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A Unilateral Move: Preferable to a Bad Agreement with a Terrorist Organization

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This past weekend, the Israeli government significantly changed its military and political strategy vis-à-vis Hamas in Gaza. Midway through the fourth week of Operation Protective Edge, Israel faced four strategic alternatives in order to attain the operation's objectives:

1. End the operation unilaterally, similar to Operation Cast Lead (2009).
2. Accept a mutual ceasefire and negotiated agreement, similar to Operation Pillar of Defense (2012).
3. Expand the operation, by air and on land, to heighten the attack on the Hamas military wing (an alternative I recommended).
4. Occupy the Gaza Strip and topple Hamas in order to thoroughly cleanse the Gaza Strip of terrorism in what would necessarily be an extended campaign (a far from desirable alternative, which incurs very high costs and means that Israel returns to govern over 1.7 million Palestinians).

From the point when talk of exit strategies began, a fundamental disagreement between Israel and Hamas emerged. The framework Israel sought was, first and foremost, an end to the fighting – “calm for calm” – followed by negotiations with Egyptian mediation toward an agreement. By contrast, Hamas – fighting for the strategic goal of lifting the siege of Gaza, along with additional and unacceptable demands – was not prepared to commit to a ceasefire before determining the principles of the arrangement to follow.

Until this past weekend, in every debate held, the Israeli cabinet opted for the second alternative, i.e., a mutual ceasefire and arrangement, based on acceptance of the Egyptian ceasefire proposal or a UN-initiated humanitarian ceasefire, to be followed by discussions in Cairo with Hamas about the terms of the arrangement for the short and mid-terms. Aside from the problem of concluding an agreement with a terrorist organization and the problematic history of Hamas' force buildup following previous arrangements, it seemed impossible to achieve a good or even reasonable arrangement under the strategic conditions in which Hamas was relating “the story of its victory.”

The cabinet met on Friday evening, August 1, 2014, against the background of the difficult humanitarian crisis and the growing number of civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip, which were intensifying criticism of Israel and placing it in a difficult position vis-à-vis the international community and the United States. The UN secretary-general and US Secretary of State had made it clear to Israel that it had no choice but to agree to a 72-hour humanitarian ceasefire, which Israel did. Hamas' flagrant violation of the ceasefire – the attack on Givati Brigade's reconnaissance forces and the attempted abduction of 2nd Lt. Hadar Goldin – enabled Israel to change its strategic position and choose an alternative that, at least in the short term, places Hamas in a difficult strategic position. Israel regained international legitimacy for its actions; Hamas was again cast as a terrorist organization lacking all credibility that for the sixth time violated a ceasefire that Egypt and the international community initiated and Israel accepted.

Changing strategic course, Israel decided to deny Hamas veto power over ceasefires and took the initiative back into its own hands, clarifying that it was not negotiating with Hamas and not granting it any achievement, neither in terms of a ceasefire nor in terms of an agreement. Israel rejected the familiar “time is on Hamas' side” mantra, bringing its asymmetrical advantages to bear on the campaign, including stamina, economic power, military might, and the resilience of Israeli society that was not deterred by the casualties sustained and provided remarkable support for the IDF and government. Hamas was left incapable of threatening to escalate events further. After Israel provided an excellent operational response to Hamas' rocket fire and destroyed its attack tunnels, it is now disengaging from areas in which its soldiers are vulnerable to attacks and abductions.

By this Israel establishes four premises that present Hamas with a new strategic situation:

1. The demands for which Hamas went to war are no longer on the table. Hamas is left without the siege being lifted, without an airport or seaport, without salaries, without prisoner releases, and without the reconstruction of Gaza. Its situation is far worse now than it was at the beginning of the fighting.
2. Hamas is left with a Gaza in ruins, a humanitarian crisis, hundreds of dead, thousands of wounded, and one-quarter of a million refugees. Hamas is responsible for a tsunami of destruction in Gaza and has no way to deal with it. The Gaza public, which was promised numerous benefits – promises that cannot be met without an agreement – will presumably want to settle scores with Hamas.
3. If Hamas continues to fire at Israel, despite Israel's vastly superior firepower, Israel will continue to pummel Hamas, no longer by attacking empty training camps but by attacking Hamas' most important targets. The political and military leadership of Hamas will continue to live in underground bunkers, and be hard pressed to broadcast credible claims of imaginary victories. Similarly, Hamas

- leaders will have to explain to the Gazan public why they brought additional destruction on Gaza instead of resolving the humanitarian crisis.
4. Unlike in previous rounds of fighting, Israel and Egypt will ensure that Hamas will be unable to rebuild its force – Egypt by continuing to prevent smuggling and Israel by the freedom of action it has reserved itself in a unilateral move in which it decides the rules of the game, chiefly, the of prevention of Hamas’ force buildup.

This move on Israel’s part may interface with two of Hamas’ strategic approaches and force Israel to reformulate its strategy so as to attain its own strategic goals:

1. Joining the unilateral ceasefire, similar to what occurred in Operation Cast Lead, based on an understanding of its loss of military measures against Israel, the depth of the humanitarian crisis, and the wishes of the Gazan public. In this scenario, Hamas will try to reach an agreement with Egypt and the Palestinian Authority and impose it on Israel. Hamas will try to use the humanitarian crisis to gain international assistance and regain the international and Arab sympathy it lost in this campaign. At the same time, Hamas will try to promote an agreement to ease the siege of Gaza, and Israel will gain the calm it tried to attain. Israel’s other objectives – strengthening deterrence and weakening Hamas – will have to stand the test of time.
2. Continuing the level of fire at Israel as of the past month: This approach will force the Israeli government – in case the military campaign fails to provide a sufficient response and Hamas’ military capabilities do not ebb sufficiently – to reconsider the option of expanding the military operation. A significant expansion of the operation could then be more carefully planned, enjoy a greater element of surprise, and be free of the need to deal with the attack tunnels. Hamas could choose the “drizzle option,” i.e., returning to the situation of limited fire on the Israeli communities bordering the Gaza Strip, in order to preserve its position as an armed resistance organization, though without the risk of dragging Israel into an extensive move. In such a case, Israel will have to make it clear to Hamas that the policy of response preceding Operation Protective Edge is no longer valid and that any fire will be met with an extreme response. Should the drizzle continue, expanding the operation can be reconsidered, and if that occurs, Hamas will begin from a far weaker position.

Unilateral withdrawal of its ground forces provides Israel with a greater variety of options. Israel can continue to attack Hamas and weaken it; the move provides an opportunity for a ceasefire, followed by an extended period of calm; it allows the formulation of international and regional cooperation to handle the Gaza problem; and it also allows reaching understandings and making arrangements with the PA and Hamas

via Egypt. The unilateral move can succeed only if it is closely coordinated with the United States and Egypt. Coordination with Egypt would be based on the shared antagonism to Hamas and the common desire to undermine Hamas and change the regime in Gaza. Coordination with the United States would be conditional on Israel's willingness to make progress in the political process in the medium term. Converging Israeli and US interests seek to deny Hamas any achievements, encourage the Palestinians who do not support the use of terrorism and violence, and weaken Hamas to the point where it is replaced by a more moderate regime.

The unilateral move is useful for the immediate and mid-terms. In the immediate future, the test will be the willingness of Israelis to return to their homes near the Gaza Strip. In the longer term, after the smoke has cleared and strategic trends have emerged, the alternative of seeking an agreement should be revisited. Indeed, in the future, it will be necessary to examine the viability of attaining a "good agreement" that prevents Hamas' force buildup and ties the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip to its demilitarization. If such an agreement is reached, it would then be a suitable replacement for the unilateral move. Now, however, Israel's unilateral move is a better alternative than the "bad agreement" Hamas currently advocates.

