



Israel, Gaza and the Region: Post-Ceasefire Opportunities

**A policy planning workshop convened by
Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies
and the International Crisis Group**

Jerusalem, Israel; July 24, 2014

In light of the prolonged fighting between Israel and Hamas, forty experts, diplomats and journalists, from Israel and abroad, convened in Jerusalem on July 24, 2014 for a policy planning workshop initiated by [Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#) and the [International Crisis Group](#). They discussed how to best advance regional stability and Israeli-Palestinian peace following a Gaza ceasefire.

The workshop addressed the changing dynamics in the Middle East, regional and international mechanisms for mediation and ceasefire implementation, the need to move from conflict management to conflict resolution, the difficulties of demilitarizing the Gaza Strip, the economic rebuilding of Gaza, the future of the Palestinian unity government and the Arab Peace Initiative.

The workshop aimed to understand the issues that led to the recent flare-up in Gaza and the favorable circumstances that could arise following a truce. This paper summarizes the main points raised in the workshop. It focuses on the analysis of key players and the assessment of future options.

A. The need to discuss opportunities

In international politics, wars often create opportunities for comprehensive change, such as promoting peace processes and altering regional and international ties.

Indeed, the period following Arab-Israeli armed clashes historically created windows of opportunity for dialogue between Israelis and Arabs. UN Security Council Resolution 242, the peace with Egypt and the Madrid Conference were all born out of the ashes of conflict.

Following an end to Operation Protection Edge, fresh opportunities are likely to emerge. The termination of this round of violence should not go unexploited, and the opportunities deriving from it should be identified and acted upon.

B. Key players

1. The regional context

Operation Protective Edge has been carried out under a different configuration in the Middle East than previous rounds of Israel-Hamas warfare.

The radical Arab camp is weaker. It still includes Iran and Hezbollah, but Syria and Iraq are no longer playing a role in it. Political Islam, which was on the rise after the Arab Spring, is also in decline. Arab countries, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are openly siding with Israel against common regional threats, including Muslim Brotherhood movements and their supporters in Turkey and Qatar.

These developments are playing in Israel's favor. However, in parallel, Israel has somewhat strained relations with the US due to differences over the American ceasefire mediation attempts, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the Palestinian unity government, the negotiations with Iran, and the nature of US relations with Qatar (too warm, according to Israel) and Egypt (too cold).

2. The atmosphere in Israel

The Israeli discourse is focusing on tactical issues and military options. There is little debate on political solutions and post-ceasefire diplomatic opportunities. Israeli public opinion has been challenging Netanyahu from the right, demanding to expand even further the attacks on Gaza. This atmosphere makes it even more unlikely that Netanyahu will carry out significant steps towards peace after Operation Protective Edge reaches its end.

And yet, the warfare in Gaza may lead the Israeli public to reflect and open up to new ideas. Operation Protective Edge has shown the limits of Israel's power and the limits of the conflict management approach. It proved that Hamas, a rather small organization operating from one of the poorest places in the world, has considerable capacity to damage Israel (including its major airport), and that this capacity is not likely to disappear anytime soon.

The Israeli public now also realizes that the "quiet for quiet paradigm", which served to end previous Hamas-Israel escalations, actually means that during periods of quiet the enemy is actually growing stronger. A new, diplomatic, answer to the challenge Hamas poses is needed.

Israel has to go beyond military solutions. It is up to think tanks and non-governmental organizations to advocate change and to empower political actors that support alternative policies. In order to do so, it can be beneficial to frame such policy recommendations as post-war achievements, rather than as concessions to the other side.

Despite a strong sense of unity among large segments of the Israeli society, tensions within the Israeli society are mounting. Tolerance towards alternative views is decreasing; hate and racism towards the Palestinian citizens of Israel is on the rise. After the war in Gaza, there is need for intra-Israeli reconciliation.

3. The situation of Hamas

Hamas has been increasingly isolated in the region, especially since the coming to power of al-Sisi in Egypt. The situation in Gaza has become non-sustainable, with Hamas being caught between Egypt and Israel, two powerful neighbors that are hostile towards it.

The severe conditions in the Gaza Strip, and the threat of further deterioration, led Hamas to recognize that it may better not govern Gaza on its own anymore. This was the main reason leading to the reconciliation agreement with Fatah, in which Hamas had made large concessions to Mahmoud Abbas.

The war in Gaza is making Hamas a more important regional player, and its popularity in the West Bank is on the rise (some voices there are saying that “a Hamas win is our win”). Consequently, Hamas leaders have gradually adopted pan-Palestinian rhetoric – changing their slogan from “Gaza resist” to “Palestine resist”, and calling for a third *intifada* in the West Bank.

Hamas is encouraged by this, as well as by its success to inflict damage on Israeli soldiers. It believes that circumstances and time are playing in its favor, not Israel's. Despite internal disputes between its political and military wings, Hamas seems determined to keep fighting up until the status quo in Gaza is changed.

4. The impact on the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas

The operation in Gaza may eventually lead to the strengthening of Abbas through the opening of the Rafah crossing under the supervision of Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces.

However, the prolonged fighting weakens Abbas politically. His policies diverge from the aspirations of many in the Palestinian population, and the rising violence in East Jerusalem and the West Bank pose a challenge to his leadership.

Israel should regard Abbas and the PA as central to the solution to the Gaza crisis.

5. The lack of effective mediators

The list of “wannabe-mediators” between Israel and Hamas is long. In previous rounds of Israel-Hamas violence the overall formula was rather clear. It was the Egyptians, with American backing, that would eventually deliver the ceasefire.

This time around, it is not clear who can serve as an effective mediator, and this complicates the situation even further. Multiple actors are involved in parallel mediation efforts. Some of them (Egypt and Saudi Arabia vs. Turkey and Qatar) are on opposing sides in regional politics. This creates a need for coordination between the different mediators.

Israel has been officially rejecting the involvement of Qatar and Turkey. It wanted to rely exclusively on Egypt, as in the past. However, Israel should accept the new multi-mediator setting, in which Egypt is no longer capable of functioning as the sole regional middleman between Israel and Hamas.

Israel will benefit from acknowledging that other regional and multi-national actors, and not only its allies, should also be part of mediation efforts with Hamas.

C. Future options

1. The future of Palestinian reconciliation

The Israeli policy of separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has been unchallenged for several years, and should now be reassessed. The Israeli demand that Abbas dismantle the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement and its decision to freeze negotiations with the PA until this happens was a mistake.

Palestinian unification can actually be an asset to Israel. It can serve as a means of containing Hamas, constraining its power, and creating more favorable conditions towards a two-state solution.

Hamas, too, seems willing to make progress, even if for different reasons. It has recently agreed that the PA pay advances for salaries in Gaza. Hamas can also benefit from the fact that its ally Turkey (that is at increased tension with Israel) is determined to play a role in supporting the reconciliation process.

However, Operation Protective Edge and the weeks preceding it saw an escalation of Hamas-Fatah factional rhetoric, which is likely to further complicate the reconciliation process.

Successful reconciliation depends on balancing the military capabilities of Hamas and the PA. Currently, Hamas is militarily superior to the PA, and this needs to be changed.

Furthermore, for reconciliation to succeed Hamas will have to accept the authority of the unity government, and should not be allowed to operate separately than that government's authority. It is not clear whether Hamas is willing to play by these rules.

2. The reconstruction and development of Gaza

A major concern in the post-ceasefire era will be the reconstruction of Gaza. The major needs of Gaza are construction materials, the opening of the Rafah crossing, and the ability to pay salaries.

Israel, which hoped in the past that economic pressure on Gaza would lead to the toppling of Hamas from within, is now changing course and is becoming more supportive of a development package for Gaza. Israel should announce what it is ready to do to alleviate social and economic problems in Gaza, and under which conditions.

Netanyahu has been advocating in the past for improved economic conditions in Gaza as a way forward, but this was not coupled with actions. After the ceasefire, Israeli is likely to be more supportive of an international investment plan for Gaza in the context of extending PA control there.

The international community should also formulate a plan for the development of Gaza, with different countries making clear financial commitments towards it. The eastern Mediterranean gas is a new component, which can be drawn into this plan to the benefit of various regional actors.

3. The option of demilitarization

The demilitarization of the Gaza Strip has become a key Israeli condition in efforts to reach a ceasefire. The Israeli concern is that without demilitarization, another round of violence in Gaza is inevitable and is just a matter of time.

However, demilitarization does not seem to be feasible as part of a ceasefire agreement. Hamas is unlikely to accept it, as demilitarization goes against their ethos. Without a culture of resistance Hamas will not be the same Hamas anymore.

The Israeli strategy of linking demilitarization to the economic development of Gaza, is not likely to yield results as well. It ignores the political context of the issue. The US position on the issue reflects this—it views demilitarization as an Israeli-Palestinian final-status issue, and not as an immediate goal.

Alternative suggestions include steps that will curb Hamas's freedom of military action, without actual demilitarization. Suggestions in this direction ranged from aiming to destroy Hamas's military wing to establishing a mechanism that will make Hamas place its rockets in international custody and/or keep its military wing in the barracks.

4. Possible resumption of the peace process

The peace process has been discredited by the failure of the last round of Israeli-Palestinian talks, and conflict resolution thinking has been transformed to that of conflict management. This should and can be changed following the Gaza war.

Operation Protective Edge made the limits of the conflict management approach evident – namely, that managing an environment without a political process is likely to result in further escalation. Furthermore, it has recast Abbas as a possible partner for peace.

Within Hamas there is support for a long-term ceasefire (*hudna*) with Israel, under certain conditions. To move beyond this, those seeking a two state solution must ensure the PLO's head can represent all Palestinians in negotiations with Israel.

Palestinians could be offered significant political incentives so they institutionalize a process for negotiations with Israel in which Hamas would abide also by decisions it does not approve of. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin's past ruling that Hamas should abide by the Palestinian majority's decision may be key to this.

On the Israeli side, government positions towards the peace process have not changed since the last round of negotiations. Therefore, even if the peace process is to resume following a ceasefire in Gaza, it will likely be more of the same - talks for sake of talks, and not for the sake of a final status agreement.

The involvement of the international community in efforts to bring about a ceasefire in Gaza can be leveraged to support the peace process. The general parameters of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, as spelled out in John Kerry's unpublished framework, can be developed into a UN Security Council resolution, which will serve as a baseline for any future negotiations.

Any effort to resume the peace process, whether bi-lateral or international, should take into account the regional dimension, which has been proved to be vital during the escalation in Gaza.

The best manifestation of this dimension is the Arab Peace Initiative (API). Although the Israeli public and leadership tend to ignore the API, this initiative has potential to serve as a meaningful incentive and framework for peace.

Efforts should be made to increase Israeli awareness to and support of the API. Some amendments in the initiative may be required, as to maintain its relevance in light of developments in Gaza and in the region. Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia could be central partners in reviving the API.

5. Making the ceasefire sustainable

A ceasefire will not guarantee all the needs of both Israel and Hamas. Nevertheless, both sides should be incentivized to implement the agreement, and should be held accountable to it.

The UN Security Council can adopt a resolution formalizing the ceasefire understandings between the sides. Also, an international monitoring group can be formed to track ceasefire violations.

Both ideas have been utilized to assist in ending rounds of Israel-Hezbollah fighting. In 1996 an international monitoring group was established, and in 2006 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1701.

A post-ceasefire international mechanism can increase the number of countries that engage with both Israel and Hamas, thus assisting future mediation efforts. It could also strengthen regional security, increase cooperation on soft-security issues, assist in preventing future deterioration due to sporadic incidents carried out by spoilers, and enable track-two diplomacy to take place.