

The Conflict in Gaza: Recalculating the Political-Military Equation

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Jul 25, 2014

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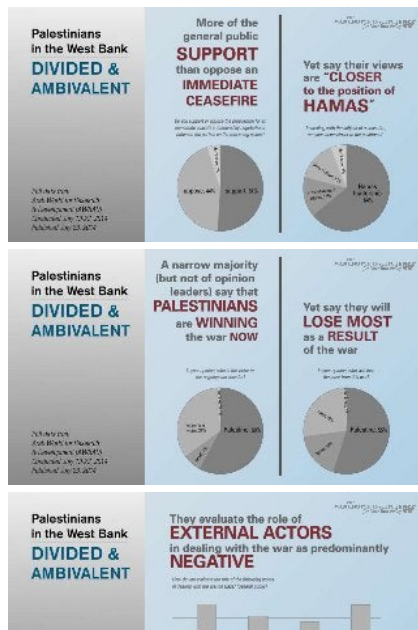


Brief Analysis

Ghaith al-Omari of the American Task Force on Palestine joins Institute fellows David Pollock and Jeffrey White to discuss the Gaza conflict.

[Download Jeffrey White's Presentation \(PDF\) \(/uploads/Documents/other/Gaza_Conflict_Dynamics_White_July2014.pdf\)](#)

[Download David Pollock's Slides of AWRAD July West Bank Poll \(PDF\) \(/uploads/Documents/other/Analysis-of-AWRAD-Poll-GazaCrisis-WestBank-July2014.pdf\)](#)



More: David's analysis of a June poll of Palestinian attitudes (/policy-analysis/view/new-palestinian-poll-shows-hardline-views-but-some-pragmatism-too) and his focus on public opinion in Gaza (/policy-analysis/view/gaza-public-rejects-hamas-wants-ceasefire)

On July 23, 2014, Jeffrey White and Ghaith al-Omari addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute, moderated by David Pollock. Pollock is the Institute's Kaufman Fellow and editor of Fikra Forum. White is a defense fellow at the Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. Omari is executive director of the American Task Force on Palestine and previously served in the Palestinian Authority government. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

DAVID POLLOCK

Three tentative conclusions can be drawn from the Gaza conflict thus far. First, the tunnels into Israel have become an important factor in the security situation. This could mean renegotiating the arrangements at Israel's borders with Gaza. Second, the Israeli government will likely be prepared to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza if the security situation is improved. Third, with regard to the peace process, the Israeli government will not consider any concessions in the West Bank without further concessions in Gaza, and Egypt will have to be a key player in any future peace talks.

Concerning Israeli political calculations, the current crisis has marginalized the far right and far left, leaving the center empowered and unified around certain political and military goals. Chief among these goals is the neutralization of Hamas and other terrorist elements in Gaza.

As for Palestinian attitudes, a recent poll conducted in the West Bank highlighted the majority support within that territory for an immediate ceasefire, albeit by a small margin. This suggests that PA president Mahmoud Abbas could leverage popular sentiment in spearheading a ceasefire initiative. At the same time, two-thirds of the respondents stated that their positions were closer to those of Hamas than to Abbas's. Rather than indicating the poll is flawed, this points to the Palestinian public's struggle to balance conflicting values.

Moreover, a majority of respondents said that the Palestinians are winning the war at the moment -- but also that they will eventually lose. This might be a result of their pride in Hamas's military successes in Gaza, balanced with the understanding that these successes are likely short term.

In evaluating the role of external players, Palestinians have overwhelmingly negative views of the United States, the UN, the Arab League, and the Egyptian government. Concerning the different Palestinian actors, both Hamas and Islamic Jihad have made gains in popularity. Although Hamas has always been more popular in the West Bank than in Gaza, its recent surge in popularity is likely a result of sympathy for the group in the wake of recent events.

Conversely, an opinion poll conducted in Gaza before the latest hostilities showed an overwhelmingly negative opinion of Hamas and its ability to govern (see "[Gaza Public Rejects Hamas, Wants Ceasefire](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gaza-public-rejects-hamas-wants-ceasefire)," July 15, 2014). Respondents to that poll did not want Hamas to begin hostilities with Israel, preferring the previous ceasefire instead. And they expressed support for Fatah and its leaders rather than Hamas.

JEFFREY WHITE

The hostilities in Gaza appear to have shifted more or less to direct-engagement fighting. Sniper fire and antitank guided missiles are being used, while Israeli airstrikes continue. Hamas has also continued to fire rockets into Israel, though these attacks seem to have slowed in recent days. Given current conditions, the parties could reach a preliminary ceasefire in the next few days.

Israel's political objectives in this operation are to demonstrate strong will, restore quiet along the border, demilitarize Hamas and other factions in Gaza, and minimize Palestinian civilian casualties. Its military objective is to reduce Hamas's capabilities in terms of rockets and tunnels while limiting casualties and damage inside Israel.

Hamas's political objectives are to break the "siege," free more Palestinian prisoners, demonstrate strong military resolve, and reaffirm its credentials as the Palestinian "resistance." From a military standpoint, its objectives are to inflict damage on Israel, maintain consistent rocket fire, present a robust defense to the Israeli ground incursion, preserve its forces, and hold onto some rocket reserves.

Strategically, Israel is attempting to use air and ground power to force Hamas into accepting a ceasefire, and to significantly damage hostile military forces and infrastructure. These objectives are being carried out with sensitivity to the number of civilian casualties.

Hamas's strategy is to demonstrate its ability to sustain rocket fire deep into Israel, reaching targets as far away as Haifa while disrupting Israeli civilian and economic life. The group also seeks to prevent a deeper Israeli ground incursion in Gaza, and to strike a blow at the Israeli military by killing troops and damaging equipment.

The conflict currently consists of three major campaigns. The first is the rocket/air war between Israeli forces and Hamas's Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, in conjunction with factions such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The rocket fire from Gaza continues, but Israel's Iron Dome system has been extremely successful in intercepting these strikes. The ongoing Israeli air campaign is directed at rocket systems and other Hamas infrastructure, including the extensive tunnel system. Although the Palestinians have suffered civilian casualties, the ratio of strikes to casualties strongly suggests Israeli restraint.

The second campaign is the Israeli ground operation, in which Hamas tunnels and improvised explosive devices are of primary concern. Israeli troops and Hamas forces have also had numerous direct engagements, and Hamas has even infiltrated Israel using tunnels.

The third campaign is the media war. Israeli authorities have been careful to label all Hamas operations as terrorist acts while diligently highlighting the efficacy of Israeli military operations. For its part, Hamas has sought to paint Israel as the aggressor.

Israel has learned that neither airpower nor Iron Dome is enough to win this war, and that civilian casualties are inevitable. It has also learned that an incremental operation gives the enemy the opportunity to adjust, and that ground forces are vital for military success. Hamas has learned the importance of initiating the fight. It also recognizes Israel's constraints regarding the civilian population in Gaza, and it is aware of the importance of the media war.

From a purely military standpoint, this conflict has highlighted three main game changers: Iron Dome, Hamas's relative success in close combat, and the highly protected Gaza tunnel system partly stretching into Israel.

GHAITH AL-OMARI

It is important to note the humanitarian aspect of this war, as a large majority of casualties have been civilians. Although Hamas has violated numerous laws and moral standards, Israel also bears responsibility for these civilian deaths. Regardless of who is responsible, a ceasefire is clearly needed -- though these types of wars will continue as long as the larger conflict persists.

In Israel, the government recognized Egypt's importance in mediating this conflict from the outset. Qatar and even Turkey attempted to adopt the Palestinian cause as a larger strategy to establish themselves in regional politics, but Egypt remains the key player.

On the Palestinian scene, Islamic Jihad has emerged as an important player, and Hamas has been forced to partner with it. At the same time, Hamas believes it is gaining strength as the war continues, civilian casualties increase, and pressure mounts on Israel. The group's leaders have four main objectives in this fight. First, they are trying to break their political isolation, though this has failed since no major player has yet demonstrated serious interest in working with Hamas. Second, they want to empower their regional supporters, though this too has seemingly failed. Third, they want to demonstrate military success; this has not become an established narrative so far. Fourth, they continue to make demands about opening borders and releasing prisoners. More broadly, as Hamas seeks to assert its role as a real resistance, it is keen on shedding its civil responsibilities while remaining the real force in Gaza decisionmaking, similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, Abbas has been empowered by the political realities of the situation, becoming the primary "address" for Egyptian and U.S. officials. He has also been able to lay the groundwork for the PA to work in Gaza. As a result, the framework of a ceasefire is emerging in which the Rafah crossing will be reopened and the closure of Gaza will be eased. Yet the prisoner issue continues to be intractable. Alongside these developments, the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation deal is reemerging as a convenient tool for everyone -- in addition to giving Abbas a pretext for getting the PA back into Gaza, it also allows Egypt and the Arab League to bypass Hamas and engage with Abbas as the nominal head of the Palestinian polity writ large.

Finally, if a ceasefire is reached, the resumption of a real Israeli-Palestinian peace process is highly unlikely in the short term. Yet the PA should still be empowered so that the people can reconnect to the political process and stem the growing disillusionment with Palestinian politics.

This summary was prepared by Gavi Barnhard.

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