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What Lies Ahead for Gaza?

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The confrontations last weekend between Hamas and Israel in Gaza have brought two facts into sharp focus. First, Hamas and Israel have locked themselves into a logic of progressively increasing violence that – unless broken – will inevitably lead to a wide scale land operation against Gaza. Second, unless accompanied by a policy of strengthening the Palestinian Authority (PA) under President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad by enabling them to deliver concrete results, the strategy of pressuring Hamas will not work and would likely be counterproductive. Violence in Gaza, accompanied by a worsening or even static situation the West Bank, will make it impossible to sustain permanent status negotiations.

What is the Problem?

Since Hamas took over Gaza in June 2007 in a bloody coup, the security situation between Gaza and Israel has been worsening. The default situation can be characterized as ongoing low intensity confrontations, defined by levels of violence that are politically manageable. This "normality" is punctuated by episodes of intense confrontations triggered by action from either side. Such flare ups follow a progressively worsening pattern, where each episode is more intense than the previous one. Both Israel and Hamas are rapidly exhausting the means they have so far employed to maintain the armed conflict at manageable levels. Each time a new tool is used, it loses its deterrence value, and it creates public demand for harsher measures next time around. If the current trajectory continues, it will inevitably lead to a wide scale land confrontation.

Israel has used up many of its non-military or limited military options. The full scale blockade – cutting off humanitarian, fuel and electricity supplies – it recently employed against the Gaza Strip has failed and is no longer an option. The international response, along with the skillful way Hamas turned the blockade to its tactical political advantage, has written it off the agenda. Similarly, progressively increased levels of localized use of armed force are failing to produce tangible results for the inhabitants of the Western Negev. Instead, they are gradually increasing the threshold of Israeli public demand for harsher responses. Some military options short of a wide-scale land operation remain: most notably assassinations of political figures in Hamas. But these, like other forms of force, will lose their potency once exercised. Once this box is ticked, and assuming that rocket fire continue, the pressure will mount towards larger operations.

Hamas is also stepping beyond manageable levels of violence. As long as Hamas was using short-range low-impact Qassam rockets against sparsely populated areas in the south of Israel, Israeli response could be counted on to be a predictable tit-for-tat. By introducing Grad missiles – capable of hitting more significant population centers with more significant damage – into the equation, they also raised the threshold a notch. As Israeli reprisals increase and intensify, Hamas might not be able to withstand pressure from its constituency to employ the ultimate weapon in its arsenal: resumption of full-scale suicide bombings and other forms of terrorism in Israel.

Where Is It Going?

While military force sometimes has its place in international relations, it must be employed carefully with an eye towards the political consequences of such actions. They must be designed and implemented to meet specific strategic political objectives. Military action that is reactive or designed as a public opinion management tool almost always backfires. The most recent case in point is the Israeli war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, the political implications of which continue to reverberate till today.

The objectives of Israeli military action against Gaza have been defined as ending rocket fire against Israel, dismantling Hamas' ability to conduct violence and terrorism against Israel, and weakening its hold on Gaza. These objectives can only be effectively achieved by a wide scale long-lasting land operation.

By its very nature, though, such an operation is untenable. The human and humanitarian costs of such an operation should in their own right preclude it. By necessity, such an operation in the overcrowded Gaza Strip will entail a high level of casualties among civilians as well as combatants from both sides. The cost in terms of the economy, infrastructure and humanitarian conditions will be steep.

But even if the inevitable human and humanitarian costs were to be put aside, there are political reasons to render such an operation unsustainable. High levels of casualties will create political pressure from Israel and elsewhere in the world. While such pressure can be withstood for a limited period of time, it cannot be sustained for the prolonged period of time necessary to achieve the political objectives of such an operation.

Even after the initial high intensity, high casualty confrontations, achieving the political objectives will require a prolonged Israeli presence in Gaza to conduct follow up counter-terrorism operations. As "Operation Defensive Shield" has demonstrated, this can extend for a long period of time and can turn into an indefinite re-occupation. It is hard to find political appetite anywhere in Israel for such an outcome. It would contradict the current political logic prevailing in Israel which supports separation from Palestinians for demographic reasons. This logic has led to the unilateral disengagement from Gaza only three years ago, a strategic decision that is hard to reverse.

Moreover, the spillover effect can spiral out of control. The limited operation last weekend has already caused a spike in unrest in the West Bank. A longer term operation could alter the security situation there more profoundly. Similarly, such an operation could have destabilizing effects in Arab countries. Hizballah's reaction is another factor to be taken into account.

Because of these factors, a wide scale military operation will most likely not, and perhaps cannot, be taken to its full conclusion. In such a case, there will most likely be significant political fallout similar to what happened in Lebanon in the summer of 2006. Hamas will inevitably claim victory and take credit for repulsing an Israeli invasion. After the events of last weekend, Hamas is already trying to claim such credit. Rather than weakening Hamas, a half-baked operation might strengthen it politically. The Palestinian Authority leadership, for its part, will be weakened. It will have to suspend talks with Israel and it will find it politically almost impossible to control the violence that will erupt in the West Bank.

What is the solution?

As an immediate first measure, de-escalation is a priority. The current level of confrontation creates a very volatile situation that can easily spiral out of anyone's control. While a direct ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas is not possible, back-to-back arrangement via a third party should be pursued.

To be sure, such a ceasefire is not sustainable on the medium or long terms. Unlike ceasefires brokered between Israel and Hizballah, a Hamas-Israeli ceasefire would be shaky for at least two reasons. First, Hamas lacks the internal discipline and control that Hizballah had, and is rife with internal power dynamics that will inevitably play-out on the Israeli scene. Second is the fact that the Israel-Gaza interaction – unlike the Israel-Hizballah interaction – takes place on a multitude of levels and issues, any one of which could trigger a breakdown of a ceasefire. But a ceasefire still has some merits. It would buy much needed time and calm in the immediate moment, and in so doing create the space for initiating a more stable and sustainable solution.

A long term solution to the Gaza issue lies in shifting the political balance within the Palestinian polity. A strategy of weakening Hamas can only succeed if it is accompanied by a policy of strengthening the PA. The Israeli policy of punitive measures against the Gaza Strip as a whole, while – at best – ignoring the Palestinian Authority and – at worst – undermining its ability to deliver to its public in terms of security, economy and political horizon has had two mutually reinforcing results. First is public identification with Hamas, particularly but not exclusively in Gaza. When the whole population of Gaza is being punished, any differences it might have with Hamas disappear in the face of the perceived external threat. Second is the prevailing sense of despair. When there is no credible alternative horizon in the form of political solution that is rooted in improvements on the ground, the only prospect in the Palestinians' mind becomes a horizon of further conflict and suffering. In this case, the prevailing sentiment – as shown in the aftermath of the weekend violence – is one of revenge, as it is with the Israeli public as well. Any action against Hamas should therefore be directed specifically towards Hamas, and should proceed in parallel with advances with the Palestinian Authority on the security, economic, and – most importantly – political fronts.

The Gaza Border Crossings

In addition to progress on permanent status and concrete changes on the ground in the West Bank, the population of Gaza must be shown that it specifically stands to gain from the peace process. Improvements in the West Bank, though necessary, are not enough. Gazans must feel for themselves the difference between what Hamas and its violence produces and what

the PA and negotiations can deliver. The most obvious way to demonstrate this is through re-opening the international crossing out of Gaza into Egypt and Israel under Palestinian Authority control

The border crossings have been completely closed since the Hamas coup in June of 2007. As a result, the humanitarian situation in Gaza has been continuously teetering on the edge of full-fledged disaster, the economy of Gaza is all but collapsed – with long term implications regarding any future revival of the economy when political circumstances change, and the population feels that it – not Hamas – is being punished. So much so, that following the imposition of a full closure – including humanitarian supplies – late January, public anger was directed towards the Gaza-Egypt border. Hamas was agile enough to recognize that as an opportunity, create breaches in the border, and take political credit among Gazans for creating a breathing space. The political price for this breach was paid by Egypt, the PA and Israel, which found itself having to seriously entertain the idea of reopening the Rafah crossing.

Israel and the PA, under US guidance and with international assistance, should take the initiative and reopen all of Gaza's external borders under PA control and not wait for Hamas action to dictate the agenda. Crossing points for people and goods from Gaza to both Israel and Egypt should be reopened, and charge of these crossings be placed with the Palestinian Authority security forces with international assistance and monitoring, similar to the arrangements stipulated for the Rafah crossing in the Access and Movement Agreement.

In such arrangements, the mission of the PA forces must be clearly defined: to ensure that the crossings are operating properly and to guarantee – pursuant to agreed protocols, in coordination with Israel, and under international supervision and assistance– that no untoward individuals or goods cross in or out of Gaza. The PA forces currently have the experience and the capacity to do the job. They have demonstrated their ability and reliability when they were in charge of the Rafah crossing prior to the Hamas takeover of Gaza.

These forces should not have the responsibility of repulsing a Hamas attack against the border crossings or stopping missile fire. Even Israel, with its superior military and intelligence resources, has been unable to do that. On the contrary, it should be explicitly stated that any attacks on the crossings and the continuation of rocket fire will result in the closure of the borders. Prospect for the success of such a proposal would be greatly improved if they are part of a larger package including a ceasefire and lifting the siege on Gaza.

If such a proposal is made in a credible manner, it will put Hamas in a lose-lose dilemma. Either oppose it and pay the political price for keeping the borders closed, or accept it and in so doing cede a measure of control over Gaza back to the PA. In addition, the threat of border closures as a consequence of rocket fire will increase the political cost of such action.

Conclusion

Ultimately the political and ideological struggle over supremacy in Palestinian political life will be determined primarily by whether or not the moderates can deliver liberation through negotiation. To get to that point, though, it is important in the interim to contain the violence and to take specific measures on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza to shore up the moderates' message and create a sense of hope and opportunity among the public. The alternative move us rapidly towards a military adventure in Gaza that will not only fail to achieve its objectives, but which might also destroy any chances that are left to reach a peace

deal in the foreseeable future.

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