to withstand the confrontation with Israel, strengthening its position vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority, and undermining Egypt's position as the leading Arab party and principal mediator between Hamas and Israel and Western elements. As most Arab governments disapproved of Hamas and its conduct, the radical axis tried to influence events during the fighting principally by inciting the masses on the Arab street – who demonstrated support for the Palestinians and who were influenced by the troubling images broadcast from the Strip – against the moderate governments, in order to harm their relations with Israel and to assist Hamas.

Alongside these countries, Turkey was also prominent in its harsh criticism of Israel. Against a backdrop of street demonstrations against Israel, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan adopted a vehement anti-Israel line: he accused Israel of killing children, proposed considering Israel's banishment from the UN, and suggested to the Obama administration that it reexamine the definition of terror organizations, which implied that he was referring to Hamas and Hizbollah. Erdogan also sent his envoy as an observer to the radical camp summit in Doha. Turkey's motivation is not entirely clear: does it stem from the interest of the current Turkish government to raise its profile in the Middle East and the Arab world? Is it connected to its vision of the Islamic domain as its own back yard? Does it result from its perception of Hamas as a legitimate organization? Or do the approaching municipal elections

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in Turkey and the understanding by the Islamic party that the Turkish street supports an anti-Israeli line influence Erdogan's stance? In any case, the episode has already damaged Israeli-Turkish relations, and both parties are now trying to repair the damage.

Ultimately, the radical axis states had a limited influence on the progress of the conflict in Gaza, as they had few options available to them and because their main consideration was to avoid taking risky steps. The demonstrations in the moderate Arab states, which were mainly organized by Islamic or Palestinian elements, were not prolonged or large scale and did not get out of hand. They principally voiced support for the Palestinians' distress, not Hamas distress. Thus, in view of the weakness of the Arab world, and as Hamas is not favored by most Arab countries, Hamas and the Palestinian public found themselves under heavy pressure from Israel for three weeks without the Arab world finding a way to provide them with measurable help.

Iran's failure is particularly prominent. Iran invested great efforts, directly and through Hizbollah, to build up Hamas as a military organization capable of withstanding an Israeli attack and inflicting considerable damage on the IDF in the process. However when put to the test, Hamas failed, at least in military terms, without Iran managing to help it, other than registering 70,000 students who volunteered to fight in Gaza. Their registration stayed on paper. Iran also refrained from using the main means at its disposal to help Hamas: encouraging Hizbollah to open another front against Israel from Lebanon. However, the story does not end there. Iran will undoubtedly labor to become the main party helping Hamas rehabilitate the Strip, both militarily and on the civilian level, and one may expect that Iran will try to infuse Gaza with arms and military equipment as well as large sums of money. In light of the expected efforts of Israel, Egypt, and Western countries to block the arms smuggling routes and money transfers to Gaza, it is unclear to what extent it will succeed.

Egypt emerged as the Arab player that gained the most from the confrontation in Gaza. It led the efforts to end the fighting in the Strip and to formulate an agreement, and European leaders sought Cairo's assistance in order to further these measures. It maintained its standing as the principal mediator between Israel and Hamas, which remained dependent on Egypt despite the tension between them. However, the

fact that Qatar, generally a moderate state that maintains relations with Israel – although it has links to the radical camp – convened even a partial summit in Doha at which the radicals set the tone, indicates the limits of Egypt's strength in the Arab world, even in the moderate camp. Moreover, in order to continue as a central element regarding the situation in Gaza, Egypt will have to carry out some considerable tasks in the future: substantially limit smuggling into Gaza, prevent significant Iranian intervention in Gaza's rehabilitation, help maintain calm in Gaza, and try to reconcile Hamas and Fatah.

What remains is a word on the regional implications for Israel. Antagonism toward Israel in the Arab world has certainly increased following Operation Cast Lead. Two countries with relations with Israel – Qatar and Mauritania – have frozen their ties. The anti-Israel line was prominent at the Doha summit, including a call to suspend the Arab peace initiative of 2002 – although it was not in fact cancelled as it was never approved as a resolution and because the Doha summit was not considered a full-fledged summit. Israel and the moderate Sunni camp have common interests, including blocking the radical Shiite axis, weakening Hamas and Hizbollah, and strengthening the Palestinian Authority. However, these interests have to date not led to actual cooperation between Israel and this bloc, partly because of the reservations of the Arab world about cooperation with Israel, certainly on sensitive intra-Arab issues. It cannot be assumed that such cooperation will occur in the foreseeable future beyond Egyptian-Israeli coordination on arms smuggling into Gaza, especially since Israel's negative image in the Arab world following the campaign in Gaza will not contribute to this.