

THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT AFTER THE GAZA WAR

The strategic effects of the Gaza War have been remarkably small. Israel's strategy of isolating Hamas continues to aim at short-term conflict management and fails to open up new prospects for resolving the Middle East conflict. While the Palestinians are striving to overcome their division, they will find it very difficult to formulate and implement a common strategy towards Israel. The US and the EU have also contributed to the convoluted political situation in the Middle East, but have so far not been able to agree on a new course in their relations with Hamas.



Reuters / M. Salem

Members of Hamas security forces sit in front of anti-Israel graffiti in northern Gaza, 15 February 2009

The Gaza War between Israel and Hamas at the turn of the year 2008/09 was already the seventh major military confrontation in the Middle East conflict since the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. It was further evidence that war continues to be an integral part of conflict management in the region. It was also another indication of how distant a comprehensive peaceful resolution between Israel and the Palestinians remains, despite many years of negotiations.

However, the Gaza War also mirrored a twofold change in the constellation of the conflict that has been on the horizon for quite some time. While Israel fought regular forces of the Arab states in the first four wars of 1948/49, 1956, 1967, and

1973, it battled non-state actors in the two Lebanon wars of 1982 and 2006 as well as in the latest conflict over Gaza. Furthermore, within this asymmetric constellation, the center of gravity in the military resistance against Israel has shifted from secular organizations to Islamist groups. While Israel's main opponent in the 1982 war was the PLO, the last two confrontations involved the Shi'ite Hezbollah and the Sunni Hamas. Their ascent as important and powerful regional actors is a structural element of the Middle East situation that can no longer be ignored.

For the time being, the strategic effects of the Gaza War, which lasted 22 days and claimed at least 1,200 Palestinian and 13 Israeli victims, have been remarkably small.

Even though Hamas suffered great losses, there have been no fundamental changes either in the constellation of power in the Middle East or in the domestic political framework in Israel or the Palestinian territories. It is true that there have been increasing indications since the end of the war that Israel and Hamas are interested in a long-term ceasefire. Yet, more effective conflict management and, even more so, progress in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would require profound changes in the strategies of Israel, the Palestinians as well as the US and the EU as the main Western mediating powers, which collectively are unlikely to occur.

Negligible strategic effect

The reasons for the Gaza War can essentially be traced to the success of Hamas in the Palestinian elections of 2006 and their power grab in the Gaza Strip after the breakdown of the unity government with Fatah in June 2007. The center-left government of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert initially reacted to Hamas' refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist and to renounce violence by imposing an economic blockade and pursuing a strategy of political isolation. After a six-month ceasefire ending in December 2008 had failed to bring about the desired outcome for either side, and when Hamas intensified its rocket attacks, Israel finally decided to embark on massive military escalation.

Significantly, though, when Israel and Hamas entered into Egyptian-brokered indirect negotiations on a longer-term cease-

Israeli settlers in the occupied territories					
Year	West Bank	Gaza Strip	East Jerusalem	Golan Heights	Total
1972	1,182	700	8,649	77	10,608
1983	22,800	900	76,095	6,800	106,595
1991	90,300	3,800	137,300	11,600	243,000
1995	133,200	5,300	157,300	13,400	309,200
2000	192,976	6,678	172,250	15,955	387,859
2005	258,988	0	184,057	17,793	460,838
2006	268,400	0	186,857	18,105	473,362

Source: Foundation for Middle East Peace (www.fmep.org)

fire, they resumed talks where they had left off at the end of 2008. Hamas continues to demand an opening of checkpoints on the borders with Egypt and Israel. In this way, the organization wants to create conditions that allow it to demonstrate its governance capability. As before the start of the war, it also seeks to demonstrate strength with its rocket fire on Israel. Meanwhile, Israel emphasizes the primacy of its security and insists that rocket attacks cease and efficient measures be undertaken against arms smuggling to Gaza. In parallel negotiations, it also aims to win the release of one of its soldiers, Gilad Shalit, who was taken prisoner in 2006, in return for setting free Palestinian detainees.

It is true that some progress has been made in the indirect talks since the end of the Gaza War. For instance, the border crossing agreement concluded between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 2005 and the EU observer mission at the Rafah crossing point are supposed to build the basis for an opening of the borders. Yet, the greater dynamic in the recent talks is most likely only partially due to the Gaza War. Instead, the increased short-term flexibility both of Hamas and of the Israeli government seen in the negotiations was rather more likely the result of a shift to the right in the Israeli elections in February 2009 and the expected return to power of Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu. In principle, however, the current domestic political constellations in Israel and on the Palestinian side are grounds for doubting the feasibility of a long-term sustainable truce and the capability of both sides to make peace.

Tactical success, strategic perplexity

For Israel, the outcome of the Gaza War has been an equivocal one. Israeli observers assess as positive the ability of their

military leaders to learn and adapt to “asymmetric conflicts” with non-state actors. The Israel Defense Forces have reacted to the lessons of the Lebanon War of 2006 by adapting their operative planning, command structures, training, and equipment to the requirements of irregular warfare. The low casualty rates on the Israeli side are primarily due to these military reforms, detailed planning ahead of the attack, and its uncompromising approach. From a purely military perspective, the deterrent capability of the Israeli military machine, which had been impaired by the Lebanon conflict, seems to have been restored.

However, the initial euphoria over military successes has since given way to a some disenchantment at the restoration of the *status quo ante* in the Gaza Strip. Not even the minimal military objective of ending rocket attacks on Israel has been achieved. Politically, Hamas has emerged stronger from the Gaza War. It continues to exert political control in the Gaza Strip and, according to surveys, has hardly lost support among the population. Furthermore, Israel has suffered severe damage in its foreign relations due to the massive material damage and the humanitarian calamity caused by the fighting. The future of its important regional alliance with Turkey remains uncertain. The leaders of moderate Arab states such as Jordan and Egypt have been weakened domestically. In parts of Western societies, too, Israel's reputation has suffered.

As seen from outside, the Gaza War is primarily a reflection of Israel's strategic helplessness in dealing with Hamas and resolving the Middle East conflict. The policies of isolating the Islamist party and weakening it militarily have brought neither security nor stability, and certainly not peace, to the country. The Israeli-Palestinian nego-

tiations over a comprehensive truce, open borders, and prisoner exchange that really matter today are those between Israel and Hamas, not the Fatah.

With the Gaza War, the Olmert administration itself has undermined Israel's efforts since the collapse of the Palestinian unity government in June 2007 to strengthen Fatah and President Mahmoud Abbas vis-à-vis Hamas as part of a “West Bank First” strategy. Israel's preferred Palestinian partners are weaker than ever and are losing ground in domestic politics. Their negotiations with Israel within the Annapolis process have generated no measurable results. At the same time, their policy of rapprochement with Israel was unable to prevent the massive military operation in the Gaza Strip.

The talks currently underway between Fatah and Hamas on the re-formation of a unity government are hardly the outcome intended by the Israeli decision-makers. The question of how to deal with Hamas as a government party is thus gaining new importance. Nevertheless, no change is in the offing in Israel's policies towards Hamas. Netanyahu, who is expected to lead the next government as prime minister, proved to be a hardliner during his first term in office in the 1990s and is seen to view the two-state solution with skepticism. He will most likely continue Olmert's assertive stance towards Hamas, but place less emphasis on peace talks with Fatah than his predecessor in office.

Experience shows that in Israel, irrespective of the party-political constellation of the government in question, it is extremely difficult to enforce the compromises necessary to ensure a permanent peace settlement based on the two-state solution. Evidence of this can be found in the continued expansion of settlements and the fact that the number of settlers has nearly doubled since the onset of the peace process in the early 1990s.

The Palestinians: Power struggle and reconciliation

Due to a number of factors, the antagonistic Palestinian factions embarked upon reconciliation talks mediated by Egypt at the end of February 2009, with a view to discussing the formation of a transition government as well as other issues such as elections, a reform of the PLO, and reconstruction in Gaza. Against the back-

ground of the growing popularity of the Islamist movement in the West Bank and the Arab world, Fatah has been damaged by its de facto alliance with Israel. President Abbas also finds himself under enormous domestic pressure to take action. His legitimacy is increasingly questioned as the end of his period in office officially ended in January 2009. Furthermore, younger Fatah cadres have criticized the fruitless course of negotiating with Israel and the widespread corruption in the party. If the most popular leadership figure of the “young Fatah”, Marwan Barghouti, should be released as part of a prisoner exchange, Abbas loyalists in the party would risk being voted out of office in the internal Fatah elections, which have already been postponed repeatedly.

For Hamas, a power-sharing arrangement would raise the chances of borders being opened. Furthermore, if the Islamists should join a national unity government, they would likely do so in the hope of gaining greater international legitimacy and enhancing their capacity to act. Finally, in view of the Gaza War and the outcome of Israeli parliamentary elections, Hamas can hardly escape the conclusion that a continued political schism is not conducive to the goal of a Palestinian state.

Still, the prospects for the formation of a sustainable government of national unity remain uncertain, despite the converging interests of Fatah and Hamas. Their reconciliation efforts are supported by a parallel initiative of the two factions’ respective Arab state backers, as manifested in the rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia. Yet, deep rifts remain between the opposing Palestinian groups as well as between the various Arab countries. In particular, Hamas and Fatah will find it extremely difficult to formulate and implement a common strategy towards Israel.

Should the formation of a unity government prove not to be feasible or fail in practice, it is possible that in the short term, the Palestinian division will become more entrenched. In the medium to long term, however, the increasing lack of prospects and radicalization in Palestinian society might well propel the Islamists to power in the West Bank, too.

A change in US Middle East policy?

The US and the EU cannot avoid their share of responsibility for the recent escalation of violence and the complex political situation in the Middle East. Although they emphatically demanded that the Palestinian elections be held in 2006, they have since endorsed Israel’s strategy of isolating Hamas. By doing so, they contributed to the polarization of the Palestinian camp and to the radicalization of Hamas. The US intention of building a coalition of moderate states in the region as a counterweight to Tehran’s increasing influence, based on the Annapolis process, has backfired due to lack of progress in the peace negotiations and has essentially driven the Sunni Hamas organization into the arms of Shi’ite Iran. The US’s and the EU’s promises of generous reconstruction aid for Gaza cannot conceal the lack of stabilizing influence of their current Middle East policies.

For now, the extent of the change of course in Middle East policy announced by the administration of US President Barack Obama remains to be seen. On the positive side, Obama advocated active US engagement from the start and nominated George Mitchell, an experienced Middle East expert, as his emissary. Critical remarks about Israel’s settlement policy and about Netanyahu’s skepticism towards a two-state solution might indicate that the US is willing to discard the Bush administration’s one-sided pro-Israel position and to work seriously towards progress in the Middle East conflict. However, it remains to be seen how far Obama is willing to take on the domestic pressure that is sure to accompany any determined peace negotiating efforts.

Unlike during the last two years of the Bush administration, the US under Obama will probably not subordinate the resolution of the Middle East conflict to a broader regional strategy targeted at Iran, but will take into account the growing interdependence of the two conflict hotspots by managing them in parallel. In this context, the US intention to take up talks with Syria and Iran could create a regional environment where it would be possible to resolve the core issues of the Middle East conflict without constant negative external influence.

Less change seems to be in the offing with regard to US and EU policies towards Hamas. While the outcome of the Gaza War showed clearly that conflict resolution without involvement of Hamas is impossible, and while the Middle East Quartet of the US, the EU, Russia, and the UN already hinted at the need for a new Gaza strategy as early as May 2008, neither Washington nor Brussels have so far deviated from their marginalization approach, not least because Hamas continues to be included on their terrorist lists and Israel has rejected a change of course.

In insisting that Hamas recognize Israel and issue a renunciation of violence, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is advocating a continuation of the policy pursued by the Quartet to date. From Hamas’ point of view, these conditions constitute an insurmountable barrier to the initiation of negotiations. The Islamists have consistently criticized the PLO for its recognition of Israel at the very start of negotiations in the early 1990s, since in doing so, the Palestinians forfeited their best negotiating point. Important Hamas leaders have repeatedly indicated that their organization could be prepared to accept a two-state solution, but would only extend official recognition to Israel in the framework of a comprehensive peace settlement.

So far, the US and the EU have refused Hamas the opportunity to prove itself as a responsible government party that is capable of transformation. If a new Palestinian government of national unity should be created, they should at least support that body, which they had largely failed to do in 2007. Otherwise, intensified efforts on the part of the West to resolve the Middle East conflict would be doomed from the start.

“Deep rifts between Hamas and Fatah remain”

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