What Is the Right Strategy with Hamas: Make Concessions or Fight?

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: What should the strategy regarding Hamas be—to make concessions or to initiate a fourth round of fighting? The best approach is for Israel to prolong the negotiations as long as possible, concede as little as possible, and wait until the sanctions against Iran come into full force. Then Israel should prepare for the next big round not to defeat Hamas, but to tame it and keep the Palestinians divided.

Israel’s leading politicians, Minister of Defense, Avigdor Lieberman, backed and by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have been engaged in a fierce debate with Minister of Education, Naftali Bennet over how to react to Hamas’ venture since the March of Return to change the status quo from Hamas’ relative submission to keep the peace to a return to the situation of tit-for-tat attacks and counterattacks that prevailed most of the time period between Hamas’ takeover of Gaza in 2007 and the third large round of fighting in the summer of 2014.

Netanyahu and Lieberman want to reach understandings with Hamas to restore the relative calm that prevailed for nearly four years since 2014. They are willing to make humanitarian concessions and probably acquiesce to a sizeable prisoner release of hard-core terrorists in order to restore the calm even temporarily. Bennet, by contrast, is bitterly opposed to making concessions and seeks a fourth round of confrontation that will considerably weaken the organization.

Why the merits of the debate are so difficult to assess is mainly due to the wisdom of both approaches on political and military grounds. The question, of course, is which of these strategies at this
particular point of time would be better for Israel at this particular point in time.

Netanyahu and Lieberman have a strong case in calling for restraint and even concessions towards Hamas. They see Israel’s strategic concerns in hierarchical terms.

By far the most important threat to Israel is Iran’s nuclear program. Initially following that are Iran’s attempts to set up a permanent military infrastructure in Syria, which would include a sizeable pro-Iranian militia presence on the Golan front.

With the Americans on board in this endeavor, as the statements made by John Bolton, President Trump’s chief security advisor, on his recent trip to Israel made clear, nothing—these two leaders reason—that nothing should detract from the focus on Iran, especially the renewal of sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

In fact, according to both Netanyahu and Lieberman, the main reason behind the decision by Hamas to heat up the Gaza front in late March was initiated by Iran and designed to remove the focus away from Iran to the Palestinians. Such a change of focus, Iran hoped, would embolden key European states such as France and Germany, to take countermeasures against United States’ sanctions on Iran.

So critical was it to maintain the focus on Iran that these leaders were willing to pay the price of changing the balance of threat in Hamas’s favor and reward Hamas for the violence it initiated. The assumption is that the balance of power between Israel and Hamas is such that the restoration of the status quo to the pre-March 2018 situation can be made after the sanctions against Iran are enforced to their full potential.

This is not a working assumption that they can apply to Iran. Time, Netanyahu and Lieberman reason that time, is of essence, not only because Trump’s pro-Israeli administration has only two more years until its fate is decided by the next presidential elections, but because there is a fear, given the legal challenges the President faces at home, that time horizon might even be shorter.

For his part, Bennet also makes a plausible argument for not acquiescing to Hamas’s exploitation of Israel’s complicated geo-strategic environment. As far as Bennet is concerned, the focus on Iran is guaranteed by a President resolved to roll back Iran on its nuclear program and aggressive behavior towards its neighbors. A supportive U.S. Congress and the legal framework within which the sanctions operate, which gives
them a life of their own, that cannot be sidelined by other crises, such as a fourth round between Israel and Gaza.

Based on these assumptions, he Bennet argues that buying times-periods of quiet through concessions comes at considerable cost, especially if this means an increase in imports into Gaza, which would give Hamas the wherewithal to improve its military capabilities. Any form of cease-fire, however whatever it is called, offers gives the organization ample time for to training for the next round. This means greater and more lethal fire-power.

Bennet is correct that Hamas has utilized its time wisely to increase its capabilities. For example, in 22 days of Operation Cast Lead in winter 2008-09, the organization along with others, launched 925 rockets, which hit Israel. This increased to 3,852 in Operation Protective Edge in 2014, which represented an almost 200% per cent increase even taking into account the much longer duration of fighting in 2014 compared to six years earlier (55 days compared to 24). Casualties were also significantly higher; 72 compared to versus 13 Israeli deaths. The increase was mainly due to effective attacks from tunnels within Gaza and greater use of mortars against Israeli troops encamped within areas adjacent to Gaza.

Though Israel has developed technology to deal with both these problems, Hamas has proved to be an innovative enemy that might come up with further surprises in the next round. And the longer the respite, one might safely assume, the greater the probability that Hamas will come up with them do so.

Looking at how Israel secured deterrence on the Gaza front also lends support to Bennet’s line of thinking. “Understandings” between Israel and Hamas have always been short-lived if acted upon at all. The 2005 “lull,” marketed as an informal understanding between the Palestinian factions and Israel, translated into a 345% per cent increase in missile and mortar attacks in that year compared to 2004. After the 2012 round, the “understandings” brokered by the ousted Morsi government lasted little more than a year until the deadly trickle of missile and mortar launchings began anew.

Still less did “humanitarian” gestures buy quiet. From the point of view of Hamas, the greatest humanitarian move was the release of over 1,000 hard-core terrorists in 2011 in return for the release of one Israeli soldier. This did not prevent the a second round in October 2012.

Over time, only the three large-scale rounds of violence created accumulated deterrence between rounds in which missile launchings after each round appreciably decreased.
The best option, then, is for Israel is to prolong the negotiations as long as possible, concede as little as possible, and to wait till until the sanctions against Iran come into full force and–and then prepare in full force for the next big round, not to defeat Hamas, but to tame it and keep the Palestinians divided.

An earlier version of this article was published in The Jerusalem Post on August 30, 2018.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family.