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Another Casualty of the Third Gaza War: US-Israel Relations

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Wars between Israel and its neighbors, as well as efforts to make peace between them, heighten the tension in Israel's relations with the United States. As evident in Operation Protective Edge, the United States believes that Israel has the right to defend itself, but is concerned about the number of casualties, especially women and children who are not directly involved in terrorism. From the American perspective, it is appropriate, if not necessary, to criticize the use of force against civilian targets. Similarly, every political process has revealed differences of opinion between Israeli and American political leaders on several fundamental issues relating to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and certainly on the issue of territory. Since December 1969, when Secretary of State William Rogers talked about the 1967 borders "with minor modifications," the US administration's position on this issue has not changed, and it is highly doubtful if it will change in the future. Therefore, assuming that the Israeli government does not endorse such a formula, the entire issue of territory for a Palestinian state, including the settlements and Jerusalem, will remain a bone of contention.

White House policy on the political process between Israel and the Palestinians during President Obama's first term in office and the failure of the nine-month diplomatic effort by Secretary of State Kerry in 2013-14 only highlighted this rift. Senior US officials have not hidden the fact that they placed most of the blame for the failure of the political effort on Prime Minister Netanyahu.

The third Gaza war in less than six years has added a new dimension of tension to US-Israel relations, and especially between the leaders. The leaking of documents; ad hominem accusations against Kerry on the one hand, and Netanyahu on the other; and even the short delay in a weapons shipment from the United States to Israel testified to one of the lowest points in relations (even if the full picture on the level of coordination, including between Netanyahu and Kerry, which was absent from media reports, is taken into account). Israel's preference that Egypt conduct the negotiations on a ceasefire in Gaza is understandable, since Egypt has some leverage over Hamas' leaders. The unconcealed satisfaction of Israel's leaders with the covert coalition formed between states in the region, including Israel, around the fear of radical fundamentalist movements

– reflected in comments by the Prime Minister at a press conference on August 27, 2014 – is also understandable. But it would be a strategic error to assume that such an unwritten alliance could last over time, and certainly if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved.

Even if the United States is in the process of reducing its presence in the Middle East, Israel has no political or security alternative to the United States. The United States finances most of Israel's military procurement and a significant portion of the development of various weapon systems, and gives Israel ongoing access to the most advanced weapons development and production system. For this, there is no substitute. Similarly, political processes, be they positive from Israel's point of view or intended as a sanction against Israel, cannot be completed without American involvement. Without an American veto at the UN Security Council, Israel would have faced sharp measures by the international community, and despite Israel's outwardly displayed and extreme displeasure at the concessions to Iran made by those conducting the negotiations, including the United States, the latter is still the most effective obstacle to the Iranian nuclear program.

Hence, Jerusalem must be careful not to strain its relations with the US administration and must avoid measures that subvert Israel's clear interests. Resolving the political and security situation vis-à-vis Gaza is one such interest. While Egypt is clearly a key player on this issue, Egypt will not be able to lead the financial effort essential for Gaza's reconstruction, and by itself it cannot help create a new governmental system in Gaza that relies mainly on the Palestinian governmental system in Ramallah. Furthermore, an agreement on Gaza with a reasonable chance of surviving over time requires progress in the political process between Israel and the Palestinians. The attempt to put Abu Mazen in charge of Gaza is of dubious potential success, but it will certainly not succeed if it does not exhibit the decisive potential and advantage of the political path over the Hamas alternative. This must be clear to Abu Mazen, to the Palestinians in general, and to Gazans in particular. The involvement of the United States in the process is essential, both as a broker that is more acceptable than other brokers and as a barrier to regional and international initiatives that could harm Israel.

The United States should attempt to leverage the situation that was created after fifty days of fighting in Gaza, while taking advantage of the changes since the most recent negotiations process ended in failure in April 2014. The United States, along with Israel and the Palestinian Authority, must learn from the previous attempt. Martin Indyk, who led the US negotiating team, stated recently, "I think it was Einstein who said the definition of insanity is repeating the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." It is to be hoped that all the parties have internalized the significance of the failure of the attempt to reach a comprehensive solution to all the fundamental

problems in one stroke – and not in stages or interim measures that ultimately converge in the solution of two states for two peoples. A staged approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would also make it possible to include Gaza in this solution. Indeed, from a legal, diplomatic, and security perspective there is no fundamental difference between a seaport in Gaza and an airport in the West Bank. It is likely that both would be possible only in the last stages of the road to a full and lasting solution.

Among the changes that have taken place in recent months that could help jumpstart the negotiations are the takeover by the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) of large areas of Syria and Iraq and the danger that the group will infiltrate the area along Israel's eastern borders. The presence so close to Israel of a hostile, uninhibited force such as ISIS, and the instability that has already been created make it necessary to rethink and reassess the question of Israel's eastern borders, even if the long term solution is not necessarily Israeli sovereignty. From this point of view, it is clear that a staged solution would allow the flexibility necessary to examine progress toward a full implementation of the two-state solution in light of the changes underway in the region.

Notwithstanding the shift toward a reduced US presence in the Middle East, Washington also understands that completely ignoring the existential danger ISIS presents to the moderate regimes in the region is contrary to American interests, even in the limited definition of these interests. A continued American presence is also an Israeli interest. Thus despite the strident friction over the third Gaza war, Israel must prefer American leadership, even if it is tacit, in the political processes between Israel and the Palestinians. To this end, an Israeli-US summit involving the President and Prime Minister is in order, to address the most urgent regional and bilateral issues as well as possible solutions that meet the new reality in the region. Prime Minister Netanyahu would do well to take the initiative to suggest such a summit, which is necessary if only for the need to prevent the further deterioration of relations between Israel and the United States.

