

Operation Protective Edge: Leverage for Returning the PA to the Gaza Strip

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Since Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 following the collapse of the Palestinian unity government, the concept of “distinction,” or separation, between Gaza and the West Bank has taken hold in Israel. This idea has its roots in security, but there is also an overlying political layer that justifies the concept.

The security argument is simple. The military wings of Palestinian terrorist organizations have their main forces and headquarters in the Gaza Strip. As these organizations, particularly Hamas, are still actively fighting Israel, Israel has an interest in severing the connection between Gaza and the West Bank and thereby blocking the establishment of a terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank and preventing arms smuggling, infiltration of terrorists and operational instructions, and other terrorist activity in the West Bank. For its part, the political consideration is based on the assumption that Israel should embrace a policy of conflict management with the Palestinians rather than conflict resolution, whether because the two-state solution is contrary to Israel’s interest or because there is no possibility of a settlement, given the lack of a credible Palestinian partner. According to this approach, separation between the two areas and the ability to maintain independent, respective policies ostensibly facilitates conflict management.

To a large extent, the events that culminated in Operation Protective Edge refute the assumption that separation facilitates conflict management, and demonstrate the strong linkage between the two geographical areas. The crisis that began with the abduction and murder of the three teenagers in the West Bank eventually led to a large scale confrontation in the Gaza Strip. In order to end the crisis, ceasefire talks were held with a united Palestinian

delegation, headed by Abbas' representatives. It became clear that a ceasefire could not be reached in total isolation from the wider Palestinian context, as long as the people living in both areas see themselves as belonging to the same people, and as long as the same political movements and the same terrorist organizations operate among them. What happens in one area affects the other.

One manifestation of the separation approach in Israeli policy is opposition to reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah and to a national unity government. When the most recent reconciliation agreement was signed and a national unity government established in April 2014, Israel maintained its tradition of staunchly opposing Palestinian reconciliation and a national unity government. It refused to work with the new government, made every effort to torpedo key clauses in the agreement, such as the transfer of funds for the purpose of payment of salaries to government employees in Gaza, and threatened punitive measures against the Palestinian Authority (PA). Israel appears to have ignored the fact that this time, the background to the reconciliation agreement and its ensuing arrangements were different from those of previous agreements.

Indeed, the background to the reconciliation was the serious crisis for Hamas following the loss of its main allies and principal sources of funding in the Arab world in particular and the Middle East in general. Its relations with Syria, Iran, and Hizbollah deteriorated when Hamas refused to support the Assad regime in the civil war, and the organization subsequently lost the support of Egypt when the Muslim Brotherhood government was ousted. This loss caused it the most serious damage because Egypt decided to take action against the smuggling tunnels, which completed the blockade of Gaza and caused a serious financial crisis for Hamas. The organization saw the financial and political components of the reconciliation agreement as a way out of the crisis, and therefore it was prepared to accept many of Fatah's demands. Thus, for example, Hamas agreed to transfer control of civil affairs in Gaza to the government in Ramallah. In fact, it agreed to cede a significant part of its control in the Gaza Strip, even agreeing to Egyptian terms on the presence of PA security forces at the border crossings. However, failure of the reconciliation agreement – from Hamas' perspective, to a large extent because of Israel's opposition – paved the way for the outbreak of violence in Gaza.

When an organization like Hamas has its back to the wall, the attempt to move forward by means of violent conflict gains greater momentum, and random events that otherwise might have been stopped at an early stage quickly escalate into widespread conflict. Perhaps Israel could have adopted another approach, which sees the reconciliation agreement as an opportunity to start a process toward restoration of PA rule in Gaza, even if at the beginning of the process Hamas continues to maintain its fully independent military capabilities. It is possible that such a change in Israeli policy could have prevented the deterioration that led to Operation Protective Edge.

Israel and Hamas reached agreement on an “unlimited” ceasefire in two stages. In the first stage, the border crossings will be opened for humanitarian purposes and the fishing zone will be extended to six miles. In the second stage, discussions will be held for a month on more comprehensive arrangements for opening the Gaza border crossings and Israel’s security demands. Consequently the question is whether new opportunities have been created for returning the PA to the Gaza Strip and whether this would serve Israel’s interests. In the public debate in Israel, this issue is part of a broader question: is Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas part of the problem or part of the solution? This formulation is relevant because the current policy of Israel’s government – especially after the failure of the talks brokered by US Secretary of State John Kerry – holds that Israel has no Palestinian partner. In other words, Abbas is part of the problem and not the solution. A change in approach to Abbas and the PA could have broader political consequences.

In talks brokered by Egypt and other international players to resolve the crisis in Gaza, the return of PA administration to the Gaza Strip was broached as part of the solution. The first element proposed was a return to the idea raised by the Egyptians in the months prior to the crisis, which was reflected in the reconciliation agreement: placing PA guards on the Palestinian side of the crossings and even along the border as a condition for regular opening of the crossings. The second component is PA involvement, up to the level of control over the aid given for different reconstruction projects in Gaza by various states. Inclusion of the PA is intended to achieve three objectives. The first is to deprive Hamas of the potential to derive political and practical benefit from control of the reconstruction and present it as a victory for the organization. The second objective is to bolster the legitimacy of Abbas and the PA government by making them key players in the reconstruction project. The third goal is to help establish monitoring mechanisms, primarily

international, and specifically European, for the aid, to ensure that dual-use goods that reach the Gaza Strip are not channeled toward Hamas' military purposes. Thus, for example, there is a need to monitor cement and iron transferred to Gaza so that they will not be used to build tunnels and other fortifications.

If Israel makes do with security separation between the West Bank and Gaza Strip and gives up on political separation, beginning the process of returning PA administration to Gaza could serve Israeli interests. From Israel's perspective, it is better to have a national unity government in Ramallah, composed mainly of technocrats affiliated with Abbas, that controls civil ministries in Gaza without a Hamas presence, and through them, manages the reconstruction project with the aid of the international community and contributing Arab countries. To be sure, the PA's security presence would be limited, and Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza will not agree to disarm. However, since Hamas has been weakened and lost a large part of its arsenal during the fighting, and since it is under heavy Egyptian pressure, it may be possible to expand the PA's security presence in Gaza gradually over time. This is especially true if the original Egyptian proposal is implemented, namely, to station PA forces (the Presidential Guard) at the Rafah border crossing as a condition for its regular opening, and perhaps also more ambitious elements of the plan, which would include placing PA forces along the border between Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula and putting the civilian police under PA control.

The second stage of negotiations for a long term ceasefire will examine the expanded opening of the crossings from Israel to Gaza. This would involve opening more crossings (up to five) and placing fewer restrictions on what goes through them. Israel could also make agreement on such subjects conditional on placement of PA security forces on the Palestinian side of the crossings. These developments could serve as a good basis for gradually expanding the presence of PA security forces in Gaza, beyond activity by the PA government ministries responsible for civil matters.

Such a policy brings with it several political implications, beginning with Israel's acceptance of the reconciliation agreement and a willingness to work with the national unity government. The second political implication is Israel's willingness to accept Abbas' increased stature as a partner for new arrangements in the Gaza Strip. It will be difficult to resolve the contradiction between this willingness and continued adherence to the approach that Abbas

is not a partner in the negotiations for a permanent settlement, i.e., that he is part of the problem and not the solution. Therefore, it can be assumed that the international community will labor to help Abbas by restarting the negotiations on a permanent settlement on terms that are acceptable to the Palestinians. The fighting in Gaza has damaged Abbas' standing among the Palestinian public, and he is perceived as having collaborated with Israel by containing the protest in the West Bank while Hamas was heroically fighting the Israeli enemy. If measures are not taken to strengthen Abbas's legitimacy among the Palestinian public, he will find it difficult to meet expectations that he can contribute to reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and the stability of the ceasefire. In addition, if the political process is not restarted, Abbas will likely implement his plan involving unilateral measures, which include joining the International Court of Justice (ICJ). These, in turn, will lead to a high level of friction between the PA and Israel. It is difficult to believe that in such a situation, it would be possible to cooperate with the PA regarding its return to Gaza and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip.

The question remains whether Abbas and the Palestinian Authority are up to the tasks now envisioned for them. Israel's policy in recent years, particularly in the past year, has greatly weakened Abbas and the PA, and their legitimacy is at a very low level. Indeed, a recent public opinion poll by Khalil Shikaki's Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah shows a steep decline among the Palestinian public in support for Abbas and Fatah and a significant rise in backing for Hamas and its leaders.¹ It will be difficult for the Palestinian security forces to function if they lack legitimacy in the eyes of the public, and a weak government in Ramallah will have a hard time conducting an ambitious plan to rebuild Gaza. The PA will need a great deal of assistance from regional and international actors and from Israel. This does not mean only the necessary financial aid, which many have pledged to donate toward Gaza's recovery. There will also be a need for direct assistance from states and government agencies (such as USAID) and international organizations (such as UNRWA) in managing the effort. Israel will need to create a situation whereby the PA can operate in Gaza, whether by making it easier for PA officials to enter and leave Gaza and easing the passage of goods at the border crossings, or by measures to strengthen PA legitimacy. This involves building a "coalition of the willing" that will be prepared to mobilize for joint action in order to assist in stabilizing the ceasefire and rebuilding Gaza.

Hamas will certainly not wish to accept its weakened military and political position in Gaza, and it will take steps to contain the strengthening of the PA there. However, the special circumstances at the end of Operation Protective Edge – specifically, the military and financial weakness of Hamas, which lost a large part of its weapon systems during the fighting; the dependence on Egypt, which is interested in containing and weakening Hamas; and the eagerness inside and outside the Middle East to give the PA a key role in the Gaza Strip – will make it very difficult for Hamas to stop the PA from increasing its presence in Gaza without paying a very heavy price. The Palestinian public will accuse it of damaging national unity and the unity government; measures will be taken against it by Israel and Egypt, which control all entrances to Gaza; and the plan to rebuild Gaza will be at risk if Hamas refuses to play by the rules of the coalition of the willing.

The government of Israel will need to consider whether it is prepared to change basic elements of its policy toward the PA and the Gaza Strip in order to take full advantage of the chance to start a process of change. Perhaps in the longer run, such a process would eliminate the political split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and produce a calmer situation between Gaza and Israel, which could open up new political possibilities.

Note

- 1 Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, “Special Gaza War Poll,” Ramallah, September 2, 2014, <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/special-gaza-war-poll>.