



INSS Insight No. 710, June 16, 2015

Gaza First (Again)?

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Recent weeks have given rise to new concerns over the possibility of yet another military escalation in the Gaza Strip. The fear is that internal tensions between Hamas and local Salafi-jihadist groups in the Strip may drag both Israel and Hamas into a round of conflict that both parties would much rather avoid. Yet along with attention to the security situation in Gaza, the broader political and geostrategic context, one where Gaza continues to occupy an especially central and crucial role, must be considered.

Since the war in the summer of 2014 between Israel and Hamas and its dire humanitarian and economic impact on the Strip, there has been much momentum to support reconstruction of the area's civilian and economic infrastructures. Moreover, reconstruction, particularly against the backdrop of Hamas' relative weakness, is increasingly thought by Western actors relevant to the political process as possible leverage for a long term truce between Hamas and Israel, and hence a means to secure calm in the Israeli-Palestinian arena as a whole.

Interestingly, this focus on Gaza resembles the line of thought that dominated the discourse on the political process in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the Oslo accords, with the "Gaza [and Jericho] first" idea (the Cairo Agreement) – agreed upon in May 1994 by Israel and the newly-established Palestinian Authority. There are of course considerable differences between then and now, including in terms of both sides' trust in the ability to reach a comprehensive peace agreement and the cohesiveness of the Palestinian political sphere. Yet Gaza once again is increasingly considered to be a place where an Israeli-Palestinian political-territorial dialogue could and perhaps should start.

No doubt, using the "Gaza first" option as a springboard for advancing the political process forward would be a highly complex project, particularly since in the past two decades the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has split into separate conflicts involving Israel, the PA, and Hamas. But one key lesson of these turbulent years is that past attempts to ignore the Gaza Strip and Hamas in the context of efforts to generate a breakthrough in the political process have not brought Israel or the Palestinians any closer to a peace agreement.

After Hamas' victory in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, the primary Israeli approach toward Palestinian politics – backed by a number of key international players, chiefly the United States – consisted of encouraging the existing divide between Hamas and Fatah as means to weaken Hamas. After the internal feud in the Palestinian arena turned violent, culminating in Hamas' takeover of Gaza in 2007, the policy focused on attempting to weaken Hamas by isolating its government and the Gaza Strip. Subsequently, renewal of the dialogue between the Palestinian Authority/PLO and Israel came to be seen as both a tool to advance an Israeli-Palestinian understanding as well as a chance to further isolate and weaken Hamas. However, the combination of economic restrictions and political isolation did not lead to Hamas' capitulation in Gaza, nor did ignoring the Strip facilitate the achievement of a political agreement between Israel and the Fatah-led PA. Put simply, ignoring a problem does not make it go away, but it may make it worse. Today, both Hamas and the Gaza Strip, just like in the past, remain essential ingredients in the Palestinian arena and in any political process related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Gaza Strip and the West Bank have grown apart significantly in terms of economic indicators since the early 1990s, and the gap has widened exponentially since 2007. However, reintegrating the two economies by investing in the economic development of the Strip as well as by encouraging economic links between Gaza and the West Bank is crucial to the viability and functioning of a future Palestinian state. Until conditions are ripe to realize the ultimate goal, the international approach should focus on more money, more access, and more integration.

More money: efforts to rebuild Gaza continue to be severely underfunded, with virtually all international organizations working well below the necessary budget and with only roughly a quarter of the more than \$3 billion pledged having reached the Strip.

More access: reconstruction depends on more construction material reaching Gaza, with border and economic restrictions eased, both from the Egyptian and from the Israeli side. For this to happen while addressing Israel's security concern, there should be a re-deployment of PA security forces at the borders and the recreation of the defunct EUBAM mission. Moreover, more access also means work to reverse Gaza's current state of isolation and promote market reintegration between Gaza and the West Bank.

More integration: political reintegration between Fatah and Hamas needs to be encouraged as part of this process. For the PA this is not only crucial to somehow reestablish its presence in Gaza, but also to promote the goal of Palestinian independence. Ignoring Gaza's de facto ruler, Hamas, disregards the fact that enforcing a political agreement that Hamas does not at least tacitly tolerate will make it politically complex for Fatah to enforce it in the West Bank, and to a much greater extent in Gaza. Hamas

will also be more likely to rely on violence to spoil a process in which it has no stakes or incentives.

The time is also ripe for an extended ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Since the end of the last round of confrontation, both sides have demonstrated their determination time and again to refrain from playing into the hands of the jihadist factions that seek to instigate yet another round of hostilities in the Gaza sphere. However, any explicit or implicit understandings between Israel and Hamas should not occur at the expense of the PA. To the contrary, reintegrating Gaza and the West Bank at the political level should remain a priority as means to get the political process back on track. In addition, institutional coordination between the PA and Hamas is essential, since cooperation of the PA in the reconstruction enterprise is presented by the main donor governments, and with good reason, as a prerequisite for transferring the critical aid already pledged and executing the project in full force. Thus, commitment to the PA as the Palestinian partner in a political process — through ongoing and substantial economic backup—should continue, along with a strong expectation of substantive coordination between the PA and Hamas, which could even evolve into yet another reconciliation effort between the two rival parties and the articulation of new inter-party rules of the game and institutional balance of power. A detailed political initiative, even if only a performance-based, incremental, and long term plan, could facilitate recognition by the PA that the “Gaza first (again)” program is not intended to bypass it as the recognized representative of the Palestinian people for any political process and therefore soften its approach regarding coordination with Hamas.

As for Hamas, a political initiative would demonstrate to the organization that the reconstruction project is by no means intended to facilitate its further military entrenchment in the Strip. True, disarmament of Hamas is an unrealistic objective. Under the present circumstances, even a total halt on its armament buildup would be hard to accomplish. Yet embarking on a comprehensive reconstruction of the Strip should demonstrate to Hamas that it must give up a great deal in return, to both the PA and Israel, if it wishes to avoid further risks to its civilian hold on the Strip.

In any case, reversing the policy of isolation of Gaza and Hamas and focusing attention on putting Gaza first should be seen not just as a step toward impeding a violent implosion in the not-so-distant future, but also as groundwork toward resumption of constructive Israeli-Palestinian dialogue.

