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Last Call for Gaza?

Proposing an Alternative to Israeli-Palestinian “Conflict Management”

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Brief Analysis

With Iran looming ever larger as Israel’s top security priority, the window for breaking the dangerous cycle of ceasefire and conflagration with the Palestinians may be closing—unless all of the actors are willing to throw their weight behind a fresh “4x4” strategy.

When Israel and Hamas announced a provisional ceasefire in May after two weeks of fighting, the news fell on the same day that Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif publicly extolled the progress being made in the ongoing nuclear negotiations with the West. The symbolism of this simultaneous announcement was not lost on veterans of Israeli Defense Intelligence, where I headed the Research and Analysis Division until last year. Whenever personnel in this division are asked to define the threat to Israel as concisely as possible, they are prone to saying “It’s all about Iran.” In the department’s lengthier strategic assessments, however, this simplified answer has long included a crucial caveat—that Israeli national security interests make it impossible to define Iran as the sole top-priority issue while marginalizing the Palestinian issue.

In this sense, the latest Gaza confrontation constituted a wake-up call—perhaps the last one—for those who wish to focus even more intently on Iranian threats while pushing the Palestinian issue off the agenda. Rather than perpetuating this “conflict management” concept, it may be time to critically examine a strategy that has imposed heavy political and economic costs on Israel and diverted attention and resources from the growing Iranian

challenge. This is especially true given Israel's growing need to prepare for more extreme scenarios, perhaps even the possibility of attacking nuclear sites or fighting another war against Hezbollah.

Anatomy of a Vicious Cycle

The denouement of the latest military showdown was a familiar one. Hawks on each side declared victory, glossing over their failures and the heavy price they paid—while privately admitting that the next confrontation is only a matter of time, even if Israel tries to argue otherwise. For their part, international and regional players made the usual offers of mediation and reconstruction in exchange for dismantling Hamas, but no one seems to believe these tepid proposals will succeed.

Hamas is a radical Islamist movement, and its tyrannical control of Gaza is a resounding historical failure. The only thing that residents of the Strip have received from the so-called *muqawama* (resistance) is destruction and death. The group's leaders will likely exploit any new reconstruction program according to their familiar principle of “tunnels and missiles first,” leaving many destroyed civilian buildings untouched for foreign propaganda purposes. Just as Ismail Haniyeh flashed the victory sign while standing amid Gaza ruins after the 2014 conflict, current Hamas commander Yahya al-Sinwar was photographed sitting in his bombed-out office and smiling in defiance just days after the latest bloodshed.

With such leadership, Hamas will almost certainly continue its strategy of using civilians as human shields, and most of the international community will remain hesitant to call the group out for its destructive tactics and ideology. Since Hamas will not change its path, the question is whether Israel will learn the necessary lessons from the confrontation.

Weighing Flawed Options

Based on my firsthand experience with military intelligence deliberations following past Gaza conflicts, the Israel Defense Forces are no doubt already conducting a sharp and introspective learning process regarding all aspects of the recent escalation. A central purpose of this process is to ensure that the IDF is prepared for the next conflict—not just with Hamas, but also any future confrontation with Hezbollah (whose leaders presumably took note of the accurate intelligence and offensive power displayed by the Israeli Air Force during strikes against underground assets and other targets in Gaza).

Yet the main question that Israel's new government should be considering is not whether the IDF is capable of defeating Hamas or Hezbollah, but whether the country's resources, priorities, and strategies are appropriately aligned. Will striving for indirect understandings with Hamas result in a lasting ceasefire? Will leaving the group as a “deterred and weakened address” really bear fruit? If not, Israel will find it difficult to focus on the complicated Iranian threat while periodically pausing for a few days of battle (or worse) in Gaza.

Even if Israel's new government concludes that its best strategy lies in treating the Palestinian issue as secondary, leaders will still need to examine what steps they should take to reduce the conflict's explosiveness enough to maintain their primary focus on Iran. This is especially true given that the Biden administration's approach to these issues differs from the Trump approach in key respects.

So what can be done about the Palestinian issue to free up attention and resources for the Iran challenge? Two options quickly come to mind, and in the end, they may wind up being carried out in whole or in part. Yet each entails fundamental strategic risks or flaws that should give decisionmakers pause.

Option 1: A “more of the same” ceasefire. This would be a continuation of the previous approach, namely, trying to reach understandings between Israel and Hamas through a third party (e.g., Egypt, the Gulf states). The focus would be on launching reconstruction, conducting negotiations on prisoner releases and missing persons, and preventing

the transfer of arms and dual-use materials to Gaza. Both sides may be amenable to this approach— Hamas desperately needs reconstruction and calm (even if only temporarily), while Israel may see this path as more convenient because it does not require difficult decisions (except regarding potential prisoner releases). Yet the risks are equally clear—it would be difficult to reach enforceable understandings that keep Hamas from rebuilding its arsenal and military infrastructure; relying on deterrence can be precarious when the party in question is an Islamist terrorist organization prone to making decisions that are illogical in the eyes of Israel; and even if such an agreement is reached, it will very likely be temporary. Even so, decisionmakers might still choose this option if only to avoid radical solutions.

Option 2: Deterrence and military rollback. Instead of offering substantial compromises on reconstruction, prisoner releases, and other issues, Israel could attempt to reach a simpler ceasefire focused on two elements: deterring Hamas from escalation, and making clear that any future escalation will spur an extreme campaign aimed at eradicating the Hamas regime. Yet even though toppling the terrorist group is politically justifiable and militarily feasible, the risks of such an approach are obvious: it would entail high-intensity fighting that takes a heavy toll on both sides, and it would compel Israel to once again assume at least partial control of Gaza. Israeli decisionmakers do not seem eager to pursue this scenario, but it may unfold at some point anyway if the parties try to continue the status quo. After all, the Hamas regime is less stable than it seems and could crumble in the face of domestic unrest or another escalation cycle, even without Israel’s deliberate intent.

An Alternative Strategy

If one accepts the centrality of the Iranian challenge, the potential explosiveness of the Palestinian situation, and the dangers inherent in the above options, then it may be time to consider a fresh approach—specifically, a “4x4” strategy consisting of four principles and four steps:

Four principles:

1. **Take initiative.** Proactively influence reality rather than just reacting to provocations and other developments.
2. **Think systemically.** Formulate a holistic response to the entire Palestinian challenge, starting with the premise that despite all the difficulties the parties have encountered while pursuing a peace settlement, the PA is still a better interlocutor than the extremist Hamas.
3. **Harness momentum.** Take advantage of the changes occurring in the Middle East amid Arab-Israel normalization accords and widespread international opposition to Iran’s destabilizing activities. This means promoting deeper involvement by pragmatic Arab governments, led by the Biden administration as a fair, knowledgeable, and powerful mediator.
4. **Build readiness.** Accumulate political legitimacy and build operational readiness for potential military action in the event that the 4x4 initiative encounters resistance and the situation on the ground deteriorates.

Four steps:

1. **Establish a more formal and durable ceasefire** in response to external demands, but minimize the issues included in this interim military agreement, saving most questions about reconstruction and other matters for later negotiations. This will allow Hamas and its constituents to internalize the magnitude of the damage it has done to the people, even if the group’s leaders hold fast to their ideology.
2. **Set the terms for conditional, supervised humanitarian reconstruction.** With mediation from Washington, Egypt, and the Gulf states, reconstruction can begin in Gaza under the following conditions: projects must be humanitarian only; all activities must be overseen by a monitoring and control mechanism that prevents diversion of materials for military purposes; and Hamas must be willing to negotiate prisoner exchanges before certain concessions are made.

3. **Significantly strengthen the Palestinian Authority.** This entails helping PA officials make economic and civic improvements in the West Bank in order to slow the government's ongoing disintegration and loss of legitimacy—a trajectory that may accelerate once Mahmoud Abbas is no longer president.
4. **Promote long-term infrastructure projects in Gaza.** Making improvements in the energy and water sectors and building a port could go far toward helping the local population and preserving the possibility of future diplomacy. These projects should be funded by multiple Gulf states—not just Qatar—and designed with the goal of full handover to the PA rather than Hamas.

The 4x4 plan may sound overly optimistic—after all, one can easily envision Hamas refusing to cooperate with moves that strengthen the PA, while Abbas's weak government can do little to assert itself on such matters. Yet under the current circumstances, it would be even riskier not to try options aimed at changing the flammable status quo. A significant regional initiative backed by the Gulf states and Egypt would make it very difficult for Hamas to refuse humanitarian and infrastructure aid in crumbling Gaza, since doing so would open the group up to broad popular uprisings and give Israel legitimacy to use force in future escalation scenarios.

As for the West Bank, the parties would be wise to resurrect aspects of the bottom-up approach: that is, gradually strengthening the fabric of life for Palestinian residents, building infrastructure, and bolstering local government systems. Returning to such activities with renewed focus could strengthen the PA regardless of what happens in Gaza. In this context, it is worth recalling the unique approach of former prime minister Salam Fayyad, who favored a more practical and realistic leadership.

Of course, this type of methodical, bottom-up process requires patience and guts, and attempting gradual change in a volatile Palestinian context is certainly not without risks. Yet embarking on unrealistic quick fixes when attempting to extinguish fires is a much more dangerous approach that will likely lead to greater explosiveness in Gaza and fatal institutional disintegration in the West Bank. The recent state of relative calm in the West Bank is deceptive, since it relies on daily efforts by the IDF and General Security Service to eliminate terrorist infrastructure, often in coordination with PA institutions headed by Abbas (who opposes terrorism but still espouses a political approach that does not offer much more hope than Hamas's). The IDF Research and Analysis Division delivered a strategic warning about this explosiveness and disintegration years ago, and events since then have only confirmed the assessment's validity.

In other words, the latest Gaza confrontation and the evident nadir of PA legitimacy should serve as a wake-up call to the new governments in Jerusalem and Washington. In addition to refreshing their learning process on the Palestinian issue, they need to consider a shift from managing the conflict to shaping it and reducing the risks it creates. These decisions will also need to be made in the context of Iran policy—whether or not a nuclear agreement is reached, and especially in light of growing tensions with Hezbollah in the shaken Lebanese state. Indeed, if one accepts the premise that Israel may be focusing even more intently on the Iranian challenge in the near future, the wake-up call may in fact be a final call. This imperative could become even more urgent if the “Afghanistan effect” reshapes the broader American approach to the Middle East and alters the calculus of Iran and its partners in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Gaza.

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