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Middle East Brief

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Stabilizing Gaza-Israel Relations: What Would It Take?

Shai Feldman and Khalil Shikaki

On August 5, 2014, after 29 days of fighting, Israel and Hamas accepted an Egyptian proposal for a 72-hour unconditional cease-fire. The cease-fire was meant to provide a calmer environment for direct and indirect talks on stabilizing the relations between Israel and Gaza. Fire was renewed after the agreed three days of quiet did not produce a breakthrough but another ceasefire went into effect on the morning of August 11, allowing the renewal of negotiations in Cairo on the terms of a broader and more enduring understanding. This fluid phase in the process might continue for some time before such an understanding is reached. This Brief is an attempt to sketch the basic requirements for transforming any cease-fire the parties may agree on to more stable relations between Gaza and Israel, and between Israelis and Palestinians more broadly.

The 2014 Gaza-Israel war raises the following questions: What can be done to turn the most recent round of violence into the last Gaza-Israel war? Can the outcomes of this war be utilized to create conditions conducive to improved Palestinian-Israeli relations? Do the current unique circumstances—Hamas' unprecedented political and financial weakness in the aftermath of the July 2013 counter-revolution in Egypt, the creation of a national reconciliation government under Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas' leadership in April 2014, and the considerable damage inflicted on Hamas' military capacity in the recent fighting—increase the odds that this round

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would comprise the last Gaza-Israel war and that Israel and the Palestinians will now move closer to resolving their conflict?

Also, do the death and destruction experienced during the recent fighting and the international reaction to these horrors encourage renewed external efforts to resolve the conflict? In light of such destruction, do Israeli and Palestinian leaders have second thoughts about positions they adopted and actions they took during the most recent U.S.-led attempt to resolve the conflict diplomatically—positions and actions that doomed the negotiations to failure? Would these leaders now be able to better capitalize on recent regional developments to improve the prospects of a diplomatic resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? While this Brief does not intend to provide definitive answers to all these questions, it attempts to address many of them and to suggest a prism through which those that are addressed directly here might be examined.

The Strategic Environment

Any attempt to establish a more stable relationship between Israel and Gaza must begin with ascertaining the immediate causes of the current instability and the circumstances that led to the most recent eruption of violence. In the broadest sense the failure of U.S.-led efforts—most recently, the attempts by Secretary of State John Kerry to broker a permanent status agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority—provided the environment in which the eruption of violence could have been expected. That being said, the opposite could have also been the case: a breakthrough in these negotiations could have led Hamas—if it deemed such an agreement as a threat to its interests—to initiate violence in an attempt to thwart the effort.

Regionally, during the past year Hamas has found itself in unprecedented isolation. This was partly self-inflicted—resulting from Hamas' earlier decision to support the Syrian rebels and relocate its headquarters away from Damascus. The decision alienated some of the movement's most important regional supporters: Iran and Syria. But the isolation was also because of developments over which Hamas had no control, most important among them, the counter-revolution in Egypt in early July 2013, which ousted the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas' traditional allies. The latter development led to very tough Egyptian measures to isolate Gaza by closing the Rafah crossing even more hermetically than before and, even more important, by destroying the network of tunnels that Hamas had built under the Gaza-Egyptian border. The tunnels were designed to circumvent the restrictions imposed by Egypt and Israel in the aftermath of Hamas' take-over of Gaza in June 2007 by allowing the smuggling of weapons and goods into the Gaza Strip.

The cumulative effect of these developments was to leave Hamas physically isolated and without regional allies. Despite the financial and political weakness created by these developments, Hamas still possessed sufficient military capacity for a confrontation aimed at regaining its credibility and reshaping the domestic and regional balance in its favor. Internally, the turn to violence may have been propelled by Hamas' military wing to thwart the April 2014 reconciliation agreement, which it saw as having made possible through excessive concessions by Hamas leadership. While the military wing's initial reaction to the agreement was that it does not contradict Hamas' "resistance"

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activities and doctrine, the abduction and killing of the three Israeli teenagers on June 12—a development that spurred the recent escalation—may have reflected the desire of some Hamas commanders in the West Bank to thwart the reconciliation efforts.

Another important development was the Israeli government's negative reaction to the Palestinian national reconciliation agreement. The reaction was propelled by the impression that given Hamas' ideological commitment to Israel's destruction, such a move cannot but imply a PLO retreat from its commitment to peace. Supported by the U.S., which regarded the agreement as circumventing its own peace efforts, the Israeli reaction further exacerbated Hamas' plight by preventing the PA from paying the salaries of Gaza's civil servants.

The battle against the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation may have also led Israel to frame the abduction and killing of the three Israeli teenagers in July as a Hamas operation and to assert that in reconciling with Hamas, PA President Abbas had entered into a partnership with a murderous organization. This framing, in turn, led the Israeli government to take another series of measures against Hamas, including the re-arresting of tens of Hamas operatives who had previously been released from Israeli jails in the framework of the Gilad Shalit deal. Hamas responded with escalating rocket fire against Israeli towns and agricultural settlements in the South, and later reaching even north of Tel Aviv.

The cumulative effect of the different components of this strategic environment amounted to an incentive structure that favored escalation over stability. Israel felt that the newly created Palestinian national reconciliation government was legitimizing a movement committed to its destruction and Hamas felt increasingly isolated, if not strangled, in the region and thus had little to lose.

In the immediate aftermath of the recent fighting, Hamas will most probably gain popularity among Palestinians, thus repeating a pattern that has characterized previous rounds of violence. This is partly because of the assessment that despite the heavy losses that Hamas suffered—in human life and material—it performed better than in previous conflicts. Indeed, Palestinians tend to view the enormous physical and human damage inflicted upon Gaza as a deliberate Israeli attempt to compensate for its perceived failures in the battlefield.

Stabilizing Israel-Gaza relations would therefore require transforming this environment in at least two ways: First, affecting the intra-Palestinian balance by strengthening the Fatah-led PA while weakening Hamas. Second,

altering the parties' cost-benefit calculus in a fashion favoring peace and stability over war and destruction. Accomplishing this, in turn, would require the parties involved to make significant, if not paradigmatic, changes in their approach—changes that will then be translated into specific policy moves.

Changes in Israel's Approach

To contribute its share to stabilizing Israel-Gaza relations, the Israeli government would need to change its approach in the following ways: First, it would need to accept that Hamas is a permanent feature of the Palestinian scene—that while its military capacity can be degraded by recurring violent confrontations, it is a popular movement that cannot be destroyed, at least not at a cost acceptable to Israel.

Second, the Israeli government would need to finally resolve that PA President Abbas is its primary partner for stabilizing Palestinian-Israeli relations and for ultimately ending the two peoples' conflict. Translating this perceptual change to policy would require that Israel take meaningful measures to strengthen Abbas and weaken Hamas. Thus, it would need to completely reverse Israel's long track record of doing exactly the opposite—rewarding Hamas violence, as was the case with the Gilad Shalit deal, while punishing Abbas, as it did following the latter's success at UN recognition of independent Palestinian statehood.

Third, Israel would need to completely change its approach to Palestinian national reconciliation, from viewing such efforts as a threat due to the implied legitimization of Hamas, to seeing it as an opportunity for two reasons: First, because successful Palestinian reconciliation would provide Israel with one address for negotiations and deterrence and would prevent the Palestinian scene from disintegrating into the kind of chaos currently seen in Syria and Iraq. Second, because such reconciliation would present an opportunity to “tame” Hamas, not by compelling it to alter its ideological commitment, but rather by incentivizing it to act responsibly to meet the broader needs of Gaza's population.

Fourth, Israel should recognize that Hamas must be given something to lose—that a Hamas unable “to deliver” (by meeting the population's basic requirements due to restrictions imposed by Egypt and Israel) is a desperate movement that will take any measure in the hope of escaping its present predicaments.

This four-dimensional paradigmatic change should induce Israel to take the following measures to empower President Abbas and to weaken Hamas while at the same time providing Hamas' political leadership with incentives to favor accommodation over violence: First, Israel should help improve Gazans' living conditions by allowing a smoother flow of goods and services and greater movement of people between the West Bank and Gaza. Second, Israel should coordinate with the PA the deployment of Palestinian National Security Forces along the Israel-Gaza border and at the border crossings. Third, Israel should facilitate the holding of Palestinian elections and refrain from thwarting the campaigning of Hamas' political activists—action that would only increase their electoral appeal. Fourth, Israel should allow greater PA security control over Area A and greater civil control over Palestinians residing in Area C. It should also remove remaining checkpoints and allow West Bank Palestinians greater access to Israeli, Gazan, and international markets. Finally, and most important, Israel should facilitate renewed peace negotiations and endow these talks with greater viability by ending settlement construction, releasing pre-Oslo Palestinian prisoners, and abandoning positions that ensure such talks' failure—for example, the demand that the IDF should remain deployed in the entire West Bank for a long period of time.

Changes in Hamas' Approach

The changes required in Hamas' approach, if violence is to be replaced by stability, are no less paradigmatic. First, Hamas must acknowledge that while it performed impressively during the last round of violence—its command structure was not irreparably damaged, it was able to continue to launch rockets and lesser projectiles until minutes before the August 5 ceasefire took effect and after, it showed remarkable tenacity in both constructing the web of underground tunnels and utilizing them during the conflict, it was able to launch a naval commando raid, and it was able to cripple international air traffic to Israel for 36 hours—it will never be in a position to defeat Israel. In the end, Israel's superiority will allow it to thwart Hamas' military designs as was recently the case: In the air, through its complete air superiority and the Iron Dome anti-rocket intercept system. On the ground by the masses of ground forces supported by state-of-the-art technology. And even underground where Israeli means to locate tunnels and spot Hamas operatives crawling out from them will only improve.

Second, Hamas must realize that its impressive military performance in and of itself will never be enough to compel Israel, let alone Egypt, to reverse the set of restrictions

that surround Gaza and render it unable to meet the minimal requirements of Gaza's population. Moreover, the horrific toll that Israel's response to Hamas' attacks have taken on Gaza's population—with over 1,800 dead, thousands wounded, and an even larger number of houses destroyed—illustrates that any Hamas attempt to use violence in an effort to lift these restrictions will only exacerbate the plight of Gaza's residents.

Third, Hamas must finally acknowledge that as long as it continues to define its goal as Israel's destruction and as long as it continues to define "occupation" as synonymous to Israel's creation in 1948 and not as limited to the lands Israel acquired in the 1967 War, no level of costs incurred will persuade Israel to accede to Hamas' demands. Continuing to define its goals in these terms is tantamount to the Algerian FLN having demanded that the French surrender not only Algeria but France as well. In short, Hamas must finally realize that without replacing—*de facto* if not *de jure*—its unlimited purposes by limited goals, it will continue to face a "mission impossible."

The aforementioned paradigmatic changes required of Hamas—without which it cannot escape its current strategic impasse—must lead the movement to take the following measures: First it must allow the deployment of PA security forces along the Gaza-Egypt and Gaza-Israel borders and the placing of all border crossings under the full control of the PA. Second, it should allow the reconciliation government to exercise full control over the West Bank-Gaza Strip unification process, including a fuller commitment to the 2011 reconciliation requirement of implementing the "one authority, one gun" principle. Finally, Hamas should reexamine the historical record of its hostility toward Israel with a view to reconciling its attitudes toward "the two state solution" with those of the PLO whose ranks it seeks to join. In examining this record it should acknowledge that even Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood, during Mohammad Morsi's presidency, abided by the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty thus accepting Israel *de facto* if not explicitly *de jure*.

The suggested changes in Hamas' approach can be encouraged through changes in others' attitudes toward Hamas. Most important is to appreciate that Hamas is a formidable political force—it will not go away and should not be taken for granted. It should be given genuine assurances that its integration into the Palestinian political system will not be opposed, and that it will be given the opportunity to fully participate in the political process and wage an effective election campaign. The risk entailed in allowing Hamas such an opportunity is not unreasonably high as its ability to capitalize on its achievements during the recent fighting is seriously constrained by its various

pre-war shortcomings. As in previous cases, its gains in popularity in the immediate aftermath of a confrontation with Israel are considerable but short-lived; over time pre-war limitations on Hamas' capacity "to deliver" on the needs of Gaza' population will prevail. This is particularly the case since Israel will remain in a position to reverse the concessions it is being asked to make, especially the easing of access and movement to and from Gaza. Moreover, Hamas will be bound to the reconciliation agreement that grants the PA and President Abbas formal authority in the Gaza Strip. It will also be limited by the expected severe negative Palestinian public reaction to steps that are likely to be seen as weakening national unity or impeding the process of West Bank-Gaza Strip unification and, consequently, of Gaza reconstruction, and of condemning Gaza to renewed isolation within Palestine and the Middle East at large.

Changes in the Palestinian Authority's Approach

During the months preceding the recent round of violence, Hamas' strategic impasse had already led it to accept Fatah's terms for national reconciliation. However, President Abbas proved unable, or unwilling, to leverage this advantage to reestablish a footing in Gaza in two ways: First, he failed to utilize the newly created national reconciliation government to reestablish its patronage in Gaza. This could have been accomplished by persuading Israel and the U.S. that it is in their interest that civil servants in Gaza be paid through funds provided by the PA and that they should allow, if not encourage, the utilization of the PA-centered banking system to execute such payments.

Second, President Abbas, the Fatah movement, and the PA were slow to recognize that regional circumstances and the outcome of the recent round of Hamas-Israel violence has provided them with an unprecedented opportunity to reestablish a footing in Gaza. This is because irrespective of its impressive performance and the likely rise in its popularity, Hamas will ultimately emerge from the present confrontation weakened on two counts: First, within Gaza, coupled with pride at Hamas' successful "resistance" there is likely to be, as indicated earlier, a gradual reduction in public support as the emotional reaction to the war cools off. Second, regional forces are now uniquely arrayed to weaken Hamas. With different motivations Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are all willing to contribute—overtly or covertly—to the weakening of Hamas.

These failures notwithstanding, the post war environment will provide Abbas with an opportunity to gain public support and emerge as the most credible Palestinian leader. In 2014, Abbas became more involved in the efforts to end the fighting in Gaza than on previous occasions in 2008-9 and 2012. Such greater involvement was propelled by the following considerations: First, this was the first war since the formation of the reconciliation government. Second, Abbas hoped to gain some advantage against Hamas in the war's aftermath. Finally, he calculated that he would not be able to limit the gains that Hamas might derive from being seen as responsible for easing the siege and improving conditions in the Strip were he to be perceived as irrelevant to the postwar arrangements.

Abbas' immediate challenge is to ensure that Gaza's reconstruction only take place under his rule. This is his greatest moment of opportunity because after the war Gaza will need reconstruction—in water, electricity, road, communication, waste, water, other infrastructure, and the rebuilding of destroyed homes—and he has the opportunity to appear as key to these essential activities. The same applies to the opening of the Rafah crossing and to improving economic conditions since none of the relevant players (Egypt, Israel, and the international community) will allow reconstruction under Hamas' control. The reconciliation deal provides the instrument that would allow Abbas to assert himself as the accepted president of, and the address for, both Gaza and the West Bank. Moreover, the reconciliation government would reflect his choices, adopt his policies, and—given the absence of a parliament and a weak judiciary—implement his and only his decisions.

To move Gaza-Israeli relations from repeated violent confrontations toward greater stability, Abbas needs to leverage Hamas' weakness and the unique array of regional forces by taking the following steps to gradually reestablish a footing in Gaza: First, he needs to encourage his reconciliation government to take far reaching steps to unify West Bank and Gaza institutions and thereby take away control from Hamas. The latter would be less able to resist change if the reconciliation government is seen as calling all the shots. Under such circumstances, the Palestinian public would fully endorse unification and strongly oppose Hamas efforts to impede it. Hamas risks losing considerable public support and the upcoming elections if it is seen as preventing national unity. That said, the reconciliation government cannot be expected to perform effectively in the security sector and succeed in imposing the "one authority, one gun" reconciliation term (thus delivering on Gaza demilitarization) in the near future. Only if elections are held, and he wins, will Abbas be in a position to tackle this issue seriously.

Second, Abbas needs to consolidate relations with Egypt's President Sisi. Only if Sisi views Abbas as a trusted ally will he be willing to open the Rafah crossing in the immediate aftermath of the war. This step is now critical for improving Abbas' standing among Palestinians—it is seen as the litmus test of his success.

Finally, Abbas must prepare Fatah for the elections stipulated in the reconciliation agreement. This is particularly important in the Gaza Strip where Fatah is currently fragmented. To this end, he must address, in some fashion, the challenge he faces from his principle rival, Muhammad Dahlan, whose support among Fatah ranks in Gaza remains considerable.

What role for the U.S.?

Despite the recent failure of the U.S. efforts to broker Israeli-Palestinian peace, American diplomacy remains indispensable for stabilizing Gaza and for triggering positive post-war dynamics. U.S. diplomacy should focus on encouraging the relevant parties to make the required changes in their approach, thus assisting in the achievement of the goals outlined above, including improving the chances for a lasting Israeli-Palestinian quiet in the Gaza Strip, positively affecting Palestinian domestic balance of power, and injecting elements of energy and optimism in the peace process.

Working closely with the reconciliation government and President Abbas, the U.S. should lead the efforts to help rebuild Gaza's destroyed infrastructure, train units of the National Security Forces for deployment in the Gaza Strip, help create jobs and new markets, and support the West Bank-Gaza Strip unification process by, for example, supporting the holding of national elections and the unification of the civil public sectors. The U.S. should also explore the willingness of Hamas to moderate its views on the peace process. It should particularly explore, perhaps via track two dialogue, the willingness of Hamas to adopt positions similar to those adopted by the Morsi government while the Muslim Brotherhood was in power in Egypt during 2012-13, namely, to accept Israel as a permanent feature of the Middle East, implicitly if not explicitly.

The combination of the failure of the U.S. led peace talks and the 2014 Gaza war could deliver a deadly blow to the two-state solution. Working closely with Israel, the U.S. should focus not only on improving living conditions for Palestinians—in the West Bank as well as the Gaza Strip—but also on creating an atmosphere conducive to the resumption of a more viable peace process. Efforts

should be made to insure the continued viability of the two-state solution through a combination of concrete U.S. bridging proposals addressing security and territorial dimensions while curbing settlement construction and guaranteeing greater Israeli-PA security coordination in the West Bank as well as in the Gaza Strip.

Final Remarks

Transforming the temporary cease-fires reached between Israel and Hamas in August 2014 into more stable relations between Gaza and Israel will require all three principle parties—Israel, Hamas, and the Palestinian Authority—to radically alter their approach toward one another. Each side would need to translate this paradigmatic change to specific policies aimed at facilitating a movement away from violence and destruction and toward greater accommodation. Together with Egypt, the U.S. remains indispensable to helping facilitate the required changes. Despite the setbacks, American standing in the region, and its recent diplomatic efforts having suffered, no external actor is better positioned than the U.S. to orchestrate the complex change suggested here. Without such change, Israel and Hamas are bound to find themselves sooner or later in another round of deadly violence, to the detriment of innocent civilians on both sides.

Post war regional and international diplomacy should now focus on improving conditions in the Gaza Strip, producing a lasting cessation of violence, helping empower Abbas, and improving overall Palestinian-Israeli relations. Moving in this direction requires appreciation that Hamas has not been defeated and that its message of victory is bound to strongly resonate with public opinion. Should Abbas now fail again to set the agenda, Hamas' narrative of victory will dominate Palestinian thinking, its direction will gain greater public endorsement, and the two-state solution will no longer be viable. Under such conditions Abbas will find himself with even more limited options and his strategy will turn to waging diplomatic warfare against Israel. Israel's likely reaction could ultimately bring down the PA and consolidate the existing one-state reality. As a result, Palestinians and Israelis will find themselves at war again, both in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Abbas seems to be motivated to take a leading role in the post-war arrangements. But his motivation is not enough; he needs to show greater initiative and address Fatah's shortcomings in preparation for the elections called for by the April reconciliation agreement. He faces difficult challenges and at this point it is far from clear whether he will manage to overcome them. Here, however, Egypt may have an important role to play as it can strengthen Abbas

by cementing its relations with him. In the Gaza context it could do so by opening the Rafah crossing under Abbas' control.

On its part, for Hamas to be effectively integrated into the Palestinian political system and become more acceptable regionally and internationally, it should reassess the positions it has adopted in the aftermath of its 2006 electoral victory—positions that have led to its regional and international isolation.

Israel should accept the Palestinian reconciliation government, contribute to attempts at ending the Gaza siege, and help empower Abbas in the West Bank. It should view the planned Palestinian elections as a potentially major positive turning point and act in a manner that improves Abbas' chances of electoral victory. Such a victory could open the door to a serious discussion of disarming the Gaza Strip and could provide an impetus to more successful peace negotiations. By contrast, if it concludes from the Gaza war that it should toughen its security requirements in the West Bank, Palestinian belief that the two-state solution is dead will only be further affirmed.

Endnote

- * This Brief is an expanded version of the article [“Stability Is Still Possible in Gaza. Here’s How.”](#) *The National Interest*, August 8, 2014.



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