



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Israel Must Make a Decision on Gaza

by Jonathan Ariel

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,001, November 9, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: For over a decade, Israel has avoided deciding whether its interests are better served by maintaining the current “two Palestinian states” status quo, or by seeing Gaza rejoin the Palestinian Authority. The result is an untenable, chronic-crisis situation that empowers Mahmoud Abbas and is a lose-lose for Israel.

In January 2006, the residents of the Palestinian Authority (PA) went to the polls on the insistence of the Bush administration, which wanted elections to be held there as part of its policy to democratize the Middle East. The Americans’ thinking was that the Palestinians, who had, by Arab standards, a relatively large and well-educated middle class, were good candidates for democratization. The hope was that if the Palestinians, who were traditional lightweights in the Arab world, could successfully democratize their society, it would be a catalyst for similarly successful democratization of the Arab world’s heavyweights, such as Iraq, Egypt, and Syria.

Both Israel and several Arab states, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, recommended postponing the elections on the grounds that there was a real danger that Hamas would win. They made it clear to the US administration that Hamas, the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, promoted a radical jihadist agenda. The Americans insisted the elections go ahead, and since neither Israel nor the Arab states wanted to oppose the US, they acquiesced in what they viewed as a bad decision.

The elections took place. Sure enough, Hamas won, giving the Muslim Brotherhood its first electoral victory in an Arab state (the AKP, which regards itself as the Turkish Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, has been in power in Turkey since 2003). This event sowed winds of change that would eventually develop into the “Arab Spring,” an erroneous moniker if ever there was one.

Fatah, which had ruled the PA since its inception in May 1994, and before that had dominated Palestinian politics since the late 1960s, refused to peacefully hand over power. A year after the election, Hamas's militia (Izz ad-Din Qassam) took over Gaza by force, killing or expelling all PA forces. Since then Gaza has been a de facto separate political entity.

Israel has never decided whether its interests would be better served by perpetuating and formalizing the two-Palestinian-state status quo, or by seeing Gaza revert to the status quo ante. For over a decade, Jerusalem has limited itself to tactical responses. When Hamas aggression reaches unacceptable levels, the IDF mounts limited military incursions aimed at containing Hamas, and assiduously avoids formulating a coherent strategy.

Initially this policy may have had some benefits over and above domestic political expediency. However, recent developments over the past 12-24 months have made it clear that its shelf life has expired.

The prioritizing of political expediency over national security interests has created a situation in which Israel has put the fate of the residents of the northwestern Negev in the hands of lame duck West Bank leader Mahmoud Abbas. He decides if over 60,000 Israelis sleep in their bedrooms or in security rooms and shelters, and if they tend their crops or watch them burn. If he decides it is in his interest to reduce tensions, he allows more aid and funds to enter Gaza, somewhat alleviating the dire conditions there. If he feels it is in his interest to raise tensions, he acts to reduce the inflow of humanitarian supplies. Because, thanks to a decade of Hamas misrule, conditions are so bad in Gaza, a few days of brinksmanship are sufficient to put Gaza on the edge of a humanitarian crisis that threatens Hamas's rule. In response, Hamas does the only thing it can: it ratchets up aggression against Israel just short of the levels that would trigger a massive Israeli military response.

The only way to end this cat and mouse game being played on the backs of the residents of the towns and rural communities adjacent to Gaza is for Israel to make a decision. It must choose whether its interests lie in perpetuating and formalizing Gaza's separation from the West Bank, or in seeing it return to full PA control. Until it takes this decision, it cannot begin to develop a coherent strategy, a prerequisite for achieving any desired outcome.

History has shown that Israeli strategy based on purely unilateral action usually fails, and there is no reason to believe this time would be any different. In other words, any Israeli strategy based on unilateral action, irrespective of whether its aim is reunification or formalized separation, would likely be unviable.

Instead, Israel must formulate a strategy in consultation with the moderate Sunni states with which it is developing a de facto alliance, and make sure that Jerusalem and those states are on the same page in this regard. This is a

prerequisite for obtaining the international support – or at least the international acquiescence – that would be vital for ensuring a successful outcome, irrespective of which option is ultimately chosen.

A reunification strategy would require a toppling of the Hamas administration. From a purely military perspective, Israel can achieve this. However, unless Israel can be assured it will not be saddled with the responsibility of reoccupying and administering Gaza, it would be folly of the first magnitude to undertake such a task. The PA is scarcely capable of providing even a minimally functional government in the West Bank, let alone taking on the massive undertaking of rehabilitating Gaza's collapsing infrastructures. This means Israel must hammer out an international agreement that includes an ironclad commitment to provide an international force that would assume responsibility for Gaza, ensuring public security and providing the level of competent governance required for its physical rehabilitation.

Because there are no free lunches, least of all when it comes to Middle Eastern diplomacy, Israel would have to make some kind of compromise with the PA in the West Bank. As even the relatively modest compromises that a minimalist interim agreement would require are anathema to the current government's hard-core base, this would require the government to choose between strategic interest and short-term expediency. This is the kind of choice politicians abhor and tend to avoid for as long as possible.

A separation strategy might seem to be more politically palatable, but this is not necessarily the case. Any agreement giving Hamas the international recognition, legitimacy, and financial aid it craves must include at least partial demilitarization. If it does not do so, it is a sucker deal as far as Israel is concerned.

Hamas would only agree to that if it fears the alternative would be its forced removal from power. Hamas knows very well that while Israel can easily topple it, it cannot afford the economic and political costs of once again becoming the occupying power responsible for governing an impoverished, predominantly hostile population of over 1.5 million. Thus, without the threat of international support that would be a prerequisite for toppling for Hamas if it breaks the agreement, any such agreement would be a waste of ink and paper.

Achieving such support could pose a domestic political problem, as it would not be without cost. No matter which strategy the Israeli government chooses, it will require some form of diplomatic payment, bringing the matter back to square one: political expediency vs. national strategic interests.

Not deciding may be expedient as far as coalition politics are concerned, but it has lost its last shred of viability from a strategic standpoint. The status quo has left Jerusalem without any effective options for ensuring the peace and welfare

of southern Israel, as it can neither topple Hamas nor reach an acceptable and viable agreement with it.

Even worse, it has created a situation in which Israel could find itself suckered into doing Abbas's dirty work for him. He wants to regain control of Gaza, but knows he lacks the power to achieve this. However, by freezing salaries and vetoing humanitarian supplies to Gaza, he has the power to escalate tensions to the point where Israel and Hamas end up fighting a war. The sole winner of such a war would be Abbas, as it would end with Israel invading Gaza and eliminating Hamas – something he can never hope to achieve by himself. He would then magnanimously agree to relieve Israel of the burden of assuming responsibility for governing Gaza's population. Israel would have squandered blood and treasure, and Abbas would reap the fruits.

Until the Israeli government prioritizes strategy over expediency, makes a decision, formulates an appropriate and effective strategy to achieve that decision, and acts to effectively implement it, the current status quo – which serves no one but Abbas – will remain in force.

Jonathan Ariel is a South African native who served as an intelligence officer with the ANC and subsequently worked with Mandela. In Israel he was News Editor of Makor Rishon, Editor-in-Chief of Ma'ariv International, and Editor-in-Chief of Jerusalem Online's English-language website Channel 2 News.

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