



***INSS Insight*** No. 706, June 8, 2015

## **Gaza Strip Reconstruction: Navigating the Strategic Dilemmas**

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The ongoing humanitarian distress in the Gaza Strip may spark processes of escalation and deterioration that result in another round of conflict between Hamas and Israel. Hamas' rule is the object of much criticism from the civilian population in the Gaza Strip and is regularly challenged by extreme jihad organizations, which stress the absence of any benefit from the current lull championed by Hamas, and are increasing their efforts at violent resistance against Israel.

The dire situation in the Gaza Strip presents Israel with two imperatives requiring the expedition of reconstruction processes in the Gaza Strip. One is a moral imperative: Israel traditionally and consistently offers aid to disaster regions around the world (from Syria to Nepal), and regards such aid as an expression of binding human and Jewish values. Israel is thus hard pressed to explain why it lends assistance to remote areas hit by natural disasters, while ignoring the severe humanitarian plight near its border. The second imperative is strategic, involving the effort to prevent the outbreak of another round of conflict.

Clearly, therefore, Israel has an interest in hastening the process of reconstruction in the Gaza Strip, even though the way to do so under the existing strategic conditions poses a series of dilemmas regarding Israel's interests regarding the Gaza Strip. These dilemmas and the tension they create demand wise caution for both the complicated diplomatic maneuvering and the measures required to rebuild the area. Israel must be fully aware of the price of Gaza reconstruction, so that it can define the conditions under which it is willing to bear this price.

One dilemma facing Israel regarding the reconstruction is the possible strengthening of Hamas as the ruling party in the Gaza Strip. In the absence of any viable prospects for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, and failing the disarmament of Hamas or the achievement by the Palestinian Authority (PA) of an effective foothold in the Gaza Strip, it is difficult to imagine how the PA might regain any control of the Gaza Strip – even limited control near the border with Israel, i.e. the border crossings. It therefore follows that if the donor countries (that have committed to provide aid for the reconstruction)

agree to withdraw their opposition to distribution of the funds other than through the PA, and even if the reconstruction is managed by international mechanisms without Hamas being directly involved, Israel will find it difficult remain opposed to a change in the standing of Hamas in the international theater by citing its classification as a terrorist organization. This would mean that Hamas would emerge strengthened from the reconstruction process, and this in turn detracts from a strategic interest of Israel, because it means a weaker PA. What would a weaker PA mean for the feasibility of renewing the political process?

As long as Hamas remains the sovereign party in the Gaza Strip, Israel will be unable to facilitate the reconstruction process without a dialogue with Hamas – even if the dialogue is indirect, such as the dialogue between Israel and Hamas dating back to Operation Pillar of Defense. Even such an indirect framework is an active channel for passing messages and coordination. This pattern will reinforce the state characteristics of the Gaza Strip entity and connote a greater division between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Israel is then liable to find itself facing two Palestinian state entities representing opposing interests. At the same time, some may regard this situation as advantageous, due to the greater maneuvering space and strategic flexibility Israel would enjoy in a Palestinian arena split into two entities.

A further dilemma relates to the complex relations between Israel and Egypt. Since the rise to power of President el-Sisi, relations between Israel and Egypt have become closer, and the intelligence and security coordination between them has reached an unprecedented level. As far as the Egyptian president is concerned, Hamas, the sister movement of the Muslim Brotherhood, is a declared and dangerous enemy that poses a strategic threat to Egypt. From his perspective, therefore, any measure that causes the consolidation of Hamas' rule in the Gaza Strip jeopardizes Egyptian interests. Egypt's clear preference is for a return of the PA to the Gaza Strip, while consigning Hamas to the margins of the Palestinian and regional theaters. This Egyptian stance will make it very hard for Israel to recruit Egypt as an active partner in reconstructing the Gaza Strip without an active PA presence in the area. If Israel seeks to hasten the reconstruction, even without the PA, it is therefore liable to find itself on a collision course with Egypt, which would have an adverse effect on Israel-Egypt relations and bilateral cooperation.

In addition, Israel's freedom of action in thwarting Hamas' arms buildup during the reconstruction project and in the next round of conflict would be restricted. If Israel and Hamas fail to reach agreement on a prolonged ceasefire, rules of behavior, and a kind of security regime, then Hamas' resistance ideology, backed by the organization's military buildup, will likely lead to another violent clash. In this round of conflict, which would occur following an international effort at reconstruction in the Gaza Strip – and an on-site international presence – Israel is liable to find itself more restricted than it is at present in its room to maneuver and use force. After mobilization and massive investment in the

reconstruction effort, the international community is not likely to show much patience and understanding for Israel's constraints and responses, and will therefore take stronger action to limit Israel's measures, making it difficult to achieve any significant military gain.

Successful reconstruction in the Gaza Strip could of course elicit possible restraining factors that will improve deterrence against Hamas – but experience shows that the effect of restraining factors of this type on Hamas is limited. Even before the round of conflict between Hamas and Israel in the summer of 2014, it was clear to the Hamas leadership that IDF actions in the Gaza Strip would cause damage on a huge scale. Accordingly, the Hamas leadership is again likely to ignore general public/civilian interests, should these run counter to the organization's interest, based on its radical Islamic worldview and the need to maintain its leading organizational status in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian theater.

These various imperatives, combined with the pressure exerted on Israel – including by international institutions (the Quartet, UN, Red Cross) and Israeli and other NGOs, some of which are very critical of Israel – all point Israel toward accelerating reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip. Against the Israeli interests that will be advanced by reconstruction in the Gaza Strip, however, are serious competing interests that stand to spark significant tension between these interests and the likely results from reconstruction in the Gaza Strip.

Taking these interests into account, so that it will be possible to achieve the respective interests – not only Israel's – in Gaza Strip reconstruction, requires thinking based on creative statesmanship. Israel will not be able to lead the reconstruction project by itself. Moving the project forward requires the PA's involvement, if only because the donor countries will transfer the money they have promised for reconstruction only through the PA. Furthermore, Egyptian support for the project is necessary, joined by a leading role for Saudi Arabia and the involvement of other countries in the region. This amounts to a regional plan, which Israel may be able to encourage by showing willingness to reconsider the Arab Peace Initiative, with necessary adjustments, and perhaps also by offering a gesture to the PA in matters pertaining to daily life in the West Bank.

This alone, however, is not enough. The international community must be actively and significantly involved in the reconstruction effort. The Quartet may be able to formulate a conceptual and operational framework acceptable to all the parties involved, and encourage them to take responsibility for what happens in the Gaza Strip. Yet in any case, even if this complex multinational format materializes, it will be necessary to design it in a way that provides a solution for the security threats inherent in reconstruction in the Gaza Strip and the strengthening of Hamas. This will unquestionably be a difficult task.