

Realities of a Third-Party Force in Gaza

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Brief Analysis

As the conflict in the Gaza Strip rages, several international entities have called for the deployment of a third-party force to patrol the Rafah border area between Egypt and Gaza. Suggestions range from simple border monitors to a full peace enforcement operation; if configured and chartered properly, this force may offer advantages to all sides. But absent clear mission objectives, robust rules of engagement, and sufficient numbers of experienced, well-trained, and culturally sensitive personnel, the introduction of such a force in Gaza risks worsening the situation. Moreover, regardless of the mission and composition of such a force, it could operate effectively only if all parties concerned accept the premise that peace enforcement operations on their territories are required. Overcoming these many obstacles, however, may be beyond the abilities of all concerned.

The EU and Gaza

As part of the Agreement on Movement and Access negotiated after Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, the European Union provided a Border Assistance Mission (BAM) to monitor the Rafah crossing point between Egypt and Gaza. During the EU mission's peak activity from November 2005 to June 2006, nearly 280,000 people crossed the Rafah border. As a result of frequent closures and clashes after the abduction of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006, the Rafah border was open for only eighty-three days in the following year. Even in this short time, 165,000 people crossed. Over the years, Rafah's porosity has become an aggravating factor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Even as a limited mission, the EU BAM encountered difficulties that pale in comparison to those an international force would face after a potential ceasefire in Gaza. First, the BAM was only a monitoring mission. The European team did not operate the border terminal and had no authority beyond the Rafah passenger checkpoints. It merely oversaw the activities of Palestinian Authority (PA) border officials and liaised with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). A future arrangement that addresses the issue of opening Gaza to the transit of goods and people will require opening not only the passenger terminal, but also Rafah's vehicle terminals for commercial goods.

Requirements for an International Force in Gaza

Regardless of its precise mission, the international force must have a mandate that allows it to curtail the smuggling activity across and underneath the border from Kerem Shalom to the sea in order to prevent the rearmament of Hamas. To be effective, the international force's countersmuggling effort must also reach into Egypt or Gaza (or both), a prospect that is sure to complicate relations with each of those parties and perhaps nullify prospects for the force's operations. In the end, Israel may find it easier to reach bilateral agreement with Egypt. Furthermore, a mission that extends beyond smuggling, and attempts to inhibit rocket fire as well, would be even more complicated and challenging.

The following requirements must be met if an international force, mandated with curtailing smuggling activity, is to be effective:

- The force must have total authority over the border area it needs for its facilities and operations both above and below ground. This territory must have operational depth on both sides of the border that supports effective border-

control operations.

- The rules of engagement (ROE) must authorize the appropriate use of lethal force (1) to counter threats to a safe and secure environment and (2) for self-defense. The force's charter must give its commander final authority on what constitutes a threat to a safe and secure environment and when to use lethal force for protection.

Given the near certainty that the force would be an international coalition, it is unlikely that all the potential contributors would have the political fortitude and the quality and type of forces needed to succeed in this type of operation. And given the current military commitments in Afghanistan and elsewhere of likely contributing nations, it will be especially difficult to assemble the necessary force. Nevertheless, nations that cannot provide the quality of troops needed, or who cannot support robust ROE, must not be included. The force commander and his cadre must be experienced in peacekeeping operations and coalition command, and must have capable U.S. and NATO political advisors. The command must be empowered to deal with senior Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian, and perhaps other regional officials, as well as senior officials of the sponsoring international body (likely NATO).

The international peacekeeping force (PKF) would also need:

- extensive intelligence capability, requiring close cooperation with Israel, the PA, and Egypt, and the highest priority intelligence support from Washington and the capitals of the contributing nations;
- a heavy proportion of special operations forces (including a deputy commander) if the settlement includes the introduction of PA forces from the West Bank to Gaza to perform reconnaissance missions, direct action, or to train Palestinian security forces;
- engineering skills and specialized sensor technology to halt smuggling under the Rafah border;
- language, cultural awareness, and negotiating skills, since reliance on local translators would give spoilers an opportunity to infiltrate and observe the activities of the units. The PKF should include veterans of Iraq and other recent international peacekeeping operations, with a premium on speakers of Arabic.

Implications

A well-led, properly manned, well-equipped force with an appropriate mandate could manage a border-control operation, but only at significant cost and effort. From the Palestinian perspective, the force would provide them with an impartial referee that would deter future Israeli military operations into the Rafah area. Further, it could also serve as a basis for reintroducing PA forces loyal to Mahmoud Abbas back into Gaza, at least at the key border-crossing points. From an Israeli perspective, an appropriately manned, missioned, and executed force might succeed in curtailing weapons smuggling and thereby decrease the rationale for any future Israeli military operations in the area. Once a ceasefire proves durable, a PKF could ensure the access of humanitarian relief to Gaza in the short term, and reconstruction and development projects in the long term. Finally, the force and its diplomatic and political links to both sides could give the United States and its allies limited control over events, and perhaps a better sense of reality on the ground.

Even with official Israeli and Palestinian acceptance, any outside force attempting to provide security in Gaza will encounter great difficulty. The emotions and scars of the fighting in Gaza and of previous conflicts would permeate every contact with local actors, particularly when the force makes mistakes, which would be broadcast instantly throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Acceptance of the force would depend on early and continued successes in maintaining security. This dynamic will apply equally to the Palestinian population and the IDF. Given the poor record of past border monitors, however, the Israeli military will be extremely reluctant to delegate security responsibilities to foreign forces.

Most dangerously, the force would become a target for the capable rejectionist and extremist groups within or

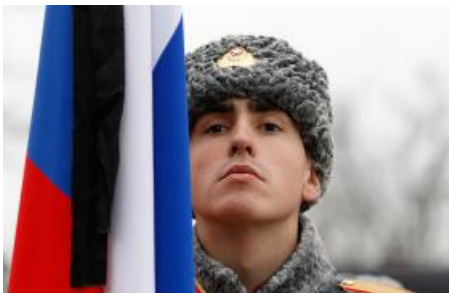
outside the Hamas umbrella. An international force must be prepared to preempt or counter well-executed, ruthless, and repetitive attacks. And if the peacekeeping forces in the Sinai and on the Golan Heights are any indicators, donor countries must accept the reality of having a PKF remain in place in Gaza for decades.

In short, knowing what the force will encounter and the certainty of frustrations and disappointments along the way, national leaders contemplating a peacekeeping operation as a means of preventing equipment and weapons from entering Gaza must approach the decision with a grounded sense of reality. To accomplish this mission, the force needs a clear mandate to use minimum lethal force to stop the smuggling, and not merely observe and report. A properly configured and supported force has a chance of success, but one not properly chartered, manned, and equipped would prove an embarrassment and, in regional political terms, very costly.

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