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Essential Conditions for Successful Reconstruction of the Gaza Strip

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The negotiations in Cairo are marked by the difficult task of devising a formula that will allow both Israel and Hamas to credit themselves with a sense of achievement. It seems that Israel is hard pressed to achieve a formula for effective “reconstruction for demilitarization” inside the Gaza Strip, and will settle for establishing a mechanism designed to prevent Hamas force buildup that is separate from an agreement, for example, a UN Security Council resolution.

The infrastructure and economic reality in the Gaza Strip, which was in a state of crisis long before Operation Protective Edge, has deteriorated even further. Israel has an interest in working for the rapid reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, even though the image of an unrealized military achievement discourages Israel from enlisting in the reconstruction process, which will be seen as a strategic achievement for Hamas. Basic reconstruction of the Gaza Strip is likewise a vital element for the Palestinian state building process, and is an important lever for strengthening the Palestinian Authority and renewing the peace process. At the same time, it is also a fundamental test of the PA’s willingness, resolve, and executive ability. Problematic or inadequate performance by the PA in the Gaza Strip would be a warning as to the functional capabilities of the PA in state governance in the West Bank once an agreement is signed.

Since the disengagement in 2005, Israel’s strategic interest regarding the Gaza Strip has been to remove its responsibility for the Gaza population. Following Hamas’ takeover in 2007, Israel came to terms with Hamas as the party responsible for the Gaza population and for preventing terrorism and violence toward Israel from Gaza, despite ongoing concurrent efforts to deter Hamas and weaken it militarily. This interest dictated the rationale for Israel’s engagement in the three rounds of violence since 2008, but the outcome of Operation Protective Edge raises questions about the ongoing viability of that interest. Israel’s demand for Gaza’s demilitarization, despite the difficulties of implementation within Gaza, is vital for preventing Hamas’ strengthening and force buildup through outside assistance. In addition, it implies laying the groundwork to allow the PA’s return as the governing authority of the Gaza Strip and make the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip contingent on the PA leadership, and not Hamas.

What is Reconstruction of the Gaza Strip?

Reconstruction of the Gaza Strip cannot simply mean restoring the area to the status quo ante, and instead denotes a significant improvement in the economic and civilian reality compared to what existed before Operation Protective Edge. To this end, it is imperative to provide for the development of electricity, water, transportation, sewage, and health infrastructures; build industrial and employment centers; develop state institutions; enforce law and order; and realize the vision of PA President Abbas: “One authority, one law, one weapon.”

The process of reconstruction must be proceed in a fashion similar to a state building process, preferably under the leadership of an international task force authorized by a Security Council resolution. Such a task force could be led by an international agency established for this purpose, incorporating experts from the international community. In any case, one must envision a process lasting 5-10 years; this would also constitute a period of mentoring and guidance for the PA with the gradual transition of governmental authority to its shoulders. The advantage of a process led by a task force lies in the delineation of clear lines of responsibility, a central control of resources, and oversight for effective execution.

The West Bank cannot be left out of the process. Concurrent investments in the development and progress of the West Bank, toward Palestinian statehood, must also be made, in order to prevent a situation whereby Gaza flourishes by virtue of Hamas terrorism and the West Bank languishes for lack of a political process. In addition, assignment of a role to the PA in the Gaza border crossings will prompt the demand for a similar role at the Allenby crossing between Jordan and the West Bank.

The reconstruction must be oriented toward the population of the Gaza Strip and focus on significant improvements to infrastructures, employment levels, and the quality of life. To this end, there must be strong leadership by a stable, responsible, and effective government that accepts existing agreements, opposes terrorism, and recognizes the State of Israel. Experience shows that failed entities export instability and insecurity, are incapable of providing their populations with personal security, and repel foreign investors.

Gaza’s successful reconstruction is an important step in the Palestinian state building process and advancing the peace process. The failure of an international coalition to lead a reconstruction operation within the rubric of a state building process will cast a heavy pall over the potential establishment of a Palestinian state. It is important that Israel contribute to the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, not only by shaping the border crossings regime but also by contributing knowledge and capabilities.

Conditions for Launching the Reconstruction Operation

The first vital condition is instilling the demilitarization principle, even if at the outset it is implemented only partially, especially in preventing renewed military buildup of Hamas. It is clear that Hamas will refuse to shed its military capabilities of its own free will: its existence and relevance as a governing force are derived from its military power. The principle of Gaza's demilitarization of offensive weapons is embedded in the interim agreement and international decisions such as the Roadmap, and it is important that Israel work to ensure its validity in future decisions as well.

The second vital condition is the motivation and resolve of the Abbas-led PA – even at the cost of an internal confrontation with Hamas – to expand its control to the Gaza Strip. To do so, a supportive coalition of Sunni Arab nations to help establish the PA's control of the Gaza Strip is necessary, to provide economic support and also to grant legitimacy to the PA's governance. For now, it seems that the PA lacks the requisite resolve and is signaling anxiety about the enormity of the task and the cost of confronting Hamas.

A third important condition is close coordination and cooperation among Israel, Egypt, the United States, and the PA. This nexus must be anchored in support from the moderate Arab states. In addition, the negative influence that Qatar and Turkey wield over Hamas must be undermined.

A fourth important condition is that the reconstruction operation take place by virtue of a Security Council resolution. The leadership must be assumed by an authorized, effective representative of the international community, under the supervision of the Quartet, with the gradual transition of authority to the PA.

A fifth important condition is a new mandate for UNWRA. For years, UNWRA has exceeded its original purpose. Instead of working to rehabilitate Palestinian refugees in general and the Gaza Strip in particular, it has become an institution that perpetuates their status as refugees. UNWRA must adjust itself to the objectives of rehabilitation of Gaza's population.

At the second stage, after the PA has proved its effective governance abilities and calm and stability have been restored, the establishment of an infrastructure for commercial maritime activity through an adequate port and security check mechanisms can be promoted, subject to security conditions and in the spirit of past Israeli agreements to the Palestinian Authority.

Conditions for a Successful Reconstruction Operation

The success of the reconstruction operation in the Gaza Strip will be encouraged by a renewal of the peace process between Israel and the PA, preferably by building a partnership with the moderate Arab states and an expanded regional umbrella based on the Arab Peace Initiative, not as a dictate, with adjustments based on regional

developments and with guarantees that the Palestinians will implement agreements. In the absence of a political process, Abbas and the PA will find it difficult to consolidate their status as a legitimate governing element. Moreover, in the absence of a peace process, the PA can be expected to continue taking a unilateral, oppositional strategy and work against Israel in the international arena, which will undermine mutual trust and damage Israel's ability to contribute to the reconstruction effort.

At the same time, the Gaza Strip reconstruction operation in the format of a state building process – without neglecting the West Bank – will also serve as a test of the PA's ability and intentions and an indication of things to come. The success of the PA and the international community in reconstructing the Gaza Strip will in turn accelerate the political process and increase the chances for the establishment of a Palestinian state. By contrast, failure will require a more sober look and a slower, more controlled state building process in the West Bank in order to reduce as much as possible the risk of creating a failed state.

Israel and Egypt are the key to lifting the sense of siege felt by the Gaza population. Without cooperation from both, those spearheading the reconstruction will find it difficult to advance the process. The reconstruction of the Gaza Strip requires that limitations on the movement of people and goods be lifted, while the security arrangements are retained.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of the Gaza Strip through a controlled process of building the capacity for the future Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, while renewing the peace process, can prove to be the means for fully realizing the strategic opportunity created in the wake of Operation Protective Edge. A vital precondition for successful reconstruction is neutralizing Hamas' negative impact and denying it veto power by means of serious damage to its terror infrastructures and its military capabilities. In addition, internal and external conditions are needed for promoting the process and ensuring its success. Even if it seems that the prospects are slim, the effort is important in and of itself. The residents of the Gaza Strip, who have long paid the price of Hamas' extremist ideology, deserve stability, security, prosperity, and peace, as does the entire region.

