

NOREF Expert Analysis

Gaza war II: Hamas's tough choices

Khalil Shikaki

Executive summary

The November 2012 Gaza war has confronted Hamas with two contradictory impulses: abandon Iran in favour of gaining a de facto state in Gaza or cement its relations with Iran, but lose the momentum to build a state in Gaza. A decision to abandon Iran would weaken Hamas's ability to confront Israel in the inevitable next round of hostilities. A decision to stay with Iran would

threaten to constrain the ability of the Islamist group to capitalise on its perceived victory and the considerable support it is currently receiving from its Sunni allies in the Arab world for the recognition of its de facto state in Gaza. The policies that Israel will now pursue might ultimately tilt the scale and help Hamas make up its mind.

Khalil Shikaki is a professor of political science and director of the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research (Ramallah). He has a PhD in political science from Columbia University and has taught at several Palestinian and U.S. universities. His research has focused on the peace process, Palestinian state-building, public opinion, the transition to democracy and the impact of domestic Palestinian politics on the peace process. His recent publications include "Coping with the Arab Spring: Palestinian domestic and regional ramifications" (*Middle East Brief* no. 58) and *Public Opinion in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Public Imperative during the Second Intifada*, with Yaacov Shamir (Indiana University Press).

This time around, in Gaza war II of November 2012 – Operation Pillar of Defence – Hamas emerged victorious; at least, this is how most Palestinians and Arabs feel. This is the first time in history that a Palestinian faction has managed to fire rockets at Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, deter Israel from launching a ground offensive, and reach a quick ceasefire after only eight days of fighting. But now Hamas faces a tough challenge: what to do with this victory.

The truce is likely to be of limited duration, will be marred by continued interruptions and will allow the Islamist group to rebuild its rocket arsenal rapidly. In the meantime Israel will continue to plan for the next limited/unlimited war against Hamas and Gaza. A durable ceasefire, one that lasts for years with few or no interruptions, requires Israel to be willing to engage Hamas at a political level, recognise Hamas's control over Gaza and facilitate Hamas's efforts to consolidate and expand that control. It is highly unlikely that Israel is ready for such a deal at present. Thus, while the current ceasefire allows Hamas to emerge a winner, Israel too will declare victory and both sides will start preparing for the next war.

For Hamas, meanwhile, the conclusion of Gaza war II brings into sharp focus two issues it now needs to address: the future of its relations with Iran and the chances for transforming the Gaza Strip into a de facto state under its control, one that has full access to Egypt and the rest of the world.

Regarding the first issue, the aftermath of the Gaza war confronts Hamas with questions about the wisdom and viability of its realignment policy away from Iran, Syria and Hizbullah and toward Egypt, Jordan and Qatar, a process that was triggered by the Arab Spring and engineered by the organisation's head, Khalid Misha'al.

On the one hand, the war underscores Hamas's near total reliance on Iranian arms and technology transfer, without which its ability to stand up to Israel would have been greatly reduced. Particularly important in this latest round has been the organisation's use of long-range missiles and Israel's reluctance to use ground forces, in part for fear of casualties among its forces, fears that must have been heightened by the recent use by

the Islamists of anti-tank missiles that were much more advanced than those used by Hamas four years ago in Operation Cast Lead. Hamas might now conclude that it cannot afford to abandon the only supplier of these arms and this technology, Iran; thus the group might soon find itself back in the arms of Iran.

On the other hand, the war generated great sympathy for Hamas in the Arab world, particularly in Egypt – sympathy that Hamas can now capitalise on to speed up its process of state-building in the Gaza Strip. Already in the wake of the Arab Spring the Sunni Arab countries of Egypt, Qatar and Jordan, hoping to pull Hamas away from Iran, have offered it all kinds of incentives. But the Hamas leadership in Gaza has always resisted this pull and fought against it, wanting instead to have its cake (i.e. maintain its alliance with Iran, Syria and Hizbullah) and eat it too (i.e. gain all it can politically and financially from improved relations with Egypt, Qatar and Jordan). Egypt, by opening the international crossing with Gaza for the movement of people and the opening of an official relationship with Gaza's government, and Qatar, by the official visit of its emir to Gaza and its \$400 million investment in the Gaza Strip economy, have signalled to Hamas that its future lies with the Sunni Arabs, not Shia Iran. A de facto Hamas state in Gaza is therefore an alternative to a Hamas dependent on Iran.

The missing piece in this picture, however, is the Israeli position, and it is in fact this that may well determine where Hamas will go from here. In his election campaign in 2009 Binyamin Netanyahu argued that the only way to stop fire from Gaza was by ending Hamas's control over the Gaza Strip. But since then the Goldstone Report has highlighted the high costs involved in such a strategy and the Iron Dome has provided a relatively effective defensive shield. Indeed, the goal of ending Hamas's role in Gaza was not among those articulated by Israel for its latest war against Hamas. Nonetheless, Israel launched Pillar of Defence because it did not want to make a far-reaching political deal with Hamas, one that would end the siege of Gaza and allow the organisation to consolidate its control over the Gaza Strip. Yet only when Israel is ready for such a deal is Hamas likely to feel that it is feasible to fully abandon its alliance with Iran.

In the aftermath of Gaza war II Israel might have reached the conclusion that it cannot destroy Hamas, but it still wants to hurt it and keep it on its toes, preventing it from consolidating its control over Gaza. Hamas might have now reached the conclusion that its strength lies in its ability to hurt the Israelis, thereby limiting Israel's military options. In the long run, however, Hamas will be stronger when it becomes clear that Israel's future options do not involve war against the organisation in Gaza. But Israel too will be stronger when it becomes clear that Hamas's future options are also limited and that they do not involve a continued alliance with Iran.