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Israel-Hamas: Conditions for a Stable Ceasefire

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At 9:00 A.M. on July 15, 2014, Israel's security cabinet accepted the Egyptian proposal for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and other elements in the Gaza Strip, and for the establishment of a framework toward formulation of understandings. Hamas rejected the proposal and continued to fire rockets at Israel. After a six-hour period in which Israel held its fire over Gaza even while Hamas attacks were underway, Israel resumed airstrikes, striking launchers and other terror-related targets, and threatened to expand the military campaign. Meanwhile, efforts to reach a ceasefire continued. Hamas announced that it had yet to formulate a final position on a ceasefire, and in any event, wanted to include Turkey and Qatar, which are more supportive of Hamas than many potential mediators, including Egypt.

Assuming that Hamas will ultimately accept the Egyptian proposal for a ceasefire, even if with minor adjustments and guaranteed by an external party, the question arises whether conditions for a ceasefire and new understandings are indeed sufficiently ripe.

Israel is emerging from this round of conflict in a much better position than is Hamas. Iron Dome is Israel's winning card; it has successfully intercepted most of the rockets targeting population centers, and provided a broad air defense envelope above most of Israel's population centers. Israel has also successfully foiled all of Hamas' attempts to conduct a strategic strike from the sea, air, and underground. Regarding offense, Israel has caused heavy damage to Hamas' infrastructure for production, storage, and launching of ground-to-ground missiles, destroyed about a third of its rocket arsenal, killed nearly 100 Hamas and Islamic Jihad operatives, and destroyed command and control positions and houses belonging to Hamas' military wing commanders.

Hamas initiated the current round of conflict out of desperation, with nothing to lose, as the only way to stop the downward spiral in its situation. The escalation was designed to demonstrate its ability to inflict damage, mainly to the Israeli home front, and to undermine stability over an area of the Middle East encompassing Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the West Bank. Thus far Hamas' only achievement is the demonstration of its ability

to launch ongoing missile barrages deep within Israeli territory, including the Dan region, up to Haifa in the north, and Jerusalem in the east, while disrupting daily life in Israel. All of Hamas' attempts to stage a strategic attack have only highlighted the extent of the failure of the military wing.

Notwithstanding the uncontrolled deterioration into the conflict, both sides have shared a joint interest in preventing a broad escalation, and the understanding that Israel does not wish to overthrow Hamas' rule in the Gaza Strip, given the absence of a relevant substitute and concern that the extremist jihad groups would penetrate the resulting vacuum. This interest quelled the political pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu to quickly expand the conflict into a large scale ground operation deep within the Gaza Strip. Consequently, as proponents of expanding the operation have claimed, there is as yet no semblance of a decisive Israeli victory, and it is difficult to translate Israel's penalty shootout victory into a visible political achievement.

The end mechanisms and the ultimate arrangement are meant to promote the strategic goals of both sides. Israel chose to mark Hamas as the responsible party in the Gaza Strip, while conducting a sustained effort to weaken it but without eliminating its rule. Israel has therefore defined the goal of Operation Protective Edge as improving the security situation in Israel by halting the fire at its territory (quiet in exchange for quiet), rebuilding deterrence in order to lengthen the interval until the next round of conflict, preventing Hamas' rehabilitation and buildup, and improving its capability to locate and destroy the attack tunnels designed for infiltration into Israel and attacks on Israeli soil. For its part, Hamas' goal is to reposition itself as a powerful actor capable of controlling the Gaza Strip, and to enhance its stature in Egyptian and Israeli eyes. Hamas also seeks to ease the blockade on the Gaza Strip through expanded movement through the border crossings to Israel, continuous opening of the Rafah crossing to Egypt, the transfer of money to Gaza, expansion of Gaza's fishing area, and better conditions for trade and agriculture.

The reference point for formulating an arrangement to end the current round of conflict is the set of understandings reached upon the conclusion of Operation Pillar of Defense. However, these understandings do not meet the demands of either side on a number of levels. Each side fears the lack of guarantees that the respective obligations will be implemented; Israel demands a more effective mechanism to prevent the production and smuggling of rockets and missiles in the Gaza Strip; and Israel demands expanded freedom of action in the security perimeter within the Gaza Strip, in order to locate and destroy the attack tunnels leading into Israel. Hamas is demanding the removal of the blockade, the opening of the border crossings (with an emphasis on the Rafah border crossing to Egypt), extension of agricultural fields up to the Gaza border, the transfer of funds, and economic development in the Gaza Strip. Toward the end of the fighting and

the formulation of understandings, the two parties can agree as a first stage to a ceasefire. Once there is calm, the blockade can be relaxed and a series of actions to improve the economic situation in the Gaza Strip can be agreed upon. This will be presented as a Hamas achievement, but does not contradict the Israeli interest in reinforcing stability.

Egypt has a key role in mediating a ceasefire and formulating and implementing understandings. The Egypt of President el-Sisi hesitated between ending Hamas' rule in Gaza and its realization that Israel does not want this, and that it must take Israel's security needs into account. At the same time, Egypt is interested in reducing as much as possible its responsibility and obligations to the Gaza Strip in general and Hamas in particular. Initially, it appeared that Egypt believed that time was on its side, especially as the two sides attacked each other and Hamas refused to discuss a ceasefire. Once Cairo, however, became aware of mediation efforts through other channels, particularly Qatar and Turkey, el-Sisi decided to take up the mediation challenge, and thereby seek three central gains for Egypt: positioning Egypt as a regional leader and the only actor capable of ending the conflict; improving its relations with the US; and strengthening Abbas and restoring the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Gaza by means of an agreement to open the Rafah border crossing only if operated by the PA, security conditions permitting. Egypt is subsequently expected to demand the deployment of PA forces between Gaza and Egypt, as well as additional measures that will intensify PA involvement in the Gaza Strip.

Israel does not want Hamas to emerge from the operation with a sense that it earned legitimacy and restored its stature, and it must therefore take care to maintain a delicate balance between measures that would be implemented in any case, such as a solution to the problem of salaries in the Gaza Strip, increased movement of goods at the Kerem Shalom crossing, and an opened Rafah crossing under Egyptian supervision; and issues with symbolic significance that Hamas can use to claim victory, such as the release of those arrested during Operation Brother's Keeper in the West Bank. Presumably a large number of those detained will be released in any case after the investigation against them has been completed because there is no proof of their guilt, but Israel should not agree to their release as part of the understandings.

An essential factor that could stabilize the situation and strengthen the mutual interest in a ceasefire and the implementation of the understandings is a detailed economic program for improving the economic situation in the Gaza Strip binding on Israel, the PA (and through it Hamas), Egypt, the international community, and Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The economic aid must focus on construction of civilian and economic infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, dealing with water; sewage and purification; electricity, including gas production from the Gazan marine shelf; civilian construction under international supervision; verification that the building materials are not used for construction of underground tunnels and infrastructure for

Hamas; expansion of fishing space and marine agriculture; increased movement through the border crossings; and more. Money transfers must be supervised, so that they are not wasted on paying salaries to a long list of corrupt public employees, most of whom do not serve the public.

In the long term, Israel should promote several opportunities: (1) sustaining the pressure on Hamas, to ensure that it remains weak, isolated, and restrained. Egypt will assume an important role in curtailing Hamas opportunities to restore and renew its rocket arsenal; (2) including Abbas and the PA in the understandings. Insofar as Abbas prevented the Gaza violence from igniting the West Bank, the Israeli government should realize that Abbas is a partner for partial understandings and arrangements that are not a permanent agreement. In this framework, a joint effort should be made with Egypt to gradually restore the PA in Gaza, at first through responsibility for the border crossings, followed by essential jobs in the realm of security and economic and civilian spheres; (3) revisiting the possibility of governmental change in Gaza, which will underscore to Hamas that its control over Gaza has no insurance policy; (4) improving intelligence and operational capabilities against Hamas' underground combat assets.

