

After Gaza, what's next for Israel?

By Noam Sheizaf

■ Executive summary

The status quo in the Occupied Territories is the common denominator that all major political forces in Israel agree on, but maintaining it requires the use of more and more military force, as the latest assault on Gaza has demonstrated. The challenge that could force a radical transformation on the ground might not be the instability in Gaza, but rather the vulnerability of the Palestinian Authority (PA). The deep understanding in Israel – supported by some public opinion polls – is that the status quo represents the best short-term “solution” to the Palestinian problem, since complete separation is almost impossible, but complete integration is undesirable.

The weakening of the PA and the inability of Hamas and Israel to reach a stable agreement in Gaza demonstrate how unsustainable the status quo has become. The Gaza war might turn out not to be just another round of the same (violence), but a turning point in the conflict. Israel is not likely to change its policies on its own, but the challenges it faces – many resulting from its own actions – are simply too great to ignore.

Operation Protective Edge was the third wide-scale operation that Israel has conducted in Gaza in less than six years, and the deadliest of them all. At the time of writing (August 12th 2014), the death toll among Gazans was approaching 2,000 people; 67 Israelis were also killed, most of them soldiers. Even after a fragile ceasefire was reached, the Israeli and Palestinian delegations who met in Cairo were struggling to reach a more permanent agreement that would address the core problems in Gaza.

In fact, it seems that escalations of this kind are becoming more and more frequent: Protective Edge was preceded by another campaign (“Brother’s Keeper”) that saw a crack-down on Hamas’s political leadership and civilian infrastructure in the West Bank. Given the regional turmoil and the failure of U.S. secretary of state John Kerry’s peace process, many wonder whether this is the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: occupation, a permanent state of violence, and an endless cycle of ceasefires and assaults. The last month – and, indeed, the last year – clearly suggests so. But there are also signs that we have reached a turning point in the conflict, and the enormous violence of Protective Edge indicates a crisis in Israel’s policy of

maintaining the status quo, which even its own right-leaning political system will need to address eventually.

Status quo or a new reality?

Just like in the previous campaigns in Gaza, Israel’s stated goal in Operation Protective Edge was to basically restore things to where they were three months ago, when Hamas kept its rockets in the bunkers and prevented smaller groups from launching their own. Throughout the campaign Israel insisted on its “peace for peace” formula, i.e. government spokespeople and military sources explained that their goal was not to topple Hamas, but to reduce its offensive capabilities and deter it from attacking Israeli targets. Israeli negotiators in Cairo are still refusing to discuss substantial changes in the reality on the ground.

While circumstances in the West Bank are different from Gaza, Israeli policy goals are strikingly similar. Their object is to maintain the current system in place – the so-called status quo. During most of the Kerry process, the Israeli government preferred to conduct its negotiations with the U.S. team, and even then it avoided specifics on core

issues and presented far-reaching security demands that doomed the entire process.

When President Abbas formed his national unity government – opening the door to an Israeli agreement with the entire Palestinian people – Prime Minister Netanyahu's government chose to withdraw from the process and fall back to its "conflict management" or "containment" doctrine. Security officials and pundits began to define military campaigns as attempts to "mow the grass", meaning a repeated action that is required to maintain the status quo.

The term "status quo" itself is misleading, of course, since the last couple of decades have been anything but static in the Occupied Territories. The siege has turned Gaza into an open-air prison whose population completely depends on international aid and Israeli services and goods, while the settlements have completely transformed the West Bank's geography and population (currently every fifth person beyond the Green Line is an Israeli Jew).

Ironically, the Israeli government's own actions undermine the very order it tries to maintain. The siege, the settlements and the complete dependence of Palestinian civilian life on the decisions of the Israeli government and the civil administration of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) are the source of increased instability, which Israel has been dealing with through military action.

Benefits of the status quo

Two competing trends have been at play between pre-1967 Israel and the territories it captured in the Six Day War: separation and integration. The settlements have contributed to the process of integration; the security wall to that of separation. Settler leader Naftali Bennet, a senior coalition partner of Prime Minister Netanyahu, advocates integration, while Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman contemplates extreme ethnic separation, even among Israeli citizens. The so-called status quo is a hybrid of these forces.

The status quo does not represent an ideal state of affairs for Israelis, but it seems to many to be the least bad of three options (the other two are the two-state and one-state solutions). All final-status agreements will involve an intense political battle and a radical transformation of society, and will carry security risks, challenges to the integrity of the political system and considerable financial costs. Even the most promising agreement will only partially address these issues. The deep understanding in Israel – supported by some public opinion polls – is that the status quo represents the best short-term "solution" to the Palestinian challenge: complete separation is almost impossible, while complete integration is undesirable.

The status quo strategy involves a great deal of improvisation at every level of state policy. Israel probably never intended to separate the West Bank from Gaza – the Oslo

Accords treat them as a single unit – but the circumstances following Hamas's rise allowed Israel to create a new reality that facilitates its control over the Palestinians. Later, the diplomatic process itself became part of the status-quo effort. During the Kerry talks, Justice Minister Tzipi Livni went as far as saying that "if there is no Palestinian partner, then we need to make an agreement with the world". Such statements, which ignore Salam Fayad's state-building effort or West Bank leader Mahmoud Abbas's concessions on every core issue, are nevertheless common among Israeli elites.

No major political force in Israel is willing to make the kind of agreement that a credible Palestinian leadership could accept. Livni opposes even a symbolic Palestinian return, while Labour's Yitzhak Herzog is not far from the same position. All parties rule out negotiations with Hamas (although Herzog did entertain the idea of talking to the Palestinian unity government). No less striking is the unanimous support for military action in the Occupied Territories: opposition to the current military operation was so tiny as to be non-existent, and even the pro-peace liberal party, Meretz, did not call for the operation to end during its first month. More than ever, maintaining the status quo seems like a national strategy, and the regional turmoil provides a handy excuse for the Israeli government to embrace this strategy: with the collapse of regimes and countries on every side, who would want to take the risky step of handing full control of territory to a fragile Palestinian state?

Challenges to the status quo

But maintaining the status quo in a rapidly changing Middle East might not be as simple as it was in the past five years, as is demonstrated by the difficulty in reaching a ceasefire agreement with Hamas. Israel found common ground with the Egyptians and the Saudis due to Hamas being their mutual adversary, but the rifts between Israel and the U.S. administration and between Hamas and Cairo played a major part in the failure to end the fighting. Too many parties have a stake in the conflict and none of them is strong enough or credible enough to impose a deal.

Israel's real concern, however, should not be with Hamas, but with the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank. The PA functions both as a police force in the service of a foreign power and a civil administration for the Palestinians; practically, the current order of the occupation depends on it carrying out these functions. It also serves an important geopolitical function: without it, the Palestinian issue will no longer be seen as an "external" diplomatic problem, but as an internal one that is no different from the current insurgencies and challenges facing other Middle Eastern countries. Without the service provided by the PA, Israel stands to lose both international support – or what's left of it – and the sense of security most of its citizens currently enjoy.

With this in mind, the fact that no less than 17 Palestinians

were killed in the West Bank during protests that accompanied the Gaza war should have raised the alarm in Israel. Most observers rule out the possibility of a widespread Palestinian revolt against the IDF (the so-called “third Intifada”), but a wave of protest against the PA, which could have huge implications, is not unthinkable. Even without one, there is growing discomfort among the PA’s donors with their continued financing of what no longer seems like a state-building programme, but more like an occupation by proxy.

The vulnerability of the PA and the inability to reach a stable agreement in Gaza demonstrate how unsustainable the status quo has become. The Gaza war might turn out to

be not just another round of the same (violence), but rather a turning point in the conflict. Israel is unlikely to change its policies on its own, but the challenges it faces – many resulting from its own actions – are simply too great to ignore.

The international community should re-evaluate its strategy accordingly. In recent years its insistence on a Green Line-based, final-status, two-state solution became a part of the status quo rather than a vehicle for transformation on the ground. An updated approach should focus not on a possible endgame, but on the root causes of the essential problem – the occupation, and the lack of political and personal rights for Palestinians – by applying pressure relating to these specific issues and allowing the parties to come up with a political solution that would address them.

■ THE AUTHOR

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