

PolicyWatch #1356 : Special Forum Report

The Gaza Challenge

Featuring Ghaith al-Omari, [James Lindsay](#), [David Makovsky](#) , and Dennis Ross
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On March 14, 2008, Ghaith al-Omari, James Lindsay, David Makovsky, and Dennis Ross addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. al-Omari is a senior fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine. Mr. Lindsay is former chief counsel with the UN Relief and Works Agency and a visiting fellow at the Institute. Mr. Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the [Project on the Middle East Peace Process](#) at the Institute. Ambassador Ross is the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

GHAITH AL-OMARI

Until Hamas accepts Israel's right to exist and agrees to end violence and relinquish its weapons, the international community should continue to isolate the group rather than engaging it. Although some believe a military solution is best, and others hope for a "national unity" government, only one thing is clear: there is no quick fix to the Gaza problem.

If there were a viable military solution, Israel would already have pursued it. Air power alone will not suffice, deploying ground forces creates the risk of mass casualties, and complete reoccupation is far too drastic and distant from current Israeli policy. Fatah-Hamas cooperation appears unworkable as well. The factions are too different, on a multitude of levels, to allow for a sustainable, stable partnership. Even aside from political problems such as how to divide cabinet posts, determining who gets control over security and the armed forces would by itself scuttle any national unity efforts.

In light of these obstacles, how should the United States and other actors proceed? Washington can pressure and isolate Hamas, but the group's future is a long-term and largely internal issue, to be dealt with by the Palestinians themselves. For the time being, however, the United States should adjust the manner in which it pressures Hamas. The United States should pursue two policies simultaneously: establishing a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, and giving Fatah a stronger position in key areas such as checkpoints.

De-escalation is particularly essential. Violence in Gaza causes spillover whose effects can greatly harm any chance at peace or stability. Therefore, although engaging Hamas politically is out of the question, engaging it in conversations about de-escalation could prove useful. Such discussion should be conducted through a third party that already has ties with Hamas; Turkey or Jordan would be good partners for this approach.

JAMES LINDSAY

Polling in Gaza indicates that while the Palestinian Authority (PA) still has more support than Hamas, its support is slowly eroding. Yet, this trend is offset by the fact that Hamas's own support is likely lower than reported. For example, at least some Gazans are now reluctant to speak their mind for fear of economic or physical retaliation by Hamas. Despite such fears, and despite being subjected to anti-Israel propaganda, Gazans who have lost innocent relatives during Israeli attacks on rocket launch sites have often blamed their situation on the militants as well as Israel.

Hamas's intentions are clear. The group seeks to demoralize Israelis, spurring them to emigrate, discouraging them from military service, and showing them that their government is unable to protect them -- all toward the main objective of causing the state's disintegration. In addition, they hope to militarily pressure Israel in conjunction with their allies (most notably Hizballah and Syria), all of whom they presume will eventually be protected by an Iranian nuclear umbrella. The Israeli strategy -- limited military responses to Hamas attacks -- is not working, as Hamas has been able to increase the range, frequency, and lethality of its rockets.

Given Hamas's objective of destroying Israel, engagement is a zero-sum game for the two parties: there are no ceasefire terms that would benefit both of them. Hamas will not approve (or maintain) a ceasefire unless it believes the truce would further its objectives. Thus, a formal ceasefire is unlikely.

In general, the peace process will be on hold whenever the PA allows itself to be held hostage to militant attacks and the inevitable Israeli response. At the same time, the March 6 attack in Jerusalem is unlikely to herald the beginning of a new intifada. As of today, it is not clear that the attack was ordered by any of the known Palestinian militant groups, and, in any event, Palestinians do not desire a new intifada.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

The Israeli government denied recent press speculation that it had agreed to a ceasefire with Hamas. Instead, there was a brief de facto arrangement after a barrage of attacks on Sderot and Ashkelon. In essence, immediately after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Egypt and Israel, a spokesman for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made clear that Israel would not retaliate against Hamas unless the group fired more rockets. This suggestion may have come from Cairo and Rice herself. Because of the arrangement's de facto status, neither side was forced to declare that it had reached a formal ceasefire with the other. This arrangement helped keep the calm for about a week, until events in the West Bank and Jerusalem ended it.

Going forward, what are Israel's policy options? There seem to be four at the moment, and they may or may not be mutually exclusive: (1) continuing the status quo whereby Israel responds to rocket fire or occasionally takes preemptive steps against the individuals in Gaza who are behind the attacks, (2) exploring prospects for a formal ceasefire, (3) escalating militarily, including partial temporary reoccupation of Gaza, and (4) working more closely with the United States and Egypt to halt the influx of rockets through underground tunnels between Sinai and Gaza.

Regarding the ceasefire option, several key challenges would need to be addressed in order to avoid repeating past ceasefire breakdowns (such as the failure of the 2003 *hudna* and the 2005 *tahdiya*). For example, what obligations would each side have, and what exactly would constitute a violation of the ceasefire? Would those obligations extend to the West Bank, as Hamas wants and Israel rejects? And who would take on the enforcement role? Is a group like Hamas -- which has long insisted to supporters that "resistance" is its *raison d'etre* -- capable of enforcing a ceasefire on other rejectionist factions like Palestinian Islamic Jihad?

Other actors present key challenges as well. Given Israeli concerns about Hamas rearming during a ceasefire, Egypt would need to show that it is serious about the problem of rocket smuggling from Sinai. The PA would need to decide whether it could establish a viable relationship with Hamas in the confines of a ceasefire, despite last summer's bloodshed between them. And outside actors like Iran may pose a challenge by inciting problems in order to meet for their own interests.

If a ceasefire proves unviable, another option is partial reoccupation, with Israel moving back into Rafah in southern Gaza. Israelis likely view Rafah as the key to halting weapons smuggling, given that most of the tunnels are located there. Israel could seek to justify such action by arguing that it is already being called an occupier, and that no one in the international community is doing anything to stop the smuggling. This view is predicated on the belief that Israel made a mistake when it withdrew from the outer perimeter of Gaza in 2005. There are at least three major challenges to the partial reoccupation approach, however. First, Israel would have to fight its way in, likely sustaining and causing significant casualties in a dense urban area. Second, its

control over Rafah could be a rallying call for further Hamas attacks. Third, it is questionable whether such an approach would be effective in the long term.

Another option is to focus on enhancing trilateral U.S.-Egyptian-Israeli relations. Egyptian defense minister Muhammad Hussein Tantawi's upcoming visit to Washington is an opportunity to halt a deteriorating situation. Egypt's recent alacrity in building a three-tiered barrier to stem the tide of Gazans into Egypt -- a move that has received virtually no media attention -- must be matched with equal energy in halting the flow of weapons in the other direction.

DENNIS ROSS

The Israeli military has long debated whether a major operation in Gaza makes sense, and each time it has concluded that there is no good military option. In all likelihood, however, a rocket will eventually hit a major target in Israel, like a school or a power plant. When that happens, the military's hesitance about a major operation will not matter because the political context will have changed.

If Israel does choose to reenter Gaza, its main objective will be halting the rocket fire. In order to meet that goal, it would need to occupy enough of Gaza to put Israeli targets out of range. But there is no way for Israel to make such a move without heavy costs. The only way to minimize its own military casualties would be to employ enormous firepower, but that approach would inevitably cause many Palestinian casualties and destroy the potential for negotiations. In other words, if the Israelis decide to move into Gaza, it would end the prospects for political agreement on peace issues for the time being.

Recognizing this, some parties have expressed interest in exploring a real ceasefire. What could each side gain from that option? The Israelis want an end to rocket fire and a guarantee that Hamas cannot increase its military capacity during the truce. The PA wants to reestablish some kind of foothold in Gaza. Hamas could benefit because its leaders would no longer be targeted and forced to live underground, and because normal commerce in and out of Gaza would presumably ensue. And Egypt now understands that Israel is not the only one with a stake in Gaza's future. Previously, the Egyptian approach was "live and let live"; Cairo let Hamas operate within certain boundaries as long as the group did not cause problems in Egypt. But Hamas recently crossed that threshold and created a problem. This could give Egypt incentive to not just control the border, but to take serious action on the smuggling.

The key, of course, is to reopen crossing points with the PA running them, and with some understanding to prevent the nearby presence of Hamas militia from becoming a problem. A ceasefire arrangement must be clear on the point of rocket fire as well: any such attacks, without exception, would cause the crossing points to close while Israel pursues the attackers.

A formal ceasefire of this sort may not work, but it nevertheless seems to offer the best chance for sustained calm. Tacit arrangements are an alternative option, but they are less likely to hold for long. And Israeli military reoccupation is full of uncertainties, in addition to spelling an end to the current political process.

If nothing is done about Gaza, sooner or later some fatal incident will occur that will guarantee no further progress on peace talks. That would only validate the Hamas narrative that diplomacy never produces anything, while violence always produces something. And the last thing the Bush administration should want as its legacy is to leave Hamas stronger than it was eight years ago.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Gerri Pozez.

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