



INSS Insight No. 641, December 11, 2014

The Gaza Strip: What Can Israel Do to Postpone – or Even Prevent – the Next Round of Violence?

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Over three months have passed since the end of Operation Protective Edge and over a month has passed since the donor nations met in Cairo and committed themselves to infuse \$5.4 billion into the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. However, any substantive reconstruction work has yet to begin, and thus the homeless in Gaza are still without a roof over their heads, while the wintry weather exacerbates the hardships. Moreover, Egypt has toughened its policy on the Rafah crossing, which is closed most of the time and has expanded its security zone along the border between the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip in order to uncover and destroy any smuggling tunnels. Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas' refusal to transfer salaries and budgets that the Hamas apparatus in Gaza needs to function has aggravated Hamas' difficulties and worsened the conditions for Gazans.

The only source of hope is the cooperation between Israel and UN envoy Robert Serry and arrangements on the supervised entry of construction materials and heavy engineering equipment to rebuild thousands of residences. The agreements, which reflect a change in the Israeli and PA position on allowing construction materials into the Gaza Strip, were formulated in response to the worsening humanitarian situation and the threats by Hamas and other organizations in the area to escalate the security situation unless there were signs that the reconstruction process was beginning. But this is not enough to ease the frustrations and pressure in the Gaza Strip.

At the end of Operation Protective Edge, Israel and Hamas committed *to renew* their indirect negotiations for on a long term ceasefire. However, the talks have been postponed indefinitely, following the Egyptian decision not to invite the parties to Cairo in the light of the terrorist attacks in northern Sinai, and also due to difficulties in coordinating matters with the PA. Hamas wants to renew the talks to promote its critical needs, such as expanding the fishing zone, expanding the agricultural lands penetrating the security perimeter, and improving relations with Egypt, and in general demonstrate concrete accomplishments to the Gazan population.

Overall, the Gaza Strip resembles a pressure cooker set to explode and ignite another round of fighting between Israel and Hamas. This instability is compounded by the tensions between Fatah and Hamas and by the concerns that the reconciliation agreement might collapse. These have raised Hamas' motivation to undermine the PA's control of the West Bank and intensify incitement in Jerusalem, in the hopes of further igniting the tensions in the city and having violence spread to the West Bank.

In order to postpone the next round of violence for as long as possible, Israel seeks to facilitate reconstruction in the Gaza Strip and enable a dramatic improvement in living conditions among the Gaza population, as it is clear that the greater the distress in Gaza and the greater difficulty Hamas has in improving daily life in the area, the greater the likelihood of a renewed violent confrontation. In such circumstances, Hamas is liable to allow military operatives and other rogue elements to carry out attacks against Israel, inevitably increasing the potential for fighting.

In this reality, Israel has three main options:

1. **Continuing and expanding existing activities:** Using supervised procedures and with the help of the UN, Israel could transfer building materials and other goods required for basic existence and housing construction. Of course, this is not enough to provide for the needs of the Gaza Strip. Therefore, Israel will have to find a way to coordinate the expansion of the fishing zone with Hamas, come to clear understandings about the entrance of Palestinians into the security perimeter and help with reconstruction of infrastructures (like sewage) in the Gaza Strip. Nonetheless, this form of action can only delay the inevitable because it lacks stabilizing factors and does not address the Gaza Strip's root problems. It is therefore probable that a violent outburst will occur sooner or later.
2. **Involving the PA in Gazan affairs with the coordination of Egypt, the pragmatic Arab nations, and the international community:** This alternative should set the stage for the PA's expanded responsibility over the Gaza Strip and, with the help of Arab states and the international community, enable it to manage the broad reconstruction process. This would also serve as a test of PA capabilities in state building process. For this option, Israel would have to promote a political plan or respond favorably to initiatives for renewing the peace process and, at the same time, expand the PA's authority over the West Bank, which would be favor the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.
3. **Severing fully from the Gaza Strip:** Israel would initiate a process, led by the international community and supported by the pragmatic Arab states, to open the Gaza Strip to the world and decrease, to the point of non-dependence, the Gaza Strip's reliance on Israel's goods and equipment. This would require the construction of a seaport off the Gazan coast, with provisions made to ensure

Israel's security needs. In this option, Israel must closely cooperate with Egypt, in order to prevent *Cairo* from suspecting that Israel is trying to deflect responsibility for the Gaza Strip onto Egypt. The failure of this option could possibly lead to placing the Gaza Strip under international trusteeship.

Any deliberation on these options must take several constraints into consideration:

1. The implementation of the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement and involvement of a Palestinian unity government in the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip is highly unlikely, at best. Hamas will remain the only significant governing and military element in Gaza and the economic and human plight there will continue.
2. The PA and President Abbas have no intention, desire, or ability to resume control of the Gaza Strip and seize the reins of government away from Hamas. The PA will lose in any violent confrontation with Hamas, unless it has significant military help from Israel and/or Egypt.
3. The Arab states, or at least the important actors, have a limited interest in the Gaza Strip.
4. Involving the Arab world and international community in the reconstruction and management of the Gaza Strip would reduce Israel's scope of legitimacy in taking military action in response to attacks coming from the Gaza Strip, even as self-defense.
5. The international community does not want responsibility for the Gaza Strip, as this would, *inter alia*, entail violent confrontations, first and foremost with Hamas, which can be expected to oppose waiving its control of the Gaza Strip.

Recommendations

None of the three options is optimal from Israel's perspective, because not one ensures long term calm. In addition, the feasibility of the second and third alternatives is low, because they depend on Egypt, the Arab world and the international community. They also reduce Israel's influence on the processes and developments in the Gaza Strip. Still, the advantage of these options lies in the fact that they include a political initiative with the potential to extricate Israel from its international isolation, break the political deadlock, and decrease Israel's responsibility for the Gaza Strip.

Prospects for success of the first option would grow if Israel were ready to accept Hamas' continued rule of the Gaza Strip and would work to accelerate reconstruction, with the help of the UN, while acknowledging Hamas' central role in the process. In this scenario, Israel would have to take into consideration, as the process moves forward, that the status of Hamas as the sovereign power in the Gaza Strip will become more entrenched, reducing the PA's chances of returning to power there. Consequently,

Hamas' status in the Palestinian arena and its influence on the West Bank as well would grow.

The second option can only be implemented as part of a broad framework that would include the renewal of the peace process and appropriate compensation for the PA in the West Bank. The preferred format would be a controlled and responsible process of Palestinian state building – including both infrastructure and government systems – with the direct help of Egypt and the backing of the pragmatic Arab world and the international community, resulting from negotiations based on agreements and proof of the PA's ability to function effectively. However, this option entails the risk of a violent confrontation between Hamas and the PA that would spill over into Israel.

The chances for realizing the third option would grow, were Egypt to assume responsibility in the name of the Arab world, the international community, and the PA for leading the process of opening the Gaza Strip to the West; or alternately, if an international trusteeship were established in Gaza. Though this process could occur without Hamas-led violence, it is unlikely to be implemented, due to the need for significant involvement on the part of the Arab states and the international community.

Therefore, for the moment, the first option in the extended scope serves Israel's interests, given the Israeli leadership's assessment that there is no hope for negotiations leading to arrangements with the PA under Abbas' leadership – certainly not in the next six months, when Israel is engrossed in national elections and the formation of a new government. Nonetheless, there exists tension in the option, between the need to rein in Hamas and the fact that the Israeli assistance will lead to strengthening its rule in Gaza and to the rehabilitation of its legitimacy. In addition, this result is not consistent with Egypt's interests and it can weaken the PA.

In order to restrain Hamas, Israel will have to grant the organization notable achievements, which in turn would entrench its legitimacy and strengthen its rule over Gaza.

