



On 14 November, Israel carried out a targeted assassination effort against the leader of Hamas' military wing, Ahmed Jabari, and followed it up by launching Operation Pillar of Defense on Gaza, which lasted for eight days and ended with an Egyptian-brokered and US-supported ceasefire.

What Lies Ahead for the Palestinian Issue in 2013 - Opportunities and Challenges

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Özet

Bu çalışma, Filistin siyasetindeki son değişimleri ele almakta ve çoktan unutulmuş bu meselenin geçtiğimiz üç ayda meydana gelen gelişmelerle yeniden gündeme taşındığını öne sürmektedir. Söz konusu gelişmeler şu şekilde sıralanabilir: Estelle gemisinin Gazze'ye gitmesi, Katar Emiri'nin Gazze ziyareti, İsrail'in Gazze'deki "Savunma Harekat Ayağı", ve Filistin'in BM'de üye olmayan devlet statüsü elde etme çabası. Bu gelişmeler her iki tarafın liderleri için hem fırsat hem de sıkıntı yaratmaktadır. Filistin tarafında uzlaşma gerekirken, İsrail tarafında ise Filistin meselesini çözmek için kapsamlı bir stratejiye ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Yine de bu gelişmelerden hiçbiri önümüzdeki yıl için muhtemel görünmeyebilir, zira günümüzde Filistin'deki grupları bölen etkenler, onları birleştiren etkenlerden daha fazladır. Buna ek olarak, İsrail'deki güvenlik söyleminin esnekliği ve bu meseleye ilişkin kısa-vadeli stratejiler uzun vadeli çabaları engellemekle birlikte Hamas'ı güçlendirdiği kadar diyalog kurma hedefine de ters etki etmektedir.

While the visit of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Emir of Qatar, to Gaza strengthened Hamas, it also indirectly deepened the division between the Palestinian Authority in West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, which can be seen as problematic for the future of the territories and for undermining the power of Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the PA.

Abstract

This article deals with recent developments in Palestinian politics and argues that the long-forgotten issue has come back onto the agenda through a series of developments over the past three months: the sailing of the Gaza-bound vessel Estelle, the visit of the Emir of Qatar to Gaza, Israel's 'Operation Pillar of Defense' in Gaza, and the Palestinian bid for non-member state status in the UN. These developments will provide both opportunities and additional challenges for the leaders of both parties. While what is needed on the Palestinian side is reconciliation, on the Israeli side a comprehensive strategy to resolve the Palestinian issue is necessary. Yet, none of these developments seems feasible in the year ahead, as what is dividing Palestinian groups seems greater than what is uniting them today. In addition, the resilience of the security discourse in Israel and short-term strategies being deployed on the issue preclude long-term efforts and, insofar as they strengthen Hamas, they are counterproductive to the goal of dialogue.

Keywords: Israel, Palestine, Hamas, Gaza, Palestinian Authority

Introduction

As the Middle East witnessed the unfolding of tumultuous events with the Arab uprisings, whether or not the Palestinian issue retains its central position in regional politics has come into question. As the discussion has increasingly become preoccupied with issues of change, de-

mocracy, elections and new constitutions, the Palestinian issue seems to have been put on the backburner, falling lower on the agendas of regional and international actors. In September 2011, in an attempt to revive the issue, the Palestinian Authority (PA) applied to the UN for full membership, with no success. Neither have the reconciliation talks of 2011 between Fatah and Hamas resulted in the anticipated elections. Yet, a few important developments since October 2012 have brought the Palestinian issue in general and Gaza in particular back onto the agenda. These are the sailing of the Gaza-bound vessel Estelle, the visit of the Emir of Qatar to Gaza, Israel's 'Operation Pillar of Defense' in Gaza, and the Palestinian bid for non-member state status in the UN, which have each reminded us of the place of the Palestinian issue in a rapidly changing regional politics. Upon examination of these developments, it appears important challenges lie ahead in 2013 with regard to the renewal of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, as well as to the relations between Fatah and Hamas.

Developments in Gaza

In October 2012, two important events occurred that drew attention to Gaza. One of these was the disembarkation of the Gaza-bound vessel Estelle from port in Europe in an attempt to break the Israeli blockade on the territory. The ship was stopped before it reached its destination and those on board; including members of the parliaments of some European countries were detained and later expelled. This was the



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first event of its kind since the Mavi Marmara incident of 2010. It should be recalled that Israel had unilaterally withdrawn from Gaza in 2005 but retained control over its borders. Since the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilat Shalid by Hamas in 2006, control over borders has turned into a blockade, and after Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, the blockade was tightened in coordination with the Mubarak regime. Following the change of regime in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood made an initial announcement that crossings into Gaza from the Rafah Gate would be eased, and this has been realized in time. Yet, the living conditions of the people of Gaza due to the blockade came to the fore once again with the sailing of Estelle.

A second and more important development was the visit of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Emir of Qatar, to Gaza with a convoy and 90 tons of humanitarian aid supplies. The emir has promised 400 million dollars more in aid and committed to projects aimed at repairing the infrastructure destroyed during 2008–9 Operation Cast Lead. Considering that after Hamas and its political bureau Chief Halid Meshal left Damascus the financial help it had been receiving from its major financiers, Syria and Iran, diminished considerably, this aid was very timely. In a way, the emir seemed, with his visit, to be rewarding the organization for having left Damascus and joining the anti-Asad forces. Prime Minister of Hamas, Ismail Haniye, had praised the of-



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ficial visit, the first by a head of state since the 1999 visit of King Abdallah of Jordan, and declared the blockade officially broken. That he had traveled to Gaza helped to legitimize the Hamas government. As I have argued elsewhere,¹ while the visit strengthened Hamas, it also indirectly deepened the division between the Palestinian Authority in West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, which can be seen as problematic for the future of the territories and for undermining the power of Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the PA.

Operation Pillar of Defense

A few weeks after the emir's visit, Israel initiated an operation on Gaza. There has been a periodic escalation of tension between Israel and Gaza in the previous months consisting of the exchange of rockets. Before the operation began,

Netanyahu asserted, "In recent days and weeks, Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in Gaza have made normal life impossible for over 1 million Israelis. No government would tolerate a situation where nearly a fifth of its people live under a constant barrage of rockets and missile fire." Accusing those that had launched the attacks of committing a double war crime, he continued, "They fire at Israeli civilians, and they hide behind Palestinian civilians. And by contrast, Israel takes every measure to avoid civilian casualties."² On 14 November, Israel carried out a targeted assassination effort against the leader of Hamas' military wing, Ahmed Jabari, and followed it up by launching Operation Pillar of Defense on Gaza, which lasted for eight days and ended with an Egyptian-brokered and US-supported ceasefire. Jabari had been behind the 2006 kidnapping of Gilad Shalit in 2006 and

In light of the rapidly changing environment resulting from the Arab Spring, Israel seems to have wanted to show it was able to respond to threats to its own security without hesitation, to test the Morsi government's reaction and learn to what extent it was a reliable partner, and it also wanted to test its defense shield, the Iron Dome.

exchanged the soldier's release in October 2011 for that of 1027 Palestinians being held in Israeli prisons.

Israel's relations with Gaza, from which it unilaterally withdrew in 2005, have been problematic especially since 2007 and were faced with two major options: carry out a full-scale ground operation in order to wipe Hamas out altogether or take a diplomatic path by pursuing an agreement. However, the first option involves too many risks and international dimensions to be viable, and the second is also unachievable with a partner that aims to destroy Israel altogether and one that is also a rival of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, a body Israel negotiates with and recognizes as representative of the Palestinian people. Instead, since it could fulfill neither of these options, Israel has implemented what some have called a "cutting the grass" strategy³—periodically carrying out operations in Gaza targeted at militants and their arsenals, and then keep quiet until the next round. Looking at Operation Cast Lead in 2008–9 and now Operation Pillar of Defense, if the pattern holds this next round will begin when Hamas or other organizations in Gaza exhibit readiness to challenge Israel through a rocket and mortar attack, which will prompt an Israeli response. Many analysts see this cyclical pattern as a sign that Israel lacks a broader strategy on the Palestinian issue in general and Gaza in particular.⁴ In the absence of a broader strategy involving dialogue and negotiation, it seems Israel will continue to rely on short-term solutions that yield short-term results in return.

Israel's stated aims for Operation Pillar of Defense was to halt the rocket attacks on it, and to thus restore its deterrence capabilities and secure a long-term commitment from Hamas to respect a ceasefire. In addition, in light of the rapidly changing environment resulting from the Arab Spring, Israel seems to have wanted to show it was able to respond to threats to its own security without hesitation, to test the Morsi government's reaction and learn to what extent it was a reliable partner, and it also wanted to test its defense shield, the Iron Dome. As Iran is at the top of Israel's foreign policy priorities, especially since the 2006 Lebanese War, Israel's operations are analyzed through the lens of its relations with Iran. This operation can also thus be understood as Israel crippling Hamas' military capabilities as a way of reducing its risks in the event of an attack on Iran—to prevent Hamas from joining forces with Iran against Israel. The upcoming elections on 22 January are another force making it necessary for the Israeli government to provide security for its citizens in this period. It seems that Israel has reached some of its aims—most of Hamas' long-range rockets have been destroyed, top military fighters have been killed and it showed that it was able to defend its territories and population. The Egyptian government under Morsi has contained the conflict and helped to broker the peace. An important development was that Hezbollah did not join Hamas during the last operation, supporting it only verbally. Yet, as Israel refrained from carrying out a ground operation—too risky just

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before the elections—to what extent the success of the operation can be sustained is a question at this point.⁵

On the side of Hamas, the operation has definitely boosted its power, and although it lost some of its top fighters and its arsenal and infrastructure, its credibility as an organization capable of standing up against Israel has been bolstered. Hanan Ashrawi, a senior Fatah member, says she is “increasingly worried that Palestinians will see armed resistance, which Fatah renounced in 1988, as the only mechanism that appears to win concessions from Israel.”⁶ Mahmoud Abbas’ position calling for dialogue with Israel has also been further weakened as a result of the operation.

After the ceasefire was announced on 7 December, ending the eight-day operation, Haled Meshal made a historic first visit to Gaza, and this visit became a great show for Hamas. Although members of Fatah came to the celebration, the visit showed the growing power of Hamas in “resistance against Israel”, bringing Israel’s view of the operation as successful into question. In a speech made by Meshal to a large crowd gathered to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the founding of Hamas the next day, he said, “Palestine is ours, from the river to the sea and from the south to the north. There will be no concession on an inch of the land [...] We will never recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation and therefore there is no legitimacy for Israel, no matter how long it will take.”⁷ This re-

jection of the two-state solution and goal of destroying Israel runs counter to the basis for negotiations and the peace process led by the PA and Mahmoud Abbas since the 1993 Oslo Accords. The difference between the two organizations seems to become more irreconcilable as Hamas’ methods gain more popularity, including by the recent operation.

Palestinian Statehood

While the abovementioned developments have given Hamas enormous popularity, enhancing its position in the region and ‘in the struggle against Israel’, the Palestinian Authority’s bid for UN member status has added a new dynamic to the issue in general. As will be remembered, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have been stalled since the last round of direct talks in 2010. In September 2011, its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, has sought full member state status in the UN based on the pre-1967 borders. Abbas asserted that “the Palestinian territories must be represented in their natural border”, referring to the pre-1967 borders, which include the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Since this effort failed due to US objection in the Security Council, Palestinians have been looking for other solutions that would give them a diplomatic victory at a time when peace negotiations have been stuck, the Jewish settlements in West Bank have grown and Palestine itself has become increasingly divided between a Fatah-dominated West Bank and a Hamas-controlled Gaza. PA has made a settlement freeze a precondition of restarting negotiations, without success.



What we may then see in the coming months is that Palestinian groups may try to seize the opportunity to unite and hold the long-promised elections.

A year after the application for full membership, in September 2012, the PA decided to take the issue to the General Assembly in a bid to apply for non-member state status. Although this status—short of full membership but a step above ‘observer’ status—would not change much on the ground, the Palestinians argued that it will strengthen their hand in negotiations with Israel, especially in issues like borders, settlements, Palestinian refugees and the status of Jerusalem. Also, a Palestinian non-member ‘state’ could apply to the International Criminal Court and hold Israel responsible for some of its operations as war crimes, although the likelihood of this in near future is small.

The bid to the UN General Assembly has been met by a harsh Israeli response. Israel viewed the UN application as a unilateral action and saw it as an impediment to the continuation of peace talks. It has objected to the application, saying that the PA, instead of using international channels, should come to the negotiation table with-

out conditions like the freeze on construction of Jewish settlements. It has also threatened to nullify the Oslo Accords.

Many analysts have criticized Israel’s position regarding the Palestinian UN bid. Both last year and this year, calls were made advising Israel to back Palestinian statehood and to “rally allies to its side, to leverage their support in decisive settlement talks.”⁸ This would help, according to these calls, to advance the peace talks, to maintain Israel’s alliances in the Muslim world and to secure a more comfortable position in a rapidly changing region, as well as to bolster its international standing. However, the Israeli response has not waived. The US administration has also criticized the PA’s application to the General Assembly; before the vote it blamed the PA for using the wrong forums.

When Palestine was granted non-member state status in the vote, Israel’s immediate response was to threaten the PA with cutting the tax rev-

venues it collected on its behalf and announced that a new settlement construction was to be carried out that would include 3000 more houses in the West Bank, in the E-1 Area, which would constitute a further breach of the pre-1967 borders. Scholars like Efraim Inbar have supported the building of these settlements as he sees them critical to linking Jerusalem with other settlements, especially Maaleh Adumim in the east of Jerusalem; he says this construction “serves as the linchpin in establishing an effective line of defense along the Jordan Valley against aggression from the east”.⁹ Yet such a policy, while possibly increasing Israel’s defense posture and enhancing its defensible borders in case of an attack by Arab forces, is undermining the power of the PA, which was already on the decline, especially after the abovementioned developments, which have had the result of enhancing the power of Hamas. By cutting revenues and building further settlements, Israel itself is weakening the PA and decreasing opportunities for negotiation, while also indirectly encouraging Hamas.

Conclusion

With the Palestinian issue increasingly marginalized in regional and international politics, a series of events since October 2012 has brought the issue to the forefront. These events have important consequences for the issue, the most important of which are the increase of Hamas’ power and the decrease of that of the PA and of Mahmoud Abbas in Palestinian politics. While the visit by the Emir of Qatar legitimized the Hamas government in Gaza, Operation Pillar of Defense, despite dealing a heavy blow from Israel showed Hamas’ power in standing up against Israel. In this context, the PA and Mahmoud Abbas have been further weakened. In a move to acquire at least symbolic power through non-member state status in the UN, Abbas tried to enhance his power but the impact of this ‘victory’ on the ground will remain limited.

What we may then see in the coming months is that Palestinian groups may try to seize the op-

portunity to unite and hold the long-promised elections. The reconciliation between the factions is more important today than before for reviving talks with Israel, and the new Obama government could help bring this to fruition. However, looking at the developments over the past few months, what divides Hamas and Fatah seems greater than what brings them together; even Meshal’s talk in Gaza is evidence of this difference. In a speech in the Turkish Parliament last month, Abbas promised a renewed effort towards reconciliation.¹⁰ Yet, how it can be established and whether it can be sustainable remains highly questionable.

Another important consequence of these recent developments has been the revelation of a lack of a comprehensive strategy by Israel in dealing with the Palestinian issue in general and with Hamas in particular. After the last operation, and its results, it appears Israel is managing tensions as they are about to erupt with responses that will only provide short-term solutions to the issue. Punishing the PA by cutting taxes and building new settlements also seems counterproductive to its interests.

Considering that the Israeli elections are ahead, the operation seems to guarantee the dominance of the security discourse in the coming period. On the subject of security and implementing policies to maintain it, not undermining the PA and radicalizing Palestinian politics seems to be the key. Yet, the challenge is to build a comprehensive policy on the Palestinian issue that will deliver Israel security. This first of all requires a willingness that has been lacking in the past. Secondly, policies are needed that encourage the factions in Palestinian politics that call for negotiation and dialogue before it’s too late. And thirdly, the US administration must be tasked with committing to a peace in the region. Looking ahead to 2013, and reviewing the direction events have been unfolding in 2012, there unfortunately seem to be little hope for progress in the short run.

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