

Gaza, Stripped

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Articles & Testimony

In the wake of Hamas blowing up the border fence between Egypt and Gaza the images of Palestinians from Gaza streaming across the border into Egypt were unsettling to the Israelis, Egyptians, Palestinian Authority, and Bush Administration. Only Hamas benefited from the images. In breaking down the wall sealing the Sinai from Gaza, Hamas seemed to liberate Palestinians besieged in Gaza and outmaneuvered all those trying to build pressure on it to change its behavior.

For Israel, a policy of isolation and containment of Hamas, designed both to pressure Hamas to stop rocket fire and show it could not succeed, came crashing down. For Egypt, the desire to keep the contagion of an Islamist Palestinian neighbor from seeping into it was suddenly undone; Egypt does not mind Israel looking like it inflicts pain on Palestinians, but it is something else for it to do so before its own public and the Arab world.

For Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority, the last thing they need is for Hamas to look like it is gaining and can outmaneuver its stronger neighbors. And, for the Bush Administration, its aim has been to help the PA succeed in the West Bank and have that stand in stark contrast with Hamas's failures in Gaza. But in Palestinian eyes, who looks successful now?

Still, it was not necessarily all gain for Hamas. The irony of Palestinians literally streaming out of Gaza was not lost on some Arab observers. In recent days, Abd Al Rahman Al Rashed, the director of al Arabiya television, and Tariq Alhomayed, the editor of Al Sharq Al Awsat, both drew attention to the failures of Hamas governance; the utter illogic of its rocket-firing policy, for which Palestinians a heavy price; and Hamas' terrible indifference to the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza.

Hamas may well have gained a brief public relations advantage by breaching the wall separating Gaza from the Sinai, and probably also gained leverage against Egypt and the Palestinian Authority. But its fundamental weakness remains. The question now is how to make sure that Egypt's desire to control the border again does not strengthen Hamas in its struggle with the Palestinian Authority.

Hamas is already insisting that the old border arrangements be replaced with Hamas sharing control with Egypt, without E.U. monitors or Israel being able to maintain its off-site monitoring. The good news is that so far Egypt is not buying; while it is calling for understandings between the PA and Hamas, it also seems to accept -- at least for

now -- that the PA should be in the border crossings and EU monitors should maintain their presence. Moreover, Egypt is showing some very real concern about the effects on its own security with the breach in the wall; not only is Egypt not permitting the restocking of stores in El Arish and Rafah and rebuilding the fence, but the Egyptian press is also reporting that 3,000 Palestinians have been arrested, some with arms and explosives, in places like Suez City far removed from the border -- suggesting that the regime wants the public to see that Palestinians are causing security problems for Egypt.

Still, resealing the border is Egypt's first priority, and must not be traded for a greater Hamas role at the border. The Bush Administration needs to do more than only remind Egypt in public that it has responsibilities. Privately, it needs to make clear that the U.S. will be closely watching and holding Egypt accountable. Similarly, we need to emphasize that how the Egyptians handle their responsibilities will affect whether a peace deal may be achievable between Israelis and Palestinians. After all, Egypt made commitments to Israel at the time of its withdrawal from Gaza. Those commitments on smuggling and the border have not been fulfilled; given that history, if Egypt now finds a way to allow Hamas to gain far more control over the border and acquiesce about Hamas being able to bring whoever and whatever it wants into Gaza, Israel will not only face a greater threat but also conclude that commitments made by others on security amount to little more than slogans.

All this should remind the administration that its stakes are high in helping to manage the outcome of the Egyptian, Hamas, and PA discussions now taking place. It should not be a passive observer waiting to be informed. It should be outlining acceptable outcomes and also coordinating closely with Abbas. And, it should do so with a broader policy approach in mind--one that might take the current crisis and produce a better approach to Gaza.

What are the key elements to such an approach? First, agree that the objective is to have the PA assume responsibility for control of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt and EU monitors; Abbas wants his presidential guard to be placed at this as well as the other crossing points from Gaza into Israel. He needs to offer a plan of how many forces can be deployed, when they will be deployed, what their role will be and how they will function.

Second, Israel should, in the right circumstances, act on Prime Minister Olmert's commitment in principle to allow the PA to run the crossing points connecting Gaza and Israel. Nothing has happened yet, because the Israeli military has raised questions about how the PA can assure that the crossing points won't become transmission belts for the smuggling of bombs or explosives and at the same time run the Qarne and Erez crossing points when Hamas has checkpoints within 100-200 meters of each site. Abbas and Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad have responded by saying that they would bring outsiders credible to Israel to check all cargo and materials transiting the sites. Fayyad has also said that the PA will run the sites without regard to Hamas, letting Hamas either allow such an arrangement to work or be responsible for its failure. While it may be worth testing this proposition, it is hard to believe that PA forces within a few meters of Hamas armed militia won't feel the need to coordinate in some fashion. Regardless, the PA would get credit for making commerce possible.

Third, recognizing that the PA will probably have to coordinate with Hamas, Israel should tie its acceptance of the PA running the crossing points to Hamas stopping all the rocket and mortar fire. Otherwise, allowing the PA to run the crossing points will mean very little. Almost certainly if the rocket fire continues Israel will be launching incursions to deal with it and invariably that will lead to closing crossing points either because the Israelis do it or because Hamas may fire on them in response to the incursions. Ultimately, it is not practical to be reopening the crossing points under PA control if Hamas does not accept that it must stop the rocket fire. Would Hamas consider doing so? The Israelis are likely to agree to stop targeting Hamas officials if the rocket fire stops. Plus, Hamas is under pressure from the private sector in Gaza to make commerce possible. So it may well do so.

Lastly, Israel needs to adopt a different posture toward Gaza. Trying to manipulate the supply of electricity, fuel, and water as a way of pressuring Hamas has not worked; worse, it has focused the attention on Israel's behavior, not

Hamas's rocket fire into Israel. Israel should now publicly declare that it will not punish the Palestinian people in Gaza and therefore will not disrupt supplies of electricity or water. But Israel should also state that it cannot be expected to be responsible for providing electricity and water to those who try to kill Israelis on a daily basis. No one else in the international community would accept such a situation. As such, Israel will give the international community six or even nine months to come up with alternatives to the supply coming from Israel and at that point Israel will no longer provide Palestinians with their fuel, their food, or their electricity.

This would put the onus and responsibility back on Hamas for life in Gaza. It would require the international community to put far more pressure on Hamas to act responsibly and to make it possible for the outside world to meet Palestinian needs in Gaza. While the current crisis is certainly not welcome, the task of statecraft is now to change the dynamics in Gaza -- and not in a way that favors Hamas.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of **Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World**

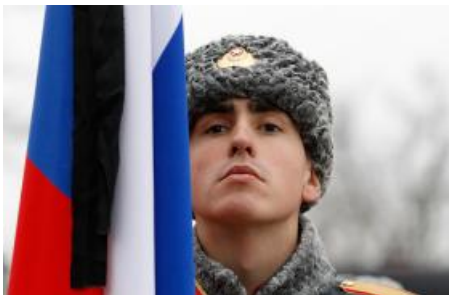
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