



Pay for Gazan Electricity? Clarifying the “Israeli Interest”

by Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The electricity crisis in Gaza offers an opportunity for the Israeli government to promote security objectives. It must keep Gaza stable and maintain the separation between the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority and Hamas. The time has come to put an end to the extortion the enemy practices.

This summer marks ten years since Hamas took over Gaza.

The Gaza Strip’s predicament was already seen as irresolvable in the years following the War of Independence. On October 28, 1956, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion outlined the Sinai Campaign to the government. When Minister Mordechai Bentov wanted to know the purpose of the campaign, Ben-Gurion replied: “Regarding the Gaza Strip, I fear that it is a heavy burden for us; if I believed in miracles I would pray that it would sink into the sea. But the *fedayeen* bases must be destroyed so that the border residents can live a normal life” (*The Renewed State of Israel*, 527 [Hebrew]).

The complexity of the situation in Gaza came to the fore last week in the electricity crisis. The well-reasoned approach to the problem of Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman reveals that complexity. While his demand that the Strip be demilitarized as a condition for its rehabilitation appears straightforward and justified, the sheer absurdity of the situation was reflected in his accompanying question: why shouldn’t the Hamas government pay for the electricity? They collect taxes from the population; they can foot the bill. Lieberman rightly emphasized that Hamas funnels most of its resources into a military buildup while foisting the civilian population’s distress on Israel and the international community. This is certainly true, but addressing it directly runs the risk that the already complex situation will spiral out of control.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that this is an internal conflict between the Palestinian Authority, with Mahmoud Abbas at the helm, and Hamas, and that Israel should not allow itself be forced to take responsibility for the humanitarian distress caused by that conflict. He also stressed that Israel has no interest in seeing the situation deteriorate into war. Gen. (res.) Amos Gilad, who has a deep knowledge of the reality, explained that Hamas, as a political and military entity, is in no way a partner for negotiations or any sort of compromise. The group's new "Document of General Principles and Policies," which it published last month, reemphasized its unwavering commitment to the path of resistance: "Palestine symbolizes the resistance that shall continue until liberation is accomplished, until the return is fulfilled ... Hamas rejects any alternative to the full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea." If that's the case, why should Israel pay for their electricity? How can one offer to build them a seaport?

Strength in Division

There are other aspects, hidden from view, that point to practical recommendations of a different kind.

Israel's disengagement from Gaza in the summer of 2005, and the Hamas takeover in the summer of 2007, caused a split between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Hamas regime in the Strip. Although it is better for the official state of Israel not to take an open stance on this division, in many ways it constitutes an Israeli interest that is worth maintaining.

Col. (res.) Jacques Neriah, who was Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's adviser on the Oslo process, spoke of the anxiety that gripped Rabin when he saw what the Palestinian demand for "safe passage" between Gaza and Mount Hebron really meant. The links between these two entities were weak even before they emerged divided from the War of Independence. Reconnecting them would likely endanger the IDF's control of the West Bank.

With Gaza having become saturated with weapons over the past ten years, renewing traffic between Gaza and Hebron would enable weapons and extensive operational know-how to infiltrate the West Bank, probably necessitating a change in the IDF's modes of activity. For example, if the IDF now enjoys full operational flexibility in light vehicles, without tanks, both in the West Bank's refugee camps and in the heart of its Palestinian towns, it is because the Palestinians of the West Bank do not have advanced weapons. It is the West Bank's isolation that prevents the emergence of armor-piercing weapons such as RPGs and sophisticated roadside charges. That isolation must be maintained.

On the strategic level as well, the division between Gaza and the West Bank is an Israeli interest. The reason Israel's position has deteriorated from the Rabin framework, which envisaged a Palestinian state mainly restricted to Areas A and B, to the Clinton Parameters, which demanded a sovereign Palestinian state along with an almost complete Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders, is the Palestinian power of extortion, which feeds on Israeli anxiety over the demographic threat.

Gaza's separation from the Palestinian Authority, coupled with its de facto emergence as a sovereign state, has greatly diminished this power of extortion. Now that a Hamas state exists in Gaza as a separate sovereign entity, Israel can, without trepidation, offer the Palestinians a choice between two alternatives: either apply the full potential of the PA's control of the West Bank territories it has held since January 1996, as Rabin proposed to them, or combine with Israel into a single state.

The Potential Threat Has Grown

Meanwhile, since the Palestinian system became bifurcated, it has pursued a dual strategy: the Hamas component is mainly responsible for resistance, while the governmental component in Ramallah takes the diplomatic tack. Israel's interest is to impede the network of covert links between these two components.

When, for example, Israel thwarted the *Marmara* convoy, it actually served an American interest of strengthening Abbas and weakening Hamas. Indeed, when in the aftermath of Operation Protective Edge objections were raised to the idea of helping to construct a Gaza seaport, the dominant assumption was that it is not desirable to bolster Hamas, as doing so would undermine Abbas. The time has come to recognize that Israel's tacit interest is actually the opposite.

If so, the issue of paying for electricity and of the overall humanitarian situation in Gaza emerges in a different light. In this context, Israel has two interests: first, to maintain stability in Gaza; and second, to maintain the separation, even to the point of tacitly cultivating Hamas in Gaza as a sovereign entity.

It appears that the potential security threat that is developing in Gaza will grow. Although helping build a Gaza seaport will not soften Hamas's attitudes towards Israel, it can generate momentum that in many regards will serve Israel's interests. It is recommended that Israel, as a regional power, pursue an approach that better serves its full range of interests, both overt and covert.

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