

The Operation in Gaza and the Palestinian System

Shlomo Brom

One of the interesting aspects to the fighting in Gaza was the behavior of the Palestinian population in the West Bank. While there were expressions of public protest, they were on a relatively small scale, both in comparison to similar protests in the West and in the Arab world, and when considering the images of death and destruction shown on Arab television. The Palestinian Authority's security forces helped temper the protests by directing them to locations where friction with Israeli defense forces would be avoided. Yet in any event, from the outset the protests were low key.

It appears there were two main reasons for this. On the one hand the relatively low participation reflected the mood of the Palestinians who have tired of the ongoing failing struggle, and understand that terrible damage was suffered by the Palestinian people as a result of the recklessness on the part of Hamas, which did not correctly assess the Israeli response. On the other hand it reflected the serious weakening of Hamas' political infrastructure in the West Bank. This process resulted from some decline in support for Hamas due to its forceful takeover of the Gaza Strip and its failure to improve the lives of Gazan residents, but mainly from a series of effective actions by the Palestinian Authority and Israel against Hamas' political and economic infrastructure in the West Bank. For example, a significant number of Hamas political activists were arrested, the Palestinian Authority succeeded in taking control of a large number of mosques where Hamas operated, and the organization's financial assets were impounded. In the absence of a

Brig. Gen. (ret.) Shlomo Brom, senior research associate at INSS

functioning political infrastructure, Hamas struggled to motivate the masses to protest.

Another indication of Hamas' weakness in the West Bank was its failure to realize its threat to inflict heavy damage on Israel from this area. Hamas did not manage to launch even one single significant terrorist attack from the West Bank during the fighting, and the few attacks that took place during this period were spontaneous attacks by Palestinians who decided, on their own initiative, to carry out attacks using improvised means (knives, arson, and so on). After the ceasefire there was one shooting attack, although it is unclear if this was a Hamas attack. One may conclude from this that Hamas' terrorist infrastructure has also been crushed through intensive efforts by Israel's security forces in recent years, and recently by the actions of the Palestinian Authority's security forces as well. This does not mean that some Hamas cells are not operating still, but their capabilities are limited.

At this stage it is difficult to assess how the recent conflict in Gaza between Israel and Hamas will impact on the relative political power of Hamas and Fatah, headed by Mahmoud Abbas. Palestinians in and out of Gaza presumably understand the damage Hamas has caused them, the more favorable situation of the Palestinians in the West Bank under Abbas, and that area's greater prospects for further future improvement. This understanding can lead to a drop in support for Hamas and a rise in the power of Abbas and Fatah. On the other hand, during the fighting Abbas and the Palestinian Authority were perceived as collaborating with Israel and as irrelevant to the Palestinian cause, while Hamas again demonstrated that it is the only party that is willing to take Israel on and not succumb despite the large number of casualties. While this image of Hamas may have suffered to an extent because the organization did not succeed in carrying out its many threats and only inflicted limited damage on Israel, it is still strong. Since the end of the campaign Hamas has tried to boost this image and create a perception of its having been victorious in this campaign because it did not succumb and stayed on its feet, thereby "forcing" Israel to stop the fighting. If Hamas does not increase its efforts to stop the violent activity from the Gaza Strip, this will indicate that Hamas operatives might even believe this to be the real situation. The balance between these two antithetical elements is still unclear although the findings of a recent public opinion

poll may indicate that support for Hamas has increased.¹ In any case, even if Hamas loses additional support, it will presumably continue enjoying significant popularity among the Palestinian public. It is also likely that even if there is strong criticism of Hamas in Gaza because of the campaign, this will not hurt Hamas' control of the Strip, and critics will be wary of expressing their criticism and certainly will not stage an uprising against Hamas.

The fighting in Gaza helped Abbas navigate his way past January 9, 2009 which, according to Hamas and many Palestinian legal experts, is the date his term as president of the Palestinian Authority ended. After it recovers from the shock of the fighting in Gaza, Hamas will likely renew its verbal attacks on Abbas on this matter, but it is doubtful whether this will have any real effect that will unsettle Abbas' regime.

Another question is the impact of the developments in Gaza on the dialogue between Fatah and Hamas. Prior to the war the dialogue was deadlocked, due to the lack of real interest among both sides in progress. Egypt is trying to renew the dialogue as part of the post-campaign agreements, but is highly doubtful if this is attainable in the coming months. Hamas was not interested in the dialogue prior to the operation in Gaza because it preferred to conduct it from a position of strength, and it believed it would be in such a position after January 9. Now, after that hope has faded and it finds itself in a position of weakness, it is doubtful it will be interested in dialogue.

The situation in Gaza following the campaign has potential major impact on Israel's political process with the Palestinians. If a new deterrence balance has indeed emerged that will make Hamas hard pressed to renew the firing from Gaza, and certainly if the arrangements with third parties – principally the US and Egypt – make it hard for Hamas to rehabilitate its power, one can assume that stability and relative calm will continue for some time along this border. If Egypt succeeds in mediating between Israel and Hamas and an agreement is reached that will consolidate and strengthen the ceasefire, this will contribute to the stability, which in turn can help renew and accelerate the political process with the Palestinians. Although Abbas put contact with Israel on hold during the fighting because he was forced to display public displeasure with Israel's actions, it is likely that he will want to renew it after the dust settles. In the meantime, there will be a new

government in Israel, and this will help him turn over a new leaf. It is more convenient for both sides to conduct a political process when the security situation is calm. In this respect Hamas' weakness in the West Bank also contributes to the possibility of advancing the political process.

If the expectations of stability in the Gaza sector prove unfounded and the small scale rocket firing and attempts to carry out terrorist attacks along the border continue, Israel will likely first try to bring about calm through air attacks that will exact a greater cost than before. If this too does not help, Israel will probably embark on an ongoing series of wider military operations that will be designed to continue weakening Hamas and achieve freedom of movement for Israel's security forces throughout the Gaza Strip. At this point there would be the risk of anarchy in Gaza and the disappearance of the central government, as happened in the West Bank following Operation Defensive Shield. In such a case Abbas would not likely agree to return to the Gaza Strip, "riding on Israeli tanks." In any case, continuation of the fighting will make it hard for the two sides to conduct serious talks, let alone conclude them successfully and implement the agreement, even if they wanted to. In this case Israel will have to decide between renewing its military rule and anarchy in Gaza.

The political process that began after the Annapolis Conference incorporates two elements: political negotiations, which is a process that works from the top down, and a process of building the Palestinian Authority's capabilities, and particularly its security capabilities, which is a bottom up process. Hamas' weakening will make it difficult for it to disrupt the process of building up the Palestinian Authority's capabilities, although the image that was created of collaborating with Israel may damage the legitimacy of the Palestinian security forces in the eyes of the Palestinian public. These forces will have to demonstrate their contribution to Palestinian interests and the welfare of the population in order to limit this damage.

Another issue that may affect the development of the Israeli-Palestinian political process in the longer term is the impact of the campaign in Gaza on internal developments within Hamas: how will the internal balance of power evolve, will the positions be toughened, or will it be possible to change stances and make them more flexible.

On the one hand, the cost paid by Hamas could generate a process of moderation in which the political branches of Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank will gain strength vis-à-vis the military arm in Gaza and the external leadership in Damascus. On the other hand, Hamas' anger and frustration, particularly in a situation in which it feels that the results of the fighting help intensify the siege and the pressure on the organization, can lead to the military arm gaining power. However, the Damascus-based leadership will probably continue to control the finances and the weapon supplies to Hamas, and this affects the balance of power within Hamas.

In any case, even if the results of the fighting create a convenient environment for the continuation of the political process, this does not mean that an accelerated political process will take place in the coming year. The fighting in Gaza coincided with political transitional periods in the US and Israel, and the position of the Obama administration and the new government in Israel will have a crucial influence on the Israeli-Palestinian political process. In the United States the picture is becoming clearer. President Obama, who straightaway announced that he intends to give high priority to the Israeli-Palestinian track, appointed former senator George Mitchell as special envoy to the Middle East, who in turn has already made his first visit to Israel. On the other hand, the picture on the Israeli side is less clear. The Israeli positions are dependent on the coalition formed after the elections. The fighting in Gaza may strengthen support for less compromising stances towards the Palestinians, and boost those who argue that Israel cannot hand over more territory to the Palestinians given the risk that such areas might become launching bases for attacks against Israel. While this position is challenged by the Palestinian Authority's positive performance during the campaign, it is not clear how much this fact left its mark on the Israeli public and might overcome wariness to handing over additional territory to Palestinian rule.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3667302,00.html>.