



INSS Insight No. 578, July 24, 2014

Operation Protective Edge and a Fragile Regional Arena

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Operation Protective Edge and the talks that are supposed to end it have brought the political and ideological fault lines in the Middle East into sharp relief. The mediation attempts demonstrate the extent to which the countries involved in the ceasefire negotiations have different political agendas, as well as opposing ideologies and interests. While firmly held ideologies and weighty interests are not an obstacle per se to success in mediation, it seems that they are complicating the efforts of the regional players as they attempt to achieve a ceasefire.

The two primary camps currently comprising the regional mosaic are the actors identified with political Islam – Qatar, Turkey, and Hamas, which oppose a coalition led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which view the Muslim Brotherhood – and Hamas, one of its radical manifestations – as a serious threat to their security and stability. These nations, which have outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, want Hamas to exit the conflict it started in as weakened and beaten a state as possible. Therefore, Hamas has been harshly criticized for its conduct. Moreover, Hamas thus far has received the least amount of support from Arab states, compared to the support it garnered in previous military confrontations with Israel.

The blow to Hamas' standing antedates the current round of fighting, being related first and foremost to the leadership change in Egypt. The el-Sisi regime wants to prevent Hamas from scoring any significant gains in the current military operation and seeks to further Hamas' political and economic isolation, even at the cost of extending the conflict. While Egypt has condemned the escalating Israeli actions and demanded that Israel "strive for a maximal measure of restraint," the Egyptian castigation of Hamas has been much more severe. Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sameh Shoukry stated that Hamas could have saved Palestinian lives had it accepted the Egyptian initiative. At the same time, as the ground incursion continues, voices in the domestic Egyptian arena have been calling for easing the suffering of the Palestinians and opening the Rafah crossing, and these have moved the Egyptian leadership to show greater flexibility in its contacts with Hamas.

Of the regional actors relevant to ending the campaign, Qatar, whose concurrent mediation attempt was welcomed by Turkey, is likely the most supportive of Hamas and the ideology it represents, and therefore, together with Turkey, is the player with most influence on the organization. Khaled Mashal, head of Hamas' political bureau, lives in Doha, and Qatar provides most of the organization's financing. Furthermore, al-Jazeera, the Qatari-owned television network, labors to promote the Hamas narrative. The United States, which at first took no direct part in the talks, supported Qatar's involvement because of American economic and security interests in the emirate, Doha's influence over Hamas, and the cool relations between Washington and Cairo. This stance countered the position of both Israel and Egypt, which (in coordination with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and with their backing), sought to reduce the Qatari role. The visit by Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim to the Saudi King on July 22, 2014 was meant to find a way to reach a ceasefire agreement in Gaza, as tension between the two regional actors over this issue rose to a high level (and it is most likely that in this meeting the Saudis tried to pressure Qatar heavily to compel Hamas to agree to a ceasefire and to tunnel all mediation efforts through Egypt). The arrival by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in Saudi Arabia on July 23, 2014 might also signal greater Saudi involvement.

Qatar and Turkey, both of which have endorsed most of Hamas' demands, are not only interested in preserving Hamas' rule over Gaza and maximizing the organization's success in the current fighting with Israel, but are also trying to sideline Egypt. The enmity between Doha and the el-Sisi regime predates the current conflict and has to do with struggles over prestige and status in the inter-Arab arena, and especially with the support Sheikh Hamed and his son and successor Sheikh Tamim gave to the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates in the region.

Similarly, since the ouster of Mohamed Morsi, Turkey has refused to accept Egypt's new regime. In November 2013, after Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan made some particularly egregious comment on the el-Sisi regime, Egypt expelled the Turkish ambassador to Egypt. Indeed, Turkey currently has no ambassador in Cairo, Tel Aviv, or Damascus, and analysts have cited this as one of the reasons for Turkey's waning influence in the region. Even in the early days of Operation Protective Edge, and certainly since the growing stridency of Turkey's criticism of Israel, it is highly doubtful that there was ever a chance of any mediation effort with Turkish involvement in the current round of hostilities. Turkey's working assumption is that the roots of the current Israeli operation in Gaza lie in Israel's attempt to undermine the intra-Palestinian attempts at reconciliation and topple the unity government. Therefore, Turkey places the full blame for the outbreak of the fighting on Israel's doorstep.

The political and economic isolation of Hamas by most of Arab nations – isolation that to a large extent motivated the organization to begin the current round in the first place – is

reminiscent of the response of some of these states to Hizbollah in the Second Lebanon War. Then there were many comments criticizing Hizbollah's "adventure" that caused death and destruction to Lebanese citizens. Now too, Hamas' rivals in the moderate Sunni camp accuse the organization of acting irresponsibly, damaging Palestinian interests, and abdicating their responsibility for the welfare of Palestinian citizens. The Egyptian Foreign Minister even accused Qatar and Turkey of attempting to undermine the Egyptian mediation initiative and deny Egypt its status as leader in this regard.

Another important factor is the timing of the fighting between Israel and Hamas. The security agendas of several of the regional actors focus on serious threats to their stability, which are linked to implications of the security status in several arenas that from their perspective are just as important, if not more important, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain. Yet as the ground incursion widens, the anti-Israel demonstrations in some Muslim countries have become more vocal and violent. Official spokespeople are also criticizing Israel's conduct, especially the ground maneuver in the Gaza Strip, saying it exacerbates the harm to innocent civilians.

Among the Muslim countries, Turkey is leading the aggressive anti-Israel line. Erdogan has condemned Israel's action, claiming Israel has been engaged in a systematic genocide of Palestinians since 1948. He has even said that as long as he is in office, there will be no improvement in relations with Israel. Given that he envisions himself serving as Turkey's president for the next decade, there is a great deal of significance to this declaration. And while Erdogan represents the hawkish line on Israel, extremely harsh criticism of Israel is a staple of the entire Turkish political spectrum, and includes threats to the Jewish community in Turkey.

It seems that the multiplicity of players with competing agendas involved in the current round of fighting has already resulted in extension of the operation, due to the pressure Qatar and Turkey applied to Hamas to reject Egypt's mediation initiative that Israel accepted, as well as Hamas' inherent difficulty in accepting Egyptian mediation of any sort given the antipathy toward the el-Sisi administration. The upheavals in the Arab world of recent years have seriously eroded its ability to come together, even on an issue where in the past consensus was the easiest to achieve – criticism of Israel in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Operation Protective Edge has not only highlighted the rifts in the Muslim world, but appears to have aggravated them further.

