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The War in Gaza An Assessment

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The ramifications of the war in Gaza go far beyond the narrow confines of the Gazan battlefield and Israel's relations with Hamas. The war has not only inflicted a resounding defeat on Hamas and wrought horrendous loss of life and physical damage on Gaza and its people. It has also shaken the regional strategic architecture.

The Middle East has undergone dramatic change in recent years. The core of Sunni Arab states has contracted in terms of regional influence as the non-Arab states of the region - Iran, Turkey and Israel - have filled the void at the Arabs' expense. The crushing of Iraq by the United States and its allies opened the Arab East to Iranian strategic penetration the likes of which have not been seen in the modern era. An arc of Iranian influence, the so-called "Shi'ite Crescent," stretches from Teheran via Iraq and Syria to the two Iranian outposts in the Eastern Mediterranean, Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

Israel could not have continued to show restraint in the face of the 8-year long Hamas rocketing of its citizens in the south, without projecting a lack of Israeli resolve and resilience. Such febleness would have strengthened the hand of all the radicals in the region, who seek the gradual attrition of Israel's staying power, leading towards its ultimate destruction. Given the wider regional implications, Israel's use of massive force was only to be expected. Israel demonstrated military supremacy, political leadership and national solidarity, more impressively than at any time since the Six Day War in 1967. As a result, its deterrence towards all and sundry, from Gaza to Teheran, has been significantly enhanced, especially after its rather mediocre military

performance against Hizballah in the summer of 2006.

In its war against Hizballah, Israel inflicted enough damage to deter the Shi'ite militia from any further action against it for at least the two and a half years since then, even throughout the Gaza war, during which Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah could muster no more than verbal bluster in solidarity with his Palestinian brethren. Nevertheless Israelis were deeply disappointed and demoralized by the irresolute and unconvincing performance of their military in Lebanon. Nasrallah could credibly have claimed a victory of sorts for the *muqawama* (“Resistance”), the asymmetric sub-conventional warfare of terrorism and rocketry that Israel was seemingly incapable of dealing with effectively. Israel's regional posture was badly bruised and its deterrence undermined, not so much in the eyes of Hizballah itself, as in the rest of the neighborhood. In the popular Arab consciousness, Iran and the radical axis were on a roll and the anxiety levels of the moderate regimes in the Arab world rose accordingly.

Israel learned the lessons of 2006 and the mistakes of Lebanon were not repeated in Gaza. On the contrary, the IDF passed its recent test with flying colors. It delivered a crushing defeat to Hamas and to the concept of *muqawama*. These last two confrontations should not simply be added to the roster of Arab-Israeli wars. Though they were fought between Israel and Arab enemies, they were both bouts between Israel and Iran, the new non-Arab contender for regional hegemony, via its proxies Hizballah and Hamas. And in Gaza, for the first time in years, the Iranian-led radical camp was dealt a serious setback, not only on the ground, but also in the imagination and the consciousness of the peoples of the region.

In a strange turn of events, the hand of the Arab moderates has been strengthened by the military actions of Israel. It is thanks to the Israeli military operation in Gaza that Egypt now has far greater leverage over Hamas, which only a short while back was treating the Egyptians with undisguised contempt. The fact that Israel has become the powerhouse of the Arab moderates, however, offers a very complicated and even embarrassing card for the moderates to play. Playing this card will require some very deft stepping through the minefields of Middle Eastern diplomacy.

Hamas's indiscretion, coupled with Iranian pressure, brought Hamas to the point of provoking the recent Israeli onslaught on Gaza. The war has cost Hamas dearly not so much in its standing versus the PLO and Fatah, but in terms of its image in the eyes of the people of Gaza. It is the people who have

paid the price of the movement's rash and irresponsible behavior, while the leadership took to their underground bunkers in Gaza or their secure residences in Damascus. No amount of "victory" parades on the ruins of Gaza will change this grim reality, while the PLO leadership and significant components of the Arab media miss no opportunity to remind the Palestinian people of these uncomfortable facts. Hamas has simultaneously exposed itself to greater Egyptian, Israeli and international pressure to desist from the prolonged armed confrontation with Israel.

To be sure, Hamas is groggy but not knocked out. Eliminating the radical organization was not realistic, and was not an objective of Israel's campaign. Weighing between the options of reoccupying Gaza, leaving it in a Somalia-like state of chaos, or allowing Hamas to remain in place, Israel deliberately chose the latter. At the same time, Israel sought to force Hamas into realizing that the cost of continued rocketry aimed at Israel would be prohibitive. In other words, Israel seems to have come to the conclusion that it is preferable to have a tamed, albeit hostile but efficient neighbor in charge of Gaza.

The failings of the PLO and Fatah are also not lost on the Palestinians. Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas will have great difficulty in trying to capitalize on Hamas's present weakness. But with Hamas having been cut down to size, there is now a greater possibility for the kind of Palestinian national unity that has hitherto eluded the Egyptian mediators. The war in Gaza is cause for a Hamas "reality check." Hamas cannot wish Israel away just as Israel cannot hope for Hamas to disappear. If Hamas reasserts its control of the Gaza Strip and a lasting ceasefire is kept in place, two further steps will become part of the immediate agenda: the formation of a Palestinian government of national unity and the restarting of some form of Palestinian–Israeli negotiation.

It is time for Hamas to decide whether to take its cues from the radicals in Tehran or the moderates in Cairo. Needless to say, if Hamas proves incapable or unwilling to impose a stable ceasefire, progress on internal Palestinian unity or on the peace front will be unlikely. In such circumstances, Israel and Hamas will sooner or later be back at war with each other and the Israelis and Palestinians will have no need to face the question of whether or not to talk to each other, whether directly, indirectly or in any other fashion outside of the battlefield.

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