

# America's Responsibility in the New Middle East

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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## Hamas's interest in preserving calm with Israel does not equate to an interest in making peace.

**T**he ceasefire struck last week between Israel and Hamas after eight days of conflict seems to be holding. But that's not to suggest that the time for diplomacy is over. To the contrary, it's precisely now that the United States needs to survey the new landscape that has emerged in the Middle East, and determine how it can shape it going forward.

The place to start is with the most obvious question of all: who won and who lost? In this particular case, there is an irony: Israel, Hamas, and Egypt all gained something.

Israel's declared goal was to re-establish its deterrent. In fact, Israel sought to prevent Hamas from defining a new normal -- where Israel would tolerate periodic rocket attacks into the south, with the lulls between attacks shorter and shorter, life for a million Israelis frequently disrupted, and the IDF unable to preserve a buffer along the border. In the weeks leading up to the conflict, Hamas did less and less to prevent Jihadi groups from firing rockets into Israel and also began to conduct its own attacks against the IDF on the Israeli side of border. Three Hamas attacks, in particular, set off the Israeli alarm bells: an IED attack, a tunnel dug under the fence and packed with explosives and ignited, and an anti-tank missile attack on an Israeli jeep. It was as if Hamas's leaders thought the new Egypt, Israel's concerns about not threatening its relationship with its post-Mubarak neighbor, and Israel's election preoccupation, all combined to allow Hamas to establish a new baseline for attacks against Israel and have it tolerated.

So Israel felt it must act and prove to Hamas that it had crossed a line and would pay for that. Unquestionably, Hamas miscalculated and Israel caught it by surprise, and, in so doing, was able to eliminate Ahmed Jaber. Killing Jaber, the architect of Hamas military buildup and the mastermind of attacks against Israelis, was certain to trigger a barrage of rockets in retaliation for some period of time -- and the Israelis knew that. But the Israelis hoped to temper that with their threat of a ground invasion of Gaza and the ability to use Iron Dome to minimize the costs to Israel.

Israel also believed that its mobilization of ground forces would give Egypt a reason to persuade Hamas to stop, recognizing that the last thing Egypt needs now is an extended Israeli military operation in Gaza that could divert Egypt from addressing its failing economy.

Did Israel calculate correctly? In a general sense, it did. There is a good chance the calm that has been restored will last for at least the next several months and perhaps longer. Hamas knows that Israel means what it says about a red-line and Egypt does as well -- and Egypt having brokered the ceasefire deal has a strong stake in it not breaking down any time soon. So Israel's achievement is that it has both restored its deterrent and destroyed an extensive part of the Hamas and Islamic Jihad arsenal. That is the good news.

The bad news is that arsenal in Gaza will be rebuilt. True, Prime Minister Netanyahu garnered a commitment from the Obama Administration to do what it can to stop the smuggling of the arms. Washington's efforts will hinder and slow the rearmament -- but Iran, Islamic Jihad and Hamas will be determined to rebuild the arsenal in Gaza and are likely to succeed over time. The key remains what Egypt can and will do to gain control over the Sinai and disrupt this supply of arms into Gaza. Mubarak's Egypt did little to deal with it. It's not clear whether Morsi will do more.

Thus, the Israeli achievement is real but inevitably limited -- and, of course, part of the reason it is limited is because Hamas has also gained as a result of the conflict. Its gains are both tangible and intangible. Tangibly, the gains will relate to opening the passages and crossings for the movement of goods and peoples into and out of Gaza. The ceasefire understandings may only speak about beginning discussions on "procedures of implementation" to ease the restrictions on such movement. But they build an expectation that such a relaxation will take place, and it is almost certainly a given that the Egyptians have promised Hamas to open up Rafah and dramatically ease their restrictions on movement between Gaza and Egypt. Until now, Egypt has been a partner with Israel in keeping movement into and out of Gaza limited -- that is about to end.

But Hamas's gains are not limited to the crossings and passages. Hamas has gained in the region and internationally in political stature and weight. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went to Ramallah on her trip to try to make the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, relevant and bring him into the picture. No one had any illusions that he had a role to play in what was going on in Gaza. Hamas is far more of an address now, and, at least for the time-being, its popularity among Palestinians is high.

The celebratory outburst in Gaza over the ceasefire reminds us, however, that Hamas for its own reasons will not want to invite an end to the calm any time soon -- because Palestinians in Gaza want the calm and Hamas will not want to undo its achievements. (Egypt will also be pressuring Hamas to maintain the ceasefire.) Hamas will thus face a dilemma as it is forced to impose its will on recalcitrant jihadi groups that are likely to soon challenge its "resistance" credentials and its long-term strategy vis-à-vis Israel?

And, here, we come to Egypt and its gains. President Morsi made Egypt the indispensable player. Egypt suddenly assumed again a central role in the region. It was not President Erdogan of Turkey who played a role -- or the Emir of Qatar -- both of whom have seemingly vied to become Hamas's leading patron. It was Egypt -- and it was not Mubarak's Egypt, but Morsi's. It is noteworthy that in Mubarak's last years, Egypt seemed increasingly to be a bit player in the region. It was the Saudis who Washington looked to, not the Egyptians, on the issues that mattered most to it in the area. Now, at a time, when its economy is in desperate shape, President Morsi has demonstrated a leadership role.

The reason he was able to do so is Egypt's relationship with Israel. Notwithstanding the Muslim Brotherhood's blatant antipathy toward Israel, it was Egypt's ability to talk to Israel that made it the broker. Morsi proved that even if he won't refer to Israel by name in public -- and even if he had his intelligence channels broker the deal so he would not have to talk to any Israelis -- he has a stake in preserving the peace treaty it has with his country. Indeed,

he seems to understand well that Egypt cannot get the economic and financial help it needs from the international community if it breaks with Israel.

There are, then, multiple ironies in this conflict and what has emerged from it. All three players in the events of last week gained. The Muslim Brotherhood dominated government in Egypt has gained in stature -- and President Morsi has already moved to exploit this internally -- but it did so precisely because of Egypt's relationship with Israel.

Washington needs to build on this. It needs to reinforce Morsi's understanding that assistance and investment from the outside depend on preserving Egypt's relationship with Israel and ensuring that calm prevails. It should push on the issue of arms in Sinai, if for no other reason than the threat it may pose to Egypt if the arms there are used by jihadi Islamists to resume conflict with Israel or to threaten Egyptian sovereignty.

The larger question for the United States will relate to whether Egypt's relationship with Hamas will now be used to push anew for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. In the current context, Hamas would have all the leverage -- it is emerging stronger from its conflict with Israel, and Fatah and Abbas are clearly weaker. President Abbas' new push in New York for a U.N. resolution on recognizing Palestine as a non-member state won't have much significance for most Palestinians, but it will trigger Israel's impulse to punish the Palestinian Authority for such a unilateral move.

Washington, too, will oppose the Abbas move at the U.N. But that's not enough. In addition to cooperating with Egypt on Israel, the U.S. also needs to work together with Israel in determining whether the future address and identity of the Palestinians will be Islamist or nationalist. After the coming vote on the resolution in New York, will Abbas choose to focus on a legacy of symbolism or is he still willing and able after the Israeli election to try to make peace? Given the stakes, the Obama administration would be wise to work with Israel to test that possibility, even as we both position ourselves to hedge against a Palestinian future that could be shaped more by Islamists than nationalists. Because what's clear is that Hamas' interest in preserving calm with Israel does not equate to an interest in making peace.

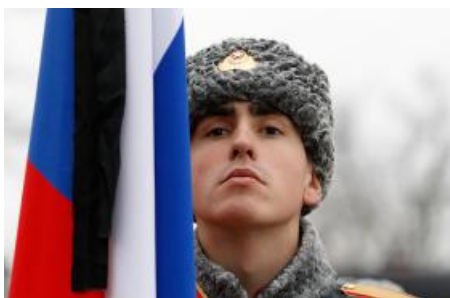
*Ambassador Dennis Ross, counselor at The Washington Institute, previously served as special assistant to President Obama and senior director for the central region at the National Security Council.* ❖

*The New Republic*

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