



The Gaza Conflict and the End of the Forty-Year Peace

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and U.S. Interests

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Madame Chairman:

At the outset, I would like to express my personal gratitude to the Chairman, with whom I have had the pleasure of working from her earliest days in this role, for the opportunity to express my views on the critical issues of this hearing. And let me add a note of appreciation and admiration to the Ranking Member, whom I have known for many years and with whom I have had the privilege of traveling to the Middle East; I hope our nation continues to benefit from your wise leadership and devotion to public service for many years to come. To all members of the Committee, thank you.

Recent days have witnessed an important turning point in modern Middle East history—a phrase I do not utter lightly. I turn the Committee’s attention less to the specific events of the Gaza conflict but rather to the context in which the conflict transpired and concluded.

- ★ Hamas rocket attacks against Jerusalem and its environs during the recent conflict marked the first time Israel’s capital came under long-range attack from an Arab military since the 1947–1949 war.
- ★ With the launching of rockets from Gaza and Sinai and the shooting of artillery shells from Syria, all during the month of November 2012, Israel was on the receiving end of long-range fire over three international borders for the first time since the 1967 war.
- ★ The potential for Islamists in Syria, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, to emerge as the dominant force in the military opposition to Bashar al-Assad and to play a leading role in a post-Assad regime raises the prospect that Cairo and Damascus will be governed by ideological allies for the first time since before the 1973 war.
- ★ Last week’s declaration by the Supreme Guide of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, a man to whom Egypt’s current president has sworn fealty, calling for jihad against Israel when Muslims achieve the requisite unity and, in the interim, the arming of Hamas and other “resistance” forces to carry on the fight against Israel is the most bellicose and provocative statement by an Egyptian leader since the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in 1979.
- ★ The visits this month to Gaza of the Qatari emir, the Egyptian prime minister, and the Tunisian foreign minister highlight the normalization of Hamas in Arab politics and the most serious challenge to the Arab consensus in support of the Palestine Liberation Organization and its stepchild, the Palestinian Authority, since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993.

Individually, each of these items deserves careful scrutiny and close analysis, as they each have unique causes and specific military and political ramifications. Taken together, they constitute a seismic shift in the makeup of Middle East politics.

Indeed, I believe it is appropriate to view the Gaza conflict as marking the beginning of a new era in the Middle East—an era defined by the end of the region’s Forty-Year Peace.

I know that it is incongruous to think of the Middle East—the region so closely associated with terrorism, assassination, suicide bombs, intifada, and civil war; the region of Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qadhafi, Ruhollah Khomeini, and Usama bin Laden—as having enjoyed a Forty-Year Peace. But that is exactly what characterized interstate relations between Israel and Arab states in the era since the October 1973 war.

In its first twenty-five years of independence, Israel’s history was characterized by multistate war with intermittent bouts of unsuccessful diplomacy. Six Arab armies invaded the fledgling Israel in 1948; Israel fought four Arab armies in June 1967; twelve Arab armies participated, to varying degrees, in the 1973 war. In the forty years since, Israel has fought no wars against an Arab state. During this period, its history has been characterized by frequently successful diplomacy with intermittent bouts of terrorism and asymmetric war against nonstate actors.

While the difference between these two realities may not be great to the grieving mother, the widowed wife, or the orphaned child, the difference is profound in strategic terms. For the past forty years, Israel knew no state-to-state attack on any of its borders. The main threat on its borders came from a nonstate actor, Hizballah, and from the intrastate threat of rebellion, terrorism, and insurrection known as the first and second uprisings (popularly known as intifadas).

Further afield, of course, Israel was a target for Saddam Hussein’s long-range missiles and the two ends of Iran’s threat spectrum, terrorism and nuclear ambitions. But there is a profound difference between the urgency and reality of regional war and the challenges Israel has faced over the past forty years. Indeed, it is this difference that gave Israel the freedom and latitude to develop from a broken, near-bankrupt, third-world economy to a first-world economic and technological power and, along the way, to emerge as an important strategic asset to the United States.

With Hamas’s strong political backing from regional states, future historians might very well view the Gaza conflict as the first episode of a new era of renewed interstate competition and, potentially, interstate conflict in the Arab-Israeli arena. This is not to suggest that full-scale Arab-Israeli war is in the offing—quite the contrary. Israel’s potential adversaries, such as Islamist-led Egypt and an Islamist-led post-Assad Syria, may quite likely be consumed with other priorities, such as sorting out internal socioeconomic problems or resolving domestic ethnic disputes, for years or even decades to come. This focus on problems at home may, for a long time, mask the strategic shift now under way—a shift in which countries that used to share strategic interests in preventing direct state-to-state conflict may find tactical ways to postpone conflict to another day. But that doesn’t make the shift any less real or menacing, either for Israel or U.S. interests.

What makes this development particularly worrisome for friends of Israel is that it puts the Jewish state at the heart of two mega-trends that are defining what can be termed the “new new Middle East.” The “old new Middle East,” a region of peace, trade, and regional cooperation, reached its heyday in the mid-1990s, when Israelis were welcome everywhere from Rabat to Muscat. The “new new Middle East” is the region defined by the twin threats of Iranian hegemonic ambitions and the spread of radical Sunni extremism, a vast area where Israelis are not only unwelcome but where they are building fences along their borders to separate themselves from the turbulence swirling around them.

In some parts of the region, such as Syria and Bahrain, these two trends are fighting each other, whether directly or via proxies. But in the Arab-Israeli arena, these two trends have found a way to join forces, as seen in the division of labor between Iran’s provision of rockets and weapons to Hamas and the growing Sunni (Egyptian-Qatari-Tunisian-Turkish) provision of political support to Hamas. That these two trends, which battle each other ferociously elsewhere

in the Middle East, can find common ground in their battle against Israel does not augur well for Israel's strategic situation in the future. Indeed, given the injection of Iran into the Arab-Israeli arena via its patronage of Hizballah and arming of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, it may be necessary to change the traditional term "Arab-Israeli conflict" into "Islamist-Israeli conflict," which would truly underscore the retrograde nature of current regional dynamics.

Despite this disquieting turn of events, there is much the United States can do, individually and with partners, to mitigate this negative shift and to advance U.S. interests in security and peace. In that regard, I offer these brief observations:

- ★ Strengthen U.S.-Israel cooperation: The fact that the Gaza conflict ended with the Obama administration as strongly supportive of Israel and its right to self-defense as when the conflict began has strategic reverberations, both in Iran and in Arab states that share with Israel fear of Iran's hegemonic goals and nuclear ambitions. Indeed, failure to have provided clear, public support for Israel in this crisis would have made more likely unilateral Israeli action against Iran's nuclear program and Arab coming-to-terms with Iran's regional objectives. It is important for Washington to build upon this positive display of bilateral cooperation to ensure that Israel has the tools it needs to deter any further adventurism along its borders, including additional support for the Iron Dome antimissile system, and that regional players see that such cooperation extends to operational cooperation and coordination in addressing the Iranian nuclear threat, in all its aspects.
- ★ Deny Hamas a political victory: The achievement of a Gaza ceasefire would be undermined if it led to Hamas capitalizing on the recent conflict to improve its political standing vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority (PA). For all its problems—and they are legion—the PA is a fundamentally different sort of political entity than Hamas and its leadership advances a fundamentally different sort of political agenda than does the Hamas leadership. Hamas is committed to perpetual war against Israel and sees diplomacy as a tool in that conflict. For its part, the PA has renounced violence and the armed struggle; while its current diplomacy, including its reckless appeal to the United Nations, makes a mockery of its commitment to a solely negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, one should not belittle the fact that the PA still advocates diplomacy, not violence, as the tool for achieving its aims. It is important for the Obama administration to work with Ramallah, Jerusalem, and supportive Arab and European capitals to ensure that the PA does not collapse from lack of Arab financial support, thereby undermining the slim reeds of security cooperation and economic relationship that still remain the pillars of Israeli-Palestinian ties, and to prevent Hamas from capitalizing on the popularity of confronting Israel to erode the diplomatic option supported, at least in theory, by the PA. This could include, for example, convincing Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas that the logical follow-on to his United Nations gambit would be to open long-stalled negotiations with Israel, without preconditions.
- ★ Incentivize moderate behavior from the "new Egypt": One of the most important outcomes of the Gaza conflict was the emergence of Islamist-led Egypt as a pivotal player in the "new new Middle East." Ideologically, President Muhammad Morsi and his government share a worldview much closer to Hamas than to Washington. Nevertheless, Morsi played a "constructive" role, to quote President Obama, in achieving the Gaza ceasefire. The reason is simple—given the crushing economic problems facing Egypt, Morsi calculated he had more to lose in terms of U.S. aid and support for international loans if he acted as an unvarnished ideologue than he would gain by contributing to the ceasefire. And along the way he has succeeded in lowering the bar on what Washington expects from Egypt—he has ended all political contact with Israel and relegated Egypt-Israel ties to the dark shadows of intelligence and military professionals, for example, and only uses the term Israel when uttering phrases like "Israeli aggression." Still, the lesson for the administration is critical—while it may be impossible to moderate the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamist ideology, it is eminently possible to moderate its political behavior through the intelligent use of American leverage. This principle now needs to be applied to all aspects of the U.S.-Egypt relationship, with a special

focus on the “regional peace” and “strategic cooperation” issues so central to U.S. interests. In the Gaza context, this should include conditioning a portion of Egypt’s foreign military assistance on counterterrorism measures in the Sinai and counter-smuggling efforts to prevent the resupply of Hamas, the failure of which would certainly undermine the prospects for a lasting ceasefire.

More generally, I would like to take the opportunity to bring to the Committee’s attention a new bipartisan task force report issued yesterday by The Washington Institute on this topic. Written by former Republican congressman Vin Weber and former Obama White House counsel Gregory B. Craig, this report is titled *Engagement without Illusions: Building an Interest-Based Relationship with the New Egypt*. In this report, Weber and Craig advocate a policy of presenting Egyptian leaders with a set of choices that would give them a pathway to act as responsible national leaders rather than as religiously inspired ideologues. Specifically, they have the following recommendations:

1. That the president agree to certify to Congress that Egypt is fulfilling two well-defined baskets of commitments—on “regional peace” and on “bilateral strategic cooperation”—as a condition of continued provision of U.S. aid and political backing for international loans.
2. That, through private conversation and public messaging, the president and congressional leaders explain to Egyptians an additional “informal conditionality,” i.e., how difficult it would be for the United States to maintain a close and mutually beneficial relationship with a government that was moving backward on constitutional democracy or that engaged in substantial violations of human rights or measures against women and religious minorities.
3. That the administration use a portion of Egypt’s military aid—at least \$100 million to start, and increasing over time—to incentivize more aggressive efforts to combat terrorism in Sinai, given the urgency of this issue to U.S. interests.
4. That the administration engage with the broadest possible spectrum of political actors in Egypt, especially the non-Islamist opposition. Not only is this a way to guard against the widely held impression that Washington actually made the Brotherhood’s rise to power possible, but strengthening non-Islamist opposition also presents the best opportunity for pulling the governing Islamists in a more moderate direction.

Taken together, Weber and Craig argue that building a businesslike relationship with Egypt based on a clear strategic bargain—offering benefits for cooperation and penalties for noncompliance—is in the best interest of both countries. I commend the report to you.

- ★ **Hasten the demise of Bashar al-Assad’s regime:** One unfortunate consequence of the Gaza conflict was to deflect attention from the regional conflagration with far greater strategic consequences—the fighting in Syria. The outcome in Syria will have an enormous impact on the shape of regional politics for years to come. Regrettably, at this point, it is difficult to see any good outcome—the options range from bad to worse. In my view, there is no chance that Assad can win, in the sense of restoring his previous role as the undisputed master of a pacified and compliant Syria. However, with Iran and its Hizballah allies doing their best to support Assad by killing their way into an ethnic showdown pitting Alawites and their collaborators against the country’s majority Sunni population, with every passing day chances for a broad-based, pluralistic, consensual, multisectarian post-Assad regime are slipping away. In the meantime, while Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood was always going to play an important role in a post-Assad arrangement, every day brings an increasing likelihood that even more radical Sunni jihadists will have a dominant position in a successor regime. America’s interest is to bring about the end of Assad’s regime as swiftly as possible, to make palatable change more likely and radical, destabilizing change less likely. The Obama administration’s reluctance to support the anti-Assad forces with the judicious supply of weaponry and protection is, in my view, a

miscalculation of strategic magnitude. As recent reportage from Syria suggests, there is a real possibility that the regime's army is beginning to crack. The endgame may evolve slowly or, alternatively, it could come about with breathtaking speed. The opportunity to shape the post-Assad environment will go to those actors who played pivotal roles in bringing about Assad's demise. For the United States, it is getting late but it is not yet too late to act.

- ★ **Prevent the collapse of Jordan:** Another key U.S. interest overshadowed by the Gaza conflict is the threat of deepening instability in Jordan, an anchor of regional peace and a partner with the United States on numerous fronts. Jordan faces a daunting set of domestic and international challenges. At home, threads of opposition that normally would be at loggerheads with each other—the Palestinian-led Islamist movement and the East Bank-led, largely secular al-Hirak movement—have joined forces in their criticism of what they view as officially sanctioned corruption and faulty economic management. This has produced the largest protests the kingdom has seen in many years. Abroad, Jordan fears being squeezed by the Islamist powers emerging in its immediate neighborhood—Egypt, Syria, and the increasingly popular Hamas. While Jordan has benefited greatly from generous U.S. economic support, one of its other main sources of foreign aid—Saudi Arabia—has inexplicably dried up, forcing the kingdom to adopt painful austerity measures that exacerbate its political crises. Addressed individually, these challenges can be survived by Jordan; but they seem to be coming at the kingdom all at once and Jordan's ability to absorb them is limited. For the Obama administration, a weakening of Jordan's commitment to its pro-West, pro-peace orientation, let alone a weakening of Jordan's stability, would be a disastrous blow to U.S. interests, one that makes much more likely the return to interstate conflict in the Arab-Israeli arena. It is important for Washington to enlist the help of Jordan's current and erstwhile friends, including Riyadh, to take measures now, before it is too late, to preserve stability in Jordan.

These are the most urgent policy priorities in the Arab-Israeli arena. Further afield, there is much the United States can do to address the twin challenges of Iran's hegemonic ambitions and the spread of radical Sunni extremism, but these items are outside the scope of today's hearing. I hope to have the opportunity to address those wider issues on another occasion.

Madame Chairman, while I opened on a pessimistic note, pointing out that we appear to be witnessing the end of a forty-year era of Arab-Israeli state-to-state peace, I would like to close on an optimistic one. It has to do with U.S. leadership.

The creation of that era of peace whose end I now bemoan was due in large part to American leadership, with successive U.S. administrations recognizing that strengthening the U.S.-Israel relationship and building diplomatic alternatives to conflict were two pillars of what proved to be a successful U.S. strategy to secure American interests in a volatile Middle East.

Today, despite all the talk about multi-polarity, energy independence, American decline, and the urgency of a strategic tilt toward Asia, the Middle East remains a region of vital importance to the United States and there is no outside power that even comes close to the United States in its ability to wield influence in it. To be sure, we cannot make the Middle East in our image, nor can we turn back the tides of Middle East history. But I believe that U.S. leadership, creatively conceived and effectively applied, remains the indispensable element in preserving our interests and those of our allies, such as Israel, in the face of the dangers of the "new new Middle East." I look forward to working with you and the administration to ensure the wise and efficient exercise of that leadership.

Thank you.