

# **The “Special Relationship” in the Test of Time: US Policy during Operation Protective Edge**

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Operation Protective Edge was the outcome of a series of violent incidents between Israel and the Palestinians after the failed effort of Secretary of State John Kerry from July 2013 to April 2014 to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Among other challenges, the operation tested Israel’s military capability, its internal resilience, and its political position. This article reviews and analyzes the Obama administration’s positions and policy toward Israel during Operation Protective Edge.

## **Israel’s Military Operation**

From the first to the last day of the military conflict in the Gaza Strip, the Obama administration took an unequivocal position affirming Israel’s right to defend itself. Administration spokespeople repeatedly emphasized that no country could tolerate missile and rocket fire at its cities or tunnels that lead into its territory. Beyond this the administration generally avoided expressing support for Israeli military operations. On July 21, 2014, however, against the background of increasing criticism in the United States due to erosion in American support for Israel’s military actions against Hamas, the Secretary of State specifically called the IDF action in Gaza “appropriate and legitimate.”<sup>1</sup>

On a formal level, recognition of a state’s right to defend itself does not have much significance, since it is the natural and self-evident right of any state to defend itself. This right is also enshrined in Article 51 of

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the UN charter. However, on the political-public diplomacy level, this affirmation, and the fact that it was emphasized repeatedly by administration spokespeople, had great significance and was perceived as an expression of American support, even if qualified, for Israel's military moves. The administration's position was likely influenced by the broad support for Israel in the US Congress and in public opinion during the conflict.

In practice, throughout the operation the administration adhered to the concept that Israel's military actions in Gaza must be defensive, proportionate, and limited to removal of the concrete threats of the missiles and tunnels, and that Israel must ensure minimal harm to the civilian population.<sup>2</sup> This implied unequivocally that the administration disagreed with two of Israel's goals of the military action: a serious blow to the Hamas infrastructures and the restoration of deterrence. Achieving both these goals required intensive and comprehensive actions that exacted a heavy cost from Hamas. Hamas' extensive use of the civilian population as human shields in fact made it impossible for Israel to attain its goals without inflicting harm on the civilian population.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Israeli Leadership Acted Responsibly and with Restraint**

Throughout the operation, Israel agreed to every ceasefire proposal, and it was Hamas that torpedoed these agreements. This fact did not escape the administration's notice. Along with criticism of particular Israeli military actions, the administration expressed its appreciation to Israel's leaders for their efforts to restore calm even at the price of harsh domestic criticism and the appearance of humiliation by the terrorist organizations. On July 15, 2014, Kerry made clear that the escalation in Gaza entailed great risks: "We don't want to see that [escalation] – nobody does – *and nor does Israel*."<sup>4</sup>

The appreciation of Israel's measured responses increased dramatically after the "outrageous violation"<sup>5</sup> of the ceasefire by Hamas on August 1, 2014. The President made it clear that he "unequivocally condemned" the attacks, and he lambasted "the incredibly irresponsible actions on the part of Hamas to oftentimes house these rocket launchers right in the middle of civilian neighborhoods."<sup>6</sup> The administration's stance was undoubtedly a key factor in the relatively broad legitimacy that in practice was granted to Israel's military actions throughout the operation. Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed this in one of his speeches: "We received international legitimacy from the global community...for very strong action against the terrorist organizations. This was substantial."<sup>7</sup>

### The Role of Turkey and Qatar in the Mediation Efforts

Throughout the operation, administration officials had a tendency to distinguish between blame for the outbreak of the conflict – an issue that it underplayed – and the agreement that would follow the conflict. At times, spokespeople took pains to note that Hamas had started the conflict, yet for the purposes of “balance,” there was sometimes an implied connection between the military confrontation and the failure of Kerry’s mission several months prior to it. These ideas were not stated explicitly, but the message seemed clear: even if Hamas was directly responsible for the outbreak of the warfare, Israel was not free of responsibility, since it had the opportunity to promote a settlement that would prevent conflict and failed to take advantage of it.<sup>8</sup>

The administration also refrained from accepting Israel’s position that a discussion on the substantive questions raised by Hamas would take place only after a stable ceasefire was reached. During Kerry’s visit to Cairo on July 21, 2014, he made it clear that nothing would be solved solely through a ceasefire, temporary or extended, if the fundamental problems were not addressed at some stage. The Secretary of State noted that the discussion on the substantive issues would begin “at some point,” but he gave no details.<sup>9</sup> The following day, Kerry stated that “just reaching a cease-fire clearly is not enough. It is imperative that there be a serious engagement, discussion, negotiation regarding the underlying issues and addressing all of the concerns that have brought us to where we are today.” When that would occur was not clear.<sup>10</sup> On another occasion, Kerry stated that the Palestinians can’t have a ceasefire in which they think the status quo is here to stay and they will not be able to begin to live and breathe more freely. In other words, the discussion on the substantive issues must take place during the fighting, just as Hamas demanded.<sup>11</sup>

On July 25, 2014, Kerry met in Paris with the Foreign Ministers of Turkey and Qatar, two countries that openly support Hamas and its struggle against Israel. The purpose of the meeting was to mobilize the two as key players in the efforts to achieve a ceasefire. It was clear that Israel would not be invited to the meeting. However, at the same time, the administration refrained from inviting Egypt and the Palestinian Authority, both of which have a critical interest in an arrangement with Hamas. “Many Arab leaders,” wrote Elliott Abrams, “were shocked to see Secretary of State Kerry in Paris with the foreign ministers of Qatar and Turkey, which were supporting Hamas, and without Egyptian or PA officials present.”<sup>12</sup> From Israel’s point of view,

this conduct by the administration could not but imply that it was seeking to push Israel into a corner and deny it the possibility of achieving the objectives for the operation that it had set for itself.

After his meetings with the Turkish and Qatari Foreign Ministers, Kerry, speaking in a firm, if not threatening, tone, stated that he wanted "everybody in Israel to understand: we clearly understand – I understand that Palestinians need to live with dignity, with some – freedom...and they need a life that is free from the current restraints that they feel on a daily basis, and obviously free from violence." Words in this vein suggest that the Secretary of State had adopted an approach more favorable to Hamas than to Israel. Later, he made pro forma remarks to the effect that "Israelis need to live free from rockets and from tunnels that threaten them." There was no reference to Hamas' culpability for the outbreak of the conflict, to Israel's demand to demilitarize Gaza, or to Israel's right to monitor materials entering Gaza. At the end of his remarks, Secretary Kerry presented the conflict as a clash of "competing interests that are real for both" the Palestinians and Israel. Thus, he once again placed Israel and Hamas on the same justification level, while making it clear that the confrontation does not reflect an unjustified aggression by Hamas, as Israel claims, but a struggle over the "competing interests" of the two sides. In such circumstances, it could come as no surprise that the proposal for a settlement submitted to Israel would reflect these positions presented. The expected crisis with the United States was not long in coming.<sup>13</sup>

According to several accounts, Kerry's settlement proposal shocked Israel's leaders. *Haaretz* correspondent Barak Ravid listed a number of elements of the proposal that, from Israel's point of view, ran highly counter to its national interests: (a) There was almost no reference in the proposal to Israel's security needs, i.e., demilitarizing the Gaza Strip by removing rockets and heavy weapons and destroying the terror tunnels leading from Gaza to Israel. The emphasis was almost exclusively on Hamas' needs: opening the border crossings, allowing entry of goods and people, and transferring funds to Hamas to enable it to pay salaries. (b) According to the draft, the agreement was between the two parties, Israel and the "Palestinian factions," or in other words, Hamas and the other factions operating in the Gaza Strip. The two sides were of equal status. (c) The proposal did not give any status to the PA under Mahmoud Abbas. Not surprisingly, Israel's cabinet rejected the proposal. Wide circles in Israel,

Egypt, and the United States harshly criticized the administration's conduct in the crisis, and in particular, the settlement proposal.<sup>14</sup>

To ease the criticism of the administration's positions on Israel, particularly by members of Congress,<sup>15</sup> State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki announced that the published proposal was not "a formal US proposal" but a "confidential draft."<sup>16</sup> Administration officials claimed that they had not expected the draft to be presented to the cabinet, and that Netanyahu's office had "breached protocol" by presenting it for a cabinet vote.<sup>17</sup> It is hard to believe that these claims were well received in Israel. There was no doubt that an important document such as this was carefully examined by the various government agencies and received the President's approval.

At the same time, and in order to display more sympathy toward Israel, the White House issued a memorandum on the main points of the conversation between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. The discussion included (a) a "serious accusation" by the President against Hamas concerning its rocket fire and its use of tunnels to attack Israel; (b) emphasis on the need to establish a humanitarian ceasefire, and then a permanent, *unconditional* ceasefire [emphasis added], as demanded by Israel; (c) support by the United States for the Egyptian initiative, meaning that Turkey and Qatar were being excluded as key mediators, although administration spokesmen continued to emphasize the need to include the countries involved in the conflict and the regional actors in actions to reach a settlement; (d) an emphasis on the need to ensure Israel's security and strengthen the standing of the PA; (e) the concept that any permanent settlement of the conflict must ensure the disarming of the terrorist groups in Gaza and the demilitarization of Gaza. However, the President made clear that the issue of Gaza's demilitarization was not a matter for the immediate term, as Israel demanded, but something to be included in a comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>18</sup>

National Security Advisor Susan Rice was also mobilized for the effort to improve the administration's image. At a meeting with Jewish leaders in the United States, she reiterated the administration's support for Israel.<sup>19</sup> The Secretary of State likewise stressed his deep commitment to Israel's security and the fact that in his twenty-nine years in Congress, he had a 100 percent pro-Israel voting record.<sup>20</sup> At a press conference on August 1, 2014, President Obama completed the campaign to defend Kerry, rejecting

the "unfair criticism" of Secretary Kerry, who was working tirelessly to achieve quiet in the area.<sup>21</sup>

### Harm to Civilians in Gaza

From the start of the campaign, the US administration stressed its concern regarding the harm to civilians. Formally, administration spokesmen generally attempted to be minimally balanced between Israel and Gaza in their comments in this context. Nevertheless, all of their statements emphasized in no uncertain terms the serious suffering of Gaza's citizens, while references to the suffering of Israel's citizens were peripheral, leaving the impression that they were merely pro forma remarks.<sup>22</sup>

During the operation, the administration took the trouble to condemn Israel harshly and publicly for significant harm to civilians, particularly near or within UN welfare institutions in Gaza. This constituted a marginalization, if not near-total rejection of Israel's claims that Hamas was solely responsible for the deaths of innocents in Gaza. It seems that from the administration's point of view, the suffering of civilians in Gaza was a phenomenon in its own right that resulted from Israel's military operations there and should not be linked to a greater context of who should be blamed in the first place for the killing of innocent people. When harm to civilians in Gaza was on the agenda, the administration did not even seriously address the admission by UN personnel that Hamas places weapons in UN institutions or the firm demand by members of Congress to investigate the issue.<sup>23</sup>

The administration's response to the death of more than ten Palestinians near the UN school in Rafah was especially serious. Officials did not bother to wait for the results of the investigation to confirm whether the IDF was responsible for the event, as is the accepted practice among allies. Jen Psaki used harsh words in relaying the administration's response, stating that "the United States is appalled by today's disgraceful shelling." According to Psaki, "the coordinates of the school, like all UN facilities in Gaza, have been repeatedly communicated to the Israeli Defense Forces." She added that "Israel must do more to meet its own standards and avoid civilian casualties."<sup>24</sup>

The wording of the statement left no room for doubt: not only was the administration not prepared to await the IDF's investigation of the incident, table the matter with a discreet conversation with Israel about such incidents, or accept Israel's claim that it was a tragic error in the use of military force. The US attitude clearly reflected a tendency to see

the incident as a deliberate Israeli attack meant to make the residents of Gaza pay a heavy price for the continuation of the fighting. Against this background, the administration apparently sought to further limit Israel's military freedom of action. "The suspicion that militants are operating nearby [civilian sites]," noted the spokeswoman, "does not justify strikes that put at risk the lives of so many innocent civilians."<sup>25</sup>

### Punitive Measures?

On July 22, 2014, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) decided to stop flights to Israel by US airlines after a missile shot from Gaza hit Yehud, located near Ben Gurion Airport. In the wake of this decision, many airlines announced that they were suspending their flights to Israel. Beyond the damage to Israel's image, morale, and economy, Israel feared – in my opinion, justifiably – that closure of the airport would provide a very persuasive image of victory for Hamas.<sup>26</sup>

Administration spokespeople contended that this was a professional decision by an independent body and that the administration was not involved. Wide circles in Israel doubted this claim: "In Israel," wrote Amos Harel in *Haaretz*, "the American move was viewed as a knife in the back of the war effort...It is difficult to avoid the impression that the cessation of flights did not occur entirely by chance." After two days, the FAA decided to resume flights to Israel. "Prime Minister Netanyahu," wrote Harel, "hastened to announce that 'pressure we applied caused the flights to be resumed.'" Harel wondered why Netanyahu had to intervene "if the decision was strictly professional."<sup>27</sup>

On August 14, 2014, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the administration was delaying a shipment of weapons to Israel after it found out that the weapons were being transferred solely on the basis of Pentagon approval.<sup>28</sup> Following harsh criticism of this unusual step – delaying weapons shipments to Israel during a military campaign – the State Department was quick to deny that this was a punitive measure against Israel. As proof, it referred to the fact that during the fighting, the administration had transferred \$225 million to Israel for the continued development of Iron Dome.<sup>29</sup> According to the State Department, this was a routine bureaucratic move that is always taken when weapons are shipped to areas of tension, and does not reflect any change in policy toward Israel.<sup>30</sup> However, here too there was a widespread feeling in Israel that if the administration so desired, it had the tools to circumvent bureaucratic obstacles. This American move



represented a departure from the position taken by the current and previous administrations, that the government will not allow disagreements on the political level to harm the military-defense relationship with Israel. In any case, after intensive discussions with the United States, it was made clear that the supply of weapons would continue as usual.<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

The conflict between Israel and Hamas in Operation Protective Edge began and took place under political conditions that were favorable, if not ideal, for Israel. The conflict involved an advanced, pro-Western democratic state – an unofficial US ally (major non-NATO ally) – and a terrorist organization, outlawed by Congressional legislation operating in contravention of international law.<sup>32</sup> There was no doubt that Hamas initiated the conflict, and throughout the operation, Israel, unlike Hamas, demonstrated willingness to bring about calm. Hamas engaged in deliberate, indiscriminate firing at civilian targets in Israel, action that according to administration spokesmen is “completely unacceptable.”<sup>33</sup> In addition, the public and brutal executions Hamas conducted during the operation damaged its image as a terrorist organization that focuses on social welfare and enjoys widespread public sympathy. Its identification with ISIS in global public opinion was inevitable, even though officially, the administration has not accepted the Prime Minister’s comparison between the two organizations.

Under these circumstances, it could be expected that during the conflict the administration would give Israel full backing for its military operation and strive to end the conflict with Israel undeniably having the upper hand. In fact, the situation was entirely different. When administration officials referred to the conflict, they projected the message that Israel and Hamas were two sides fighting each other as equals and that the administration was not favoring either of them. The overriding goal was to end the conflict, or in other words, bring about calm on the basis of the understandings that led to the end of Operation Pillar of Defense. Secretary Kerry expressed this poignantly when toward the end of Operation Protective Edge he was asked directly whether the United States gave its full support to Israel in the operation. He refrained from answering in the affirmative, making do with a routine statement to the effect that the United States supported Israel’s right to defend itself.<sup>34</sup>

The administration’s somewhat alienated stance toward Israel during the operation was likely dictated by the following main considerations:



- a. Responsibility for the conflict: The administration acknowledged that it was Hamas that initiated the latest conflict in Gaza, and was well aware of the fact that the Israeli government, unlike Hamas, demonstrated a sincere desire throughout the campaign to agree to a ceasefire and return to a state of calm. Nevertheless, in comments by administration officials, there was a tendency to make clear, albeit implicitly, that Israel was also responsible for the outbreak of the conflict.<sup>35</sup>
- b. Turkish and Qatari involvement: These two economically and politically powerful countries, which have a very close relationship with the United States, have openly declared their support for Hamas. This fact greatly limited the administration's ability to maneuver during the campaign. It likely estimated that if it were to express explicit support for Israel and Egypt, this could engender a harsh response from Turkey and Qatar that would harm the essential United States interests. The turbulence in today's Middle East, and particularly the violent actions of the Islamic State and the need to deploy the US military in operational tasks in the Middle East, make it necessary for the administration to avoid a crisis with these two important countries. This is presumably the reason the administration attempted to make Turkey and Qatar key actors in the mediation efforts; only after it had been harshly criticized did the administration renege on the move.
- c. The exclusion of the United States from the agreement process: During the campaign, the United States found itself in the rather embarrassing position of lacking a meaningful status in the process of achieving a ceasefire and regulating relations between Egypt, Israel, and Hamas. This was the first war since the establishment of the State of Israel in which the United States did not play a dominant role in the process of achieving a settlement. Its attempts to be part of the efforts at a settlement involved incidents embarrassing to it and to its representatives. Ultimately, the administration had no choice but to accept the fact that Egypt was leading the process of reaching an arrangement with Hamas. Among various circles in the administration, the prevailing assumption was that Netanyahu had pushed the United States aside.<sup>36</sup>
- d. The issue of image: The harrowing photographs from Gaza publicized by the global media aggravated Israel's image problem. For the administration, it was especially difficult to accept the sight of injured children and harm to civilians within or next to UN institutions. The administration was familiar with Israel's explanations and even voiced

them a number of times, but the pictures made it difficult for the administration to express full support for Israel.

However, and with a broad perspective, it is important to stress that in spite of the pitfalls, disagreements, arguments, and mutual insults between Israel and the United States during the operation, the picture that emerges is that the "special relationship" remained stable and successfully survived the severe turmoil surrounding the operation. Throughout the operation Israel and the United States conducted an ongoing, intensive, deep, and intimate dialogue, as befits countries with a broad strategic partnership. Furthermore, all during the operation, there was an effort by both sides to avoid a rupture, with a clear emphasis on continuing an intensive dialogue in spite of the disagreements.

Moreover, it is impossible to ignore the fact that even when the administration chose to publicly or discreetly emphasize its displeasure with Israel's conduct in the campaign, it avoided heavy pressure on Israel to change the nature of the military operation. This means that in practice, throughout the operation, i.e., a period just short of two months, the United States allowed Israel fairly large freedom of action even when Israel's military actions were unprecedented and very far from the parameters the United States saw as appropriate. Ultimately, this is the crucial point in evaluating US policy during the operation and its significance for relations between the two countries.

## Notes

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- 3 Statement of the President on Ukraine, the White House, July 18, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/07/18/president-makes-statement-ukraine#tran>.
- 4 Remarks, John Kerry, Secretary of State, Vienna, Austria, July 15, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/07/229275.htm>, emphasis added; henceforth, "Kerry remarks, July 15, 2014."
- 5 "The Situation in the Gaza Strip," Press Statement, John Kerry, Secretary of State, August 1, 2014, <http://embassies.gov.il/san-francisco/Newsandevents/Pages/The-Situation-in-the-Gaza-Strip.aspx>.

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- 11 Remarks with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid al-Attiyah after their Meeting, July 26, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/07/229811.htm>, henceforth "Kerry remarks, July 26, 2014."
- 12 Elliott Abrams, "What Now for Israel? Common Enemies and Shared Interests Have Aligned the Saudis, the Egyptians, and Other Arabs with the Jewish State. That's the Good News," *Mosaic*, September 2014, <http://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2014/09/what-now-for-israel/>.
- 13 Kerry remarks, July 26, 2014.
- 14 Barak Ravid, "Kerry's Cease-fire Draft Revealed: U.S. Plan Would Let Hamas Keep Its Rockets," *Haaretz*, July 28, 2014.
- 15 See, for example, the statement by the speaker of the US House of Representatives in this context: John Boehner, "The House Will Always Stand with Israel," July 28, 2014; and "House Passes Foreign Affairs Legislation Condemning Hamas' Use of Human Shields," July 30, 2014.
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- 20 Remarks, John Kerry, with Ukrainian foreign minister Pavlo Klimkin, July 29, 2014.
- 21 White House, "Press Conference by the President," August 1, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/01/press-conference-president>.
- 22 For a clear expression of this, see Kerry remarks, July 21, 2014.
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- 32 On July 15, 2014, Kerry stated that the indiscriminate firing by Hamas at Israeli civilian targets was against the laws of war, and that therefore Hamas was a terrorist organization. Kerry remarks, July 15, 2014.
- 33 Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, July 15, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/15/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-7152014>.
- 34 Interview with Zeinab Badawi of BBC's HARDtalk, John Kerry, August 5, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/08/230292.htm>.
- 35 Friedman, "Obama on the World."
- 36 Entous, "Gaza Crisis."