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**Recalculating the Gaza Route:
Reconstruction of an Autonomous Area with Protected Zones
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Operation Protective Edge ended in August 2014, leaving the Gaza Strip in a complex humanitarian reality. Infrastructures were destroyed, and some 100,000 people were left homeless. The economic situation deteriorated dramatically due to the fighting and Egypt's harsh policy toward Hamas and the Gaza Strip, with the area cut off almost entirely from Egypt and the smuggling industry via the tunnels along the Philadelphi corridor destroyed.

In the summer of 2014, the international community committed itself to the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, and at a conference in Cairo close to the end of the military operation some \$5.4 billion was promised. The pledge was conditional on the Palestinian Authority taking charge of the reconstruction, as a preliminary stage toward its full return to Gaza. However, the failure of the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement and the inability of the warring organizations to agree on the delegation of authority over the reconstruction made it impossible to meet the prerequisite for transferring the sums pledged. Other facts delaying reconstruction were the lack of an effective supervision mechanism that would ensure appropriate use of both the funds and the construction materials; Egypt's antagonistic policy toward the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip; widening disagreements between Hamas' military wing and the movement's political leadership; and Israel's concern that in the absence of sufficient supervisory mechanisms Hamas would exploit the reconstruction effort to fortify its military power and strengthen its hold on the Gaza Strip.

Consequently, the Gaza Strip is now a powder keg. Current assessments indicate a reasonable chance that Hamas will again choose a violent confrontation with Israel as an escape valve, even though such a conflict would clearly only worsen conditions for the desperate civilians in Gaza. In an attempt to extricate Hamas and the Gaza Strip from this dead end, Quartet representative Tony Blair, in a mid-February visit to the Gaza Strip, posited several conditions that could allow the international community to begin the reconstruction project, among them: internal Palestinian reconciliation; agreement on a

political plan for a negotiated solution with Israel based on a two-state solution; and a calming message to the Cairo regime making it clear that Hamas and the Gaza Strip are not sources of terrorism and that Hamas is committed to the Palestinian cause rather than to the Muslim Brotherhood policy. Hamas rejected the conditions presented by the Quartet as part of a comprehensive plan for a breakthrough toward a negotiated settlement, including the need for institutional unity on the internal Palestinian political arena.

Given this state of affairs, there is a need for a creative solution that would bridge the respective gaps, positions, and demands, and improve the likelihood of starting the reconstruction project while ensuring effective supervision of the use of reconstruction funds and materials. In 1951, during the Korean War, the idea of “sanctuaries” was developed: certain zones were defined as off limits to combat, even during battles between the sides. Accordingly, the warring parties agreed to define the seaports of both Koreas as sanctuaries, and pains were taken not to damage them during the war. This idea could be adopted for the good of Gaza Strip reconstruction, with certain areas defined as neutral, protected zones. All combat-related activity on the part of Hamas and other terrorist organizations active in the Gaza Strip, including rocket fire at Israel, would be banned there. On the other hand, Israel and Egypt would be prohibited from attacking these zones, even while fighting terrorism coming from the Gaza Strip.

Schools, civilian aid installations, existing critical infrastructures (water, sewage, electricity, outdoor marketplaces, and so on), as well as installations to be built as part of the reconstruction effort, such as power stations and desalinations plants, would be defined as neutral protected zones. In addition, it would also be possible to ensure an orderly, effective process of construction and reconstruction under the defensive umbrella of protected zones. These areas would be managed by an agreed-upon international mechanism that would include representatives from the Arab nations and major donor states. The ban on Hamas operations in these zones would make it easier for the international management mechanism to monitor and enforce all aspects of the use of construction materials for civilian reconstruction only.

The status of protected and neutral zones could be part of a political-security package that includes Hamas’ commitment to a long term period of calm to allow restoration of the Gaza Strip. While Hamas would not be required to cede its control of the Gaza Strip, Israel could feel relatively secure in the knowledge that reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip would not be exploited to strengthen terrorist and military infrastructures. To achieve this, it is imperative to establish an effective supervisory mechanism that, in addition to supervising the neutral zones, would prevent the import of weapons and dual-purpose materials from Egypt and the sea. Subject to Hamas’ meeting its commitments

and ensuring a period of calm with no security breaches, Israel would be able to assist in the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, the production of natural gas off the shore of Gaza, and the construction of power stations and desalination plants. An Israeli contribution to an improved quality of life of the Gaza population could improve Israel's image both in the Gaza Strip and in the regional and international arenas. Involving the pragmatic Arab states in the process would provide added impetus for Hamas to meet its obligations.

The reconstruction process, which would not require the organization to relinquish its hold of the Gaza Strip, would likely lower Hamas' motivation significantly to embark on yet another round of violence. The protected zones would presumably puncture the legitimacy within the public in Gaza for violence against Israel. At the same time, a process such as the one proposed herein would weaken Hamas because it highlights the limits of its power in the eyes of the local population. It would thus be possible to prove to the population that the reconstruction work is possible not thanks to Hamas but despite Hamas. Other advantages of the protected zones idea are non-dependence on a Fatah-Hamas agreement on the division of authority and responsibility for reconstruction, on the PA's renewed control of the Gaza Strip, and on the PA's goodwill and presence to confront the challenge of entering the Gaza Strip and operating in the area as the governing agent. Moreover, reconstruction of Gaza conducted on these terms would increase the influence of Israel, the Arab states, and the relevant international nations and organizations on the realization of the project. This would also raise the chances of advancing reconstruction programs while reducing the scope of the humanitarian crisis experienced by the civilian population of the Gaza Strip and the threat of another round of violence.

A possible outcome of a reconstruction process on the basis of mapping out protected zones would be the acceleration of the idea taking shape in the Palestinian arena about establishing two autonomous regions – the Gaza Strip and the West Bank – as representing two distinct entities. In the future, these entities would be able to become members of a Palestinian federation if and when the political process between Israel and the PA becomes a negotiated settlement on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

In its current political state, the Gaza Strip is a proven major obstacle to promotion of a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, but the obstacle can be reduced, if not removed, if the conditions of the civilian population in the Gaza Strip improve and if, at the same time, each of the central hubs of power in the Palestinian system retains its status and influence in the regions where it is the leading factor under a federated umbrella. This possibility is consistent with current trends in many parts of the Middle East resulting from the recent upheavals in the Arab world, which are leading to the

weakening and even collapse of nation states and the growth of groups demanding the right to realize local autonomies and maintain their own exclusive zones of control and influence.

