

Gauging the July-August 2014 Gaza war

By Jamil Hilal

■ Executive summary

The July-August 2014 Gaza war has not thus far initiated regional and international action to address the root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor to end the inhumane blockade that has been imposed on Gaza. Israel is keen to separate “humanitarian” issues from political ones, and is trying to play on the Hamas/Fatah division and the tense relations between Hamas and the Egyptian government. This will not help to address the real issues. Hamas and other Palestinian factions will resist measures to disarm them and thus lose the “deterrent” advantage that they have acquired. Discussing the situation in Gaza separately from that in the West Bank will not help to calm the frustrations and anger felt by Palestinians as they watch the disappearance of the meagre chances of ending the Israeli occupation and establishing an independent Palestinian state, and the lack of international concern for their rights. The continuation of Israel’s policy of colonisation in the West Bank, control over natural resources and borders, and the arbitrary implementation of administrative detention and collective punishment against the civilian population will foster popular unrest in the West Bank, while in Gaza the likely scenario is a return to war.

Contextualising the war

The July-August 2014 Israeli military offensive against Gaza (the third in six years) needs to be viewed in the context of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, resulting in the West Bank and Gaza Strip being subjected to the longest military occupation in modern history. It also needs to be viewed against the backdrop of the failure of the Oslo Accords to lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the failure of the latest U.S. attempt (led by Secretary of State John Kerry) to broker an agreement between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel. The Oslo Accords did not change Israel’s policy toward the West Bank and Gaza Strip in terms of either settlement building or the fragmentation and control of the major aspects of life in these areas.

The latest Gaza war also needs to be viewed against the backdrop of Israel’s unilateral withdrawal in 2005 from the Gaza Strip and its total blockade of the Strip imposed in 2006 following Hamas’s victory in the Legislative Council elections earlier that year. Palestinians saw in the unilateral withdrawal and the blockade an attempt by Israel to

separate the political future of Gaza from the West Bank and allow it (Israel) to concentrate its efforts on the colonisation of the latter.

The latest war needs to be viewed with the following considerations in mind.

Firstly, this offensive is the third in six years, coming after Israel’s offensive against Hizbullah in Lebanon in 2006, which undermined the deterrent capability of the Israeli army. Israel needed to reassert this capability in Gaza, because the West Bank has been “docile” since 2005. The first offensive took place after the split between Hamas and Fatah, the former’s takeover of Gaza in 2007, and its forming of a government there antagonistic to the PA government in the West Bank. The repeated military offensives against Gaza were seen as part of an Israeli strategy to instil among Palestinians a “consciousness that they are a defeated people”.

Secondly, the strained relations between Egypt and Hamas since the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood govern-

ment in Egypt provided a politically opportune moment for Israel to attack Gaza, given that most Arab countries are currently preoccupied with internal conflicts and Israel can count on the support of the U.S. and most governments in the European Union (EU).

Thirdly, the kidnapping and killing of three young Israeli settlers in the West Bank provided the excuse for Israel to initiate an offensive against Hamas in the West Bank (although Hamas denied any responsibility for the killings) and to attempt to embarrass the “unity” government formed in early July 2014, following the signing in Gaza in April of an agreement between the two main Palestinian political factions (Fatah and Hamas) to end the split in Palestinian politics.

The reconciliation agreement and the “unity” (technocratic) government were rejected by the Israeli government, which saw in them a threat to Israeli strategy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Commentators are right to argue that a major aim of the recent Israeli offensive was to undermine the new deal between Hamas and Fatah, because it would empower Palestinians.

Palestinian popular reactions to the war

The positive mood among the Palestinian public regarding the immediate outcome of the war, despite the enormity of the suffering, destruction, and carnage endured by the people and infrastructure in Gaza, is informed by a belief that Israel failed to achieve its immediate objectives of foiling the unity agreement and weakening Hamas politically and militarily. The immediate outcome proved to be contrary to these Israeli aims: Hamas’s popular support and standing increased tangibly and its strategy of resistance gained credence over the strategy that has been pursued by Fatah (i.e. bilateral negotiations). This was reflected in the change in the political discourse of Fatah and the PA leadership, resulting in it adopting much of the Hamas political discourse, thus reversing a process that had occurred a few months earlier when Hamas moved towards accepting the discourse of Fatah (and the PA) and its political agenda almost without reservations.

An immediate impact of the war was to solidify the Palestinian body politic, manifested in the forming of a unified Palestinian delegation to negotiate with Israel indirectly in Cairo. For Egypt to agree to play the role of broker between Palestinians and Israelis, it had to accept a Palestinian delegation dominated by Hamas (with the strong participation of Islamic Jihad), which had formed the main fighting force in Gaza and without whose agreement no truce can be implemented.

The war has renewed a vigorous discussion on the need for a new Palestinian political vision that can unify the struggle for collective rights and self-determination in the various Palestinian communities in historic Palestine and the diaspora. The war in Gaza has renewed the potential that Palestinian patriotism holds for different forms of struggle

and militancy in these communities that is not confined to armed means, according to the conditions permitted and demanded by each community (demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, strikes, civil disobedience, uprisings, boycotts of Israeli goods and services, support for sanctions, and various forms of active support and solidarity).

The war has invigorated the demand for Palestine to join all the United Nations bodies to which it is entitled and for the PA leadership to have access to the International Criminal Court so as to take Israeli leaders responsible for war crimes to court. Such a move is likely to be strongly opposed by Israel and the U.S., for obvious reasons.

The medium- and long-term outcomes of the war will depend on the final outcome of negotiations in Cairo. At the moment Israel seems to be steering the indirect talks towards purely humanitarian concerns and away from political issues. Its approach to ending the blockade of Gaza is reduced to administrative and security measures that appear to improve “the quality” of life of the people of Gaza in terms of providing access to food and medicines, enlarging the sea limits for Palestinian fishing, allowing more people to travel to the West Bank, slightly reducing the buffer zone imposed on Gaza’s northern and eastern borders with Israel, and allowing in (under Israeli supervision) materials for the reconstruction of the damage inflicted on Gaza by the war. Simultaneously Israel is insisting on the demilitarisation of the Gaza Strip and demanding that the PA in Ramallah exercise administrative and financial control over the Strip, in the hope of generating a split between Hamas and Fatah in the process (by creating a situation of dual authority).

Considerations when viewing the medium- and long-term impacts of the war

Four main considerations are relevant in this regard.

Firstly, Hamas, at the moment supported by Palestinian public opinion, will not willingly agree to disarm itself and give up its deterrent capabilities. This explains why Israel is insisting on measures to prevent Hamas from rearming and rebuilding its underground tunnels. Hamas faces a serious funding problem in maintaining its military capabilities, but could still overcome this obstacle in the medium term. It is obvious that Hamas will not give up its strategic asset (as has been the case with Hizbullah), and in this it will find strong Palestinian support.

Secondly, because of the casualties it would incur, Israel is very reluctant to invade the Gaza Strip, whether to remain there or hand it to the PA. If the PA were to agree to administer Gaza under Israeli supervision and conditions, this would make it a quising in the eyes of Palestinians. The PA has been under constant public pressure to end its “security coordination” (which many see as security collaboration) with Israel, but has not done so because of the consequences this would incur: it remains vulnerable to external pressures because of its high dependence on

foreign aid (mostly from the U.S. and EU) and transfers of customs revenues collected by Israel.

Thirdly, the leadership of the PA and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (both held by Fatah) faces difficulties in calling for a general election for the president of the PA and the Legislative Council (or for membership of the Palestine National Council), as is required by the unity agreement. Such a move needs authorisation from Israel to ensure that free and fair elections take place in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including East Jerusalem, without Hamas candidates and others wanted by Israel being arrested. Because of the implications of such a strategy, should a new leadership evolve through consensus between the main Palestinian political factions, it will not be easy for such a leadership to articulate a new political vision and strategy that calls on the various Palestinian communities to use the necessary forms of resistance in the struggle for their collective rights within the framework of the struggle for independence and self-determination.

Fourthly, experience since the Oslo Accords and from the 2012 truce agreement between Hamas and Fatah mediated by Egypt, as well as the agreement brokered by Kerry in early 2014, shows that Israel does not respect agreements with the Palestinians. Ensuring Israeli adherence to a new agreement needs international and particularly U.S. guarantees, which are not readily forthcoming.

The agreement that will eventually be reached in Cairo will succeed in the short term in calming the tension between Israel and the Gaza Strip while Gazans rebuild their daily lives, but this is not likely to hold in the medium or long term, particularly if the blockade is not completely lifted and access to the West Bank is denied. In the West Bank the situation is likely to remain tense, with frequent protests against settler aggression and Israel's policy of settlement expansion, collective repression and the Judaisation of East Jerusalem. ■

■ THE AUTHOR

Jamil Hilal is an independent Palestinian sociologist. He is the author of a number of books and numerous articles on Palestinian, Israeli and Arab issues, and a senior research fellow at a number of Palestinian teaching and research institutions. His recent publications include works on poverty, and Palestinian political parties and the political system after Oslo. He edited *Where Now for Palestine? The Demise of the Two-state Solution* (Zed Books, 2007) and, with Ilan Pappé, *Across the Wall* (IB Tauris, 2010).

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