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Anything but 1701, Anything but 1860

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Given the history of its military campaigns in recent years, Israel likely launched Operation Protective Edge bereft of a political exit strategy, a set of political goals, or any preliminary decision about what constitutes a required minimal political outcome. Consequently, Israel stands to emerge from the current round of hostilities with no significant achievement save new internal debates and frustrations that will continue until the next round. The enemy will buy itself another lull that it can use to recharge its batteries, restock its inventories, and rearm in advance of the next conflict.

This is the pattern common to both arenas in which Israel has faced two organizations that are a cross between what is for all intents and purposes a state, even without the formal status, and a sub-state organization that has assumed the right to decide when and under what circumstances it will use the military force at its disposal.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701, dated August 11, 2006, ended the Second Lebanon War. Many regard it as the least of all possible evils, and attribute the relative quiet since then on the Israel-Lebanon border to the restoration of Israel's deterrence, achieved, inter alia, by the enormous destruction caused to Hizbollah's military and political infrastructure and Lebanon's economic infrastructure. Based on the test of time and the duration of the lull, the operation can be considered a success. At the same time, Hizbollah has rearmed and fortified itself, and in this respect has actually improved its situation, in total disregard of Resolution 1701, which stipulates that all non-state organizations in Lebanon must be disarmed and the entry of weapons and ammunition into Lebanon without the Lebanese government's approval must be prevented.

The situation is similar, albeit not identical, to what has emerged in the Gaza Strip. Operation Cast Lead, which included the entry of IDF ground forces into Gaza, ended ten days after the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1860, dated January 8, 2009. The operation and the resolution gave Israel less than four years of relative quiet, culminating in another military campaign in late 2012, followed by a short lull that lasted until July 2014. Hamas exploited the two lulls for rearmament and fortification, in

violation of Resolution 1860 and the understandings reached with Egyptian mediation toward the end of Operation Pillar of Defense.

An end to the current round with resolutions and understandings similar to the above-mentioned Security Council resolutions would constitute a political and security failure for Israel. They will not weaken Hamas, which in any case will portray the situation at the end of the fighting as a success, nor will they prevent Hamas' rearmament; furthermore, a large proportion of the rockets launched against Israel are now self-produced. Only a radical change in the behavior of the various actors in the Gaza theater is likely to bring about a change in the situation, and the chances of such a change are not good.

Some of Israel's dilemmas have been known for a long time, while some have been created by the regional upheaval and the changes of regime in Egypt, which is a key element in the effort to achieve a political resolution to the current conflict. The first dilemma concerns Israel's strategy and the means to pursue. If the strategic goal is to maintain the separation between Gaza and the political entity to arise in the West Bank, then Israel has no interest in strengthening the status of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Gaza at the expense of Hamas. Moreover, strengthening the PA in Gaza would require a long term plan based on massive economic reconstruction, which can occur only with the participation and cooperation of Israel, the Palestinians, Egypt, the Arab world, and international players. Ostensibly, each of these parties has an interest in promoting such a plan of action. Israel can attempt an alternative to the use of military force on a small model, in other words test the theory that economic development will create an interest in coexistence on the other side.

Egypt has an interest in rebuilding its political standing in the internal Egyptian arena, the internal Arab arena, and the international arena. It may also be able to benefit from some of the financial resources channeled to Gaza's infrastructure development in Egyptian territory: a seaport, airport, power plant, desalinization facilities, and so on. Hamas will have to choose between a rejection of the development strategy, i.e., maintaining its position through force and coercion, and an understanding that it must allow for a government in Gaza acceptable to all the regional and international actors, and perhaps be a partner in it. The main dilemma for the PA is whether it is willing to approach the Gaza issue separately from the political process. Conversely, Israel faces the internal battle of persuading those demanding decisive military action against Hamas, including the stiffening of economic and other sanctions against it, to soften this position. However, it is difficult to prove that the policy of sanctions adopted by Israel against the Hamas government, and indirectly against its people, has achieved the goal of stopping terrorism from Gaza. The assumption that an ongoing military campaign accompanied by a tighter blockade would lead to a different result is far from certain.

In a letter to his colleagues, the Israeli foreign minister demanded the dissolution of the Fatah-Hamas unity government. Abu Mazen, despite his courageous statements during the crisis since the kidnapping and murder of the three Israeli boys, will presumably be unable or unwilling to meet this condition. Hamas, therefore, should be weakened by other means.

Another dilemma facing the Israeli government concerns the role it would like Egypt to fill. For Israel, Egyptian mediation is preferable to mediation by Turkey or Qatar, and even to indirect American mediation. By definition, however, Egyptian mediation requires the softening of the position taken by the Egyptian regime since the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted from power; indeed, the regime is generally determined to limit the freedom of action of parties identified with movements having a religious political tinge. Any ceasefire arrangement with a reasonable chance of success will require determined efforts to end the smuggling of arms into the Gaza Strip. At the same time, an Egyptian mediator is liable to assess the situation differently and show more “flexibility” than the Egyptian government. The gap between these Israeli and Egyptian interests should be coordinated in the existing channels for dialogue between the two countries in order to avoid future friction as much as possible.

It is questionable whether Israel, even if it decides on a multi-strategy course, will be able to formulate it within a short time. On the other hand, adopting such a strategy would yield Israel immediate political achievements, with an additional chance of achievements in the longer term. Israel should therefore seek to devise a three-stage plan: an immediate ceasefire – limited in time and accepted by all the parties; internal discussion in Israel on a long term exit strategy; and a political dialogue with all the relevant parties in the region and in the international arena, with the aim of eventual adoption of a suitable plan in an agreed forum, be it the UN, an international conference, or a combination of the two. The alternative to a different strategy is another UN Security Council resolution whose value will be no greater than Resolutions 1701 and 1860.

