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Negotiations with Hamas on a Long-Term Agreement

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There has been much mention in recent weeks of negotiations between Israel and Hamas on a stable long-term agreement. Negotiations are reportedly underway through various mediators, with Turkey and former Quartet Middle East envoy Tony Blair the most prominent. According to some reports, the parties are close to a 5-10 year ceasefire and a “removal of the blockade” on the Gaza Strip, which will include opening the borders and establishing a port in Turkish Cyprus, from where, after inspection in Cyprus, cargo will head to the Gaza Strip.

On August 16, 2015, for example, Yasin Aktay, senior advisor to Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, said, “Gaza is moving toward a comprehensive agreement on the removal of the blockade and opening the border in exchange for a ceasefire,” Aktay claimed that the question was discussed during Khaled Mashal’s visit to Turkey, and that Ismail Haniyeh, deputy head of the Hamas political bureau, was also involved in the talks. Senior Hamas leaders, including Haniyeh, likewise contributed to heightened expectations for a dramatic change in the situation in the Gaza Strip through an agreement with Israel. For its part, the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah took advantage of these reports to attack Hamas for conducting separate negotiations with Israel and for being willing to conclude a partial agreement with Israel, thereby contributing to the split in the Palestinian arena and damaging Palestinian interests. The official responses in Israel reflected the impulse to lower expectations, although the ongoing contacts between Israel and Hamas through mediators were not denied.

Operation Protective Edge ended with a ceasefire on August 26, 2014, after Israel and Hamas reached understandings through Egyptian mediation, whereby the border crossings between Israel and the Gaza Strip would be opened for the passage of humanitarian aid and reconstruction supplies. Gaza Strip fishermen were to be permitted to fish up to six nautical miles from the shore, and Egypt was to take action to resume payment of salaries to state employees appointed by Hamas in the Gaza Strip. It was also agreed that negotiations would take place in Cairo concerning understandings for the

longer term, in which other issues would be discussed, including the construction of a port in the Gaza Strip and extension of the fishing zone.

Since then, Israel has indeed to a large extent opened the land crossings to the Gaza Strip, and has also opened the Erez border crossing for some 1,500 Gaza Strip residents every day. The Erez crossing thus serves as an alternative of sorts for the Rafah border crossing with Sinai, on which the Egyptians have imposed severe restrictions. Fishing is allowed off the Gaza Strip up to six nautical miles from the coast, although there is constant friction between Israel Navy patrols and fishermen trying to go beyond the agreed area, in which fish are scarce. Israel has also allowed Hamas forces to deploy in the area near the Gaza Strip border, where there was a great deal of friction between the two sides in the past, in the hope that Hamas will be able to prevent terrorist attacks by members of other organizations active in the Gaza Strip.

Nonetheless, the continuation of the negotiations, which was supposed to have taken place in Cairo, has led to no results, and as of now, there are no tangible signs that the basic obstacles to achievement of a long-term agreement through Egyptian mediation have been eased. Chief among these are the attitude of the Egyptian government toward Hamas, the lack of cooperation from the PA, and Israel's reluctance to conclude a formal agreement with Hamas and pay the accompanying price.

Cairo regards Hamas as a dangerous branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Egyptian regime, which regards that movement as a principal enemy, is waging an all-out war against it, and for this reason also wishes to weaken Hamas as much as possible. There are currently new mediators, but the Egyptian position is still important, because Egypt is able to influence the positions of the PA and Israel, and to exert painful pressure on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The PA leadership, which also regards Hamas as its main enemy, aims to weaken it, and is therefore refusing to transfer salaries to the Gaza Strip. The PA is expected to use any possible means to torpedo an agreement, which would legitimize and strengthen Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip. The PA also fears that such an agreement will perpetuate the separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The Israeli government wishes to avoid formal signed agreements with Hamas that will grant it legitimacy and make it easier for international players to maintain contacts with it. Israel no longer denies the existence of a dialogue with Hamas on the political level through mediators – these denials have not been credible for a long time – but Israel wishes to limit this dialogue to unsigned understandings on matters pertaining to security quiet and daily life in the Gaza Strip. Ostensibly Israel would also be concerned that an agreement between with Hamas will weaken its partner in the political process – the

leadership of the PLO and the PA – but it is not clear how significant a consideration this is for the narrow right wing coalition comprising Israel’s present government.

It therefore appears that the optimistic reports about an imminent agreement between Israel and Hamas are the result of the interests of several of the actors related to the contacts between the two sides.

For the Turkish government, these reports buttress its image as an influential element that can serve as a mediator for the various regional actors (in tandem, Turkey can promote additional interests, such as strengthening the status of its presence in Cyprus). Regional prestige is an important issue for Turkey, even if it is highly doubtful whether Israel has any desire to contribute to the standing of the current Turkish government at the cost of damaging Israel’s flourishing relations with Cyprus and Greece. For Ankara, however, especially in view of the erosion in its prestige and regional influence caused by the regional upheavals, any contribution, however small, is important.

Hamas itself is in dire straits due to its inability to effect a significant improvement in the situation of the Gaza Strip population and hasten the reconstruction process in the aftermath of Operation Protective Edge. For these reasons, it has a real interest in a more stable agreement with Israel that will enable it to promote these objectives. Furthermore, even in the absence of such an agreement and no chance of reaching one, various individuals in the Hamas leadership believe that one of the ways of coping with the situation is to generate hope of an imminent improvement among the Gazan public.

European mediators, such as Blair, also have an interest in reports about the roles they play, even if their efforts to convince Hamas that they are carrying out a mission on behalf of the European Union (EU) are not entirely credible. There are no signs of anything more than efforts by private individuals and countries that play an insignificant role in the EU.

The PA leadership has an interest in inflating the reports of negotiations between Israel and Hamas, because it provides grounds for its public criticism of Hamas. The PA is striving to undermine the status of Hamas among the Palestinian public by denying it the “heroic” image of the “Palestinian resistance” and by accusing the Hamas leadership of negotiating with Israel for negligible benefits, while religiously observing the Hamas-Israel ceasefire.

For its part, Israel has a strong interest in stabilizing the ceasefire with Hamas. The situation in the Gaza Strip is a time bomb that will ultimately explode, and it is therefore important for Israel to take action to improve the situation there. It is very doubtful, however, whether the current Israeli government is capable of changing its basic approach toward Hamas, based on conflict management rather than conflict resolution. Consequently, there is no willingness to conclude a *hudna* – a long-term agreement –

with Hamas, and to pay the accompanying price. The effort to extend the understandings with Hamas will probably continue, but the prospects for success are unclear. Moreover, raising expectations of a dramatic improvement in the situation in the Gaza Strip is also risky, because disappointment is liable to aggravate the crisis in the Strip and increase the chances that violent expressions likely to result from such disillusionment will spill over to Israel.

