

ISRAEL AND HAMAS: FIRE AND CEASEFIRE IN A NEW MIDDLE EAST

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There they went again – or did they? The war between Israel and Hamas had all the hallmarks of a tragic movie watched several times too many: airstrikes pounding Gaza, leaving death and destruction in their wake; rockets launched aimlessly from the Strip, spreading terror on their path; Arab states expressing outrage at Israel's brute force; Western governments voicing understanding for its exercise of self-defence. The actors were faithful to the script: Egypt negotiated a ceasefire, the two protagonists claimed victory, civilians bore the losses.

Yet if this was an old war, it was fought on a new battleground. It was the first Israeli-Arab confrontation since the wave of Arab uprisings hit in early 2011, and Islamists rose to power. Hamas was better equipped and battle-ready and had exchanged its partnership with U.S. foes for one with Washington's allies. Egypt is ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas's parent organisation, which made its reputation partly by lambasting its predecessors for accommodating Israel and abandoning Palestinians to their fate. In this first real-life test of the emerging regional order, protagonists sought to identify, clarify and, wherever possible, shape the rules of the game. The end result is a truce that looks very much like its predecessors, only this time guaranteed by a new Egypt and occurring in a transformed environment. If it is to be more durable than those past, key requirements of both Israel and the Palestinians will need to be addressed.

Israel was keenly aware of the transformed landscape, wary of it, but also determined to show that these changes change nothing. With Egypt in Brotherhood hands, it sensed that Hamas was feeling invulnerable, confident that Israel had lost its freedom of action, limited in what it could do against Gaza for fear of provoking Cairo and jeopardising diplomatic ties. Israel's military operation could be interpreted as a reply to rocket attacks. Yet, the chronology of events, precise targeting (eg, of Hamas's principal military leader) and overwhelming response suggest more than that. Israeli decision-makers were delivering a message: if Hamas thinks it enjoys a cloak of immunity, if Cairo thinks it can deter Jerusalem, think again.

Turn this logic upside down, and you have Hamas's perspective. Egypt long had been the wall against which Israel

would back the Palestinian Islamist movement, President Mubarak and his colleagues not so secretly wishing for the pummelling that would end Islamist rule in Gaza. The wall, Hamas believes, has since become its strategic depth. By standing its ground, Hamas was measuring the support it could expect from countries that have the resources and international connections its previous allies lacked, prodding them to do more, seeking political dividends from the new regional configuration. It was discovering whether, by substituting Egypt, Qatar and Turkey for Syria and Iran, it had traded up. It was trying to convey its own message: rules *have* changed. The Arab world is different. Israel must live with it.

For Egypt's leaders, the test had come much too soon. They still are finding their way, uneasily balancing competing interests. Their immediate priority is economic, which pushes them to reassure the West and deny any intention to upend relations with Israel. But they have domestic constituencies too, as well as a longstanding creed and history of denouncing previous rulers for selling out Palestinians. Passivity in the face of Gaza's suffering would expose their impotence and undermine their credibility.

The conflict next door also helped shed light on the balance of power at home. Still a creature of Mubarak's regime, the military-security establishment has its interests when dealing with Gaza: cut Hamas down to size; maintain working relations with its Israeli counterpart; and ensure Egypt does not assume responsibility for the chaotic Palestinian territory, becoming its sole exit to the outside world. Today's Muslim Brotherhood civilian leadership might be animated by other concerns; physical boundaries matter less, and closer ties to Islamist-ruled Gaza appeal more. Whether the crossing between Egypt and Gaza opens up, as provided for in the ceasefire agreement, will help elucidate the state of this internal tug of war.

At this point, the balance sheet is not absolutely clear. Israel showed it would not be cowed by the Islamist wave and that it retained both freedom of action and Western backing. Success of the Iron Dome system inevitably has significance for Israel's posture toward Hizbollah and, crucially, Iran. But it hesitated before a ground invasion and felt compelled to reach a quick ceasefire that did not

clearly address its central concerns; among reasons for its reluctance was greater mindfulness about inflicting irreparable damage to relations with Cairo. Israel also benefited from strong Western support, principally from the U.S. But Washington's apprehension about the conflict dragging on and negatively affecting broader regional dynamics was palpable; in the end, the U.S. evidently pressed Prime Minister Netanyahu – while promising to have his back if the fighting restarts – to endorse the Egyptian proposal.

For its part, Hamas can claim a major triumph: it showed it would not be intimidated and has basked in unparalleled visits to Gaza by Arab officials. The ceasefire agreement promised greater access of Gaza to the outside world, a considerable and long-sought achievement. The Islamist movement proved itself the central player in Palestinian politics. In Gaza, demonstrators conveyed a genuine sense of exultation. Still, the picture cannot be said to be entirely positive: if Arab rhetoric was more combative, the actions were somewhat stale. Prisoners of their own dilemmas, Egypt's rulers offered little fundamentally new: outraged denunciations, the recall of their ambassador to Israel, behind-the-scenes mediation and cooperation with Washington in finding a solution.

For now, the immediate objective must be to ensure fighting truly stops and that the other commitments mentioned in the ceasefire agreement are fulfilled. There is good reason for scepticism given the history of such undertakings and the imprecision in the text itself. But new dynamics in the Middle East potentially could make this time different. Cairo has an incentive to ensure success; it has much to offer – politically, diplomatically and, together with its allies in Ankara and Doha, materially – to Hamas; and the Islamist movement would be loath to alienate Morsi's Egypt in the way it rarely hesitated to alienate Mubarak's. By the same token, Israel can take solace in the fact that, even when governed by the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt proved pragmatic and eager to avoid escalation. If it does not wish this situation to change, it too will have to live up to its undertakings. Finally, the U.S. and President Obama likely acquired new credibility and leverage in Israel by virtue of the unquestioned support they offered Jerusalem; those assets can be used to ensure compliance with the ceasefire agreement.

Many unanswered questions remain: whether the ceasefire's ambiguity will be its undoing, as has happened in the past; whether Egypt will effectively monitor implementation and whether it will live up to its own commitments, namely opening the Rafah crossing to Gaza; whether other third-party monitors, European perhaps, will be involved; how the U.S. will meet its parallel pledge to Israel to curb weapons smuggling into Gaza; whether Egyptian cooperation will be needed to that end and, if so, be forthcoming; and whether Iranian factional allies will seek to reignite a conflict that serves Tehran's and its Syrian

ally's interests. Even as the conflict between Israel and Hamas continues in various ways, other subtle battles will be waged, including between Israel and Egypt over who will pay the greater price for normalising Gaza's economic status as well as between Egypt's political and security leaderships over how far to go in opening Rafah.

One thing is clear. Whatever else it turns out to be, the new order does not look kind to the non-Islamist side of the Palestinian national movement. With attention focused on Gaza, Islamists doing the fighting and the negotiating, the Palestinian bid for a UN status upgrade pushed to the sidelines, the Palestinian Authority looking irrelevant and powerless, and West Bank protesters sporting Hamas's flag for the first in a long time, President Abbas and Fatah, as well as prospects for a two-state solution, are on the losing end. Then again, what else is new?

Advancing a genuine peace will not be easy. At a minimum, and as a first step:

- Egypt should relaunch an energetic push toward reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, so that the PA can fully return to Gaza, and a unified government can be formed, elections held and negotiations resumed between Israel and a patched-up national movement; and
- it should use its reaffirmed cooperation with the U.S. to try to persuade Washington to adopt a more flexible, pragmatic attitude toward Palestinian unity.

Ultimately, as the dust settles and guns turn silent, much more will be known about the new regional map – how it works, who sets the rules, how far different parties will go, whether the obstacles continually encountered in the past can be overcome. This short war has been, as President Obama might put it, a teachable moment. A pity the education came at such a high price. And that, once more, all the wrong people – the civilians on both sides – were asked to foot the bill.

**Jerusalem/Gaza City/Cairo/Ramallah/Brussels,
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ISRAEL AND HAMAS: FIRE AND CEASEFIRE IN A NEW MIDDLE EAST

I. INTRODUCTION: CHRONOLOGY OF AN ESCALATION FORETOLD

On the afternoon of 14 November 2012, Israel launched Operation Pillar of Defence, its largest military campaign since Operation Cast Lead, the 22-day Gaza war that began on 27 December 2008 and left some 1,400 Palestinians and thirteen Israelis dead.¹ A large Israeli military operation against Gaza had long been predicted by officials in both places; the only question was when. Since the end of Cast Lead, the Gaza-Israel border has witnessed regular, low-scale violence: near daily mortar or rocket attacks by mostly non-Hamas Palestinian militants,² and weekly Israeli incursions, together with more frequent machine-gun strafing of Palestinians entering a 300-1,500 metre-wide Israeli-imposed “buffer zone”,³ naval fire against Palestinian fishermen travelling outside a three-nautical mile limit,⁴ shelling of areas close to the Gaza-Israel border and aerial strikes against Gaza militants.

This low-scale violence has been punctuated by short, intense, increasingly frequent escalations. A majority of Palestinian projectiles land in fields; Israel mostly answers by killing their perpetrators or shelling empty areas. Occasionally, however, it will signal through strikes on Hamas persons and targets that the group’s prevention of rockets by other militants is dangerously slackening. In the two years after Cast Lead, Hamas officials said they had been deliberately ignoring Israeli attacks, viewing them as prov-

ocations to a fight for which they were not ready.⁵ But in March 2011, Hamas responded forcefully to the assassination of two of its members in the wake of a rocket fired at the Sdot Negev Regional Council, leading to the first large escalation since Cast Lead, with multiple Israeli airstrikes on Gaza and some 125 projectiles fired at Israel. Further escalations followed that year in April (144 projectiles) and August (191 projectiles), and during 2012, in March (208 projectiles),⁶ June (218), October (171)⁷ and the November days preceding Pillar of Defence (189).⁸

Israel’s recent offensive was launched shortly after one such escalation appeared to have ended. As had been the pattern in previous rounds, each side pointed to a different trigger; against a background of regular low-scale violence, there is never a shortage of prior causes to claim. Israelis say it was the 10 November wounding of four soldiers in an attack claimed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) against an Israeli jeep.⁹ Palestinians – including the PFLP in its announcement of the 10 November attack – say it was the 8 November killing of a thirteen-year-old boy by Israeli machine-gun fire during an incursion into Gaza.¹⁰

Israel retaliated to the attack on the jeep with shelling and over a dozen aircraft raids, resulting in six deaths and 30 injuries that day.¹¹ Palestinians responded during the same

¹ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°26, *Ending the War in Gaza*, 5 January 2009, and Middle East Report N°85, *Gaza’s Unfinished Business*, 23 April 2009.

² In recent times, when no large escalation took place, some two dozen projectiles have been launched per month: 27 in July 2012, 24 in August and 25 in September. “Monthly Summary”, Israel Security Agency, October 2012, at www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/english/TerrorInfo/reports/oct12report-en.pdf.

³ 35 per cent of Gaza’s agricultural land is in this buffer zone. “5 Fallacies in Gaza”, Association of International Development Agencies, at www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/aida-gaza-blockade-factsheet-5-fallacies.pdf.

⁴ This restriction cuts off access to 85 per cent of Gaza’s fishing water. Ibid.

⁵ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°30, *Gaza: The Next Israeli-Palestinian War?*, 24 March 2011.

⁶ In the previous two months, January and February 2012, sixteen and 37 projectiles respectively were launched from Gaza. “Monthly Summary”, Israel Security Agency, March 2012, at www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/english/TerrorInfo/reports/march12report-en.pdf

⁷ On 23 October 2012, an Israeli soldier was wounded by an improvised explosive device (IED) attack on Gaza’s border.

⁸ This figure reflects the number of projectiles launched toward Israel in the four days preceding Operation Pillar of Defence.

⁹ Though other factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, at some point also took credit for the attack, a senior Israeli official said Israel believed the PFLP was responsible. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 14 November 2012.

¹⁰ “New Israeli Escalation against the Gaza Strip, 7 Palestinians, Including 3 Children, Killed and 52 Others, Including 6 Women and 12 Children, Wounded”, Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 11 November 2012.

¹¹ A seventh person died of his wounds four days later.

period with 37 rockets and eighteen mortar shells, injuring three Israeli civilians. Frequent rocket and mortar attacks continued over the following two days, subsiding on 13 November, when one rocket landed in Israel and was met by a single tank shell that landed in Gaza. The Israeli press reported a ceasefire had taken hold.

The calm, as in previous rounds, was negotiated by Egypt. Israeli and Egyptian accounts of where things stood differ. Egyptian officials say they had an Israeli commitment to uphold the ceasefire that began the day before Pillar of Defence was launched; in a press conference with the Turkish prime minister, President Morsi said:

Up until Tuesday [13 November], Egypt was preoccupied with [reaching] calm between both sides, and that was last week until Tuesday, when there was six injured from the Israeli side, and six killed Palestinians. We had reached an agreement to [a] ceasefire between the two sides, except Israel did not abide by that, and escalated the situation on Wednesday evening [afternoon], when it killed the Hamas militant leader in Gaza, Ahmed Al-Jaabari.¹²

Israeli officials deny they had committed to a ceasefire.¹³ Egyptian intelligence officials appear to have communicated to Hamas that Israel had agreed to one.¹⁴ They say they feel betrayed by Israel, not only for breaking it and undermining their credibility with Hamas, but also for doing so with a provocative assassination of the leader of the organisation's military wing. Jaabari had been Egypt's primary interlocutor in negotiating ceasefires and had led the Egyptian-brokered negotiations for the freeing of 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the release of Israeli Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit in October 2011. Egyptian officials and third-country diplomats questioned the logic of killing Jaabari, whose replacement would need time to acquire the same stature and influence in Gaza for imposing a future ceasefire on militants.¹⁵

Jaabari's assassination was followed by Israeli air strikes across Gaza and a barrage of mortar and rocket fire from Gaza toward Israel. Ultimately, over 1,500 projectiles were launched toward Israel, including several from militants in Sinai, and Israel attacked over 1,500 targets in Gaza. Six Israelis were killed; the number of victims in Gaza ex-

ceeded 150.¹⁶ The remarkably low casualty rate on the Israeli side largely was due to the success of the relatively new rocket interception system, Iron Dome, which stopped some 421 projectiles during the conflict. Israeli officials say that Iron Dome intercepted roughly 90 per cent of those projectiles at which it took aim (the system only launches at rockets it estimates are due to fall in populated areas).

At a press conference shortly after the launch of the operation, Defence Minister Ehud Barak listed four objectives: "strengthening our deterrence; to inflict serious damage on the rocket-launching network; to deliver a painful blow for Hamas and the other terrorist organisations; to minimise damage to our home front".¹⁷ Within the first day of the operation, Israeli officials declared that they had succeeded in seriously damaging the rocket-launching network in Gaza. That did not prevent militants from firing long-range rockets over the following days toward such distant places as Tel Aviv and the Gush Etzion settlement block of greater Jerusalem, suggesting that the damage inflicted to the arsenal was not complete.

As the conflict unfolded, perceptions in Israel and in Gaza could not have differed more starkly. Each side at times believed it had frightened and damaged the other much more than was the case. In Gaza, a popular video clip showed an Israeli soldier crying from fear of an incoming rocket, and there was pride at the sight of rockets reaching so far north, even landing in a West Bank settlement; cheers and machine-gun fire greeted news of the Tel Aviv bus bombing on the conflict's final day.¹⁸ Israelis for their part took much solace from the performance of Iron Dome. Hamas felt it was showing it would not surrender; Israel claimed it was restoring its deterrence.

Another important difference between the two parties concerned claims regarding Egypt's role. Hamas spoke of a new Middle East in which the Egyptian president did not close Gaza's Rafah crossing, as Mubarak had done during Cast Lead, but rather sent medical supplies and offered signs of support, including a visit, on the third day, by his prime minister. Hamas's prime minister, Ismail Haniyeh, called the visit "historical and a message to the occupation" that it "can no longer do whatever it wants in Gaza".¹⁹ High-profile visits then multiplied, including from the

¹² www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdOTAxrmSml.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomat, 18 November 2012; U.S. official, Washington DC, 18 November 2012.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, diplomat, Jerusalem, 18 November 2012; Hamas official, Gaza City, 15 November 2012.

¹⁵ "By killing Jaabari Israel got rid of their one address in Gaza. Egypt's one address, but through Egypt, Israel's too". Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Jerusalem, 19 November 2012.

¹⁶ According to the Gaza health ministry, "Palestinians count their dead after one of the worst days of the war", *The Guardian*, 21 November 2012.

¹⁷ "DM Barak's Statement from his Press Conference Earlier This Evening", Israel Government Press Office, 14 November 2012.

¹⁸ Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 21 November 2012.

¹⁹ "Qandil vows to end Israeli aggression on Gaza Strip", *Saudi Gazette*, 17 November 2012.

Turkish foreign minister, the head of the Arab League and ten Arab foreign ministers. Israel, by contrast, pointed to the fact that though President Morsi's words were stronger than Mubarak's, his actions differed little: both reprimanded Israel by withdrawing their ambassador from Tel Aviv; both sought to broker a ceasefire; both were on the phone to Washington; and neither took any significant action.

In the final days of the conflict, there was every indication that Hamas – contrary to Israel's expectations, but consistent with past experience – would emerge the victor, not militarily certainly, but politically, having reaffirmed its staying power, attracted unprecedented international attention and yet again reduced President Abbas and the PA to passive, powerless bystanders. The public terms of the ceasefire, to an extent, confirmed this impression. The text as distributed by the Egyptian presidency specifies that:

Israel should stop all hostilities in the Gaza Strip land, sea and air including incursions and targeting of individuals; all Palestinian factions shall stop all hostilities from the Gaza Strip against Israel including rocket attacks and all attacks along the border; opening the crossings and facilitating the movements of people and transfer of goods and refraining from restricting residents' free movements and targeting residents in border areas and procedures of implementation shall be dealt with after 24 hours from the start of the ceasefire; other matters as may be requested shall be addressed.

Regarding implementation measures, it provides: "Egypt shall receive assurances from each party that the party commits to what was agreed upon; each party shall commit itself not to perform any acts that would breach this understanding. In case of any observations Egypt as the sponsor of this understanding shall be informed to follow up".²⁰

On paper at least, Hamas's demands appeared to have been met: an end to targeted assassinations, easing restrictions on movement and trade and an opening of the crossings. Israel obtained an end to Palestinian attacks but, that basic element of any ceasefire aside, its broader goals were not mentioned, notably an end to arms smuggling. U.S. officials hurried to report that Washington had committed to curbing such trafficking, and the agreement itself allowed the parties to raise "other matters", arguably a reference to this issue. Still, some Netanyahu supporters appeared stunned. A wife of one of his advisers vowed not to vote for him in January and said her friends, even left-leaning ones, could not understand why the prime minister had capitulated.²¹ There were no victory parades in Jerusalem.

In Gaza, by contrast, the mood was of great triumph and jubilation, the streets filled with the din of celebratory gunshots, honking car horns, fireworks and victory announcements from mosque loudspeakers.²²

A war that arguably began with Hamas's miscalculation (assuming Israel would not dare launch a major attack) ended with Israel's own misjudgement – believing that in this type of war, superior firepower and massive military imbalance translate into the ability to dictate events or are the gateway to political triumph. It is a lesson to be mulled and learned, but one that – if history is a guide – almost certainly will not be.

²⁰ Reuters, 21 November 2012.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 21 November 2012.

²² Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 21 November 2012.

II. HAMAS'S PERSPECTIVE

Hamas officials concede that the movement played a larger than usual, though – an Israeli security official agreed²³ – not the largest part in the escalation that occurred in the weeks preceding Pillar of Defence. As justification, they offer several reasons. First, they say that Israeli attacks against targets in Gaza had increased since October and more precisely since the announcement of early Israeli elections,²⁴ and that Hamas's increased participation in retaliatory strikes was intended as a clear response to this new assertiveness. This theme was repeated in television appearances by three Hamas spokespersons in mid-October.²⁵

Secondly, Hamas officials argue that in recent years escalations typically have been set off by Israel or various Gaza-based groups, and that when they occur, Hamas feels less able to refrain from participating. Much of its popularity depends on being perceived as the defender of Gazans, and when Israel is attacking, it can ill afford to cede that status to other factions, as occurred during an escalation in March 2012, when Islamic Jihad took the lead and implied Hamas had given up on resistance. This charge – repeated by the emir of Qatar during his visit to Gaza²⁶

– causes considerable tension within Hamas, some of whose members have defected to Salafi-jihadi groups as a consequence.²⁷

Thirdly, they claim that their participation in attacks helps prevent escalations from spinning out of control and bringing a war to Gaza at an inopportune moment. They argue that smaller, less sophisticated factions often miscalculate Israeli reactions, bringing reprisals for which the militants are ill-prepared; by participating in the attacks, Hamas can help coordinate the militant response, see to it that Israeli targets are selected wisely and ensure Israeli signals of de-escalation are met in kind.²⁸ Other possible reasons, cited not by Hamas officials but analysts in Gaza – and echoing views heard in Israel – include an increased sense of immunity to Israeli attack because of Hamas's close ties to the new regime in Cairo and a sense that conflict with Israel could help pressure Egypt to move more quickly toward easing restrictions on Gaza.²⁹

Yet, whatever the reason for Hamas's increased assertiveness in the weeks preceding Pillar of Defence, its officials see this conflict as one that began with the assassination of Jaabari after a ceasefire had been agreed. As such, and in their view, it is a fight they did not pick but one from which they could not back away.

The precise chronology of the escalation aside, once Israel resumed the type of high-level assassination it had avoided for years, the Islamist organisation felt it had no choice. Any show of restraint would have sent a message of weakness to Israel, critically undermined its domestic standing and likely led to a further bleeding of its more hardline militants to rival groups. Shortly after the assassination, a Hamas official in Gaza said, "an attack on a figure like Jaabari had to be answered. He was hugely respected. Leaders of the military wing won't allow this to pass without an enor-

²³ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 14 November 2012.

²⁴ In the words of an official, "we're telling Israel loud and clear that they can't use Palestinian blood for their election propaganda". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 15 October 2012. More recently, a Gaza official reiterated this view: "We read the map very well. We saw this coming. In the past, too, Palestinians have been attacked during election campaigns, and we expected it this time, too. Our participation was meant to send a very clear message: we will not pay with our blood for your election campaign". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 20 November 2012. There was indeed a spike in armed confrontations between Gaza groups and Israel after the election announcement – three projectiles launched in the week preceding, 45 in the week of – but determining which party "started it" is next to impossible, because, as noted above, there is no shortage of prior causes each side can claim. In the case of the upsurge in October, when 166 projectiles were launched from Gaza, Hamas points to an increase in assassinations of Gaza militants (most notably, Abu Walid al-Maqdisi, one of the Strip's most prominent Salafi-jihadi leaders, whom Israel killed on 13 October, two months after Hamas had released him from seventeen months in prison), while Israel says the targeted militants were planning major attacks. The numbers of rockets fired from Gaza in the preceding two months were 25 (September) and 24 (August). "Monthly Summary", Israel Security Agency, October 2012.

²⁵ See, for example, "News of Terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 10-16 October 2012.

²⁶ The Qatari emir said, "why are you [Fatah and Hamas] staying divided? There are no peace negotiations (between Palestinian factions), and there is no clear strategy of resistance and liberation. Why shouldn't brothers sit together and reconcile?" "In

Gaza visit, Qatari emir forges leading role", Associated Press, 23 October 2012.

²⁷ For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°104, *Radical Islam in Gaza*, 29 March 2011.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Gaza City, 13 October 2012. A senior Israeli security official recently offered a compatible assessment: "This isn't a unanimous view in the government, but I and several others believe Hamas joined the last escalation so it can control the next one. The purpose of joining was to put an end to it, so that it would have the credibility to assert its ability to control. Will Hamas now learn that it cannot be a government and let militias run around shooting rockets at its neighbours? In the short run, I think we'll see restraint from Hamas, as it holds out hope for good things from Egypt". Crisis Group interview, Israeli security official, Jerusalem, 9 August 2012.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Gaza analyst, Gaza City, 13 October 2012.

mous response”.³⁰ For Egyptian negotiators, the question thus quickly became at what point Hamas would feel that it had responded with adequate strength, and whether reaching that point would so undermine Israel’s claim to having restored deterrence that it would think a ground operation necessary.³¹

The broader picture, as in Israel’s case, was in fact related to Egypt and the wider Arab world. Hamas had lost its traditional political ally, Syria, and relations with a principal weapons supplier, Iran, had soured. The question for the Islamist organisation was how well its new partners would fare, and whether their assets – regional political weight; material resources; and international legitimacy – would prove more useful than those possessed by Damascus and Tehran. And Hamas’s challenge was to ensure that, at the tail end of this conflict, it would have pulled Cairo, Doha and Ankara ever more closely to its side and set itself clearly as the more active and relevant Palestinian party. Speaking the day before Jaabari’s assassination, a Hamas official in Gaza acknowledged the gamble:

Egypt still is in a delicate position. Morsi hasn’t yet consolidated power. He is not fully in control. An escalation with Israel puts Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in a difficult position. Hamas doesn’t want to force Morsi to choose between treaty obligations with Israel and losing popularity by turning his back on Gaza. It would be catastrophic for the Brotherhood if people started coming to the streets of Cairo and calling for the end of Camp David; if Morsi were to act on such calls, he would be accused of caving to Brotherhood demands, of placing Brotherhood ideology above Egyptian interests. He should change the treaty later, when he has more power and has proven himself to act in the Egyptian national interest, not just the Brotherhood interest. In the meantime, Hamas will lose if Morsi is weakened and his ties with the West start to fray.³²

Finally, and for those in Gaza in particular, there were other stakes as well: to normalise economic conditions in the Strip, open up the Rafah crossing with Egypt and, more generally, further solidify relations with the Egyptian hinterland.³³

If Israel’s goal in part was to show that its ability to operate was not constrained by changes in the region – and that Western countries in particular would come to its support even in the wake of an aggressive operation – then Hamas’s

was to demonstrate that its standing and power had been enhanced by those same transformations.

True, Hamas was aware of the military beating it – and Gaza – might take. Beyond that, however, it conveyed, not just once the conflict began but for many months and even years before, confidence that there were limits to what Israel could do. The Islamist movement was and remains convinced that Israel has no realistic alternative to its rule in Gaza: the Fatah leadership and the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority are too weak to control the Strip and, besides, would not be prepared to enter Gaza on the back of Israeli tanks; Egypt is unwilling to assume full responsibility; and Israel does not wish to reoccupy. What is more, severely weakening Hamas – the only realistic enforcer of any agreement to restrain rocket launches – would only strengthen the more radical militants Hamas had been actively, albeit far from perfectly, suppressing.³⁴

The best indicator of Hamas’s self-assurance is the magnitude of the risks it was prepared to take and of the supposed Israeli redlines it willingly crossed: it aimed anti-aircraft missiles at Israeli planes; fired an extraordinary number of rockets and mortars (over 1,500), some toward major cities; and was evidently prepared to cause the deaths of countless Israeli civilians, because it could not have known whether Iron Dome would perform well under such a barrage. In itself, this suggests a conviction that Israel would either not seek the movement’s destruction or could not achieve it.³⁵

Of course, Hamas also was counting on Israeli fears of provoking an angry response from the Egyptian street that might force Morsi to take decisive steps against Israel that he had hoped to avoid; Jordan – a Palestinian-majority state that contains a large Muslim Brotherhood opposition and is facing its biggest protests in years – could follow. On the sixth day of the conflict, Khaled Meshal, the head of Hamas’s political bureau, said of Prime Minister Netanyahu, “now he’s threatening a ground operation. He can launch it, but he knows it will have a price, and Netanyahu knows it will be fatal for him; he will lose the election and lose his place in Israeli politics. That’s why he’s hesitating and why he’s asking the entire world to pressure Egypt and Turkey to pressure Hamas”.³⁶

Hamas felt it had history on its side: its officials were convinced that Israel’s two recent ground invasions – the 2006 war in Lebanon and Cast Lead – resulted in condemnation in international forums, Hizbollah’s and Hamas’s

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 15 November 2012.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Egyptian intelligence official, 17 November 2012.

³² Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 13 November 2012.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian analysts close to Hamas, October–November 2012.

³⁴ For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°104, *Radical Islam in Gaza*, 29 March 2011.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, 20 November 2012.

³⁶ “Egypt, Israel, Hamas close to reaching cease-fire deal”, *Haaretz*, 20 November 2012.

consolidation of power and, ultimately, the rebuilding of their arsenals to levels of greater strength. By the same token, the more the conflict wore on, the more inflamed Egyptian public opinion would become and the less able Egypt might feel to reject Hamas's demands, chief among them to lift the closure regime imposed on Gaza, facilitate investment in the Strip and guarantee that Israel would cease assassinating Gaza leaders. In the end Hamas appeared to achieve all three.

As a result, and though it remains to be seen whether and how the ceasefire will be implemented, Hamas has reason to feel vindicated and that its reading of regional dynamics was largely accurate. It withstood Israel's barrage, showed off the quantity and sophistication of its weaponry and, perhaps of greatest importance, registered momentous gains in regional legitimacy. The visits by Arab and Turkish leaders were the most impressive recognition of its standing since it took control of Gaza in 2007. Gaza in effect was treated as a state and Hamas officials as its statesmen. Referring to the visit and speech by the Turkish foreign minister, a Hamas official in Gaza said, "Davutoğlu gave an extraordinary speech. He said 'your blood is our blood'.³⁷ It is totally unlike 2008, when so many were against Hamas. Now everyone says they support the choices we make".³⁸ At ceasefire talks in Cairo, Israeli officials were forced to hide their presence, and President Abbas's envoy was relegated essentially to reporting, while Hamas leaders stood before the cameras with some of the most powerful regional heads of state.

What is not entirely clear is how far Cairo is prepared to go, and the degree to which its interests and Hamas's are aligned. The Islamist movement knew it could not afford to anger Egypt, Gaza's only outlet to the rest of the world, or ignore its president's political needs. It knew its ally was engaged in a perilous balancing act, fearful of incurring domestic criticism for not doing more than Mubarak and anxious about imperilling Western aid and political support by taking stronger steps against Israel. An Egyptian intelligence official said, "maybe in the Mubarak era Hamas could say 'no' to Egypt. But under Morsi there is no way".³⁹

In the end, Egypt's new rulers appear to have shown greater willingness to meet the Islamist organisation's needs, particularly on the issue of ending the closure; but implementation will be the real test. And Egypt also has shown considerable sensitivity to U.S. interests, notably in the lead-up to the ceasefire. This is a reality Hamas can look to with mixed feelings: as a potential harbinger of future dealings (direct or more likely indirect) between it and Washington; or as a sign that, led or not by the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt will temper solidarity with Palestinians with the need to placate the U.S.

Equally blurred is the impact of the conflict on Hamas's internal power struggle. As Crisis Group described in an earlier report,⁴⁰ views within the movement regarding how to adjust to the Arab uprisings and the Islamist rise to power have not been uniform. Internal tensions likely played out during this conflict as well, notably between the leadership in exile – more sensitive to the immediate political concerns of regional Islamist allies – and that based in Gaza, which believed this was the time for the movement to consolidate its hold on power.⁴¹ In this regard, the war may have contradictory implications for Hamas's internal balance of power. As the Gaza leadership views it, the latest round has reemphasised its centrality, the degree to which its sacrifices are the movement's backbone and the necessity of it having a greater weight in internal decision-making. Pictures of Prime Minister Haniyeh receiving senior foreign officials reinforced this message.

Leaders in exile see it differently: for them, the conflict demonstrated the importance of having the movement's most senior figures where Israel cannot easily attack, of close ties with regional leaders and of the deeper understanding of regional politics that comes with years of engaging in diplomacy abroad.⁴² Tellingly, Khaled Meshal was in Cairo negotiating with Egyptian and other officials, the central public Hamas figure in the diplomatic and media arena. Here too, implementation of the ceasefire – in particular, how far it goes in meeting Gazan demands for opening the crossings and linking the Strip with Egypt – will help clarify where the balance within the movement lies.

Putting the ceasefire agreement into practice involves considerable obstacles, chief among them the sense shared by

³⁷ Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's precise words were: "Your pain is our pain, your fate is our fate and your future is our future. You must know that the pain of every drop of blood shed is opening deep wounds in the hearts of the 75 million people residing in Anatolia. We will continue to stand by your side until hopefully this occupation is over, and Jerusalem is finally liberated". "FM Davutoglu: Turkey will never leave Gaza on its own", *Sabah*, 21 November 2012.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Gaza city, 20 November 2012.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, 17 November 2012.

⁴⁰ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°129, *Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas & the Arab Uprisings*, 14 August 2012.

⁴¹ A week before the launch of Operation Pillar of Defence, an Egyptian official lamented: "The Hamas leaders on the outside, as you know, are more reasonable. The problem is there is no unified vision in Hamas. In Gaza, you're still dealing with a gang mentality". Crisis Group interview, 7 November 2012.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian analysts, Gaza, November 2012.

some within Hamas – notably in Gaza – that it is politically too costly to fully prevent attacks against Israel by other groups. One of the greatest blows to Hamas’s standing in recent years came because it was seen to be killing fellow Muslims, as it did during a confrontation with the Salafi-jihadi group Jund Ansar Allah in August 2009.⁴³ A 2011 Crisis Group report on Hamas’s relations with Salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza described a familiar picture:

Though Hamas has given its more militant Islamist rivals less room to manoeuvre, it has fallen short of fully controlling or entirely eradicating them, something most Gazans and Israelis believe to be well within its power. Some analysts surmise that it is turning a blind eye to rocket fire in order to bolster its legitimacy and pressure Israel, while maintaining deniability. Others speculate it is too costly for it to take harsher measures against militants Hamas leaders acknowledge the tension between ensuring security and not clamping down too hard on those who engage in violence against Israel. Bassem Naim, a senior leader and health minister, said, “at the end of the day, Hamas has two choices: fight the resistance or allow the resistance to retaliate against Israel. Both hurt Hamas”.⁴⁴

What it might take for Hamas to crack down more comprehensively against anyone violating the ceasefire is unclear. Before the ceasefire was reached, a Hamas supporter in Gaza said he believed that in the absence of a national consensus that resistance against Israel no longer was legitimate – something that would require a more comprehensive political agreement with Israel – Hamas would not suppress all attacks or, if it did, would lose considerable popularity.⁴⁵ Yet, after the ceasefire announcement, the same supporter said he believed the movement had been so strengthened by the conflict and its resolution on Hamas’s terms that it enjoyed considerable space to ensure a cessation of rocket fire.⁴⁶ This view was congruent with that offered by an Egyptian official a week before Pillar of Defence began:

Hamas needs more than merely a mutual ceasefire with Israel. They want a full lifting of the blockade and an opening of the Rafah crossing to commercial traffic. If they get that, they can fully restrain all the groups in Gaza. But without that I don’t think they will.⁴⁷

Finally, a Hamas official in Gaza suggested that the movement might curtail (nearly) all rocket fire if it were given the rights, and not merely the responsibilities, of a sovereign state: “Israel wants to hold us responsible for everything that happens in Gaza, as though we were a sovereign state, but at the same time deprives us of sovereignty. It can’t have it both ways”.⁴⁸

⁴³ For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Radical Islam in Gaza*, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 27 December 2010. Naim was Gaza health minister at the time that report was published; he no longer is.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 13 November 2012.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 20 November 2012.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, 7 November 2012.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 16 November 2012.

III. THE VIEW FROM ISRAEL

Hamas saw a different Middle East; so too did Israel. Ever since Mubarak's ouster and the rise of Islamists throughout the region, Jerusalem worried that Hamas would feel emboldened, persuaded Israel would not dare confront it head-on for fear of undermining ties with Egypt. It saw signs that its deterrence was eroding as more sophisticated weaponry and increased rocket fire emanated from Gaza. In 2010, the year after Cast Lead, Palestinian militants in Gaza shot some 360 projectiles (rockets and mortars) into Israel. Since then, that number has steadily increased. In 2011, more than 675 landed in Israel, a number that, even before Jaabari's assassination, was on pace to be exceeded in 2012. During the past ten months, the more than 500 that hit Israel included a higher percentage of rockets, which travel farther, so are a more significant military and political threat.⁴⁹ In parallel, Hamas acquired Grad and anti-tank missiles (as did Islamic Jihad) and, for the first time, smuggled in and developed long-range missiles (Fajr-5 and M-75), putting a wider swathe of Israel within its range.

By late 2012, the situation had worsened further. Whereas previously Hamas at times had done more to prevent Islamic Jihad and other groups from attacking, it now appeared to Israel that its efforts had weakened. In the words of a U.S. analyst, Israel worried that the Islamist movement was trying to "create a new normal, and Israel would adjust to it".⁵⁰ At some point, the government concluded it no longer could endure this emerging status quo. It was determined not to let regional uncertainty affect its strategic posture and limit its freedom to act, including militarily. A Likud minister said:

Of course, everything is new. Egypt's leadership is not yet well formed, it lacks a clear pattern of thinking or of behaviour from which we can accumulate knowledge and from which we can predict its reactions. But we have to assume that the leadership group is rational and that Egypt is not fully free to do as it pleases – none of us is. And so, it is logical to assume Cairo will not want or seek escalation. Like others in the area, they will aspire to calm things down.⁵¹

At the heart of Operation Pillar of Defence thus lay an effort to demonstrate that Hamas's newfound confidence was altogether premature and excessive and that, the Islamist awakening notwithstanding, changes in the new Middle East would not change much at all. Its goal, in other words, was to reaffirm the rules of the game that would govern the emerging Middle East. Israel's restraint over the past few months and years, said Benny Begin, a senior Likud minister, had encouraged Hamas to reach a wrong conclusion:

Before [changes in] Egypt, before the Brotherhood came to rule, Hamas restrained itself. Suddenly this changed. If they had been miscalculating that our hands were tied and that we would not dare decapitate a central figure in the organisation, then we will bring them back to reality. I cannot tell you what the empirical indications would be that they have figured this out, but the whole objective is to move them to this realisation.⁵²

The approach of Israeli elections in January 2013 arguably played a part. The mounting number of rockets threatened to undercut the message of Netanyahu's Likud party, which is standing on a platform of stability and security.⁵³ But if political considerations were relevant, they likely affected the timing of the operation more than its principle. In Begin's words, violence from Gaza "simply reached a point which was too severe from our perspective".⁵⁴ Given growing attacks against Israel, many political leaders asked not why Pillar of Defence came so soon, but rather why it took so long.⁵⁵ Otniel Schneller, a Kadima member of the Knesset Defence and Foreign Affairs Committee, commented: "If you ask why someone who is attacked would defend himself, you don't have a good grip on reality. That is the sign of someone who is deranged. We defend ourselves because we have not gone crazy".⁵⁶

As it were, the move prompted virtually wall-to-wall political and (among the country's Jews) popular support.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ "Rocket and mortar fire into Israel", B'Tselem, 18 November 2012, at www.btselem.org/israeli_civilians/qassam_missiles. Monthly reports published on the Israeli Security Agency Website, www.shabak.gov.il/publications/monthly/Pages/default.aspx.

⁵⁰ Dennis Ross, "The Fuel for the Flames", *New York Daily News*, 18 November 2012.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Likud minister, Jerusalem, 16 November 2012.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 15 November 2012.

⁵³ As recently as October 2012, Netanyahu had said, "in all my years in office I haven't declared a war". He accused his predecessor, Ehud Olmert, of starting two unnecessary ones. "Gaza – The First Netanyahu War", *Haaretz*, 15 November 2012.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 15 November 2012.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* He added: "We and the prime minister withstood pressure and temptation. We have shown restraint".

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 15 November 2012.

⁵⁷ Shelly Yechimovich, head of the Labour party, said, "there is no reason to be an automatic opposition when I agree with the operation's objectives and am awed by the IDF's achievements". "Yechimovitz: Agrees with operation's objectives", *Ynet*, 17 November 2012. Meretz, the left-wing opposition party, was relatively alone in voicing opposition to Jaabari's assassination. Zehava Galon, the party chairwoman, said, "in my view, this

As noted, and learning a lesson from the mishandling of the 2006 Lebanon and 2008-2009 Gaza wars, the government was careful to lay out a (relatively) modest goal that it believed could be achieved quickly: deal Hamas a sufficiently powerful blow to discourage it for some time from once more engaging in this pattern of behaviour. Referring to Hamas, a Likud minister argued that if sufficient pain were inflicted, the movement would have no choice but to learn the lesson. "They are not stupid people. They need to sit down and assess the situation – where this is going, what is the alternative, can I deter Israel".⁵⁸ Schneller said:

If Israeli intelligence shows that Hamas still has large-scale military capacities, or that independent bodies [smaller organisations] can act in Gaza, or that there is an absence of central government that actively blocks smaller groups, then Israel should not stop.⁵⁹

Parties from the governing coalition as well as from the opposition endorsed the cabinet's objectives. If anything, critics charged they were excessively modest. Kadima figures called alternatively for ending rather than diminishing the threat posed by rocket-fire to civilians⁶⁰ and (as did more right-wing leaders) for toppling Hamas.⁶¹

From experience, Israeli leaders knew that, as time went by, risks would mount, and the operation likely would produce diminishing – and, past some point⁶² – negative mar-

way of assassinating leaders brings the next assassination and the next shooting and will certainly not bring quiet". Television interview, "London and Kirshenbaum", Channel 10, 14 November 2012.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 15 November 2012.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Knesset member Otniel Schneller, Jerusalem, 15 November 2012.

⁶⁰ Kadima Knesset member and former Israeli Security Agency deputy head Israel Hasson criticised the government: "If you are not aiming to reduce the number to zero, why bother?" Television interview, Continuous News Program, Channel 2, 15 November 2012.

⁶¹ Kadima's former Deputy Prime Minister Haim Ramon criticised Netanyahu: "To my regret today there is no intention to topple Hamas", IDF Radio, 15 November 2012. Nafatali Ben-net, the recently elected chairperson of the Jewish Home party, called for ousting Hamas from power. Television interview, Continuous News Program, Channel 2, 18 November 2012.

⁶² A key lesson Israeli defence officials drew about the first days of fighting from the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead is that "there has to be an internalisation period until the blow seeps in and affects the decision-makers on the other side". Amos Yadlin, "Luxury Operation", *Maariv*, 16 November 2012. Israel's government, therefore, has been seeking to inflict what it considers a sufficiently sustained blow on Hamas, giving enough time – a Likud Minister spoke of "several days" – for the purported internalisation to occur. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 15 November 2012.

ginal returns. They calibrated the operation so as to limit Palestinian casualties, which were far lower than at the outset of Cast Lead, when more than 200 were killed on the first day alone. They also secured strong support, most importantly from the U.S. and Europe, including for their military decisions.⁶³ But Israel worried this would not last forever. Important Western officials warned about the tide turning against Israel should civilian casualties mount, in particular in a land incursion.⁶⁴ Israel's leaders also were concerned that Arab leaders could feel compelled to take decisions unpopular with the West but necessary back home. An official acknowledged fearing large demonstrations in the Arab world should Israel launch a ground operation.⁶⁵

⁶³ Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes said, "the Israelis are going to make decisions about their own military tactics and operations There's a broad preference for de-escalation if it can be achieved in a way that ends that threat to Israeli citizens". <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2012/11/17/white-house-leaves-gaza-invasion-decision-to-israel/>. Catherine Ashton, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said, "the rocket attacks by Hamas and other factions in Gaza, which began this current crisis, are totally unacceptable for any government and must stop.... Israel has the right to protect its population from these kind of attacks". However, she added, "I urge Israel to ensure that its response is proportionate". A German government spokesman described Chancellor Angela Merkel as "very worried" about the escalation of violence and called on Hamas "to immediately stop shooting rockets from Gaza into Israel". "Ashton, Merkel say Israel has right to defend itself", *The Jerusalem Post*, 16 November 2012.

⁶⁴ On 18 November 2012, President Obama said, "Israel has every right to expect that it does not have missiles fired into its territory. If that can be accomplished without a ramping-up of military activity in Gaza, that's preferable; that's not just preferable for the people of Gaza, it's also preferable for Israelis – because if Israeli troops are in Gaza, they're much more at risk of incurring fatalities or being wounded". See www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/18/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-shinawatra-joint-press-confer. UK Foreign Minister William Hague went farther: "A ground invasion is much more difficult for the international community to sympathise with or support – including the United Kingdom". Quoted in *The Guardian*, 18 November 2012. An Israeli official challenged the view that a land incursion automatically would backfire in terms of Western support. "It is debatable whether one can be surgical with a land incursion, but if that is possible and civilian casualties will not significantly increase, we believe we can retain the West's support even if IDF forces enter the Gaza Strip". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 18 November 2012. Another echoed this assessment: "I believe that today the West can still tolerate a short land incursion of say two to three weeks as it did in Cast Lead, especially if we make more of an effort to minimise civilian casualties. It will criticise, send envoys and call us to stop, but not more". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 18 November 2012.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 18 November 2012.

Even in the West Bank, quiet and stability seemed at risk of slipping. As discussed, the escalation in Gaza provided Hamas with the necessary cover to come out of hiding there, its green flags seen in such numbers for the first time in five years; for some young West Bankers, armed resistance seems to have acquired a new attraction; and friction between Israeli troops and demonstrators poses its own threats. Israeli officials assessed as low the risk that Hizbollah would aggressively enter the fray; as they saw it, Iran had no interest in provoking a confrontation, thereby neutralising what it considers to be one of its main deterrents against an attack on its nuclear facilities. That seems to have been the case, though Damascus and its allies clearly had an interest in drawing attention away from the uprising and exposing the impotence and hypocrisy of Arab states willing to arm Syrians to fight other Syrians, but not Palestinians to fight Israel.⁶⁶ The fighting has quieted for now, but Damascus's incentive arguably remains strong.⁶⁷

As a result, it took only a few days after the initiation of the operation for first voices to call for ending it and declaring success⁶⁸ – even though the underlying issues had not been resolved by that point.⁶⁹ In defence of this view, some were quick to claim that Israel already had achieved victory: it had eliminated the de facto head of Hamas's military wing; destroyed a large portion of Gaza's long-range rockets as well as weapon storage facilities and launching

pads; and demonstrated the effectiveness of Iron Dome, all with minimal casualties.⁷⁰

Yet, this was not a decision the Israeli government could make alone; as seen, Hamas had its own calculations, and its perception that time was in its favour to a degree militated against a rapid conclusion.⁷¹ Aware of this, the Israeli government took concrete steps to bolster the credibility of a land operation, including the drafting of tens of thousands of reservists. These were, first and foremost, intended as a warning upon which Israel preferred not to act, but had a rocket struck a highly sensitive target in Israel causing mass casualties, Netanyahu could have found himself with little choice.⁷²

Israel's reading of the political map was not unreasonable. In launching their attack, decision-makers were not only sending a message to Egypt's rulers and Hamas that they would not be deterred by the new regional landscape; they also appeared to be banking on Cairo's need for international (notably U.S.) financial support to act as a powerful restraint.⁷³ Moreover, they surmised, concerns about

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, foreign affairs ministry official, Jerusalem, 18 November 2012. A former Israeli official would not rule out missile launches from Lebanon – whether from Hizbollah or a Palestinian militant group – precisely for those reasons, though he doubted Iran would want the Shiite movement to expose itself to a devastating Israeli retaliation. Crisis Group interview, 15 November 2012.

⁶⁷ Just before the ceasefire took effect, two mortars were shot from Lebanon toward Israel. A Lebanese official confirmed the firing and said that at least one rocket fell in Lebanon. An Israeli official said that no rockets landed on Israeli territory. Naharnet, 21 November 2012.

⁶⁸ Veteran commentator Ben Dror Yemini argued that ending the operation is the least bad option. Its continuation, in contrast, would either lead to a gradual erosion of Israel's achievements or to a full-scale land operation that could lead to a "mega-Goldstone", a reference to the UN Human Right Council committee tasked in 2009 with examining the conduct of Israel and Hamas in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead and Israel's re-occupation of the Gaza Strip. Ben Dror Yemini, "Ceasefire Now", *NRG-Ma'ariv*, 18 November 2012.

⁶⁹ In particular, there would be no guarantee against resupply of Hamas's stockpile, nor any assurances regarding the launching of rockets in the future. Nevertheless, a rumour circulated on 20 November, the evening before the ceasefire was agreed, that Israel would announce a unilateral ceasefire to bring the fighting to a close without having to make any concessions of its own. Television interview, Continuous News Program, Channel, 1, 20 November 2012.

⁷⁰ Three days into the attack, Colonel (res.) Omer Barlev, a prominent Labour Knesset candidate, said that Israel was at the operation's peak; it should hold its fire and propose a ceasefire, which if rejected would be met with a doubling of Israeli attacks. Television interview, Continuous News Program, Channel 1, 16 November 2012.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, 20 November 2012.

⁷² Public pressure for a land incursion gradually increased, not least due to the tens of thousands of reservists camped out near the Gaza Strip, away from their families, and repeatedly telling journalists that they were prepared to enter. Crisis Group observations, 19-21 November 2012. Small protests were organised in different Israeli cities, especially in the south, in favour of a land incursion. For example, two dozen youths at the entrance to Jerusalem called drivers to honk in support of a ground incursion into Gaza, prompting most passers-by to lean on their horns. "Entry to Jerusalem: Protest Support for Land Incursion", *Arutz 7*, 21 November 2012.

⁷³ Egypt receives over \$2 billion from the U.S. (\$1.3 billion in military aid, \$1 billion in assistance and \$375 million in financing and loan guarantees). Steven Lee Myers, "U.S. move to give Egypt \$450 million in aid meets resistance", *The New York Times*, 28 September 2012; members of Congress have made clear the aid would be in jeopardy were Cairo to take an overly hostile stance toward Israel. Senator Lindsey Graham said, "Egypt, watch what you do and how you do it You're teetering with the Congress on having your aid cut off if you keep inciting violence between the Israelis and the Palestinians". Anne Flaherty and Jim Kuhnhen, "Senator Graham threatens US will cut off Egypt aid unless it reins in Hamas", *The Times of Israel*, 19 November 2012. Egypt also has been negotiating final details of a \$4.8 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund during Israel's Gaza operation and expects the negotiations' conclusion within days. Edmund Blair and Nadia El-Gowely, "Egypt PM says very close to IMF deal", Reuters, 19 November 2012. An Israeli official argued that the U.S. Congress' par-

lawlessness in the Sinai as well as the porous border with Gaza provided incentives for the Egyptians to seek calm. In the early days at least, they could conclude that their logic had been vindicated. President Morsi's rhetoric may have been stronger than Mubarak's, the dispatch of Prime Minister Qandil to Gaza was unprecedented, and Cairo recalled its ambassador; but the language, the visit and the recall were seen to compensate for the lack of concrete action. The rest – calling for meetings of the UN Security Council and of the Arab League, consulting with President Obama – essentially was standard fare, again remarkable more for reflecting continuity than rupture with the past.⁷⁴

A Likud minister said, “the title of their 100-day program is ‘Islam is the Solution’. But as Egyptians can see in this instance, Islam is *not* the solution”.⁷⁵ Another official described the stance of other regional players: “I can't see Turkey, Qatar or Tunisia going beyond brief solidarity visits by their leaders or providing medical supplies and funds for humanitarian purposes. I'd be surprised if they even risk launching a Mavi Marmara-like flotilla”.⁷⁶

Equally important, Israel proved its ability to conduct a major operation and continue to enjoy strong Western support. An Israeli official stressed that this was one of the most consequential achievements:

This was no small operation – it was robust, it was aggressive, it was risky. Yet we received unanimous backing from the countries that matter most in our eyes, whether the U.S. or EU member states. That is very

ticular sensitivity to Morsi's rhetoric and policy leave him with limited manoeuvring room. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 18 November 2012.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, Jerusalem, 14-18 November 2012.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 15 November 2012. Ot-niel Schneller concurred, saying that the costs of alienating the U.S. and other Western nations would have been prohibitive for Egypt: “Ultimately Egypt cannot allow itself to be disconnected from the Western states, and therefore in my view Egypt will take reasonable considerations into account”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 15 November 2012.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 18 November 2012. Another official said, “Arab governments could escalate diplomatically with moves that appear significant but are in fact hollow. For example, Egypt's government could declare it boycotts Israel. This does not mean anything about the status of the peace agreement – only that they will not meet Israeli officials whom they don't meet anyway”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 18 November 2012. A Likud Minister concurred, although he warned that public opinion could be an unpredictable wildcard. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 15 November 2012. The Mavi Marmara flotilla was the 2010 venture that sought to reach Gaza; a deadly assault on it by Israeli commandos led to a major rift in relations between Israel and Turkey.

important and boosts the credibility of our threats, now and in the future.⁷⁷

Two other potential implications of the current war ought to be considered. The first is its relation to a possible war with Iran. Although there is no immediate link between the two – especially now that Hamas's relations with Tehran have deteriorated⁷⁸ – Netanyahu arguably has undercut the perception that he is all talk and no action; moreover, Iron Dome's apparent success could lessen the threat posed by Hizbollah's missile arsenal, viewed as an Iranian strategic deterrent.⁷⁹

The second is the question of the longer-term significance on Israel's strategy toward the Palestinian question. Whether or not it was an explicitly considered objective, it would have profound implications for the Palestinian national movement if the conflict resulted in an outcome in which Cairo, Jerusalem and Hamas reached an understanding normalising the economic situation in the Strip and solidifying its links to Egypt while providing security assurances to Israel. This could entrench the division between Gaza and the West Bank, link Gaza ever more tightly to Egypt and, by achieving a de facto long-term, indirect understanding between Hamas and Israel, clearly signal Israel's preference for dealing with an effective and relevant address (Hamas) rather than with President Abbas and Fatah. An Israeli official noted:

Intended or not, one of the upshots of the war is that the central Palestinian address increasingly will be viewed as Gaza and the central player as Hamas. Abbas was the single most significant political casualty of the operation. He now faces a lose-lose proposition: forego the UN General Assembly to seek an upgrade in status, and he will be thoroughly discredited; go there, and have Israel retaliate in ways that will further damage the PA's economic situation, thereby accelerating the very process that is weakening Abbas and strengthening his Islamist foe.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, 20 November 2012.

⁷⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *Light at the End of their Tunnels?*, op. cit.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Israeli analyst, 19 November 2012. That said, the system is extremely costly – \$35,000-\$50,000 for every intercepted rocket – and to be fully effective its coverage would need to be significantly expanded. On Iron Dome's success rate, see Inbal Orpaz, “How does the Iron Dome system work?”, *The Marker*, 19 November 2012.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, 20 November 2012. This certainly is the view of some Fatah cadres, who view this as “the last chapter of [ex-Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon's plan. The Israeli government will work on achieving the operation's main goal, which is to close Israel's borders with Gaza forever and open Rafah. Then Israel will consider Gaza as part of Egypt; because Hamas

Some Israeli voices have long clamoured for such an approach, arguing that the Islamist movement can deliver far more than its non-Islamist counterpart, and that a final status agreement with the PLO was far less worthwhile than a coexistence understanding with Hamas. In this spirit, Giora Eiland – a former head of the National Security Council – has urged Israel to treat Gaza as a (Hamas-dominated) state, lifting the sea blockade in exchange for a long-term ceasefire.⁸¹

IV. EGYPT'S BALANCING ACT

Although Israel and Hamas were shooting at one another, a principal indirect target was Egypt, one prodding Cairo's new political leadership to stick to past policies, the other to break with them. For President Morsi, this presented a considerable challenge. Since assuming power, he for the most part has sought to balance various interests and constituencies, putting off critical decisions and postponing controversial choices. The eruption of fighting on his north-east flank posed a test to his ability to do so – a test that he passed with aplomb. Now he faces an equally difficult challenge: implementing the agreement he so artfully mediated.

In the case of the Syrian civil war, after injecting itself into regional diplomacy and seeking to craft a possible solution, Egypt backed away once it encountered the stark differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In the case of Gaza, however, it enjoyed no such luxury. It had to mediate lest violence escalate uncontrollably, with considerable risk of spillover. And it had to do so at a time when a still nascent leadership was confronting competing pressures – from the West and other donors to ensure stability, protect ties with Israel and restrain Hamas, and from domestic as well as Arab public opinion to live up to its ideological pronouncements and stand shoulder to shoulder with Palestinians. The success with which Morsi navigated this challenge has further boosted Egypt's position in the emerging regional order.

Again hoping to avoid a clear choice, he sought to preserve options. He tried to highlight differences with his predecessor. Until the outbreak of violence in Gaza, Morsi had not publicly uttered the word "Israel" since assuming office.⁸² Cairo mounted a show-of-force with a military operation in August 2011 and its follow-up, Operation Eagle, a year later to combat lawlessness and militant activities in the Sinai. Most of these steps, involving large deployment of troops and heavy weapons, were coordinated with Israel, but some armour entered Sinai in August 2012 without prior coordination, as the military annex of the 1979 peace treaty requires.⁸³ Though deeply troubled,

belongs to the Brotherhood, they both have shared interests in Islamic rule". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 20 November 2012.

⁸¹ See Eli Ashkenazi, "Giora Eiland: Removal of sea blockade in exchange for security arrangement", *Haaretz*, 18 November 2012. Eiland argued such an agreement should be accompanied by Egyptian guarantees – maintaining the quiet and preventing the entry of weapons to Gaza – and would allow European Union member states to send dinghies supervised by their national police forces to Gaza's port. The goal would be, in part, to ensure that Hamas has something to lose were it to breach the ceasefire. See also Ehud Yaari, "How to End the War in Gaza: What an Egypt-Brokered Cease-Fire Should Look Like", *Foreign Affairs* (online), 17 November 2012. As early as 2010, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman came out in support of "completing the Gaza disengagement". See Geoffrey Aronson, "Is Avigdor Lieberman on to something in Gaza?", *Foreign Policy Middle East Channel*, 29 July 2010, at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/07/29/is_avigdor_liebberman_onto_something_in_gaza.

⁸² Members of the Muslim Brotherhood often cite this omission as evidence of Morsi's, and therefore his organisation's, pro-Palestinian credentials and departure from Mubarak's strategic alliance with Jerusalem. Crisis Group interview, head of foreign relations at the Alexandria Branch of the Freedom and Justice Party, Alexandria, 1 October 2012. Since the beginning of the Gaza war, Morsi has uttered the word Israel several times, mostly to denounce it. The most high-profile occasion was a joint press conference with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdOTAxrmSml.

⁸³ Despite discomfort with the heavy deployment of the Egyptian army, Israeli officials did not show hostility, both to pre-

Israel did not react – a sign of its desire to maintain ties and, perhaps, of its understanding of Morsi's challenges.⁸⁴ At the same time, bilateral ties have degraded. Contacts have been restricted to the security establishment, and though in some respects cooperation has been strong, reluctance to engage politically has caused much Israeli frustration.⁸⁵ Israel's military complains of a gradual decline in relations with its counterpart.⁸⁶

With the onset of major combat, chilly relations grew colder still. Morsi denounced Israel's attacks in harsh terms,⁸⁷ recalled his ambassador for consultation, dispatched his prime minister to Gaza in an expression of solidarity and hosted Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan, Hamas leader Khaled Meshal, the Emir of Qatar and the Tunisian foreign minister in a vivid display of a new, Islamist, regional alliance.⁸⁸ An Egyptian analyst said:

Cairo is saying that Hamas will not be isolated while Israel takes care of its business. The prime minister's visit signals that Hamas enjoys support, while Egypt's bilateral relationship with Israel will suffer, that its aggression comes at a price. Israel is acting as if that doesn't matter, as if it can act with impunity, and that's infuriating for Cairo. Israel will realise that losing Egypt

serve ties and because these operations essentially aimed at cracking down on radical militants, potentially plotting to strike at Israel. Crisis Group interview, Arab League official, Cairo, October 2012.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, October 2012.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, Jerusalem, 19 November 2012.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Jerusalem, 19 November 2012. Amos Gilad, director of policy and political-military affairs at the Israeli defence ministry, and principal go-between with Egypt, gave a talk in which he spoke of Egypt in a highly controversial fashion: "From this democracy what has sprung is a shocking dictatorial force. Where are all the young people who were demonstrating in Tahrir Square? They have vanished. There are the Muslim Brothers in the parliament. Here and there you have a young person. The parliament became green but it is not an environmental green". "Amos Gilad: in Egypt sprung a shocking dictatorship", *NRG-Ma'ariv*, 2 November 2012.

⁸⁷ In a televised statement, President Morsi warned: "This aggression must stop, and not happen again. Peace and security in the region will not materialise for everyone, unless acts of aggression, murder and blood-letting are not conducted. We completely do not accept this aggression, blood-letting, and blocking the Palestinians [to cause them] suffering". Sky News Arabic Channel, 15 October 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBzyjeFpXrw&noredirect=1.

⁸⁸ Egypt's response may have been further intensified by the feeling it was tricked by Israel into working with Hamas on reaching calm in Gaza, just as Israel was preparing to strike.

is a pretty hefty price to pay just to go back to the status quo ante.⁸⁹

Yet, the continuity in Egypt's policy is perhaps more striking still. Its leadership went out of its way from the beginning to reassure Western interlocutors it had no intention to amend, let alone abrogate the Camp David accords.⁹⁰ Before the present crisis, Morsi sent a warm letter to Israeli President Shimon Peres (from which he subsequently, albeit unsuccessfully, tried to distance himself).⁹¹ Cairo has gone farther in combating the smuggling tunnels to Gaza than the previous regime, though still without notable achievement,⁹² and prevented fuel and other supplies from reaching Gaza,⁹³ earning itself the ire of Gazans and the disappointment of Hamas.⁹⁴

Most significantly, and heightened rhetoric aside, Egypt did not publicly do much beyond cautious steps during the conflict. Most of what it did – denouncing Israel's actions, calling for a ceasefire, communicating with the U.S. – was the standard practice for the Mubarak regime that the Muslim Brotherhood so vehemently denounced. A Morsi adviser acknowledged this:

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 16 November 2012.

⁹⁰ Morsi's promise to maintain Egypt's international treaties and obligations was stated on various occasions, including in his first televised speech as president. Egyptian State Television, 24 June 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ox0qem1WI_Q. The leadership was firm on this in a September meeting with a high-level U.S. delegation. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington DC, September 2012.

⁹¹ Morsi sent a routine letter to Peres introducing the new Egyptian ambassador, drafted by the protocol department at the Egyptian presidency. Like dozens of other virtually identical letters of ambassadorial accreditation signed by the president, it contained warm expressions, such as "my dear and great friend" and "your loyal friend". Crisis Group interview, Egyptian diplomat, Cairo, 20 November 2012. Morsi was fiercely criticised by his opponents. A former senior Muslim Brotherhood member who resigned from the organisation in 2010 described the incident as an "unjustifiable scandal". See "Habib: Morsi's Letter to Peres is a Scandal...", *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 20 October 2012.

⁹² "These tunnels are used to smuggle everything into Gaza, including some of the missiles they are shooting. The security officials would like to see this end, but there is limited capacity for that. We cannot shut down the tunnels logistically or politically. These tunnels are hard to detect and easy to dig. Every day there are new ones". Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, 15 November 2012.

⁹³ A Gaza-based analyst remarked that while the situation had not objectively deteriorated in Gaza following Morsi's coming to power, it felt like it due to the inflated expectations that preceded his victory. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 25 July 2012.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza City, July, August 2012. An Egyptian diplomat noted that both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority were unhappy with Egypt's attempt to maintain relations with the other. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 7 November 2012.

We have not taken any measures that would significantly jeopardise our international standing or bilateral relations with the U.S. We have taken diplomatic steps that even the previous regime used to do. What we did differently this time was to send the prime minister to show that such an operation undermines Israel's policy of blockading and isolating Gaza, and we offered more rhetorical support. The change in policy compared to the past is one of appearance, not substance. Nothing on the ground has changed, or will likely change. We are not arming Hamas, and we are not going to deploy our army to their rescue.⁹⁵

As many in the leadership see it, such continuity is a reflection of economic and domestic political constraints. Egypt suffers from a massive budget deficit (estimated to be in excess of 170 billion Egyptian pounds, approximately \$28 billion) this fiscal year, more than 13 per cent of its GDP. The government hopes to overcome this and other economic hardships largely through foreign direct investment, soft-loans (including from the International Monetary Fund) and other forms of external aid, in addition to unpopular structural reforms such as lifting fuel subsidies.⁹⁶ Cairo also is in the midst of a slow-moving and contentious political transition that has left the country with no constitution, a legislative vacuum and a politicised judiciary.⁹⁷ The same presidential adviser cautioned that Morsi could not afford to take risks in his foreign policy at a time of such political and economic turmoil:

Egypt's policy and interests in Gaza are summed up in one word: calm. We want calm whatever way it comes about. If Hamas, the U.S., Israel, or anybody else could provide it, we will take it. There is no specifically Egyptian policy for Gaza, something we are determined to push through. We need to focus on getting our house in order and resolving Sinai's security problems. We do not want a major crisis right on our border.⁹⁸

The stance is not without its strong critics, including – perhaps most notably – from within Brotherhood ranks. The organisation traditionally has evinced strong sympathy for Palestinians⁹⁹ and has long lambasted prior regimes

for excessive deference to Israeli and U.S. demands. Many members evinced some discomfort with its stance during the war; whether the ceasefire deal, which has been praised by Hamas, changes this remains to be seen.¹⁰⁰ Their discomfort was made greater due to denunciations by more conservative religious groups, only too pleased to seize the opportunity to denounce the Brotherhood's hypocrisy. Seeking to outflank its Islamist rivals, the Salafist Al-Nour party stated that it would aid “brothers in Gaza and Palestine with men and money until all Palestinian rights are fully restored”.¹⁰¹ Morsi's adviser acknowledged:

The Salafis have the Muslim Brotherhood in an extremely difficult position. The Brotherhood used to preach to its constituency the need to liberate Jerusalem and stand up for the Palestinian cause, etc. Now that they are governing, they cannot talk or act like this anymore. The Salafis have stepped in and filled the void by selling this Palestine stuff to the public. [The Salafi] Al-Nour [Party] is talking about sending money and arms to Gaza itself. It is as if the Brotherhood had been the biggest Coca-Cola distributor in Egypt and now suddenly finds itself unable to sell it. Well, the Salafis still do, and people want it.¹⁰²

In reaction, a young Brotherhood leader said:

On Gaza, pressure is building from the base, which is clamouring for a stronger reaction. In contrast, our leaders' objectives have become very modest. They have been tamed by power. The cadres have refrained from organising Palestine protests in order not to add to the pressures being exerted on the president. Given how fluid the political situation is in Egypt, they don't want a repeat of the 2003 protests against the Iraqi invasion by the U.S. 50,000 people massing and marching on the presidential palace could have unpredictable and dangerous consequences with the country as unstable

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior presidential adviser, Cairo, 17 November 2012.

⁹⁶ “Coupons for the dispensing of gasoline and butane gas canisters' rations”, *Al-Ahram*, 3 September 2012.

⁹⁷ Several non-Islamist leaders including Amr Moussa, as well as a consortium of Christian Churches, withdrew on 17 November from the Constituent Assembly, which is to draft a constitution by 12 December. This has plunged the political transition into even greater disarray and threatens to extend the constitutional and legislative vacuum into 2013.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 15 November 2012.

⁹⁹ The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928, came about in reaction to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the con-

comitant rise to prominence of nationalist, Western-educated secular elites. It viewed the establishment of the State of Israel in the historical Palestine province of the Ottoman Caliphate as an offence against all Muslims, and many members fought in the 1948 war. It has maintained a pro-Palestinian position, albeit one that is more Islamist than nationalist, emphasising the need to restore Jerusalem to Muslim control.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, head of foreign relations at the Alexandria branch of the Freedom and Justice Party, Alexandria, 1 October 2012. He emphasised: “Egyptian relations with Israel should be suspended, while relations with Gaza ought to be improved. We need to shut down the smuggling tunnels, and instead open the border crossings, and build free-trade zones along the border”.

¹⁰¹ “A Statement from Al-Nour Party Concerning the Criminal Raids against the Gaza Strip”, 14 November 2012, www.alnourparty.org/nodes/view/type:e3lam/slug:gza.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 15 November 2012.

as it is now. The presidency is part of the state, but the state mechanism itself has not been captured by the Brotherhood, so the president's reaction to Gaza so far has been within diplomatic norms.¹⁰³

Islamists have not been alone in pressing the government and seizing a golden opportunity to denounce its hypocrisy and impotence. After the fighting broke out, hundreds of non-Islamist youth activists marched in downtown Cairo to condemn Israel's assault, again calling for a stronger Egyptian response; they gathered again on 16 November in Tahrir Square. The leftist Popular Movement, led by former presidential candidate Hamdein Sabbahi, likewise attacked Morsi for not doing enough to help Gaza.¹⁰⁴ Facing pressure, the Brotherhood issued a statement on 14 November that somewhat awkwardly urged a president from its own ranks to cut off diplomatic and commercial relations with Israel and called for a protest at the Al-Azhar Mosque following the Friday sermon.¹⁰⁵

Morsi was caught in other cross-currents. Alongside charges that he has not done enough to help Gaza, some claimed he was doing too much, showing greater solicitude for Palestinians than for his own people. Prior to the current escalation, some among the non-Islamist opposition criticised him for allegedly diverting scarce fuel resources to Gaza at Egypt's expense; contemplating a free-trade zone on the Gaza border that supposedly would benefit his fellow merchants in the Brotherhood; and looking the other way as Gaza-based militants snuck into Egypt to build bases for attacking Israel, and in the process get Egypt "bogged down in a fight that was not hers".¹⁰⁶

Accusations that Morsi was neglecting his home front intensified after the outbreak of the war. These were aided by twin road accidents on 17 November that claimed at least 65 lives, including of 50 children, highlighting the dilapidated state of domestic infrastructure. Non-Islamist politicians and activists seized on the tragedy to accuse

Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood of privileging Gaza at Egypt's expense.¹⁰⁷

The tug of war over Gaza policy also reflected competition between the new Islamist political leadership and the country's entrenched security establishment, which habitually has dealt with Israel, Gaza and Hamas according to its worldview and interests.

For the latter, a priority is to resist any Israeli attempt to renounce responsibility for Gaza and shift it to Egypt; instability and chaos in the Palestinian territory, they fear, will spill over into Egypt, with particularly dangerous repercussions in the Sinai. As it sees matters, Hamas has long been a problem, Gaza is a headache, and free movement between Gaza and Sinai would promote lawlessness and the back-and-forth smuggling of militants and weapons.¹⁰⁸ In this context, a decision to comprehensively open the Rafah crossing to the movement of individuals and goods would risk "letting Israel dump Gaza into Egypt", tantamount to a strategic threat.¹⁰⁹ An Egyptian official shared these misgivings:

The Rafah crossing is unlikely to be opened for goods anytime soon. The consensus in the security establishment and diplomatic circles is that Israel desperately wants Egypt to take responsibility for a Strip that is far away from Cairo's central authority, packed with armed militants, and suffers from a persistent humanitarian crisis. Once Egypt opens the Rafah crossing for goods, Israel is likely to permanently shut down the Karam Abu Salem crossing, when the next crisis erupts, effectively turning Gaza into Egypt's burden to bear.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Muslim Brotherhood member, Cairo, 15 November 2012.

¹⁰⁴ A Muslim Brotherhood member complained that the charges were less than sincere: "Those who used to attack us for supporting our brothers in Gaza are the ones criticising us now for not doing enough. They exploit any event to score political points". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 15 November 2012.

¹⁰⁵ The statement went on to suggest Egypt should break diplomatic and commercial ties with Israel and urged the Palestinian Authority to suspend its security cooperation with Israel. "The Muslim Brothers call for protests today and demand Morsi cut off ties with Israel", *Al-Shorouk*, 15 November 2012.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, retired state security general, Cairo, 4 November 2012.

¹⁰⁷ Another retired state security general sarcastically remarked: "More kids died here in Egypt yesterday than Israel has killed in Gaza so far. At least we are ahead of Israel on that score". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 18 November 2012. This sentiment seems to be growing among some non-Islamist constituencies, particularly as living standards deteriorate. A waiter at a Cairo coffee shop voiced frustration that Egypt has to worry about its Palestinian neighbour, while the country itself is in bad shape: "There is little security, no good jobs and high prices for everything. We need help as much as Gazans do", Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 17 November 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, retired General Intelligence Service general, July 2012. An Egyptian diplomat sympathetic to this view commented: "The problem is not the Salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza. It is Hamas's approach to these groups. Essentially they say, 'Please don't harm the Gaza-Israel truce. If you want to do something, do it in Sinai'. They're encouraging Salafi-jihadis to go through the tunnels and launch the attacks from Egyptian territory". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 12 November 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Egyptian diplomat, Cairo, 12 November 2012.

¹¹⁰ He added: "The tunnels provide Gaza with items banned by the Israeli authorities at Karam Abu Salem, such as construc-

The Muslim Brotherhood perspective differs in significant respects. The division between Gaza and Egypt strikes the Islamist group as less relevant, and political ties with its offshoot in the Strip weigh heavily. Plus, it sees the security equation through a highly different prism. A movement official said:

The security establishment under Mubarak had convinced itself that Hamas was the problem. However, since 2008, Hamas has been the one confronting the militant Salafi groups in Gaza. The reasons such groups have flourished in Sinai is the security vacuum there. We now have joint agreements with Hamas to monitor the borders more effectively and close the tunnels, in exchange for opening [the] Rafah crossing.¹¹¹

Some in the president's entourage go further, viewing Hamas potentially as their country's first line of defence against the principal threat to the north east.¹¹²

Over time, the president's influence over the security sector likely will grow. After dismissing the top military commanders in the wake of the killing of sixteen Egyptian

tion materials and weapons, but the bulk of Gaza's daily needs actually come from the Israeli crossing. Should it be shut down, Egypt, through the Rafah Crossing, would be entirely in charge of supplying Gaza with virtually everything it needs". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 20 November 2012.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 10 October 2012. Many in Hamas would like to see bigger changes at Rafah, including passage of commercial goods (which many Egyptian officials are willing to consider under the right circumstances) and a Free Trade Zone (which most are not), in exchange for closing the tunnels. Many Egyptian officials fear that a free trade zone (FTZ) would pose enormous challenges: the North Sinai Bedouin, who are already threatened by Hamas's growing influence, would protest loudly at the loss of land; Gaza's export potential is limited; an FTZ could be used to transfer Israeli products into Egypt, which would harm the Egyptian economy; Hamas, which stands to lose financially, might not follow through on closing the tunnels; and Israel might well destroy the FTZ's infrastructure in a future round of hostilities. An Egyptian official said, "Qatar has told us that they are willing to pay \$1 billion for the creation of a FTZ. This is in addition to the \$400 million they have pledged for development projects in Gaza. But for this to happen – even for Qatar's development projects to happen – Hamas has to answer the fundamental questions: Is it ready to approve a durable ceasefire with Israel? Without that, no investment, no economic growth, not even reconstruction will take place. Qatar, and any other donor for that matter, is not going to simply throw that kind of money at a project without any assurance that it won't be bombed the next day. Qatar has asked Israel for guarantees that the projects won't be targeted, and Israel has refused to give any guarantee. And without a more formal, durable ceasefire, they won't". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 12 November 2012.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 15 November 2012.

troops near the Gaza border in August 2012,¹¹³ Morsi has trodden carefully, making appearances at virtually all formal occasions for both the military and the police and incrementally building personal ties with the security apparatus. A Brotherhood member said, "in Egypt, loyalties within the security establishment are slowly, but surely, shifting. Morsi has not embarked on revolutionary changes; he has not pushed for structural reforms or reshuffles; but the changes he made on the top level are real. Appointees owe their loyalty to the man who appointed them".¹¹⁴

In the run-up to the Gaza war, the security establishment's views on the question of Gaza largely prevailed in practice. Its officials reportedly talked Morsi out of either instituting a crossing at Rafah for commercial goods or opening a free-trade zone. Persistent attacks on police and army positions in Sinai arguably bolstered his cautious approach.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Tensions between the political and security leaderships came to a head with the killing of sixteen Egyptian troops in the town of Rafah, near the Gaza border on 5 August 2012; the security establishment (and media) blamed Hamas for failing to secure the tunnels and curb the flow of militants and arms into Sinai. Crisis Group interview, retired state security general, Cairo, 4 November 2012. The Muslim Brotherhood, in contrast, placed the blame alternatively on Israel or on the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which, it privately claimed, had known in advance of the attack but refused to prevent it in order to embarrass the newly-elected civilian president. Crisis Group interview, head of foreign relations at the Alexandria Branch of the Freedom and Justice Party, Alexandria, 1 October 2012. When an unidentified mob disrupted the funeral procession of the dead soldiers, thereby preventing Morsi from participating, a Freedom and Justice Party leader attributed the incident to the "remnants of the Mubarak regime, who operate with the consent of the (security) agencies of the deep state". Ibid. Morsi opted to tread carefully. He replaced the heads of all major security agencies and abolished the SCAF entirely, but did not echo accusations of complicity.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, editor-in-chief of Ikhwan Web, Cairo, 15 November 2012.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Cairo, 15 November 2012. A senior presidential adviser said that Operation Eagle – which targeted Sinai militants in August 2012 – was necessary to restore calm in the strategically and economically critical peninsula. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 September 2012. A foreign ministry official detected a similar, if subtle, shift in the thinking of those around Morsi: "Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood are close ideologically, and their relationship is obviously significant. But a change has taken place. Initially we saw how well Meshal was received by Morsi, spending together an entire day at the presidential residence. But then sixteen Egyptian soldiers were attacked, and it seemed that Hamas was involved in this. Egypt demanded that Hamas hand over five suspects and was rebuffed. As a result, when [Gaza Prime Minister] Haniyeh came to Cairo, he was met only by [Egyptian Prime Minister] Qandil. This is one of the signs, like the absence of any major change at the crossing, that show a

All in all, Morsi's election – while producing some loosening at the crossing – did not prompt a fundamental change in the country's Rafah policy; indeed, a presidential adviser spoke in revealing terms of a de facto convergence: "Israel, the U.S. and Egypt all have a joint interest in bringing stability and security to Sinai".¹¹⁶

A ground invasion, by damaging Israeli-Egyptian security cooperation, almost certainly would have aggravated this debate.¹¹⁷ This is one reason why all Egyptian decision-makers, from whichever camp – fearful of the steps the government might have been compelled to take should the situation have worsened – were eager to bring the conflict to a rapid conclusion, albeit without appearing to be squeezing Hamas. As a Brotherhood member said, "despite his instincts, which are to be staunchly against all Israelis, Morsi is being pragmatic. He is learning to make calculated decisions as president".¹¹⁸

Pillar of Defence is now over, and Morsi has shown himself capable of working effectively with Washington, earning Obama's praise; mediating a ceasefire agreement; proving his usefulness to Israel; and all this without alienating Hamas. Still, the longer-term picture in terms of security-political dynamics remains undecided: the ceasefire seems to provide, in general terms, for a broader opening of the Rafah crossing than many in the security sector want to see, but implementation is where the debate ultimately will be decided.

decline in the Egypt-Gaza relationship". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 17 October 2012.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 15 November 2012. Egypt has eased passage of people in and out of Gaza but still blocks the import and export of goods. An Egyptian official reflected prevailing wisdom in Cairo, at least until the beginning of Pillar of Defence: "A commercial crossing in Rafah and a free trade zone do not seem to be in the cards. Morsi fully realises that these would mean Gaza becoming a part of Egypt. Israel would love that, but it goes against Egypt's interests". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 17 October 2012. Another Egyptian official argued that changes at Rafah already were considerable, but limits still would remain in place: "Rafah is open seven days a week, even on national and religious holidays, this for the first time in ten years. There are still restrictions and security checks. This will not change. Especially with all of the concerns about security in Sinai and cooperation between Gaza and Sinai-based Salafi-jihadi groups. The rules for entering Egypt, including security checks for men under 40, and lists of persons who are restricted from entering, won't change". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 12 November 2012. On this issue, see Crisis Group Report, *Light at the End of their Tunnels?*, op. cit. An Egyptian official acknowledged: "After the revolution occurred, many of the restrictions on the travelling of individuals into and out of Gaza have been lifted. The infamous security no-passage list that included 150,000 names of Gaza residents, or almost 10 per cent of the entire population, has been thankfully discarded. But Morsi's presidency has not done much to change the situation at the crossing, because control of this national security issue remains with the security agencies". Crisis Group interview, 20 November 2012.

¹¹⁷ At his 17 November press conference with the Turkish prime minister, Morsi warned that if Israel were to launch a ground invasion, there would be "grave consequences". www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdOTAxrmSmI. A senior presidential adviser agreed that such an escalation inevitably would prompt a strong Egyptian response. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 17 November 2012.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Muslim Brotherhood member, Cairo, 15 November 2012.

V. WEST BANK TIPPING POINT?

In the current fight between Hamas and Israel, the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah almost certainly will come out as the principal loser. With the peace process – its *raison d'être* – widely discredited in the West Bank, President Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and the Fatah movement as a whole have been struggling to regain their political footing. Coming on the heels of the sizeable protests in September that started out of economic desperation and wound up targeting Fayyad and Abbas, Pillar of Defence has dealt the leadership another blow. Absent from the fight and distant from the centre of political gravity, it has been reduced to a spectator as the new regional order takes shape; arguably the one thing Israel and Hamas have in common is their desire to sideline Ramallah. Abbas, who has faced setback after setback over the past half-decade, now faces his greatest challenge yet: how to make himself relevant again.

Perhaps most worrying from his perspective, the Gaza fighting has brought to the West Bank a quasi-revolutionary spirit that has been absent since the second intifada. Radio stations and music shops are playing nationalist and jihadi songs; members of the political factions who remember an earlier era in the nationalist movement's history are humming hoary PLO and Fatah tunes that glorify armed struggle,¹¹⁹ and West Bankers' internet chat rooms, Facebook postings, and Twitter feeds are commending the idea of teaching Israel a lesson.¹²⁰

A young activist commented: "Let the Israelis live in fear like us. We live like this every day". A Palestinian analyst compared the mood to that during the 1990-1991 Gulf War, when Iraqi missiles hit Israel. "Today people are even more excited, because the rockets are coming from Gaza and the Palestinian resistance, not from other countries in the region". She also compared the atmosphere to May 2000, when Israel unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon under Hizbollah pressure.¹²¹ That too was a moment when it seemed that armed struggle had prevailed, while the Oslo Accords had failed. Four months later, the second intifada broke out.

This militant spirit is generating a sharp critique of a leadership that has embraced a strategy of cooperating with Israel to end the occupation and not only turned its back on but also combated armed struggle. A university student in the West Bank said:

Dealing softly with Israel produced nothing. What have we gotten after twenty years of negotiations? More settlements and more annexed Palestinian land, a Wall in the West Bank, an isolated Jerusalem and a division between the two main factions. Meanwhile missiles brought Israel to beg for a truce in just a couple days.¹²²

As no small number of West Bankers now see it, Hamas's rockets have not been in vain, as Abbas is wont to say,¹²³ and the movement's enhanced standing – a result both of the suffering endured in Gaza and the rocket launches initiated by the Islamist movement – has brought Hamas back to political life in the West Bank. On 19 November, the PA permitted it to protest after Friday prayers.¹²⁴ Some 500 Hamas members were joined by another 500 persons, most of them plainclothes security officers watching warily over the demonstration in Ramallah's central square, where Hamas raised its green flags in the West Bank for one of the only times since 2007.¹²⁵

¹²² Crisis Group interview, Palestinian student, 18 November 2012.

¹²³ For example, when he spoke to an Israeli television station on 4 November 2012, Abbas said that he would never permit a third intifada and that "there is no justification for rockets from Gaza or anywhere else". He also said "rockets attacks are in vain because they do not bring peace any closer". United Press International, 4 November 2012.

¹²⁴ A Preventive Security agent said, "I was in the mosque along with tens of other agents in order to keep the protest under control, but the moment everyone finished praying, Hamas pulled out flags – I had no idea they were hiding them – and immediately fell into formation. They were extremely well organised". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 16 November 2012.

¹²⁵ In the square, they were met by tens of persons from the security services and others who raised Fatah's yellow flags, as well as Palestinian flags. Hamas called for revenge and praised the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, chanting slogans such as "From Ramallah to Haniyeh, Your government [Haniyeh's] is legitimate" and "The people want to bomb Tel Aviv", while Fatah called out, "National Unity for all the Revolutionary Factions" and "Long Live Palestine". Crisis Group observations, Ramallah, 16 November 2012. After two clashes erupted in the first half-hour between Fatah and Hamas supporters, Hamas withdrew from the protest. A Hamas leader said, "Fatah is dragging us into a fight with them. We don't want to get involved, because we don't want to see our youth in PA prisons today". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 16 November 2012. Hamas, without flags, participated that same day in a demonstration of about 2,000 people in Nablus. Crisis Group interview, political activist, Nablus, 16 November 2012.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group observations, Ramallah, 15-19 November 2012. Two new pop-songs are "Tel Aviv is Burning" and "Strike, Strike, Tel Aviv", www.youtube.com/watch?v=afj7XSI_B34; www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1ipnACBT1g. Government radio and television stations are an exception, referring to Gaza only during news broadcasts.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, youth activists, Ramallah, 20 November 2012.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 18 November 2012.

By the same token, clashes between Palestinian youth and Israeli troops were particularly acute in the past week. People are in no mood for demonstrations in the centre of the city, where they are under the control of PA security forces and far from the checkpoints staffed by Israeli soldiers. Organising by other Palestinian factions – which are constrained by their relationship with the PA and must keep protests within legal bounds – has been desultory. Instead, most protesters are youths who come on their own initiative.¹²⁶ A Palestinian journalist said that the protests permitted by the PA were sparsely attended, “because people don’t believe in a peaceful reaction to what’s happening. They want their voices to be more powerful, to throw stones at Israeli soldiers, to give them a taste of their own medicine”.¹²⁷ As a result, most protests spilled beyond the permitted boundaries within the cities and headed toward Israeli checkpoints and settlements to clash with soldiers.

This presented the PA with a dilemma: stop the marches and turn the population against it, or let the demonstrations proceed and risk seeing ensuing Palestinians casualties set off an escalation in the West Bank. At the outset of Pillar of Defence, PA security aggressively – and sometimes brutally – tried to confine the protesters to the cities in order to maintain calm,¹²⁸ but as the days passed, it grew somewhat laxer, so as to avoid clashing with its own people at a time of high tension.¹²⁹ Some took Abbas’s words,

¹²⁶ The total number protesting in Ramallah over the past week has varied from day to day between 200 and 1,000. There are also weekly protests, particularly intense during the week of Pillar of Defence, in Palestinian villages near the Separation Barrier.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 17 November 2012. A mid-level Fatah leader offered a similar explanation: “We have moved from the era of the two-state solution to the era of no solution at all. The sound of a popular uprising is heard around the world, but the sound of the peace is nothing but a whimper”. A member of the Fatah youth movement, Shabiba, said, “we are frustrated. We are a potential army to start new intifada. There is no language to speak except the language of violence”. Crisis Group interviews, Ramallah, 17 November 2012.

¹²⁸ A protest organiser in Ramallah said that, his instinct for caution notwithstanding, the desires and emotions of the crowd left him little choice but to cede to the demand of 400 marchers to head toward the Israeli military compound of Beit El, on the outskirts of Ramallah. The police set up multiple cordons that ever smaller numbers of protesters circumvented; some fifteen protesters made it to Beit El, climbed the external wall and were promptly arrested by Israeli forces. Later, a second group breached the walls of the compound to “rescue” the fifteen protesters. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 17 November 2012.

¹²⁹ At a 21 November protest against U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit to Ramallah, the police took a soft approach to containing the demonstration at Abbas’s presidential compound. After some shouting and pushing, an officer declared to an activist, “I will not allow you to goad me into hitting you.

just days before the Israeli campaign in Gaza commenced, that he would prevent a third intifada in the West Bank as a challenge. Security personnel commented that since “blood is running hot”, it is better to show maximum restraint, lest they appear to be “collaborators”, chasing down fellow Palestinians in the West Bank at a time when Israel was doing the same in Gaza.¹³⁰ The end of the Israeli campaign in Gaza is likely to cool the temperature in the West Bank, though its outcome will be anything but a boost to the leadership.

Just as the PA is coping with fresh challenges on the ground, Abbas is facing a new hitch in his push for a UN General Assembly resolution granting Palestine non-member-state status: no one is paying attention. A Fatah cadre said, “the war has erased all attention for the UN move. It is becoming colourless. It has no weight on the ground, and people have no enthusiasm left for an empty resolution as compared to the power of a Fajr-5 that can drive Israel and the U.S. to beg for a truce”.¹³¹ In response, Palestinian officials have tried to restore the world’s, or at least Palestine’s focus by accusing Israel – rather implausibly – of trying to scuttle the UN bid by attacking Hamas. In Abbas’s words, “What is happening in Gaza is aimed at preventing our request to get the status of non-member state at the United Nations, but we will vote on the resolution on November 29”.¹³² Abbas’s seeming irrelevance,¹³³ as well as the lack of public enthusiasm for his planned efforts at the UN, have provoked some to display disdain.

You will not get me to attack you in front of the cameras. We have orders not to be rough”. Crisis Group interview/observation, Ramallah, 21 November 2012.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, civil police officer and General Intelligence officer, Ramallah, 17 November 2012. The latter added: “There is an unannounced decision not to directly confront those who want to go to the checkpoints. We don’t want to appear to be collaborators with Israel while it strikes Gaza. If we prevent them, their anger will be directed against the PA. This is not the time for the PA to face any protest: it is under Israeli political attack, just like Hamas is under Israeli military attack in Gaza”. He expressed certainty that the protests would not get out of control because “Palestinians are not ready for a third Intifada: if it becomes bloody, people will think twice before going to checkpoints”. By then, however, it may be too late.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 20 November 2012.

¹³² Agence France-Presse, 16 November 2012.

¹³³ A Fatah member said, “there is deep frustration within the movement. While Hamas is busy rebuilding its reputation as a resistance movement, Fatah feels it is very far from – and irrelevant to – the main events. Today, the operation centre is in Cairo and is steered by Morsi. Nabil Shaath’s [Fatah commissioner for international relations] role there is no different from a reporter’s, and even Abbas is relegated to receiving news from his embassy in Cairo and from television. The Ramallah leadership is active neither in the truce talks nor in diplomatic meetings”. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 20 November 2012.

His repeated promises to press ahead at the UN in November – in principle the 29th, the 65th anniversary of General Assembly Resolution 181, which provided for the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states – put him in a lose-lose position. If he retreats, he will be pilloried at home. A senior Palestinian official, who opposes the move, emphatically said, “he has no choice. If he does not go now, if he appears to be succumbing to U.S. and Israeli pressure at a time when Gazans are resisting Israeli airstrikes, he is finished”.¹³⁴ A Palestinian analyst said, “it would be political suicide. He’s committed political suicide before, but this time I think he might actually kill himself”.¹³⁵

Yet, if Abbas goes ahead and as expected obtains a resolution, he risks alienating the U.S., retribution from Israel (eg, a devastating withholding of tax revenue transfers) and perhaps the U.S. Congress. Moreover, as he has promised to return to talks with Israel after the vote, he could find himself back in highly unpopular negotiations. And with bloody Gaza fighting recently ended, he likely would be under increased pressure to resort to an avenue Palestine’s new status would open – the International Criminal Court, an absolute Israeli redline.¹³⁶

The mainstream Palestinian national movement is in disarray.¹³⁷ It lacks strategy, direction, resources and momentum, the last of which will be hard to gain as it continues sailing against regional headwinds. Reconciliation with Hamas – that elusive goal, advocated by both sides yet to date genuinely sought by neither – may be the only way to save itself. Once the dust settles, it could perhaps be more earnestly pursued, promoted by Hamas’s new allies, Egypt, Turkey and Qatar. Unifying the national movement also is the best hope for relaunching a credible political process with Israel.

Otherwise, and especially because the ceasefire terms that ended Pillar of Defence are perceived as advantageous to Hamas, the UN bid appears all the more hollow, as does the Ramallah leadership’s claims to defining the trajectory of the national movement. The Gaza fighting has crystallised just how much the region is passing by the Palestinian president and the movement he heads.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, 18 November 2012.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 17 November 2012.

¹³⁶ A presidential adviser said that Abbas’s goal is to return to “serious” negotiations and that the UN General Assembly resolution is a step in that direction. “We don’t want to launch lawsuits”. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 2 November 2012. Should Israel punish Abbas, however, an escalatory dynamic could ensue.

¹³⁷ A Fatah Central Committee member, asked over a meal what the next step after the General Assembly vote is, said that he had no idea. “We don’t even know what we are doing after lunch!” Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 19 November 2012.

VI. CONCLUSION

The 21 November announcement of the ceasefire agreement did not come as a huge surprise. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit and her long meetings with Netanyahu and Morsi all pointed to a stronger U.S. role – and U.S. interest – in bringing the conflict to a conclusion and suggested the end was near. The bus bombing in Tel Aviv that same day, followed shortly by the stabbing of an Israeli Border Policeman in Jerusalem, led some to fear the effort would collapse; it did not, and Washington can take some credit for pressing and persuading the Israeli prime minister that prolonging the war and, worse yet, undertaking a ground operation, would be a high-risk gambit. It can also gain satisfaction from having worked effectively with Egypt, reaffirmed Cairo’s role as broker between Israel and the Palestinians and showed that the administration’s investment in building a relationship with Morsi paid off.

The agreement, or at least those items that were included in the published text, appeared to tilt toward Hamas. Although it was ambiguous, and although much remains imprecise, Hamas can justifiably claim it achieved its main goals: an opening of Gaza’s crossings; the cessation of attacks against Gaza by land, sea, and air; and an end to incursions as well as assassinations. Implicit in this is the end of the several-hundred-metre “safety belt” Israel maintained on the Gaza side of the border. Hamas officials and Gaza residents were quick to hail the accord as a significant victory.¹³⁸

As far as Israel is concerned, the text essentially reiterates the basic premise of the ceasefire itself: Hamas commits to cease launching rockets and attacks along the border fence. Nothing is said about weapons smuggling, despite expectations to the contrary. Washington made clear that this was covered in separate U.S.-Israeli agreements; it might also have been the subject of confidential understandings with Egypt and could still be raised during the implementation stage. According to press reports, Obama told Netanyahu that he would support Israel’s right to self-defence if the ceasefire was violated; that U.S. military assistance to Israel would increase, including additional funding for Iron Dome and other anti-missile systems; and that the U.S. would assist in preventing the smuggling of arms into Gaza.¹³⁹ Emphasising such commitments, Defence Minister Barak dismissed the ceasefire terms as a door prize for

¹³⁸ Khaled Meshal claimed victory over Israel in absolute terms at a 21 November press conference. The mood in Gaza reflected precisely that sentiment. Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 21 November 2012.

¹³⁹ “Cease-fire agreement almost identical to that reached in Operation Cast Lead”, *Haaretz*, 22 November 2012.

the defeated; he said that Israel is much better served by having restored deterrence, which cannot be translated in any text.¹⁴⁰

Nonetheless, the vagueness and bareness of the agreement fuelled critical commentary among Israeli analysts and politicians. Shaul Mofaz, head of Kadima and opposition leader, said, “the operation’s goals haven’t been met. It’s only a matter of time before the next round occurs. This is not how you end a battle against terrorism The operation shouldn’t have been stopped at this point. Hamas is empowered and deterrence hasn’t been restored. Hamas has the upper hand”.¹⁴¹

In the days and weeks ahead, the principal challenge will be implementation. That this agreement, unlike past ones, was in writing is a real advance; nonetheless, ambiguities remain and these will feed divergent interpretations.¹⁴² Israel wants to make sure that the Islamist movement will not merely use the lull to replenish its arsenal and that it will not turn a blind eye to resumed attacks by other Palestinian factions under the belief that Israel would not be willing to launch punishing, widespread offensives at each truce violation. Stated differently, Israel expects Hamas to end all attacks, prevent other groups from engaging in hostilities and be deprived of its ability to rearm. As it sees things, Gaza’s factions have had a free hand to stock up over the past several years, given the chaos in Sinai, the booming tunnel trade, arms trafficking from Libya and the support they have enjoyed from Iran. However, preventing a resupply in weapons likely will be a tall order; even when Israel was fully in control of Gaza or when Egypt’s president was far more hostile to Hamas, the record in that regard was far from perfect.

For its part, Hamas wants – beyond the end of punishing attacks and, of particular importance, the stopping of targeted assassinations – life in the Gaza Strip to recover a genuine sense of normalcy. Especially if it is expected to fulfil Israel’s demand that it behave as the sovereign of Gaza and ensure that attacks from the territory end, Hamas says, it must be given some of the benefits, not just the responsibilities, of sovereignty. The movement’s credibility and claims to legitimacy stem largely from its resistance credentials. That is all it has been able to deliver, even if not steadily or sufficiently enough for some radicals’ taste. If Hamas were to acquire an alternate source of legitimacy, of domestic accomplishment, its internal hand would

be strengthened, and it would be in a better position to achieve an effective consensus opposing violence against Israel. Short of this, Hamas would prefer to let Israel do its own policing of rocket attacks by non-Hamas militants – which in the past has drawn Hamas back into the fray in fairly short order.

None of this will be easy. Israel recoils at the notion of foregoing the use of its full security panoply, including targeted assassination. It likely has questions about both Egypt’s willingness to monitor and prevent weapons smuggling and Hamas’s reliability should it reacquire – or allow others to acquire – the most dangerous weapons systems. Hamas, eager not to be tagged as the new Fatah, abhors the notion that it will police other militant organisations. And it sees no logic in restricting its weapons stockpiling when Israel systematically enhances its own. Prior efforts to expand the scope of the ceasefire beyond a mere (and temporary) quiet-for-quiet arrangement have faltered against these very same obstacles. One interesting question will be whether various parties – notably Egypt – are open to external involvement, either regional or more widely international, to help monitor implementation, register complaints, etc.

A key novelty in the arrangement lies in Egypt’s newfound profile. Close to Hamas, it enjoys the movement’s trust far more than ever did the Mubarak regime, which the Islamist movement systematically suspected of seeking its undoing. As a result, Hamas arguably will be far more likely to respond to Cairo’s entreaties and pressure. A reaffirmed U.S.-Egyptian partnership in this undertaking – one of the other important outcomes of this crisis – will be critical in this context. Morsi can more effectively press Hamas; in turn, Obama – whose standing and leverage in Israel almost certainly rose significantly given the unconditional backing he extended to it – now can do the same with Jerusalem.

But if Egypt wishes to perform its role effectively, it will have to live up to its commitment to open the crossings in order to normalise the economic and social situation in Gaza. Likewise, it will need to find a way to work with the U.S. which – as seen – has pledged to Netanyahu that it will seek to stop arms smuggling into Gaza.

Finally, one must address two related issues: the fate of the PA and of the non-Islamist national movement on the one hand; the future of the peace process on the other. Some way needs to be found to restore the relevance and effectiveness of those who have been left on the sidelines by the current conflict, yet without whom prospects for a two-state solution likely will vanish.

With such factors in mind, several ideas are worthy of thought:

¹⁴⁰ “Barak proud in closed conversations”, *Haaretz*, 22 November 2012.

¹⁴¹ *Ynet*, 21 November 2012.

¹⁴² Among the imprecision: which crossings are due to open and when? What kind of goods will be allowed to be exported and imported and in which direction? Does the agreement allow Gazans to travel to Israel and to the West Bank?

- ❑ An Egyptian negotiation with Israel on a possible increase in troop and armament levels permitted in eastern Sinai through the Agreed Activities Mechanism of the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty. Should that prove insufficient, Cairo and Jerusalem could contemplate reopening the treaty's military annex. In turn, the Sinai Peninsula would need the benefits of a full development package to help stabilise the situation;
- ❑ establishment of a monitoring mechanism to ensure compliance with various undertakings. One possibility would be for Egypt, Qatar and Turkey to dispatch observers to Gaza; because their support is so vital to Hamas, they arguably would make it more difficult and costly for Hamas to disregard its obligations.¹⁴³ Likewise, some have suggested the EU form a maritime monitoring force to inspect deliveries to a reopened Gaza port¹⁴⁴ or have a presence on the Gaza/Egypt border to help reduce weapons smuggling;¹⁴⁵
- ❑ consideration by these Arab states and Turkey of other steps to facilitate Gaza's economic normalisation and deepen Hamas's political integration in the region under the logic that this would give Gazans and the Islamist movement more to lose if the ceasefire broke down. This could entail a promise to rebuild destroyed government infrastructure in Gaza; construction of a port; and upgraded representation for Hamas in various capitals. Among other benefits, these steps might attract investment and enable the \$450 million in projects financed by Qatar to proceed; and
- ❑ renewed efforts, mediated by the same trio, to reach and implement a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, leading to the establishment of a unified government and new elections. One upshot would be to allow a PA presence at the crossings, fulfilling a core Ramallah demand also articulated by the U.S. and Is-

rael.¹⁴⁶ By being engaged in this endeavour, Hamas's regional allies could draw the Islamist movement toward a more political profile and the West to deal with it accordingly. More broadly, and as argued elsewhere by Crisis Group, Palestinian reconciliation and the national movement's re-stitching are preconditions for resuming a credible peace process. Such a process would have to be radically restructured – bringing in new constituencies, new solutions, and a new cast of mediators – to take account of the no less radical changes that have affected Israelis, Palestinians, and the region as a whole.¹⁴⁷

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¹⁴³ A U.S. expert, Lara Friedman, has proposed an alternative, based on the UN mission that monitored the Israeli-Lebanese border. "Obama can also help by spearheading the establishment of an internationally-backed oversight and grievance-resolution mechanism, like the Israel-Lebanon Monitoring Group, established following the 1996 Lebanon War. Such a step would require Obama to accept engagement, direct or indirect, with Hamas (something Israel has already started doing, like when it negotiated with Hamas for the release of Gilad Shalit)". Lara Friedman, "Only the U.S. can broker peace", *The New York Times*, 20 November 2012.

¹⁴⁴ Former Israeli NSC Head Giora Eiland argued such an agreement could allow European Union member states to send dinghies supervised by their national police forces to Gaza's port. See Eli Ashkenazi, "Giora Eiland: Removal of sea blockade in exchange for security arrangement", *Haaretz*, 18 November 2012.

¹⁴⁵ According to a European official, Israel has raised the possibility of a European presence in the Sinai. Crisis Group interview, 21 November 2012.

¹⁴⁶ The Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority stands to benefit from opening the crossings: were Gaza trade to increase, the PA would collect more tax clearance revenues. Israel, as specified in the Paris Protocols, collects the revenues and remits them to the PA in Ramallah.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°122, *The Emperor Has no Clothes: Palestinians and the End of the Peace Process*, 7 May 2012.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF ISRAEL/WEST BANK/GAZA



APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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APPENDIX C

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APPENDIX D

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