

The United States and Israel in Crossfire

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The dilemmas facing the US in the Middle East since Barack Obama entered the White House, and certainly since the Arab Spring began, resurfaced clearly during Operation Protective Edge. The first dilemma concerns relations between Israel and the United States. Since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in 2006, Israel has launched three military campaigns against the terrorism and rocket fire emanating from the area. The first, Operation Cast Lead, ended a few hours before President Obama's inauguration in January 2009; this was apparently a factor in timing the end of the operation. Operation Pillar of Defense occurred in November 2012, at the end of Obama's first term, while the third campaign, Operation Protective Edge, took place nearly midway through his second term.

During the recent conflict, the Obama administration reiterated consistently that Israel has the right to defend itself, while at the same time demanding vociferously that Israel refrain from harming innocent civilians in the Gaza Strip. Indeed, a degree of hardening in the American attitude to civilian casualties was discernible, which can be attributed to the number of casualties. During the week-long Operation Pillar of Defense, 180 people were killed in Gaza; in contrast, Operation Protective Edge continued for 50 days and over 2,200 people in Gaza were killed. Schools and other civilian facilities used as a base for rocket fire against Israel were used by Gaza civilians as shelters; for its part, Israel had no choice but to attack these launch sites. However, official US statements such as the one issued on August 3, 2014 stating that "the United States is appalled by today's disgraceful shelling outside an UNRWA school in Rafah" aroused much anger in Israel that will be difficult to assuage.

Furthermore, during the recent conflict the US took measures that had not been used for many years. Washington suspended a shipment of military equipment to Israel, albeit for a few days only. In the course of his six years in office, and even though relations with the Israeli government and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have been tense if not stormy on more than one occasion, President Obama has reiterated the US commitment to Israel's security. However, when Israel embarked on a military operation whose justification the US did not dispute, the President had recourse to a measure that was absent from US-Israel relations for over three decades. Some have also cited the decision by the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to ban flights by US airlines to Israel for security reasons as a signal of the administration's dismay at the force of Israel's operation in Gaza. This author, however, is inclined to believe that the decision was motivated by professional and safety reasons only.

The conflict in Gaza also focused renewed attention on US-Egypt relations. These relations are not strictly bilateral, as there is a triangular relationship between Israel, Egypt, and the US. The countries considered the partners of the US in the Middle East, led by Israel and Egypt, were disappointed, if not disturbed, by the abandonment of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the internal conflict in Egypt in 2011 that led to his overthrow. They subsequently watched with dismay what they regarded as American indifference to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt and the vocal criticism in Washington of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who was elected following the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government, and his efforts to suppress the opposition in Egypt.

For its part, Israel did not conceal its satisfaction with the coup that returned the Egyptian military to the Cairo helm, and the army's determination to fight terror cells in Sinai and rein in the tunnel activity between Sinai and the Gaza Strip. Israel's lobbying in Washington on behalf of the old-new regime in Egypt is well known. Israel and Egypt find themselves on the same side against Hamas, and Israel prefers Egypt-led mediation with Hamas over any other mediation – including mediation involving the US. Although US involvement in the ceasefire outline proposed by Qatar and Turkey was minor, the American administration was expected to evince more understanding for Israel's sensitivity – certainly with respect to Turkey, as Erdogan, Turkish Prime Minister at the time, made particularly vitriolic statements against Israel during the operation. The divergent Israeli and

American responses to the proposal by Turkey and Qatar, some of which were aired publicly, were especially sharp, indicating the frayed nerves on the two sides regarding their relationship.

The grating tones were not directly related to the dispute about Israel's policy on Gaza and Hamas. There has virtually never been an Israeli military operation in which the US did not vacillate between support in principle for Israel's right to defend itself and criticism of Israel for civilian casualties and damage to civilian targets. However, American criticism of these or other aspects of Operation Protective Edge may well have been related to the frustration of the Obama administration vis-à-vis Israel, especially during the nine months ending in late April 2014, in which US Secretary of State John Kerry made an effort to jumpstart substantive negotiations toward an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. The Americans did not hide their opinion that the principal, if not exclusive, blame for the failure of the talks lay with the Israeli Prime Minister. Furthermore, Washington is still trying to use the end of the fighting as leverage to restore the Palestinian Authority (PA) to power in the Gaza Strip. It can be assumed that the American administration expected Israel to provide PA President Mahmoud Abbas with a diplomatic bridge in the form of willingness to compromise in the West Bank, which Abbas can use as a springboard toward power in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli government, however, hastened to make clear to the administration that it saw matters differently. Moreover, the speeches by Abu Mazen and Netanyahu at the UN General Assembly in September 2014 have given a new negative twist to the situation, and an immediate return to talks is highly unlikely.

Even without events in the Gaza Strip, the American administration faces a dilemma over how to handle Palestinian political measures designed in part to fill the political vacuum created following the most recent round of talks. If implementation of Palestinian or other political initiatives depends on a resolution by the UN Security Council, the US will have to decide whether to cast a veto or allow resolutions to pass, thereby becoming milestones and/or stumbling blocks in the political process between Israel and the Palestinians. There may be other questions involving American efforts to deter various Palestinian initiatives regarding international organizations that are not directly related to a vote in the Security Council. The views of Israel and the US on issues relating to reconstruction in the Gaza Strip, such as Israel's involvement in the establishment of international mechanisms, supervision

of these mechanisms, and the use of equipment and raw materials used by Hamas in building tunnels, are also liable to affect relations between the two countries.

The US could not have prevented the formation of an investigative committee by the UN Human Rights Council, but it can, should it choose to do so, use its weight to influence other UN forums to limit the damage that the expected report is liable to cause Israel. In the past, Congress pressured the administration in this direction through its authority to approve budgets for US participation in various international organizations. The accumulation of hostile activity against Israel in international agencies is liable to put this issue back on the agenda, and serve as the background for a confrontation between the current administration and Congress.

There is no proof that the responses and reactions by the US and Israel are affected by considerations related to the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue. These negotiations are continuing, and it does not appear that the US is exerting pressure on Israel to refrain from crushing the military infrastructure of Hamas, Iran's ally. No activity in the Gaza military campaign by either Israel or Iran can be cited as designed to send a specific message to each other. Israel's actions during Operation Protective Edge do not give much indication to how it will act if the current negotiations do not lead to a suspension of Iranian nuclear activity. On the other hand, the regime in Tehran has made no threat or taken any other action against Israel and/or the US suggesting linkage in Iran's view between the nuclear negotiations and events in Gaza.

The events in the international arena that were unrelated to the conflict between Israel and Hamas were instrumental in preventing further deterioration in Israel-US relations. The violent confrontation in Ukraine between the government and pro-Russian elements and the extension of control by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) will continue to occupy the American administration in the coming months. The increased American involvement in the struggle against ISIS eased the tension between Washington and Jerusalem. The disagreements that caused that tension, however, even before the outbreak of fighting in Gaza, have not dissipated. The end of negotiations with Tehran in late November 2014 on Iran's nuclear program is liable to ignite the dispute on this issue between Israel and the US anew. Political initiatives involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even if they do not originate with the US, such as a Palestinian approach to international

agencies and institutions could also restore the Israeli-American differences to the headlines.

The three military operations conducted by Israel in Gaza since Hamas seized power have not solved the main questions – political, military, and economic – in that area. In the absence of a long term arrangement in Gaza, a renewed outbreak of hostilities is very likely. At this stage, Israel finds relief in its dialogue with Egypt on security matters of interest to both countries and in the role Egypt is playing in reaching a stable ceasefire. Israel can expand this dialogue to include Jordan, which has an interest in weakening the Muslim Brotherhood in its own territory. While the value of this identity of interests with Jordan and Egypt as far as Gaza and offshoots of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement are concerned should not be underestimated, their life span should not be overestimated, either. Both Egypt and certainly Jordan will need the “cover” of an ongoing political process between Israel and the Palestinians to sustain their cooperation with Israel. This assessment is also valid for the Gulf states and the concerns they share with Israel as a result of Iran’s nuclear project.

Such a partnership, as far as it goes, also depends on the Arab side’s perspective of the relations between Israel and the US. Outside observers cannot ignore the erosion in Israel-US relations, relations that constitute a key element in any version of Israel’s security concept. Israel cannot afford further decline in these relations. President Obama will remain in the White House for more than another two years. This is a long period by any standard, especially in a dynamic region undergoing upheavals at an increasingly fast pace. Extra effort is therefore required to renew the dialogue between the two countries at the highest levels, even though the difficulty of this task is clear.