

## **Demilitarization of the Gaza Strip: Realistic Goal or Pipe Dream?**

---

Kobi Michael

Operation Protective Edge has made the concept of low intensity conflict irrelevant. It dramatized the weight of Hamas' military capabilities and infrastructures in the Gaza Strip and their potential for striking the Israeli home front, along with the organization's steadfastness in a prolonged campaign, which was longer than both previous Gaza campaigns and even the Second Lebanon War. In addition, Hamas' military capabilities and infrastructures reflect both a process of institutionalization of the group as a governmental and military power in Gaza, and the link between military and political power.

Hamas' military capabilities since Operation Protective Edge have remained significant, certainly in comparison to those of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Hamas will seek to maintain or even develop them, despite the difficulty involved in light of the results of the operation. It is clear to Hamas that its military capabilities are the basis for realizing its political demands in the Gaza Strip, and in general, in securing its standing as an influential political force in the Palestinian arena and beyond. Therefore, Hamas will refuse any voluntary demilitarization and will use its military capabilities to challenge the PA or any entity that in the context of the operation to reconstruct Gaza attempts to undermine it or threatens its power or influence.

The reconstruction of Gaza, led by the international community and implemented through the PA, has a greater chance of success if Hamas' influence on the project is limited. The same is true of prospects for turning the project into leverage to restart the political process with the Palestinians and build a Palestinian state in a controlled and responsible process, with the Gaza Strip as the first significant layer. In order to neutralize Hamas'

negative influence on the process, it must be allowed to be a political partner only, in the framework of the Palestinian reconciliation government led by Abu Mazen, and not be allowed to exercise veto power or exploit the process for another seizure of Gaza and from there, a takeover of the PA. To this end, Hamas' military capabilities must be weakened, which means demilitarization. In other words, without demilitarization, a constructive reconstruction operation in Gaza will not be possible.

To Israel, the successful reconstruction of the Gaza Strip is a necessary condition for reshaping the Palestinian, Israeli-Palestinian, and regional systems. Therefore, it is important to make every effort to ensure the necessary conditions for successful reconstruction, and demilitarizing Gaza is one of, if not the most important of these conditions. The failure of the immediate attempts at reconstruction would reduce the chances for any further reconstruction efforts, particularly insofar as complex projects of this sort must balance between the required investment of extensive resources, coordination between the respective actors, and the political prestige of the party leading the effort.

The more that Gaza is demilitarized, the less the likelihood that Hamas will continue to rule, and the greater the likelihood of a gradual PA return to political and security control. Similarly, the more substantive the demilitarization, the greater the chances of economic and infrastructure development and reconstruction in Gaza. The greater the improvement in the quality of life for Gazans, and the more that Gaza is rebuilt, the stronger the restraints on escalation. In strategic language, the greater the assets possessed by the governmental authority in Gaza, the greater will be the ability to deter violence and escalation.

Thus, the strategic benefit to be gained from the demilitarization of Gaza and the ensuing benefits to the Gaza civilian population are indisputable. In this context, however, three fundamental questions arise:

- a. What is demilitarization? Is this an all-or-nothing situation of demilitarization or no demilitarization, or is this a continuum, with no demilitarization at one end and complete demilitarization at the other, with countless values of demilitarization along the continuum?
- b. Is it even possible to achieve demilitarization of Gaza (total or partial), and how?
- c. Could even partial demilitarization of Gaza become leverage for changing and reshaping the system in Gaza?

Answers to these questions can help shape an informed approach to definition and implementation of Israel's strategic interests in Gaza.

### **Demilitarization in the Context of the Gaza Strip**

Demilitarization denotes clearing or evacuating fighting forces and weapons from a defined area and a ban or restriction on any military activity. It is a security regime of sorts and a means of managing or settling violent conflicts, which reduces the potential for escalation and allows for an early warning zone and early deployment to thwart possible escalation, whether peacefully (through diplomacy) or through military means.

Demilitarized zones do not require reciprocity or symmetry between the parties to the conflict. There may be situations in which a demilitarized zone is created only in the sovereign territory of one party. Alternatively, there may be cases in which there are demilitarized zones in the sovereign territory of two (or more) parties involved in the conflict, but the size of the zones is not identical. An example is the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. There is also partial demilitarization, which permits retention of a limited and defined number of weapons and military forces, such as in the Israel-Syria Separation of Forces Agreement. There are also cases in which the presence of military forces of any of the parties to the conflict is banned, but the presence – and operation – of military forces of a third party is permitted, be they peacekeeping forces or a party agreed upon by the sides that is engaged in supervision of the disputed area.

Full demilitarization of the Gaza Strip means depriving Hamas and other terrorist organizations of the ability to operate militarily against Israel or another player that seeks to operate in Gaza, including for purposes of reconstruction. In this context, therefore, it is important to distinguish between capabilities and intentions. While the intention to continue to attack Israel or other actors cannot be suppressed in the foreseeable future, the ability to do so can be suppressed or very significantly contained by: eliminating the existing tunnel infrastructure and preventing its renovation; eliminating the rocket and weapons production infrastructures and preventing their renovation by means of self-production or smuggling; and neutralizing senior operatives and others in the organizational military apparatuses, whether through persuasion, arrest, or targeted killing.

Although a goal sought by Israel, total demilitarization of the Gaza Strip will presumably not be possible in the short term. Until then, Israel, with aid

from Egypt, the moderate axis in the Arab world (including the PA under Abu Mazen), and the international community will need to benchmark points on the continuum between no demilitarization and full demilitarization, and will need patience, determination, and strategic insight to ensure progress across the continuum. Full achievement of the goal will require ongoing international resolve and backing, close cooperation between Israel and Egypt and the PA, determination and a capacity for action from the PA, and an ongoing military effort against the terrorist infrastructures. In addition, there is a need for efforts, led by the international community via the PA, to rebuild and develop Gaza while at the same time strengthening and entrenching PA rule there. As such, this involves an intelligent, cautious, patient, and ongoing combination of militarism and diplomacy.

The actors operating in the Gaza Strip are a state actor (Israel), a semi-state actor ( Hamas), and non-state actors (Islamic Jihad and other terrorist organizations). The formative logic of the system in Gaza is different from that of an interstate conflict, and the actors' respective motivations regarding demilitarization do not converge. In this case, it is likely that voluntary demilitarization cannot be implemented, nor apparently can complete demilitarization. Hamas, and certainly the other terrorist organizations, will seek to maintain military capabilities, because without them they have no political viability.

While it is clearly impossible to achieve total demilitarization of Gaza in the immediate wake of Operation Protective Edge, Israel's strategic interest following the campaign makes it necessary to demand that any ceasefire and settlement agreement be conditional on Gaza's full demilitarization, even if the process is gradual. The settlement agreement must determine the appropriate mechanisms for implementing the demilitarization and give Israel the legitimacy to thwart any attempt to renovate the military infrastructure. For this purpose, it is important to start the process by formulating an agreement on the minimum threshold definition of demilitarization necessary to allow the arrangements for Gaza's reconstruction through the PA to begin. At the same time, the PA's status and influence must be strengthened, while Hamas' political standing is continuously and regularly weakened.

On the other hand, Israel must prepare for a situation in which there is no agreement. In such a case, it must work to consolidate legitimacy for ongoing operations against the terrorist infrastructures and establish new rules of the game about a response if the terrorist infrastructure is used

against the Israeli population. In light of the lessons of Operation Protective Edge, Israel cannot allow Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip to rehabilitate themselves militarily and return to the situation that existed prior to the campaign.

### **Partial Demilitarization of the Gaza Strip: Likewise a Lever for Change?**

Complete demilitarization promises the most favorable outlook for creating the strategic leverage to change the situation in Gaza and restart the political process in its broader contexts. But given a situation in which the chances of total demilitarization in the near term are not great, could limited demilitarization, i.e., partially dismantling Hamas' military infrastructures and capabilities and preventing another buildup, be sufficient to create change there? The answer would appear to be "yes," but it is contingent on the simultaneous fulfillment of several conditions.

First, the minimum required demilitarization of Gaza must allow a functional PA government, or alternatively, allow the PA security apparatus to deal with attempted challenges by Hamas. At the same time, it must preserve and maintain deterrence against Hamas and the other terrorist organizations and reduce their ability to challenge the PA and disrupt its activities.

Second, security and strategic cooperation between Israel and Egypt must be improved or at least maintained on the current level to ensure that the smuggling of weapons and other military capabilities from the Sinai Peninsula and by sea from the border with Egypt is thwarted. For this purpose, US-Egyptian relations should be tightened. The United States should resume its support for the Egyptian regime and relax the pressure it has placed on Egypt since the Muslim Brotherhood government was ousted. It should also restore its economic, military, and political support for the benefit of the regime of President el-Sisi.

Third, Qatar's drive to support Hamas and radical elements must be contained, whether by direct pressures on the country's rulers or by other means that will clarify to Qatar the price for supporting Hamas and the risk inherent in its dangerous and subversive policy. In addition, there must be an effort by the Arab world and the international community to strengthen the axis of moderate Arab states – with an eye to other conflict zones in the Middle East and as a counterweight to the dangerous radical and subversive axes.

Fourth, the possibility of rebuilding and developing Gaza should be cast as a significant stage in the process of Palestinian state building. This means building functioning and responsible Palestinian institutions as well as providing training, support, and supervision. In particular, it means constructing mechanisms that will ensure that the resources allocated to developing Gaza will be used in the most effective manner. After twenty-one years of economic support for the PA, crucial lessons must be learned. UNRWA's mandate and operating procedures must be changed, and there must be tighter control over the resources at its disposal in order to ensure it will be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. The financial aid must not support the infrastructure of corruption and inefficiency. It must ensure the development and prosperity of Gaza, the development of Palestinian governmental institutions, law and order, and above all, the monopoly on the use of force.

Fifth, Israel must comprehensively reformulate its strategic interests vis-à-vis the Palestinian arena, turning the crisis in Gaza into an opportunity for strategic change. Even if the chances of a peace treaty with the Palestinians are not great, at this time the PA, headed by Abu Mazen, can be a strategic partner for Israel in weakening Hamas and terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip and reorganizing the area. Such a strategic partnership requires a change in Israel's approach to rebuilding Gaza, generosity and cooperation in easing the security closure of Gaza, and a willingness to undertake more significant actions to implement the model of two states for two peoples. In addition, Israel needs military resolve for ongoing prevention of attempts to rebuild the terror infrastructures and for maintaining deterrence against Hamas and the terrorist organizations.

## **Conclusion**

Gaza must be demilitarized in order to reshape the system there and impose restraints against further escalation, or in strategic language, achieve and maintain deterrence. At the same time, demilitarization is presumed to be a necessary condition for the success of the operation to rebuild Gaza and resume the political process with the Palestinian Authority under Abu Mazen.

It is clear that at the current time and in the conditions created after Operation Protective Edge – when Hamas retains sufficiently large military capabilities to challenge any actor that attempts to step into its shoes – it is not possible to achieve full demilitarization, either voluntary (by Hamas) or

by force. On the other hand, the situation is ripe for international recognition of the need for demilitarization. Therefore, Israel must ensure that there are mechanisms for implementing demilitarization and international legitimacy for a response on its part should there be any attempt to violate it. The demilitarization of Gaza is a process that requires time, determination, persistence, and much collaboration between many actors. A relevant strategy could help Israel establish and promote the demilitarization process. Even if at this time complete demilitarization appears to be a pipe dream, by the very act of progress toward it, Israel can improve its strategic position.