



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Regional Players Maneuver to Reengineer the Israeli-Palestinian Landscape

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** A [possible ceasefire between Israel and Hamas](#), the Islamist group that controls the Gaza Strip, may be about more than ending the ongoing, escalating violence that threatens to spark yet another Gaza war. It could also be an attempt to pave the way for the return of Muhammad Dahlan as successor to PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

United Arab Emirates-backed Egyptian and UN efforts to mediate an agreement between Israel and Hamas, with nemesis Qatar in the background, are about not only preventing months-long weekly protests along the line that divides Gaza and Israel and repeated rocket and kite-mounted incendiary device attacks on Israel that provoke Israeli military strikes in response. They also constitute yet another round in an Israeli-supported effort to politically, economically, and militarily weaken Hamas and pave the way for the possible return of Abu Dhabi-based former Palestinian security chief Muhammad Dahlan as successor to ailing PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

Ironically, Israeli discussions with representatives of Qatar, which has long supported Hamas, constitute recognition of the utility of Qatar's longstanding relations with Islamists and militants – relations that the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain cited as the reason for their 15-month-old diplomatic and economic boycott of the Gulf state.

Israel and Egypt have agreed that Qatar would [pay the salaries of tens of thousands of government employees in Gaza](#). Abbas has refused to pay those salaries as part of an Israeli-UAE-Saudi-backed effort to undermine Hamas's control of Gaza and give the PA a key role in its administration. Moreover, in

response to Abbas's demand, [Israel reduced electricity supplies](#), leaving Gazans with only three to four hours of power a day.

Qatar has also been negotiating the return by Hamas of two captive Israeli nationals as well as the remains of two Israeli soldiers killed in the 2014 Gaza war.

Abbas's economic warfare is the latest tightening of the noose in a more than decade-long Israeli-Egyptian effort to strangle Gaza economically. Included in the moves to negotiate a long-term Israeli-Hamas ceasefire are proposals for significant steps to ease the blockade.

In a [statement on Facebook](#), Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said Israel's goal is to "remove the Hamas terror group from power, or force it to change its approach, i.e., recognize Israel's right to exist and accept the principle of rebuilding in exchange for demilitarization."

Lieberman said he wants to achieve this by "creating conditions in which the average resident of Gaza will take steps to replace the Hamas regime with a more pragmatic government" rather than through military force.

In another irony, involving Qatar in efforts to prevent Gaza from escalating out of control gives it a foot in the door as the UAE seeks to put a Palestinian leader in place who is more attuned to the Emirati and Saudi willingness to accommodate the Trump administration's controversial efforts to negotiate an overall Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Speaking in a series of interviews, Qatari Ambassador to the Palestinian territories Muhammad Emadi insisted that "it is [very difficult to fund the reconstruction of Gaza in an event of yet another destructive war](#)." He said he has "discussed a maximum of a five- to 10-year cease-fire with Hamas."

Abbas, like Hamas, rejected US mediation following President Trump's recognition earlier this year of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

The US president startled Israelis and Palestinians last week by saying that [Israel would pay a "higher price"](#) for his recognition of Jerusalem and that Palestinians would "get something very good" in return "because it's their turn next." Trump gave no indication of what he meant by this.

The effort to negotiate a lasting ceasefire is the latest round in a so far failed UAE-Egyptian effort to return Dahlan as part of a reconciliation between Hamas and Abbas's Fatah movement. Dahlan frequently does UAE Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed's bidding.

US President George W. Bush described Dahlan during an internecine Palestinian power struggle in 2007 as "[our boy](#)." Dahlan is believed to have close ties to Lieberman.

Since late March, Hamas has backed weekly mass protests by Gazans demanding the "right of return" to homes in Israel proper that they or their familial predecessors claim to have lost on the creation of the Jewish state in 1948 and during the 1967 Middle East war. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said recently that "thanks to these marches and resistance" an [end to Israel's decade-long blockade of Gaza is "around the corner."](#)

Some 170 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces and thousands others wounded in Israel's response to the protests. The IDF has acted to prevent Gazans from breaching the fence with Israel, a goal explicitly encouraged by Hamas.

Abbas may prove to be the loser as Israel and Hamas inch towards a ceasefire arrangement that could ultimately give Dahlan a role in administering the Gaza Strip.

"[Gaza has become a de facto state](#) as it comprises a set area with a central body that governs the population, has an army, and conducts foreign policy," said Giora Eiland, former head of Israel's National Security Council. "So, in a way, countries have to be pragmatic and negotiate with Hamas. Israel's main interest is security – a period of complete calm in Gaza – and it is willing to do what is necessary to achieve this."

Eiland continued, "Until recently, Cairo insisted that Abbas reassume control over Gaza, which Hamas would not accept, specifically the call for it to disarm. Now, Egypt understands that this is not realistic and is only demanding that Hamas prevent [the Islamic State's affiliate] in the Sinai from smuggling in weaponry. The only party that is unhappy with this arrangement is Abbas, who has been left behind. But this is his problem."

A Hamas-Israel ceasefire and the possible return of Dahlan are likely to be but the first steps in a UAE-Egyptian-Israeli-backed strategy to engineer the emergence of a Palestinian leadership more amenable to negotiating an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Whether Trump's remark that Israel would have to pay a price for his recognition of Jerusalem was a shot from the hip or part of a broader strategy is hard to discern. The [White House has since sought to roll back his remarks](#).

With the jury still out, Israelis, Palestinians, and their regional allies have been put on alert as they maneuver to ensure their place in whatever emerges from efforts to reengineer the political landscape.

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