



What Is to Be Done About Gaza?

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 263, Aug 10, 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Operation Protective Edge has not weakened or threatened Hamas enough to encourage them to accept a ceasefire. Israel has no choice but to continue to attack Hamas. Talks of reconquering Gaza are an unlikely option. Involving international actors to help manage the conflict, uprooting Hamas leadership or re-instating Mahmud Abbas as leader in Gaza are equally unlikely solutions. Israel has no power to mold its strategic environment, it can only manage it. Consequently, the only option available to Israel is to once again "mow the grass" by launching another ground attack to the point where Hamas fears that its rule over Gaza is at stake.

Hamas refusal to accept a ceasefire indicates that the Protective Edge operation has so far failed to attain its modest goal of calm on Israel's border with Gaza. Jerusalem is not expecting peace or integration with its neighbors – it wants just to be left alone.

It is clear that Hamas does not feel weakened or threatened enough to accept a ceasefire. If most of their conditions are met, they might agree to a fragile ceasefire that can be violated at will, which will amount to a Hamas victory. Such an outcome will be disastrous for Israel, with negative political and strategic implications.

Therefore, Israel has no choice but to continue to attack Hamas targets in order to exact a higher cost from the organization. So far the Israeli government has shown commendable caution and reluctance to use massive force. The media

reports of the disproportionate use of force are a result of Hamas manipulations and show little understanding of the realities of war. Moreover, air attacks, with the exception of targeted killings, have limited impact. Most destroyed targets are renewable. The limited ground incursion also did not force Hamas to accept a permanent cease-fire, despite the destruction of many tunnels. Therefore an escalation of the military effort is necessary.

Many Israelis advocate reconquering Gaza and cleaning it of its terrorist infrastructure by hunting down all members of the terrorist organizations, primarily Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Such an objective is not beyond the IDF's capabilities and it commands much support in Israel. A re-conquest may need many weeks and even months and it will be costly in terms of casualties.

It is not clear that Israel can garner the support of the international community, particularly the US, for a prolonged operation. Nevertheless, if Hamas does not mellow there may be no choice but to revisit to this option. In the absence of Hamas willingness to stop rocket fire for a prolonged period, the conquest of all Gaza will be needed to eradicate Hamas military capabilities and to secure calm for Israel. However, staying there would be problematic, as democratic societies are increasingly reluctant to be enlightened conquerors.

In the meantime, less drastic military options are available. In the past, the IDF has established corridors to the sea, cutting the Gaza strip into several parts, leaving Hamas to guess where the IDF is headed next. Israel's government must demonstrate that it is not afraid to have the IDF enter urban areas, even if it takes heavy casualties. Israeli society is prepared for it. Moreover, casualties now could save even more casualties in the future.

The IDF may need to launch a ground attack to a point where Hamas fears that its rule over Gaza might be at stake. It is true that Hamas has no clear center of gravity that if pushed past would assure victory, but Hamas political and military leaders value their power and even more so their lives. Without going deeper into Gaza such a threat cannot develop.

The sooner this happens the better. Various proposals to involve international actors and UN forces are being aired. Israel's experience with such experiments is terrible. All international mechanisms and peace-keeping troops in the Arab-Israeli arena have proven again and again to be ineffective. The last UN force stationed in Southern Lebanon to prevent rockets reaching Hizballah (2006) was a total failure. In Gaza, just a year after they arrived, European observers at the

Rafah crossing ran away at the first sign of trouble. Israel cannot rely on others to be responsible for its security.

There is much talk about reassessing Israel's approach toward the rule of Hamas in Gaza. Some advocate ending its rule and bringing back Mahmud Abbas into the Gaza Strip on Israeli bayonets, which might revive the discredited two-state paradigm. It is not clear at all whether Abbas is ready and able to take control of Gaza. This proposal also displays Israeli arrogance and scant memory of Israel's attempts for political engineering in Lebanon (the 1982 War) and among the Palestinians (The "Villages Leagues" of the late 1970s). Israel's involvement in deciding on who is the ruler among our Arab neighbors has brought little benefits. It is beyond Israel's power to affect the political dynamics within the Arab societies around us. Moreover, favoring one contender for power immediately boomerangs because it undermines the legitimacy of the contender. Pragmatic cooperation with Israel does not earn popularity points in the Arab world.

Furthermore, uprooting Hamas is not in the cards. It is a popular movement that draws support amongst over thirty percent of the Palestinians. It has a civilian wing that delivers many services to the Gazans. Hamas also won the elections in 2006, which indicates even larger support among the Palestinians. The violent struggle against Israel is popular, despite the heavy price paid by Gazan civilians. Unfortunately, Palestinians are not educated to seek peace, but to make sacrifices and to be martyrs in a holy war against the Jewish state.

As long as the Palestinians do not change their education system, there will be no end to the conflict; Israel can only manage it. It will continue to live by its sword and "mow the grass" when it deems it necessary. Israel has no power to mold its strategic environment, only the power to debilitate the capabilities of its enemies to harm it. In the case of Hamas more of this is needed.

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