



INSS Insight No. 595, August 24, 2014

Israeli Policy following Operation Protective Edge: Continuity or Change?

Shimon Stein and Shlomo Brom

Israel's positions in the Egyptian-mediated indirect talks with Hamas – suspended on August 19, 2014 – reflect an unbending Israeli approach to the management of the conflict with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, with the exception of few tactical adjustments required by the situation. In other words, continuity guides Israel's policymakers, despite the fact that the shorter intervals between the three rounds of fighting with Hamas in recent years should spark doubt about the effectiveness of this approach.

Several basic components of Israel's thinking prevent a changed approach:

1. The perception that the struggle between Israel and Hamas is a zero sum game: What is ignored is the fact that there may be situations that benefit both sides. For example, improving the lot of the Gazan population is good for Hamas and good for Israel. While it allows Hamas to take credit for success, it also exerts pressure on Hamas to maintain the calm. People who have nothing to lose often favor exploding the situation through the use of violence.
2. The notion that in order to weaken Hamas it is necessary to make sure Gaza persists at a sub-standard level, i.e., limited economic activity that basically – and barely – precludes a humanitarian crisis. Trucks move in one direction alone and bring goods into the Gaza Strip, but there is no export of goods from Gaza.
3. Addiction to the image of victory: Hamas can present any change in Israel's Gaza policy as a victory, and therefore Israel avoids any policy change. In this context, consider that at the end of the Yom Kippur War, Egypt presented its population with the image of victory when Israeli forces were sitting on the west bank of the Suez Canal as well as encircling the Egyptian Third Army, yet no interest of Israel was harmed as a result. Some even claim that this was one of the factors that jumpstarted the process that eventually led to peace with Egypt.
4. Continued separation of the Gaza Strip from the West Bank: This stance is based on the divide-and-conquer illusion and the assumption that it is possible to separate the two and handle each independently without there being repercussions for the other.

5. Abbas is not a partner, certainly not someone who can lead the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to an agreement with Israel, and therefore Israel must oppose a unity government between Fatah and Hamas.
6. Fears and reservations about international intervention, including international supervision of the implementation of agreements.

Given the repeated failures of recent years in reducing Hamas' incentive to fire at Israel, perhaps after Operation Protective Edge it is time to create a new balance of factors affecting Hamas' considerations. If the Israeli approach does not change, it is more than likely that the renewal of fighting is only a matter of time. Only a fundamental change in Israel's approach provides a chance of not returning to the cycle of violence yet again.

The key components in the strategy that should guide Israel are:

1. Abandoning what has proven to be a failed approach, i.e., conflict management as a substitute for conflict resolution, and returning to the approach that strives for conflict resolution. This does not mean ignoring the political reality on both sides, which apparently does not allow for the conflict to be resolved any time soon. The process will be hard and gradual, but from the outset it is vital to announce that the objective is to resolve the conflict. New contents must be infused toward a conflict resolution formula, in order to create a clear, feasible framework for a settlement, and to work backwards to delineate the gradual steps required to achieve it. These, alongside negotiations, could be partial or unilateral agreements. Hamas itself adopted the notion of a partial agreement with Israel in the form of a long term *hudna* (armistice).
2. Internalizing the reality that separating the West Bank from the Gaza Strip has failed and that therefore it is necessary to strive for the reintegration of Gaza in the Palestinian Authority. A first step in that direction must be recognition of the Palestinian national unity government and willingness to work with it. Moreover, it is necessary to ensure that the reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip be spearheaded by the PA and that the opening of the border crossings is conditional on the presence of PA security forces on the Gazan side of the border.
3. To the extent possible, the creation of a normal economy in Gaza, which includes exports and imports, must be advanced. There is no reason why the Gaza Strip cannot export vegetables and other products to Israel. It is necessary to aim for a situation (which once existed) whereby Israeli industrial plants once again work with Gazan subcontractors. It is also necessary to expand the Gazan fishing zone.

Concomitant with Gaza's economic reconstruction, renewed force construction on the part of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in Gaza must be prevented as a stage in attaining the goal (that for now appears unrealistic) of demilitarization of the Gaza Strip, i.e., stripping Hamas and the other organizations of their weapons. Greater

openness to the needs of the civilians in Gaza will facilitate regional and international cooperation in preventing the rearming of Hamas. Implementing the objectives of both areas – economy and security – cannot occur without the involvement of other countries. Israel must work toward the establishment of a “coalition of the willing” whose objective will be to help the sides create a new reality in the Gaza Strip. Participating countries must include Egypt (which will play a key role in changing the Gazan reality), Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states (with the exception of Qatar), and Jordan. Common to these countries (and Israel) is, on the one hand, rejection of Hamas as a member of the radical Islamist axis that includes Iran, Turkey, and Qatar; and, on the other hand, support for PA President Abbas and, accordingly, a demand to restore the PA and supplant Hamas. The collaboration of these nations will be possible only in a context where there is a chance for real change in the relations between Israel and the Palestinians. In other words, the Israeli government must change its current attitude in exchange for the joint efforts of these countries. The United States and the EU, both of which made it clear during the fighting that alongside the need for a ceasefire there was great importance in achieving a permanent settlement that would ensure the security of Israel and provide for Gaza’s humanitarian needs, will also have to be part of the coalition and prove their willingness to go beyond rhetoric by working to implement the economic and security dimensions of the agreement to be achieved. It is worthwhile considering anchoring any agreement and the mechanisms of its implementation in a Security Council resolution; this would emphasize the commitment of the principal parties and the assisting nations to implementation of the agreement.

If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, but the third round of fighting in less than six years shows that the approach that has shaped Israel’s conduct to date has failed. The alternative offered herein proposes a different approach holding the potential for a graduated change over time in the basic attitudes of Hamas, as well as Israel. The organization will have two options: either it becomes an integral part of the process of achieving stability in Gaza, whereupon it will find itself in a situation in which the constraints on using violence will grow to the point that it will be forced to change basic attitudes, or it cleaves to violence and gradually becomes politically weak to the point of irrelevance.

