

The Gaza Campaign: An Arena for Inter-Arab Confrontation

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The Arab world was never a paragon of cooperation and unity, and the respective approaches in the region to political Islam, which have become more distinct since the upheavals of the so-called Arab Spring, have further eroded the ability of the region's states to come together, even on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which traditionally garnered much consensus. The division resulting from differing political and ideological approaches was also evident during Operation Protective Edge. Not only were many Arab states focused on domestic problems, but battles for status and prestige and conflicts of interest among those involved in the negotiations made it difficult to draft terms for a ceasefire and a new arrangement in Gaza.

The Region and Political Islam

Two prominent camps comprise the regional mosaic today. One, including Qatar and Turkey, is made up of countries identified with political Islam, and the other is a coalition led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which sees the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas in particular, as a threat to stability and security. To these latter countries, Hamas – beyond the fact that it is a militant Muslim Brotherhood proxy that entangles the Egyptian regime with Israel, undermines the rule of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and serves as an example of Islamic movements' ability to seize power – is an organization that collaborated, and to some extent still collaborates, with Iran.¹ Thus, there is evident tension in the position of these countries between hostility toward Hamas and the ideology it represents and a traditional drive to show solidarity with the Palestinians. The attitude of the “moderate” camp toward Hamas in the recent conflict with Israel was similar to regional responses to

Hizbollah actions that led to the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, which included much criticism of Hizbollah's "adventure" that ultimately hurt many Lebanese civilians. Likewise in the summer of 2014, Hamas was accused of acting irresponsibly and harming Palestinian interests and civilians.

Indeed, from the outset of the crisis, Hamas was the target of harsh criticism for its conduct and its refusal to accept the terms for a ceasefire formulated by Egypt. Egyptian and Saudi commentators bemoaned the fact that Hamas rejected the Egyptian initiative and argued that this caused the deaths of many Palestinians in Gaza. In their view, in rejecting this initiative, Hamas was in fact acting in the service of Iranian interests and those of the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies, Qatar and Turkey. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry even accused Qatar (and Turkey) of an attempt to thwart the Egyptian mediation initiative and commandeer Egypt's leading position.

During Operation Protective Edge, Hamas in fact garnered minimal support compared to its record in previous rounds of fighting with Israel.² The damage to its standing in the region was evident even before the outbreak of the fighting and reflected developments in the region, led by the civil war in Syria and the change of leadership in Egypt. As a result of the war in Syria, Hamas lost its stronghold in Damascus, and the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt denied Hamas Egyptian support. The government of Abdel el-Sisi strove to entrench Hamas' political and economic isolation, even at the price of prolonging the conflict: the ceasefire terms drafted in Cairo were such that they would clearly be difficult for Hamas to accept.

While Cairo condemned the escalation of Israeli operations and demanded that Israel strive for maximum restraint, Egyptian condemnations of Hamas were no less vehement. Foreign Minister Shoukry stated that Hamas could have saved the lives of many Palestinians had it accepted the Egyptian initiative.³ Cairo's approach to Hamas was clearly reflected in the terms for a ceasefire and a new arrangement in the Gaza Strip that it placed on the regional agenda. Egypt demanded that the economic aid to rebuild Gaza come from countries sharing Egypt's view of the Muslim Brotherhood, that it be transferred through Egypt and the Palestinian Authority (PA), and that it be channeled for civilian, not military reconstruction of Gaza. Nevertheless, as the conflict dragged on, and particularly during the Israeli ground operation, calls began to be heard in Egypt to relieve the suffering of the civilian population in Gaza and open the Rafah border crossing.

This growing popular sentiment propelled the Egyptian leadership to show greater flexibility in its talks with Hamas. Still, Hamas' leaders, particularly Political Bureau chief Khaled Mashal, were not permitted to enter Egypt to participate in the negotiations, and the organization was forced to take part in a delegation headed by a PA official.

Qatar, which has sought to expand its regional influence, and in so doing has angered various Middle East regimes, played a key role, mainly negative, in the efforts to promote a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. As the main supporter of Hamas, Qatar sought to maintain the organization's rule in Gaza, which explains the opposition by Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia to the Qatari (and Turkish) ceasefire initiative that accepted most, if not all, of Hamas' terms. In a concomitant drive, Qatar also sought through its mediation efforts to harm the regional interests of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Qatar's rivalry with the el-Sisi regime in Cairo and with Riyadh is connected, first and foremost, to Doha's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its proxies in the region.

The US government, which did not take direct part in the ceasefire negotiations, initially supported the Qatari mediation initiative. US economic and security interests in the emirate, as well as chilly Washington-Cairo relations following the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt in what the administration views as a military coup, formed the background to this support.

The Cairo-Doha rivalry presented the Hamas leadership with a dilemma: should it adopt the Egyptian mediation initiative and thus risk the loss of Qatari aid, or should it prefer the support of the wealthy emirate and incur the risk that Gaza would be cut off from its Egyptian lifeline? Hamas' intransigent position toward the Egyptian mediation initiative during the campaign was attributed to Qatari influence over the organization. Nevertheless, and under heavy Egyptian pressure, Hamas was ultimately forced to accept the Egyptian proposal when it appeared that the extent of the death and destruction in Gaza was threatening its very rule. Predictably, Qatar was not pleased with its inability to influence the ceasefire negotiations as it had hoped or with the political priority given to the Egyptian political effort.

In addition to the limitations on Qatari influence in the region, the Hamas leadership was also forced to contend with what appeared to be a small regional matter regarding the events in Gaza and the Palestinian arena in general: the instability in Iraq and Syria and the takeover of large parts of

these countries by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is at the top of the political and defense agenda of many states in the region. The Sunni monarchies in the Gulf seek to stop the progress of radical Islamic forces in Iraq and Syria as well as in Lebanon and the Maghreb. As part of this effort, on several occasions forces from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates attacked Islamic forces in Libya, which enjoy Qatari support.

Saudi Arabia's relatively minor interest in the events in Gaza was explained by its need to concentrate on events beyond its borders. The kingdom is focused on the challenge to stability in its vicinity from radical Islamic forces in Yemen and Iraq and on the effort to fend off the danger that domestic struggles from those countries will spill over into Saudi Arabia. Riyadh participation was limited to behind-the-scenes support for the Egyptian political line, which can be interpreted as tacit agreement with Israel's operations against Hamas. Riyadh sees Hamas as a hostile organization, but it sought to avoid being seen as unsupportive of the Palestinian issue. Therefore, as occurred more than once in the past, the Saudi king gave a forceful speech implicitly criticizing Hamas' conduct as well as those who carried out what he called "war crimes" in Gaza, although he did not mention Israel by name.⁴ Even before the ceasefire announcement, Saudi officials and commentators joined the call for a comprehensive regional political settlement on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative.

Toward a Regional Arrangement?

Is inter-Arab polarization beneficial to Israel? The "Arab street," like the rulers of Arab countries, remained largely indifferent to the conflict in Gaza. The source of this relative apathy is loathing of Hamas and a desire for it to be weakened, as well as the focus on a political and security agenda that is not connected to events in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. On the other hand, the diplomatic proceedings around the attempts to formulate a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, and in particular, the difficulty in drafting joint principles for a cessation of hostilities, reflected the centrality of the power struggles in the Arab world. A necessary conclusion is that in the future as well, these power struggles could cause wars to be prolonged, even if this gives Israel more political and military leeway. However, the rivalries in the Arab world, particularly between Egypt on one side and Qatar and Turkey on the other, could hamper the creation of effective leverage for pressuring Hamas. This danger fits into a regional trend, in which non-state actors play

a key role due to the erosion of the power of Arab states, the relationships among them, and the web of threats in the region.

On the other hand, Israel's ability to strike at Hamas' military force buildup will improve if an effort in this direction is made in the context of a regional political framework that is as broad as possible. Reconstruction of Gaza with the backing of the "moderate" Arab states is an Israeli interest: vigorous joint action to rebuild Gaza will reduce the inflammatory influence of Qatar (and Turkey) over the organization. In order to promote this interest, Israel must turn to those countries in the Arab world that are interested in working for the benefit of the people of Gaza while curbing Qatar and weakening Hamas. "The good news" according to Mamoun Fandy, writing in *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, "is that if Israel wants to strike a grand deal with the Arabs, now is the time to do it...Arab states are in their weakest political positions for a long time, and given their internal political upheavals they are ready to sign a comprehensive deal."⁵

While some would say that the division between Arab states and the weakening of those states is actually an argument in favor of Israel's avoiding agreements, since Israel's partners would find it difficult to implement the agreement and meet their obligations, there is much room between a comprehensive regional political settlement and a lack of cooperation, and Israel can utilize this fluid situation. Against the backdrop of the campaign in Gaza, several political possibilities have become clear that can deepen ties between Israel and the Sunni-monarchic-secular bloc. Aside from a common interest in curbing the Iranian nuclear threat, this bloc also shares the Israeli interest in weakening state and non-state regional forces that are affiliated with radical political Islam.

Notes

- 1 Zvi Barel, "The Victor in Protective Edge: El-Sisi," *Haaretz*, August 7, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/middle-east/.premium-1.2400618>.
- 2 Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, *Operation Protective Edge and a Fragile Regional Arena*, *INSS Insight* No. 578, July 24, 2014, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=7306>.
- 3 Roi Kais and Elior Levy, " Hamas Demonstratively Bypasses Egypt," *Ynet*, July 19, 2014, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4546333,00.html>.
- 4 "Saudi King Abdullah Labels Israeli Offensive against Gaza 'War Crime,'" *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 1, 2014, <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/08/article55334964>.
- 5 Mamoun Fandy, "No Longer an Arab-Israeli Conflict," *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 11, 2014, <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/08/article55335312>.