

After the Gaza Flotilla: Policy Challenges and Options

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Brief Analysis

Israel's May 31 interception of the "Gaza flotilla" has provoked a great deal of commentary on the wisdom and even legality of the naval blockade. This focus is misplaced, however; Israel's embargo is a consequence, not the cause, of the situation in Gaza. Indeed, given the lack of progress in addressing Hamas's continued rule and the repeated efforts to challenge the blockade, an incident like Monday's was inevitable. Rather than focusing on the blockade, the United States, Israel, and others should address the policy shortcomings that have allowed the situation in Gaza to fester.

Blockade Background

Although Gaza has been under various forms of land, air, and sea closure since the second intifada in 2000, the current blockade began with Hamas's 2007 takeover. Israel has justified the blockade by citing both the kidnapping of Cpl. Gilad Shalit and the desire to prevent Hamas from rearming. Since the Gaza conflict of late 2008-early 2009, Israel has been under considerable international pressure to lift or ease the embargo, with the Middle East Quartet (the UN, EU, United States, and Russia) and many others criticizing the closures. Israel has responded by gradually permitting more goods into the territory, including not only humanitarian supplies such as food and medicine, but also limited amounts of construction materials. For example, just a week before the flotilla incident, on May 24, Israel permitted the delivery of 250 tons of cement to Gaza, the largest such shipment since the blockade began.

Aside from the categorical international reactions, the blockade has yielded mixed results. On one hand, like most blockades, it appears to have increased opportunities for corruption, allowing Hamas to control what little commerce does pass into Gaza to the detriment of local businesspeople. It has also undoubtedly diminished the quality of life in the territory; a 2009 UN report suggested that the number of Gazans living in "abject poverty" tripled following its imposition.

On the other hand, the blockade does appear to be pressuring Hamas. Most important, the group has been denied a naval corridor (used to great effect by Hizballah in Lebanon) for replenishing its rocket stocks and upgrading to heavier weaponry. Hamas is also experiencing a shortage of cash, leaving it unable to pay salaries. As a result, it has had to raise taxes, including an unpopular 40 percent levy on cigarettes.

Strategic Shortcomings

Although Israel may have achieved certain tactical successes with the blockade, the flotilla incident demonstrates that the closures will face increasing challenges, making them costly to sustain in the long run. This underscores the importance of developing a successful strategy for dealing with Hamas rule in Gaza, which has largely been ignored amid efforts to resuscitate the peace process.

One oft-advocated approach is engagement. Proponents of this idea suggest that Hamas can and should be persuaded to lay its weapons aside and join peace negotiations. In fact, the "Quartet conditions" decreed after the group's 2006 electoral victory offer a pathway for Hamas to do just that. There is little evidence, however, that the group is interested in taking such a route. Although leader Khaled Mashal has tantalized Western journalists and envoys with hints of moderation, he has been unfailingly quick to backtrack or contradict himself when addressing a non-Western audience.

Unlike the Palestine Liberation Organization of decades past, Hamas is not a nationalist group that can be convinced to abandon militancy. Rather, it is a terrorist organization that appears irrevocably opposed to Israel's existence and dedicated to a broader extremist movement, as it has demonstrated via efforts to impose its brand of Islamic strictures on Gazans. At worst, engagement would simply give Hamas time to regroup and rearm while undercutting brave Palestinians who have chosen peaceful routes toward statehood. At best, it would turn back the peace process clock by several decades, to a time when Palestinians refused to recognize Israel's right to exist, and statehood was unfathomable. Despite these scenarios, the failure to articulate a clear counterstrategy -- one that focuses on undermining Hamas, loosening its still-solid grip on Gaza, and preventing it from acting as a spoiler to peace efforts -- continues to fuel arguments for engagement.

Addressing the Shortcomings

When faced with the ups and downs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, international policy can be dangerously cyclical, extending rather than defusing crises. To avoid this unintended result, the United States should not focus on the Israeli blockade. Instead, it should address policy problems that perpetuate the Gaza situation, and encourage other countries to do the same.

The United States, Europe, and other allies. While European and UN officials have expended considerable energy decrying the blockade, they have provided few if any ideas addressing the problem it was designed to solve: the flow of weapons and other supplies to Hamas. Past efforts by Israel, Egypt, and others to address smuggling have been only partially effective. Furthermore, mounting evidence (such as that recovered from the vessel *Francop* in November 2009) shows that Iran is willing and able to use naval corridors as a means of heavily arming groups like Hizballah and Hamas.

If the West and its allies are serious about easing Israel's blockade, they must initiate a concerted international effort involving inspections, interdiction, and intelligence sharing to stem the flow of arms. Lifting the current blockade would do Gazans and the region little good if it led to the rearming of Hamas and a second, deadlier conflict (especially as the rockets available to the group increase in size and range or, worse yet, are replaced with guided weapons).

Yet undermining Hamas requires more than simply halting arms shipments. International efforts to advance peace negotiations must be complemented by simultaneous initiatives to improve the quality of life in the West Bank, highlighting the advantages of the Palestinian Authority's peaceful approach in contrast with Hamas's intransigence and violence. Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu has expressed interest in easing restrictions on movement in that territory and facilitating Palestinian trade. The United States and its allies should press for further steps in this regard, such as removing barriers to foreign direct investment in the West Bank and dismantling more

checkpoints.

Regional states. Countering Hamas and furthering sustainable peace will require regional states to demonstrate their commitment on two fronts: accepting Israel's permanent existence in their neighborhood and fostering a responsible, nonviolent Palestinian government. Specifically, governments should isolate Hamas and other terrorist groups that target not only Israel, but also the Palestinian Authority. Although visits by Hamas officials to Iran are to be expected, other types of meetings (such as Mashal's January 2010 trip to Riyadh, or the procession of American and European envoys who have spoken with him in Damascus) should be halted. In addition, further progress in U.S.-Syrian rapprochement should depend on steps by President Bashar al-Asad to end the impunity that Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad enjoy in his country.

One particularly troubling development on the regional front is the Turkish government's increasing tendency to extol Hamas and attack Israel. If the once-solid Israeli-Turkish relationship can crumble so quickly, the prospects for detente (much less friendship) with others in the region are dim.

Israel. The Netanyahu government must view peace with the Palestinians as a strategic imperative, to be pursued with the same vigor and seriousness devoted to security. Although the prime minister has recently taken some welcome steps, he has appeared too reluctant to engage in realistic negotiations with the Palestinians. This is partly a function of Israeli politics -- Netanyahu came to power by campaigning against what he saw as dangerous concessions by the Olmert government, forming a fragile coalition that could fracture if serious peace talks are joined.

Nevertheless, tactical measures such as the Gaza blockade and the West Bank separation fence will only serve Israel's interests in the short term. Down the road, Israeli security and democracy require an end to occupation and the establishment of a viable, democratic, and peaceful Palestinian state.

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