

Five Bad Options for Gaza

The latest war in Gaza—from the beginning of July to the end of August 2014—is over, but both Israelis and Palestinians believe it will not be the last one. Israelis believe they must deter Hamas from conducting additional attacks and keep it weak should a conflict occur. This is an approach that more pro-Western Palestinian leaders and Arab states like Saudi Arabia, fearing the political threat Hamas poses, often quietly applaud. For their part, Hamas leaders remain hostile to Israel and feel politically trapped by the extensive blockade of Gaza—and all the while, Gaza lies in ruins. The combination is explosive. Israeli security analyst Yossi Alpher put it succinctly: “It is increasingly clear that the Gaza war that ended in August will soon produce...another Gaza war.”¹ The *Economist* also gloomily predicted that “war will probably begin all over again, sooner or later.”²

Since Hamas seized power in Gaza in 2007, the United States always subordinated its Gaza policy to the peace process in the hope that a comprehensive deal would transform the Israel-Hamas dynamic. This approach was always questionable: since Hamas took over Gaza, there were three major rounds of negotiations but also three major wars. And in April 2014, the peace talks, always a weak structure, collapsed yet again; renewed talks are not in sight. Both Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the moderate Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, who heads the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Palestinian Authority (PA) and rules on the West Bank, loathe each other, and ordinary Israelis and Palestinians are intensely skeptical that the other side is serious about peace.³

The peace process is no longer a plausible way out, but the 50 days of war in 2014 also show a window of opportunity. Although Hamas claimed victory —“Gaza forced the enemy to retreat,” claimed Hamas’ spokesman⁴—its rocket

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arsenal is diminished and it is weaker than at any time since the Second Intifada. At the same time, it is poised to grow far more dangerous in the coming years. Its rival, the Palestinian Authority—with its aging leadership, reliance on international donor largesse, and support for both peace negotiations and cooperation with Israel on West Bank security looking bankrupt to many Palestinians—lacks broad legitimacy, while Hamas is gaining popularity on the West Bank for having stood up to Israel. Israel too claimed victory, with Netanyahu calling it “a major military achievement.”⁵ However, polls show Israelis are skeptical and feel no one really won.⁶ Israel even accepted that Hamas would be part of a Palestinian unity arrangement, a huge shift from its pre-war position, when it vehemently rejected any Palestinian government that included Hamas.

Now is a good time to consider alternatives that would break us out of the cycle of provocation, response, and war. On one end, Israel could reoccupy Gaza, either ruling it directly or trying to bring in moderates like Abbas to rule there on the back of an Israeli tank. On the other extreme, a deal could be arranged that gives Hamas far more freedom to govern Gaza and have the area prosper in exchange for some form of disarmament. Israel might also try to bring the PA back to Gaza or even try to arrange a separate ceasefire with Hamas. These, along with the current approach, all have their strengths and weaknesses, but all deserve a more careful look as the peace process solution lacks credibility. Any alternative would probably involve a mix of measures from the different approaches, but for purposes of analysis, each is treated here as an ideal type.

In the end, several steps are necessary if Israel is to gain more lasting security and Gazans are to gain better lives. First, almost all the options

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require moderate Palestinians to govern more competently and be politically stronger: currently they are on the path to political irrelevance. Second, the world should encourage pragmatists in Hamas to work with Palestinian moderates. Finally, options that offer small changes in the status quo deserve consideration. Such steps would, over time, enable Israel to take more risks and allow everyone to move beyond the current stalemate.

What's At Stake in Gaza?

Israel occupied Gaza in the 1967 war and governed it directly for over 25 years before surrendering control over much of the Strip to Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority in 1994. Israel did not reoccupy all of Gaza when the

Second Intifada broke out in 2000, instead relying heavily on a security barrier, which it completed along the Gaza border in 2001. In 2005, Israel withdrew completely, this time even from the small Jewish settlements on the Strip—a wrenching move for Israelis that was bitterly controversial. Israelis hoped that this withdrawal would put Gaza and its problems behind them, removing it from the political equation, but instead it led to rocket and mortar fire. At times the attacks were just a brief disruption, at others a threat to daily life, and at all times intolerable. As Hamas’s arsenal advanced from primitive, short-range “Qassam” rockets to advanced Iranian- and Syrian-supplied long-range rockets, almost all of Israel came under threat.

The rocket fire and other problems led to regular clashes, particularly in 2008–2009, again in 2012, and most recently in 2014. These clashes as well as several smaller ones led to over 90 deaths on the Israeli side, 71 of which occurred in the 2014 war. UN figures show almost 4,000 total Palestinian deaths in these three wars, among them at least 2,500 civilians, including roughly 900 children.⁷ (Palestinian deaths are harder to measure, and Israelis hotly challenge UN claims that many among the dead are civilians). Although Israel’s “Iron Dome” missile-defense system has intercepted many rockets headed toward population centers, rockets have still forced Israelis to huddle in shelters, disrupted Israel’s economy (especially tourism), and otherwise interrupted the daily lives of its citizens. In 2014, rocket fire led the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and several airlines to briefly suspend flights to Israel. In contrast to the 2012 conflict, Hamas was able to sustain rocket attacks throughout the most recent war, firing large salvos even as the ceasefire approached. Hamas also fired large numbers of mortars—short-range systems that cannot be intercepted by Iron Dome—leading many Israelis to leave areas near Gaza. Part of the reason Israel sent forces into Gaza was to stop the mortar threat.

Israelis also fear the tunnels Hamas has constructed in Gaza. In 2006, Hamas forces raided Israel via a tunnel and captured Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldier Gilad Shalit, whose captivity only ended after five years and the exchange of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners. During Operation Protective Edge in 2014, Israel discovered over 30 tunnels, almost half of which went into Israel proper.⁸ Israeli officials fear Hamas could repeat the Shalit operation or simply send operatives into Israel to kill and sow mayhem. Tunnels within Gaza itself greatly complicate Israeli military operations into the Strip. During the 2014 fighting, Hamas fighters emerged from a tunnel and surprised Israeli soldiers at the Nahal Oz border post: they did not capture a soldier, but they did kill five while taking only one casualty of their own.⁹ The tunnels also hide rockets, making it hard for Israel to destroy them.

Hamas has also trained an army of several thousand fighters, some of whom are embedded within Gaza’s civilian population.¹⁰ The result is what military

analyst Jeffrey White calls a “human dome,” enabling Hamas fighters to avoid the full brunt of Israel’s military response.¹¹ These fighters lack the skill and firepower of the IDF, but they are tenacious, and the 2014 fighting showed them to be more capable than Hamas forces had been in previous rounds.

For Palestinians, the Gaza problem is less about repeated wars—though these are tough enough—and more about the grinding misery of day-to-day life. Israel has made life difficult in Gaza as part of a policy designed to avoid a full-out humanitarian crisis but to discredit Hamas by preventing economic development in Gaza. U.S. government officials privately referred to this as keeping “Gaza’s economy on the brink of collapse without quite pushing it over the edge.”¹² Food security is low, electricity sporadic, and unemployment high. Making a bad situation worse for Hamas, the 2013 coup against the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt transformed a potential friend into a bitter enemy. Egypt has since clamped down on cross-border tunnels that are used to smuggle everything from diapers to rockets, devastating the Gazan economy—to the point that some Israeli security officials feared the pressure would backfire and lead to a complete collapse of order in Gaza or the empowerment of even more radical voices.¹³ Potential funders in the Gulf have also turned against Hamas, sharing Egypt’s fear of the Brotherhood, and Iran and Hamas split when they picked opposite sides in the Syria conflict. War with Israel compounds all these problems.

The Gaza conflict is troubling not just for Israelis and Gazans but for the region as a whole and for U.S. interests as well. Israelis look at their 2005 withdrawal from Gaza as a questionable precedent for the West Bank: why would withdrawal in the West Bank lead to peace when the withdrawal from Gaza failed to do so? Israelis are skeptical that talks with Abbas on the West Bank will really mean peace if rockets continue from Gaza, while the back and forth between Israel and Hamas, and the resulting heavy Palestinian casualties, inflame Palestinian anger against Israel and damage the standing of moderate Palestinian leaders. As long as the conflict festers, it is difficult for the peace process to resume and gain traction, and as long as the peace process ignores Gaza, the conflict festers. Conflict in Gaza also bleeds over into neighboring Sinai, contributing to the growing terrorism problem in Egypt. For the United States, which has more than enough problems in the Middle East, close ties to Israel become a millstone when Israel is perceived as slaughtering innocent Muslims.

The Current Approach: Mowing the Grass

Any solution must take into account the goals of the parties involved and the politics on all sides. For Israel, the immediate requirement is security: no rocket or other attacks from Gaza. This applies both to Hamas and to other militant groups in Gaza, like the Iran-linked Palestine Islamic Jihad and Salafi-jihadists (who

have an ideology akin to that of al-Qaeda). Some of these are Hamas's enemies or rivals, but some Israeli leaders contend Hamas could suppress them if it wanted to and that Hamas allows them to strike Israel as a way to continue applying pressure while avoiding direct responsibility. (The truth is somewhere in between: Hamas cannot prevent every attack, and most of the attacks after 2012 were from Palestine Islamic Jihad, but Hamas can certainly do more than it has done to stop them.) Israel also worries about the development of Hamas's military potential, be it by building up rocket arsenals, restoring its tunnel complex, or otherwise being able to challenge Israel more successfully. Israel believes that Hamas did not honor the terms of the ceasefire after the previous clash in 2012: Hamas placed explosives on the border, built tunnels, manufactured weapons, and did not fully prevent rocket fire from Gaza.¹⁴

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Hamas, in turn, has multiple and conflicting goals. On one hand, Hamas seeks Israel's destruction. On the other hand, some, though not all, of Hamas's leaders recognize Israel's overwhelming military superiority and know they must temper their goals, with some calling for ceasefires—though these same leaders at times use violent rhetoric, and precisely where Hamas stands regarding even a de facto recognition of Israel has never been fully tested.¹⁵

Hamas also must maintain its internal cohesion. Hamas tries to represent the vast Palestinian refugee population in Jordan, Lebanon, and elsewhere in the Arab world and globally; Palestinians in the West Bank; and of course Gazans; but the three groups have different goals. A more peaceful path threatens Hamas's internal cohesion. Having cultivated an ethos of violence for decades, and having come to power in part by denouncing the Palestinian Authority and using terrorism to undermine its efforts at peace, conciliatory steps might anger militants within the movement, particularly in the military wing, as well as members of smaller rival groups. This would give them an opportunity to slam more pragmatic Hamas leaders for appeasement and cowardice. In general, Hamas has managed overall cohesion well, but it remains a delicate balancing act. Finally, Hamas wants to govern. It rules Gaza, and its own philosophy stresses creating a successful Islamic government—a difficult if not impossible goal if Gaza is always at war with Israel and is under near-constant blockade. Governing well also enables Hamas to win over Palestinians and make a more credible claim to overall leadership. Hamas believes that Israel did not honor the terms of the 2012 ceasefire, did not stop targeting Hamas members, did not end restrictions on people and goods in Gaza, and otherwise kept up the same policies that led to war in the past.

Both sides have a complex attitude toward an important third player: Abbas and the Palestinian Authority. Israel relies on Abbas to help police the West Bank, and many Israelis recognize that Abbas is as conciliatory a leader as Israel can reasonably expect. Israelis, however, are skeptical of the peace process—a skepticism that runs deep within the Netanyahu government—so they are reluctant to make advancing the peace process part of the equation in Gaza. In addition, they regard Abbas as a weak leader whose political and physical longevity is uncertain. Indeed, before the 2014 war, Israel rejected the “government of national consensus” between Hamas and Abbas, fearing that it would be the foot in the door for Hamas to take control of more Palestinian institutions.

Hamas, for its part, sees Abbas and his Fatah party as a rival for leadership of the Palestinian national movement. Part of the reason Hamas foments terrorist attacks against Israel in the West Bank is to draw a harsh Israeli response against Abbas and the PA there and thereby undermine their popularity.¹⁶ In addition, when Hamas seized power in Gaza in 2007, it had a short but bloody fight with PA security forces, complete with torture and executions (perpetrated by both sides).¹⁷ However, because Palestinian public opinion strongly favors unity, it is hard for Hamas to make its competition overt—it must appear conciliatory. Moreover, Hamas at times uses the PA as a backstop. Part of why Hamas joined the unity arrangement was that it felt unable to govern Gaza effectively due to the blockade and was happy to hand the mess over to the PA.

Both Israel and Hamas also fear Hamas could become too weak. For Hamas, a loss of power would undermine its credibility. For Israel, the perceived alternatives to Hamas are not just the moderate Abbas and the PA, but also more radical elements of Hamas, terrorists with an ideology more akin to that of al-Qaeda, or just chaos where the worst are full of passionate intensity. Thus, as one senior Israeli military official admitted, “I see no alternative to control being exercised by Hamas.”¹⁸

With these goals in mind, the logic behind the latest war is clearer. Hamas, weakened by the blockade, battered by Egypt, and having lost much of its support from important donors like Iran, initially tried to restore its legitimacy by entering into a unity deal with Abbas. Israel vociferously opposed this, even though the terms of the agreement overwhelmingly favored Abbas: the unity government’s senior figures were all from the PA, and Hamas allowed several thousand PA security forces back into Gaza with no reciprocity for Hamas in the West Bank. Abbas also made clear that the PA would continue to negotiate with Israel. All of these were painful concessions for Hamas—though Hamas did claim, to itself at least, that joining with the PA did not mean embracing a peace process (Hamas leaders justified this concession rather lamely by arguing that it allowed the organization to focus on fighting Israel, as opposed to governing Gaza).¹⁹ Israel

maintained tight restrictions on what went into and out of Gaza and refused to allow the tens of thousands of civil servants in Gaza to be paid. As the International Crisis Group's Nathan Thrall points out, this made the agreement of little value to the people in Gaza, where electricity is sporadic, sewage at times floods the streets, and medical care is often lacking.²⁰

Israel particularly feared that the agreement would allow Hamas to reestablish itself on the West Bank, a security nightmare for Israel. When three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped and murdered on the West Bank by Hamas members in June 2014, Israel responded by trying to uproot the Hamas infrastructure there, arresting several hundred Hamas members and leaders, including many who had earlier been freed as part of the prisoner-release deal involving Shalit.²¹ Hamas responded with rockets—the first time it admitted to launching rockets itself since 2012—and Israel responded with air strikes on Gaza. In the past, Hamas backed away from the brink; this time, however, Hamas had little to lose and felt that a broader conflict was the only way to restore its credibility and bring publicity to the situation in Gaza, which the world was ignoring.²² It didn't back down and instead increased the rocket attacks; Israel responded with more air strikes and eventually a limited ground invasion.

Now that the war is over, one can look back and see how Israel's current approach to Gaza reflects its competing goals: it doesn't solve the Jewish state's problems, but it limits them while giving Hamas enough to survive (though not prosper). In part, Israel's approach is classic deterrence: it seeks to convince Hamas's leaders that any aggression or unwanted behavior will result in a severe response. But Israel's approach also involves continual efforts to keep Hamas weak and off-balance—though not enough to cause Gaza to collapse completely or allow even more radical rivals to gain strength.

Israel's approach is often considered part of a strategy labeled “mowing the grass.”²³ As the label suggests, Israel considers Hamas and other terrorist groups a constant danger, but one that is almost impossible to uproot. The approach, then, is to strike regularly to keep the danger limited (or the grass mowed), recognizing that, on a regular basis, additional strikes will need to be carried out.

The current approach limits the threat Hamas poses to an acceptable cost—to Israel, at least. Fewer Israelis have died fighting Hamas since it took power in Gaza in 2007 than died in Lebanon fighting Hezbollah and other foes between 1985 and 2000, when Israel abandoned its security zone in Lebanon. Israel does not need to maintain troops in Gaza as it does in the West Bank, and because

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Hamas administers the Strip, Israel is not administratively or politically responsible for Palestinians there.

Hamas has also proven it can be deterred, at least temporarily, particularly if it is hit hard and feels it has gained concessions in exchange, such as a reduction of the impact of the blockade. After major clashes such as those in 2008–2009, 2012, and 2014, the number of rockets launched from Gaza fell precipitously. After the 2012 war, for example, Israeli intelligence found there was only one attack in the three months after the ceasefire, and 2013 was the quietest year in a decade.²⁴ Hamas has at times called on groups to refrain from rocket attacks and even created a special security force to prevent unauthorized strikes. In essence, it acted as Israel's policeman, though of course the Islamist group would vigorously deny this claim.

Perhaps most important, containing and deterring Hamas is politically the easiest option for Israel. It does not bring the costs or opprobrium of a new occupation, allows political leaders to show they are strong—vital in Israel's political culture—and avoids reliance on the international community, which is widely viewed with suspicion among Israelis (often justifiable—just look at Hamas's use of UN Relief and Works Agency buildings in Gaza to hide rockets).²⁵

Israel's current approach has many hidden costs, including internationally and in the U.S.

Yet, Israel's current approach has many hidden costs. Deterrence works at best fitfully, and Hamas rockets have longer ranges than in the past. The casualties Hamas has inflicted are a high number for a small state, especially one as casualty-sensitive as Israel. In addition, the rocket attacks, and the constant risk of them, impose a psychological burden. Some Israelis living near Gaza are reluctant to return, and rates of trauma are high.²⁶

Israel also pays a cost internationally. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank is deeply unpopular around the world and is even causing growing skepticism among some supporters of Israel in the United States.²⁷ Ironically, this opprobrium shows up with regard to Gaza—even though Israel withdrew from Gaza completely—because of a conflation of Gaza with “the Palestinians”; thus, violence there is viewed in the context of Israel's broader occupation. In addition, the repeated wars that are part of “mowing the grass” create a different kind of opprobrium, fostering the impression that Israel deliberately kills Palestinian civilians.

Mowing the grass also hurts more moderate Palestinians. Whenever Israel attacks Gaza, the cooperation of moderate Palestinians with Israel, and their dislike of Hamas, are on full display. When PA security forces help Israelis disrupt Hamas in the West Bank, they look like collaborators. The attacks highlight the ineffectiveness and irrelevance of the moderate leadership, which

has no influence over the actors and no way to protect Palestinians in Gaza. In addition, because Hamas is neither destroyed nor committed to peace, Hamas has the ability to disrupt peace talks, should they ever get on track.

The current approach also increases Hamas's reliance on Iran. Although Syria remains a bone of contention, Iran still needs allies in the anti-Israel struggle, particularly a leading Sunni group like Hamas, and Hamas has few other choices if it wants to maintain its ability to use violence and gain access to external funding. Finally, the current approach puts the conflict in stasis: Hamas is weak and off balance, but politically and militarily still a potent force.

Four Alternatives

If the status quo is deficient for both Israelis and Gazans, what are the alternatives? This section reviews four possibilities: crushing Hamas and reoccupying Gaza; a ceasefire deal with a unity government that leads the PA to return to Gaza; a deal where Hamas disarms in exchange for aid; and an extended ceasefire negotiated directly with Hamas.

Option One: Crush and Occupy

Israel has the military power to reoccupy Gaza and subdue Hamas there, an approach that conservative Israeli leaders like Naftali Bennett and Avigdor Lieberman have suggested.²⁸ Once in charge, Israel could rule directly or try to install its preferred proxy and, as it did in the West Bank after retaking territory there in 2002, gather the intelligence and develop the security presence necessary to identify and arrest the Hamas cadre. The task would take months, as Hamas has a vast administrative and military infrastructure. However, Israeli intelligence is quite skilled, and over time Israel would crush Hamas and largely end the rocket threat. The timing for such a move in some ways is ideal given Hamas' international isolation.

The costs of occupation, however, are considerable—to the point that even conservative Israeli governments like Netanyahu's have shied away. Although Israel could devastate Hamas, the organization's roots in Gaza are deep, and it has spent decades as a clandestine terrorist group. Hamas would be able to run a low-level insurgency from Gaza, using guns and bombs to inflict a steady, if limited, flow of casualties on the Israeli military. An Israeli military assessment found that assuming control would cost hundreds of soldiers' lives and billions of dollars each year: "we would long for southern Lebanon," said an Israeli military official, referring to Israel's security zone there that experienced constant clashes with Hezbollah.²⁹ All factions in Gaza would almost certainly join Hamas in opposing Israel, and massive unrest could erupt in the West Bank in sympathy.

Israel would also pay heavy political costs. Israel would have to run Gaza, and in the eyes of the world the occupation would be growing, not shrinking. All of Gaza's myriad problems, ranging from sewage to crime, would be Israel's to solve. Occupation would also strengthen the Hamas narrative that Israel is committed to controlling all of Palestine and does not want a negotiated peace, destroying the credibility of moderate Palestinians as well as voices within Hamas calling for a pragmatic deal with Israel. Even if Israel handed off power to Abbas and the PA, they would (rightly) be seen as Israeli puppets, reducing what little legitimacy they have left.

Over time, it is also possible that Egypt would become less supportive, given the unpopularity of Israel among the Egyptian public. Israel relies on Egypt to police its border with Gaza, preventing arms from entering and militants from moving in and out to train and develop connections with Iran and other radical forces. If Egypt became more sympathetic to Hamas, Hamas' ability to arm and otherwise become more deadly would grow dramatically.

Option Two: Bring the PA Back to Gaza

Instead of attempting to impose a government on Gaza, Israel could try to help—or at least not hinder—a return of the PA to Gaza through peaceful means, particularly as part of a unity deal between Hamas and the PA. Since 2007, Hamas has controlled the Gaza Strip while the PA (controlled by Fatah, the largest party in the PA) has controlled the West Bank. Fatah and Hamas have fought bitterly over the years, but agreed to a unity deal in April 2014 in which they would share power. Hamas accepted this deal out of weakness, but Israel refused to negotiate with a Palestinian government that had any Hamas role. After the summer 2014 war, however, Israel proved more willing to accept some reintegration of the two parts of the Palestinian Authority and to deal, at least indirectly, with a unity arrangement in which Hamas has no direct role—a complete fiction, but one both Israel and Hamas prefer.

Under such an arrangement, the PA would assume responsibility for Gaza's border crossings with Israel and Egypt as well as aspects of the economy and overall administration of the Strip; in reality, though, Hamas would continue to run much of the show. Israel's extensive cooperation with the PA in the West Bank on security issues would be applied in Gaza to prevent the smuggling of weapons into Gaza (and especially to get Egypt to work with the PA on the Rafah crossing) and to conduct inspections to ensure Hamas is not secretly stockpiling weapons, building tunnels, or otherwise becoming more dangerous militarily.

From Hamas's point of view, the unity agreement would allow it to continue to play a political role, yet free it somewhat from the burden of Gaza's failing economy and isolation. A unity government is also politically popular, as both Hamas and Fatah supporters see themselves as one people and do not want Gaza

and the West Bank to go their separate ways. For different reasons, both Fatah and Hamas need this legitimacy.

However, bringing the PA back is only the first step. The PA would have to consolidate its power in Gaza for this approach to reap its full benefits. To gain politically, the PA would need to ensure that Gaza has electricity as well as building materials, and that Gazans can go to Egypt when necessary.³⁰ This could prove somewhat easier for the PA than for Hamas: with the PA back in charge, when Israel supplied electricity and other services and goods to Gaza, it would be to bolster the PA, not aid an enemy government. Ultimately, for the PA to succeed, Gaza would have to succeed, at least modestly; if not, Hamas's gambit of shrugging off responsibility for Gaza to the PA would succeed, dragging down Abbas by making him look like an Israeli puppet and making Hamas look good by comparison.

The eventual goal would be for the PA to be strong enough to compel Hamas to disarm, or at least make it hard for the organization to resume violence. We're a long way from that. In the meantime, and perhaps surprisingly, for this approach to work, Hamas must also gain politically. Hamas is not defeated—it retains its arms and thus some military capacity and could resume fighting should it choose to do so—and so to avoid further violence, it must know that it has a chance of triumphing politically. The unity agreement also gives Hamas more room to compete politically on the West Bank with Abbas and his supporters, and it is unclear who would win. Hamas has already gained ground politically in the latest war simply by standing up to Israel, and with peace talks in shambles, the PA has no credible path to independence that can counter Hamas's argument that Israel only understands force.

Perhaps surprisingly, for a unity government (and the PA) to succeed, Hamas must also gain politically.

Option Three: Exchange Aid for Disarmament

Another option Israelis are bruiting about is to combine two extremes: Hamas would make the ultimate sacrifice and disarm, effectively ending its self-styled role as a resistance organization, and in exchange Israel would provide Gazans with a massive aid package that would greatly improve their standard of living. Former Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz proposed an initiative in which, in exchange for the demilitarization of Gaza, Israel would offer a "significant, economic aid package for the Palestinian population that would include a budget of \$50 billion over five years for infrastructure, welfare, healthcare, education, and employment," as well as easing restrictions on border crossings.³¹ Other leading Israelis, such as former intelligence chief Yuval Diskin, have

proposed less sweeping trades, with a more gradual demilitarization that focuses on particular types of weapons, such as long-range rockets, in exchange for “implementation of an international plan to rebuild the Gaza Strip,” among other concessions.³²

Such offers put Hamas in a bind: it must choose between advancing the welfare of Gazans and its own military power. For Hamas, disarming is a huge risk. Most Palestinians would see disarming under duress, and without significant Israeli concessions, as surrender. Most Gazans accept Hamas’s view that it is military capacity, not goodwill gestures, that will lead Israel to make concessions. They point to the prisoner exchange after the Shalit kidnapping and the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and contrast them to the failure of negotiations by the PA. Hamas also fears that once it demilitarized, the PA security forces would exact revenge for Hamas’s bloody takeover of the Strip in 2007. In addition, while Hamas might agree to disarm, other groups like Palestine Islamic Jihad or Salafi-jihadist fighters would not—and many within Hamas’s military wing might choose to join them rather than give up the fight. That would leave a situation in which the most extreme individuals committed to violence are heavily armed while the relatively more pragmatic elements of Hamas lack any capacity to police them.

Nor is it clear who would provide the aid to Gazans should Hamas agree to disarm. The \$50 billion proposed by Mofaz would be a huge sum for Israel, and skeptical Israelis would prove reluctant to give any money to Hamas even if it agreed to disarm, as Hamas would surely not end its hate-filled incitement against Israel. Hamas is not popular in the West, and the figures discussed are large for Turkey and even Qatar, Hamas’s key allies. Several states in the latest donor conference on Gaza questioned the wisdom of sinking billions more dollars into rebuilding Gaza yet again, only to see their work undone in the next round of conflict.³³

Hamas might also gain politically. Part of the West’s failed strategy so far has been to make the West Bank more attractive than Gaza economically in the hopes of enhancing the PA’s stature; now the opposite could be true. So success of this option would mean a less violent Hamas, but one that is a more influential voice among Palestinians.

Option Four: Negotiate a Lasting Ceasefire

Although Hamas is a seemingly implacable opponent of Israel and the PA embraces peace, a limited deal with Hamas over Gaza is in some ways simpler than a comprehensive one with moderate Palestinians. Emotional issues in contention in negotiations with Abbas, such as the status of Jerusalem or the fate of Israeli settlements, are not present in Gaza. And Hamas is a stronger organization than the PA: if it makes a deal, it is better able to stick to it.

A limited “like for like” ceasefire, in which Hamas ends rocket attacks and polices the Strip while Israel eases the economic vise on Gaza—but neither side goes much further—is more plausible. Hamas could claim that its long-term goals remain expansive, but that it is accepting a lasting ceasefire due to its current weakness; in fact, Hamas’s current approach has elements of this logic. Israel would have to ensure a modicum of basic economic activity in Gaza, and Egypt would have to allow Gazans some freedom to travel to and from the Strip (admittedly a difficult requirement given Cairo’s hostility to Hamas). Such a ceasefire would also help the people of Gaza, as any deal would involve lifting economic restrictions and otherwise making life easier. This approach could even potentially shift the debate within Hamas over how much to emphasize governance versus resistance: a lasting ceasefire combined with economic rewards that would allow Hamas to govern more effectively would bolster its political position with Palestinians through non-violent means and strengthen more pragmatic voices within Hamas, making further moderation more likely.

Although the Hamas leadership is strong, a long-term ceasefire would be opposed by militants in its own military wing, along with groups like Palestine Islamic Jihad and even more radical al-Qaeda types. Much of Hamas also opposes this ideologically and—perhaps more important—believes it has gained the support of many Palestinians by positioning itself in opposition to Abbas and the PA, denouncing them for their willingness to sell Palestinian patrimony. For its part, Israel would find it hard to commit to a long-term ceasefire without a bold gesture by Hamas to show it has changed its stripes.

Hamas’ pragmatism is uncertain—and there’s the rub, for this option as for so many of these options. Hamas does have pragmatic voices, but it also has radical ones. So even if Hamas leaders are genuine now, there is no certainty that its leaders would not return to violence in five years, or even five months. Indeed, if there are not economic restrictions on Gaza, then Hamas might be able to smuggle in even more weapons and otherwise bolster its military capacity, making the next conflict even bloodier. And if the situation stagnates but Hamas continues to

stop violence emanating from Gaza against Israel, it could find itself in the same situation the PA has been for the last 20 years: accused of being Israel’s subcontractor while failing to end the occupation. Hamas thus worries that any move toward peace would lead to violent splinters and the growth of radical rivals, developments that would greatly weaken Hamas.

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There would be one clear loser from this deal: Abbas and other moderate Palestinian leaders. In essence, Israel would be bypassing them, sending a message that Hamas's violence is what commands Israel's attention, not an offer of negotiations.

Implications

The problem with the current Israeli and international policy toward Gaza is that there is no end state beyond repeated conflict. The problem with all the alternatives is that they are often costly, infeasible, or uncertain. For now, it is not realistic to expect change, but as the stagnation of the status quo becomes clearer, circumstances might shift.

Any long-term strategy depends on the strength of moderate Palestinians as well as moderate Israelis. Even if Israel were to pursue the most muscular policy—reoccupying Gaza—Israel would eventually want to hand off power to moderate Palestinians. Any approach involving negotiations similarly requires moderate Palestinians to be able to triumph politically and, when negotiations end, to be the voice of the Palestinian people. Unfortunately, Hamas remains strong politically among Palestinians.

The United States should seek to strengthen voices within Hamas that favor governance over violence. There should be no illusions: Hamas as an organization remains committed to violence, including violence against civilians. But Hamas has pragmatic as well as zealous voices, and it knows when it is in a tight spot—as it is now. For pragmatic voices to win politically, Hamas needs political options.

Small, more politically feasible steps should be pursued in the absence of a broader peace process.

As such, it should be encouraged to work with moderate Palestinians, and the siege of Gaza should be eased as long as Hamas stops violence.

Finally, the suffering of Gazans is real and constant, and there is no end in sight. Diskin's idea of limited disarmament in exchange for greater aid will satisfy no one—Hamas will want more, and Israeli hawks will protest that Hamas remains armed—but it would reduce the threat to Israel while making life better for ordinary Gazans. Similarly, efforts to increase the PA presence in Gaza, and especially to bolster it once it is there,

are small steps that might have a long-term payoff. Such specific trades that are more politically feasible should be pursued in the absence of a broader peace process.

Gaza lacks an optimal solution, so it is not surprising that short-term approaches dominate policy. Yet short-term logics have led to war after war,

with victory always elusive. Taking small steps to end the impasse while exploring new approaches will not guarantee peace, but the alternative is to continue stumbling into clash after clash in the years to come.

Notes

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