

Regional Opportunities to Improve the Situation in Gaza

***Summary of a civil society roundtable held by
the Mitvim Institute and IPCRI on 31 October 2018
at the UN Headquarters in Jerusalem***

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Israeli and Palestinian experts and activists – together with international diplomats – gathered on 31 October 2018 at the UN Headquarters in Jerusalem for a civil society roundtable discussion on “Regional Opportunities in Support of Current Efforts to Improve the Situation in Gaza.” The event, attended by some fifty participants, was initiated and convened by Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies and Israel-Palestine Creative Regional Initiatives (IPCRI). It included an opening address by UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov and explored how various regional actors can help improve the situation in Gaza, without jeopardizing chances for a broader Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. It also identified recommendations and possible courses of action. The event was held in cooperation with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, the Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands, IEMed, and the EuroMeSCo Network. This paper summarizes the discussion.¹

A. The Current Crisis in Gaza

The Gaza Strip is facing a deep humanitarian and economic crisis. In recent months, this crisis led to escalation and violent clashes along the Israel-Gaza perimeter fence. Israel and Hamas were on the verge of another cycle of warfare, which was eventually prevented due to international mediation efforts led by the UN and Egypt, and to financial assistance provided by Qatar.

Attempts to improve living conditions in Gaza and restore the Palestinian Authority’s governance in Gaza continue, however the threat of escalation is resurfacing. The situation in Gaza is becoming dangerous, with the worsening of the humanitarian crisis, the deterioration of living conditions, and the high rate of unemployment (over 50 percent).

¹ The workshop was held under Chatham House Rule, and therefore this document does not include direct quotes, attributions or names of participants. This document does not reflect consensus among all participants, but rather highlights the key insights from the debate.

Gaza is also facing an electricity crisis, its health system is collapsing, 90 percent of its water supply is unfit for drinking, and its sewage flows into the Mediterranean Sea.

The crisis in Gaza is expected to have health and environmental implications that will not stop at its borders. The current ceasefire regime is very fragile and the danger of another war is real and terrifying for Israelis and Palestinians alike. All these elements, combined with the ongoing stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the prolonged split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, emphasize the seriousness and volatility of the current situation in Gaza. There is an urgent need for immediate action, by local, regional, and international actors.

B. The Issues on the Table

Regional actors should take into account three goals when defining their intervention strategy regarding the Gaza issue: (1) to prevent violent escalation and another war in Gaza, and ensure calm and restraint along the Israel-Gaza border; (2) to improve living conditions in Gaza through increased humanitarian aid and reconstruction; (3) to promote reunification of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as well as Israeli-Palestinian peace based on the two-state solution.

The crisis in Gaza involves humanitarian, political, economic, security and diplomatic aspects, each consisting of multiple issues and problems that need to be addressed and resolved. Dealing with only one of the aspects, as is often done by regional and international actors, is not enough to bring upon significant improvement. This raises a dilemma. On the one hand, some argue that if Gaza will be dealt with only from a humanitarian lens, without addressing the broader context and the need for a political horizon, then the international efforts are likely to fail, and to be temporary and unsustainable. On the other hand, some argue that Gaza and its population should not be hostage to progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and Palestinian reunification talks, which seems unlikely at the moment. According to this argument, the current crisis in Gaza requires urgent and realistic solutions, first and foremost to prevent war and stabilize the situation.

The challenge faced by regional and international actors is how to promote immediate steps on the ground in Gaza, without losing sight of the bigger political picture and goals; how to make sure that current efforts regarding Gaza can also serve to promote Palestinian unity and Israeli-Palestinian peace, rather than consolidate the Palestinian split and the stagnation in the peace process, as some local political actors want.

While efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace are currently on hold, efforts to promote Palestinian unity are taking place, although without success, with Egyptian encouragement. In order for progress to be made, Fatah and Hamas need to agree on three main elements: (1) the long-term goal of one government, one security system, and one legal system; (2) solutions and mechanisms to deal with pressing issues such as policing, border crossings, salaries and tax collection; (3) a process to monitor and ensure proper implementation of any agreements reached by the two movements.

In the short-term, the most urgent steps that should be taken to improve and stabilize the situation on the ground in the Gaza Strip are:

- Resolving the electricity crisis. The entering of Qatari fuel to the power plant in Gaza was an important step in the right direction, but additional action is required. In the past, an idea was developed by the Technion (Israeli Institute of Technology) to establish a buffer zone between Gaza and Israel that will be used for producing electricity. The time may now be ripe to revisit the idea and advance an updated version of it.
- Finding a long-term mechanism to pay salaries to public sector workers in Gaza. This is a crucial issue that has important implications for Gaza's economy. Qatar has been providing assistance in this regard, but this assistance is a temporary fix for the short-term, and does not provide a long-term solution to the issue.
- Easing restrictions on movement. Egypt recently agreed to increase to 1,500 (from 500) the number of permits its grants to Palestinians from Gaza for entering Egypt through the Rafah border crossing, but this is not enough. There is a need to allow businesses in Gaza to export products and import raw material, to allow more Gazans to leave the Gaza Strip for medical treatment, studies or family visits, and to enable more movement between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. It will also be beneficial to upgrade the Erez border crossing and to grant working permits in Israel to a certain number of Gazans.
- Expanding Gaza's fishing zone. Israel is changing the size of Gaza's fishing zone according to security and political considerations. There is a need to extend the fishing zones in order to assist Gaza's fishery sector. Although this sector is only a small part of Gaza's GDP, it has an immediate impact on the economy of Gaza.
- Advancing the economy via new jobs and trade routes. The implementation of various proposals and ideas on how to promote a long-term improvement of the economy in Gaza requires the stabilization of the Gaza Strip. Possible steps towards this goal include the rebuilding of the Erez industrial zone, which has the potential of creating some 5,000 new jobs, and to create a shipping corridor from Cyprus to Gaza.
- Releasing Israeli hostages: Hamas is holding two Israelis hostage in Gaza and bodies of two Israeli soldiers. Israel declared that it will not agree to a long-term ceasefire with Hamas and to a breakthrough in the economic development of Gaza until the hostages will be released and the bodies of the two soldiers are returned. Therefore, it is in the interest of both Israel and the citizens of Gaza that a solution to this issue be found, and international actors can assist by carrying out mediation efforts towards that goal.

C. The Regional and International Actors Involved

Egypt is the most important regional actor in efforts to improve the situation in Gaza. Ties between Egypt and Israel are perhaps at their highest point since the signing of the peace treaty in 1979. Netanyahu and al-Sisi have good relations, and share concerns regarding Iran and its influence in the region. Egypt is the main mediator in the talks between Fatah and Hamas (to which Russia has also expressed interest to contribute), as well as between Israel and Hamas. The regime in Egypt considers the Muslim Brotherhood as an enemy and a threat, sees Hamas as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, and demands that Hamas cut their link to the movement. At the same time, Egypt and Hamas manage to cooperate on issues related to the Sinai Peninsula and the Rafah crossing, Hamas handed over to Egypt terrorists from Sinai, and Egypt enjoys effective leverage over Hamas. Egypt is trying to engage Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in talks regarding Gaza, and is promoting a gradual Fatah-Hamas reconciliation that will bring the Palestinian Authority back to Gaza.

The UN, led in the region by its Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov, also serves as an effective mediator regarding the situation in Gaza, and is acting in close coordination with Egypt. Mladenov himself is playing an important role – and a much more central one than his predecessors – in efforts to improve living condition in Gaza and to prevent another round of Israel-Hamas escalation. Mladenov has succeeded in building a positive image in Israel for himself and the UN efforts, despite the overall negative Israeli attitudes towards the UN.

Another relevant regional actor is Qatar, who has close relations with Hamas and played a significant role in paying for delivering fuel to Gaza's power plant and in paying the civil servants' salaries in Gaza. Turkey also wishes in principle to play a role in Gaza, and provides scholarships for students from Gaza to study in Turkey. In general, Turkey would like to be involved in humanitarian and reconstruction projects related to water, schools, and hospitals in Gaza. But, in practice, its involvement in Gaza is limited, partly due to its own prioritization and partly due to its crises with Egypt and Israel. Turkey may have hoped that the reconciliation agreement it has signed with Israel in 2016 will enable it to have more influence in Gaza and to increase its investments there. However, since then, its relations with Israel have deteriorated, and so did its economic situation. This impacts its ability and motivation to get involved with Gaza. Regional actors that are not immediately affected by the conflict between Israel and Hamas, do not seem to attach much importance to the situation in Gaza, and point their attention to other regional crises, such as Yemen or Libya. The United Arab Emirates is an exception, given its increased attempts to influence domestic political developments in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority.

As for the EU, it officially supports intra-Palestinian reconciliation, the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza, and the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The EU defines Hamas as a terror organization, and adheres to a no-contact policy regarding it. After the US stopped funding UNRWA, European countries stepped up their support for the organization, in order to bridge the financial gap it was facing. In

addition, countries such as Germany, Norway and Sweden are providing financial support to construction projects in Gaza, such as desalination, infrastructure, and energy projects. Cyprus has also been recently mentioned in regards to Gaza, in the context of an initiative to establish a seaport to Gaza there. In general, viewing Gaza through an Eastern Mediterranean may open up new opportunities, that are not easily seen when viewing it only through a Middle Eastern lens.

Throughout the recent tensions in Gaza, the EU played only a marginal role in efforts to resolve crises. This was due to internal-EU divisions and priorities, but also due to its no-contact policy with Hamas and to Israeli limitations on European access to Gaza (including limitation on European diplomats and politicians, who are often not allowed by Israel to enter the Gaza Strip). This marginalization of the EU, is leading some in Europe to call for a reevaluation of policies towards Gaza and Hamas, and to seek whether the EU can adopt alternative strategies that will make its efforts to influence Hamas' and Israeli policies more effective.

Other relevant international actors include the US and China. The US tried to ignite an international working process to define a new mechanism of support to Gaza but without results. It is currently voices unequivocal support to Israel's position, and has recently focused on pressuring the Palestinian Authority and on cutting funds to UNRWA. This alienates the Palestinians, and limits the US' ability to influence the realities on the ground. As for China, its regional involvement as part of its Belt and Road Initiative highlights the potential of Chinese involvement in the reconstruction of Gaza and the development of major infrastructure and connectivity projects there. Yet, China is unlikely to make significant economic investments in Gaza, as long as the threat of another war there is looming.

Two distinct approaches regarding regional and international involvement in Gaza emerged during the discussion. The first approach stresses the urgent need for the international community to take responsibility, engage, and deal with the Gaza crisis. It is based on an assumption that without such involvement, the situation in Gaza will deteriorate and escalate. The second approach is critical towards the current type of international involvement in Gaza. It reflects concern that regional and international actors are working in Gaza in a way that serves their own interests, and not those of the parties to the conflict. This approach highlights the role of Israel and the Palestinians to find solutions to Gaza. Other countries can contribute to that, but should not be the ones to take the lead.

In order for more effective international interventions in Gaza to take place, there is a need for greater cooperation and coordination between the different countries and actors involved there. Currently, there are multiple efforts and tracks, carried out by different actors with little coordination, and this causes confusion and setbacks. Coordination between all those involved in efforts to improve the situation in Gaza will produce a more synchronized, and probably also a more successful, process. Such a process should also involve Israeli and Palestinian civil society organizations who can make genuine

contributions in the fields of research, policy planning, dialogue, advocacy, and service providing.

Civil society organizations can put forth creative and innovative ideas, which do not exist in the official diplomatic discourse, on ways to ensure stability and conflict resolution. They can also have a significant role in promoting accountability and good governance. Much like on the official level, there is also a lack of cooperation and coordination within the civil society. Different organizations and donors are not aware of activities and projects carried out by others. This sometimes creates duplication of efforts and overlap of projects, which in turn limit the effectiveness of civil society efforts to improve the situation. Civil society organizations should increase their cooperation, exchange best practices and lessons learned, establish tools to improve their coordination, and put more efforts in publicly sharing the projects they are implementing. Possible ways to promote this are the creation of a database with information about different projects, and of a joint coordination body.

Efforts should also be made to assist and encourage the private sector in Gaza, and to invest in local professional training that can improve Gaza's economy's growth. In addition, the international business sector should also be engaged, although private companies will probably refrain from investing in Gaza prior to stabilization there.

In general, only a few countries (including Russia, Switzerland, Turkey, and Qatar) currently have contacts with Hamas, and it was debated whether additional dialogue channels between Hamas and the international community (and under which conditions) will assist in changing Hamas' policies and improving the situation in Gaza, or will merely do the opposite.

D. Conclusion

Improving the situation in Gaza is a delicate and complicated task. It is not just a security and military issue, as many tend to think, but also requires effective use of diplomatic and economic tools and expertise. It is a multi-layered process, which involves both opportunities and threats, and which requires to address immediate and urgent needs on the ground as well as long-term political goals regarding Israeli-Palestinian peace and Palestinian unification. It is important to strike a balance between the short-term and the long-term, and to solve current problems in Gaza without consolidating the Palestinian split and jeopardizing prospects for a future Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. To do so, regional and international actors involved in Gaza should be better coordinated with each other – preferably through a new and trustworthy implementation mechanism – in order to ensure that the different tracks are well synchronized and are fulfilling their potential. International efforts should also involve the parties to the conflict themselves, ensure that their real needs are being addressed, and encourage and support constructive local initiatives.

Whatever happens in Gaza is directly influenced by domestic Israeli and Palestinian politics. On the Palestinian side, this includes the conflict between Fatah and Hamas,

internal dynamics within Hamas, the delicate relations between Hamas and other fractions in Gaza, and the post-Abbas succession question in the Palestinian Authority. On the Israeli side, this includes governmental policies that distance the two-state solution, political considerations related to the next general elections, the lack of a clear strategy or policy towards Gaza, concern of security threats on Israel's northern border, and lack of transparency regarding the government's diplomatic and military actions concerning Gaza. All these should be taken into account by the international community, as it tries to make the most out of regional opportunities to improve the situation in Gaza.