

## **The Fighting in Gaza: Just “Round Two” in an Endless Series of Future Clashes and Battles?**

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The rights and wrongs that have led to the current crisis between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza are scarcely irrelevant, but almost all of the different arguments on each side have only one outcome. They all help lead to a degree of strategic paralysis that ensures no stable solution is possible to the crisis, that future tensions will rise, that Palestinians will suffer more because they are weak, and that Israelis will not become more secure simply because they are strong.

At best, a cease-fire will not offer anyone in Gaza a real future or stop some new form of asymmetric attack on Israel. The only question is how long a pause will last and when the new attacks will come. A land invasion and air strike might or might not buy more time.

Only a lasting Israeli ground occupation, however, could provide a reasonable prospect of stopping future rocket attacks on Israel as long as the occupation lasted. Such an occupation, however, would inevitably lead to attacks on Israel Defense Forces (IDF) targets in Gaza, a new internal cycle of violence, and eventual Israeli withdrawal.

At a given point, which may well already have passed, more air strikes have to be made at targets of little or no marginal value, but at a continuing risk of hitting civilians. Additional air strikes will continue to have some value in pushing Gazans and the outside world to negotiate and possibly some cumulative, temporary deterrent impact. At the same time, they will steadily alienate Egypt, Jordan, the Arab public, and Europe. They will further undermine a gravely weakened Palestinian authority and a peace process that already has little or no credibility among most Palestinians and Israelis.

The same, of course, is true of Palestinian rocket attacks. They are far too ineffective in military terms to intimidate Israel and all too effective in making Israel respond and escalate. They also lead to the disproportionate use of force. Israel has to use far more force to achieve any impact that pushes the Palestinians to pause attacks than Hamas or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) has to use to fire rockets. The resulting comparisons of Israeli and Palestinian suffering do offer Hamas and the PIJ strategic leverage in terms of outside support, but then inflict far more suffering on their fellow Palestinians.

The very nature of the exchanges also offers extremists and hardliners on both sides the opportunity to escalate the use of force and gives a clear advantage to outside powers like Iran who fund and arm Palestinian violence. Limited, cheap transfers of money, arms, and skills to Palestinian extremists can lead to low-level attacks—with or without official Hamas tolerance or support—that Israel cannot (or will not) ignore. In fact, one key lesson Iran may have learned from the past week is that it can distract the world from Syria and gain political leverage over moderate Arabs at little or no cost or risk.

It is also clear that Arab extremists and Iran can use similar tactics in Lebanon or Syria and along the Golan, against Israelis and Jews outside Israel, and potentially in the West Bank and Israel proper as the Palestinian authority steadily loses credibility and popular support. Israel will always be able to out-escalate its immediate opponent, but it will have far more problems in attacking neo-Salafist extremist groups outside the Levant and Iran.

The end result will always hurt the Palestinians more in comparison, but this will not matter to violent Arab extremist groups whose main goal is to damage Israeli politically, damage more moderate Arab regimes, and undermine the peace process. This makes new rounds of violence, negotiations, cease-fires, pauses, and yet

another cycle of attacks almost inevitable and seemingly endless. As long as extremist groups exist among the Palestinians, outside groups will support and manipulate them. Their goal in most cases will not have to have any relation to either supporting the Palestinians or destroying Israel. It will be to seek power and control in the Arab world.

It is fair to argue that this would not be true if there was a real and effective Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The goals set at Oslo remain the only way of achieving any lasting grand strategic solution to the present cycle of violence. It is all too clear, however, that neither side now takes the process seriously or believes there is a meaningful partner on the other side. Rhetoric and gestures remain, and so do payoffs in aid and politics, but they are hollow covers to political power struggles on both sides that see the real supporters of peace grow steadily weaker and more irrelevant.

Today's Israel is the Israel of greater Jerusalem, expanding settlements, walls and barriers, and de facto pressure and discrimination against Israeli Arabs and West Bank Palestinians. It is the Israel of immediate security first. The Palestinians are effectively two separate movements: one tied to violence and anger in Gaza, and another tied to a fading hope for some kind of independent Palestinian Authority mini-state on the West Bank—and with a capital in East Jerusalem—on terms Israel now seems to firmly reject. The coming elections—or non-elections—on both sides are almost certain to make this worse, as are the comparative demographics and disparities in power and wealth.

There are still those on both sides who seek peace out of sheer hope and idealism. The problem is that hope is not a strategy. At this point, there are no real plans, actions, and probability of success. Moreover, every year separates Israelis and Palestinians more from the time they lived and worked together.

This situation is worst in Gaza. Gaza is a tiny urbanized slum with no real resources except the uncertain future prospect of offshore gas. It has over 1.7 million people living in the equivalent of a prison that have no secure access in or out on either personal or economic terms. Gazans have become a development problem that the World Bank now sees as nearly hopeless. The CIA estimates that over 40 percent are unemployed, 38 percent live below the poverty line, and the median age is under 18 with a population growth rate that is the sixth highest in the world.

The West Bank is marginally better in terms of living conditions, economic conditions, and political freedom. It too, however, has few real resources, no clear supply of additional water, and a population that already is far too large for its agricultural and other economic base. The CIA estimates that the West Bank has over 2.6 million people living under severe restrictions, with some 311,000 Israelis living in the West Bank and another 186,000 in East Jerusalem.

The West Bank too is over 70 percent urbanized, its median age is under 22, and the Palestinian population is still growing rapidly. Overall unemployment is near 24 percent, and youth unemployment is over 46 percent. Over 18 percent live at the poverty line. There are no credible current figures on the average combined per capita income of Gaza and the West Bank, but the CIA uses \$2,800 and a ranking of only 173rd in the world. Much of this comes from outside subsidies and aid. Neither Gaza nor the West Bank has a real economy of its own.

In contrast, Israel is a major success, although it too is built on an aid-driven economy. It has some 7.6 million people, some 76 percent of which are Jews. Youth unemployment is less than 15 percent, and much of this is Israeli Arab. Per capita income is now around \$32,000, and overall unemployment is around 5.6 percent. Some 23.7 percent is rated as living at or below the poverty line, but this is set at \$7.30 a day—far higher than the usual level and again is largely Arab. It is scarcely fair to criticize Israel for its economic successes, but the contrast to life in Gaza and the West Bank are clear. Anger, history, religion, culture, politics, and a lack of sovereignty and dignity all interact with economics and demographics while feeding Israel's matching concerns over its security.

These differences also now interact with the political crises and upheavals in the Arab world. Egypt now has a Muslim Brotherhood government and more real democracy, which makes tolerance of the problems in Gaza and

the West Bank far more difficult and does much to ensure that arms, money, and extremists can more through the tunnels into Gaza.

Egypt faces years of economic reform and challenges and has no immediate ability to absorb Gaza or even properly fund development in the Sinai. There are some Israeli officials and political leaders that are thinking about an Egyptian solution to Gaza, but that is the last thing the Egyptian government wants and might well prove a threat to an already uncertain peace treaty. (Egypt's population stands at 83.7 million, with unemployment of 12 percent, a poverty level of 20 percent, per capita income at \$6,500, median age of 24.6, and youth unemployment of 24.8 percent.)

Many of the same pressures affect any talk of making Jordan the solution to Palestinian state. The last thing Jordan needs for the foreseeable future is another massive source of instability. The Jordanian economy is in a crisis of its own, and it cannot absorb the problems of the West Bank, much less the far more difficult problems of Gaza. (Jordan's population stands at 6.5 million, with unemployment of 12.3 percent, a poverty level of 14.2 percent, per capita income at \$5,900, median age of 22, and youth unemployment of 27 percent.)

As for Lebanon and Syria, the most one can hope is that the short-term outcome of the current crisis in Gaza will be seen as a deterrent to supporting Hamas and anti-Israeli extremism rather than as an incentive. In practice, the risks are more likely to be limited by the internal tensions in Lebanon and Syrian than such calculations, and it is difficult to see that either country will have a government or security service that can limit the actions of its various violent extremist movements. Hezbollah may not be an open-ended risk taker, and Lebanon's Sunni extremists may now be too weak to act, but this is no guarantee for the future. As for Syria, if Bashar al-Assad manages to survive, playing the Palestinian extremist card may be a way to leverage both Israel and the United States and win some Sunni support. If Assad fails, and Neo-Salafi extremist movements have a major role in his overthrow, they may pressure future Syrian governments and join other movements like al Qaeda's various branches in pushing hardline and violent Palestinian action.

As for Iran—and indeed Sunni Neo-Salafi extremist movements outside the region—it is clear that low-cost support of Palestinian violence wins outside support, puts pressure on Israel and the United States, and poses few risks. Even a few longer-range Grad rockets can steadily undermine any cease-fire and exploit the fact that there is no real progress toward peace and a meaningful form of either sovereignty for the Palestinians or security the Israelis.

And yes, these are grim conclusions. They may argue for new peace efforts in theory, but there is almost no prospect of real efforts in practice. They scarcely argue against cease-fire and negotiating efforts, but they warn that such efforts are likely to buy little more than time as the situation continues to deteriorate. Accordingly, the real world solution may have to be to accept that what is happening in Gaza today will be repeated again and again in the future, that the United States can do little more than encourage Israeli restraint while helping Israel steadily improve its defenses against each new form of asymmetric attack, and continue to do what it can to check Iran and violent Salafi extremism and terrorism. In the real world, the only lasting solutions are the ones neither side will really support or act upon.

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