

Gaza and the New Middle Eastern Order

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Washington should craft its response to the Gaza crisis to reinforce its position and alliances in the region.

The conflict unfolding in the Gaza Strip takes place against a starkly different regional backdrop than the last round of fighting in late 2008 and early 2009. The old regional order that existed then has been swept away, replaced with a new order which is uncertain and, until now, untested. This emerging crisis will be the first such test, and will reveal much about how the recent years' uprisings have affected key regional actors and the relations among them.

The old order in the Middle East was founded on mutual interests, and looked something like a hub-and-spoke alliance system with the United States at its center. U.S. allies in the region shared, above all, an interest in stability and economic prosperity, though each defined stability differently. For Washington, stability required political and economic reform; for our allies, it often meant the preservation of an increasingly shaky status quo.

Israel was a key part of this alliance, and cooperated openly with some regional states, and tacitly with others, through the good offices of the United States. Israel and Washington's Arab allies largely shared a desire to counter and deter Iran and its proxies and combat terrorist groups in the region; many applauded privately or openly when Israel dealt a blow to Hezbollah in the first days of the 2006 Lebanon war or destroyed a nuclear reactor in Syria in 2007.

The new regional order in the Middle East is different, but precisely how and how much is unclear. Two things in particular are uncertain. First, how do leaders in the region -- especially new leaders such as Egyptian President Morsi -- now perceive their national interests? In important ways, these interests have not changed with the Arab uprisings. Armed militias in the Sinai, for example, are just as apt to target Egyptian soldiers and interests as they are Israel, and the perception of instability or extremist sentiment in the region will deter investment and tourism desperately needed to revive the Egyptian economy.

On the other hand, President Morsi's political calculations and the ideology of his Muslim Brotherhood faction militate against even tacit cooperation with Israel. Morsi and his government had appeared to be leaning in the direction of pragmatism until now, but sending Prime Minister Kandil to Gaza -- like Turkey's dispatch of a flotilla to Gaza in 2010 -- is more stunt than strategy. The Gaza crisis will test whether Morsi, along with other leaders in the region, will place ideology over interests.

The second question lingering about the new regional order concerns the U.S. place in it. Washington's diffidence in the face of the turmoil in the Middle East over the last two years, combined with the "pivot" to Asia, has conveyed the impression that the US is not prepared to continue its brokering role in the region. This suits some regional leaders just fine; the leaders of Egypt and Iran disagree on many things, but they share a desire to see American influence in the Middle East recede. For U.S. allies, however, it raises the troubling question as to whether Washington can be counted on to act firmly to advance our mutual interests.

This uncertainty has already led to the deterioration of the "hub and spoke" system, which has been replaced, roughly speaking, by the formation of smaller regional coalitions acting independently (for example, the GCC intervening in Bahrain) and jockeying with one another for preeminence. This is most evident in the case of Turkey, which rather than turning West or East has sought regional leadership, which has meant repudiating its erstwhile alliance with Israel.

While the first signs of this strategic shift in the region are evident, it is not inevitable that it should continue. Washington should craft its response to the Gaza crisis to reinforce its position and alliances in the region.

- First, the United States should demonstrate strong support for Israel. The Obama administration took a welcome first step in this direction by issuing statements affirming Israel's right to defend itself and holding Hamas accountable for the fighting and for the suffering of Palestinians under their misrule. Behind the scenes, the administration will need to work closely with Israel to help it to define concrete objectives for the operation and accomplish them quickly and decisively. Once the fighting stops, the United States and Israel should privately develop a realistic and shared approach to Gaza and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- Second, Washington should practice some realpolitik with Egypt, Turkey, and other regional allies. Any strong alliance is based on shared interests. Given the changes in the region, we should not simply assume that the region's new leaders share our conception of these shared interests, but should enumerate them explicitly through strategic bilateral dialogues. Identifying such mutual interests should not be difficult -- issues like terrorism and Iranian support for the Syrian regime are of concern to both the United States and our regional partners. The United States should insist, however, that our allies act on the basis of these interests rather than simply acknowledging them in private, especially in times of crisis. It is in this context that discussions of aid should take place. Our economic and military assistance should be seen -- in Washington and abroad -- neither as charity or compensation for furthering American interests, but as a policy tool to further shared interests.
- Third, the United States should offer energetic and determined leadership throughout the crisis to ensure that its conclusion advances our interests and those of our allies. The Obama administration's first steps have been positive, but there will be much more work to do at the United Nations to ensure that any eventual ceasefire is sustainable and enhances regional security; to encourage Arab allies in the short term to press Hamas to de-escalate and take responsibility for the activities of terrorist groups within Gaza, and in the longer term to shift all of their support to the Palestinian Authority; and in doing so, ensure that the ultimate result of the conflict is to put Israelis and Palestinians alike closer to peace and security, rather than deeper in turmoil.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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