

COMMENTARY

The Fighting in Gaza: How Does It End? (And, Will It?)

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The fighting in Gaza is already a major human tragedy for the Palestinians. It compounds the impact of Hamas's takeover of Gaza, a heritage of terrorism and rocket attacks on Israel, and Palestinian and Israeli internal political tensions that have made the search for peace largely a matter of hollow rhetoric. The key question is whether this tragedy, and the casualties and damage on both sides, can have any meaningful strategic outcome? It is whether it will simply be another peak of violence in a continuing process of conflict or can actually move towards some form of stable result.

A Strategic Liability for the US

One thing is certain. The fighting has already become a strategic liability for the US. There is no good answer to what level of force is "proportionate" in this kind of asymmetric warfare. There is no equation that can decide how many rocket firings and acts of terrorism justify a given level of air strikes or use of conventional ground forces. The fact that the weak suffer more than the strong in war is a grim reality, as is the fact that no power is going to accept terrorism because its best military options produce civilian casualties.

Nevertheless, the US has again been pushed into being Israel's only defender in an international environment where it is far easier (and more lucrative) to take the Arab side than seek any form of balance. Arab and Islamic media and think tanks already portray the fighting as enabled by US support of Israel and actions in the UN, and this is the judgment of most media and think tanks in Europe and outside the US.

Hard-line Islamist extremist movements, the Hezbollah and Iran, and other opponents of the US have all begun to capitalize on the fighting. Moreover, moderate Arab governments have become targets as well as the US. This pushes such Arab regimes – which have no more love for Hamas than Israel and the US to distance themselves from the US as well as support of Fatah and the peace proposals of the Arab League. It also puts new pressure on Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations.

Fairly or unfairly, these attitudes are reinforced by the fact that the Bush Administration ceasefire proposals have been tied to Hamas halting all attacks on Israel, which is perceived as a de facto green light to Israel, and by memories of similar US approaches to calling for a ceasefire in Lebanon. The "silence" of President elect Obama has weakened hopes for a new US approach as has the appointment of Senator Clinton as the future Secretary of States – although seeing Senator Clinton as pro-Israel has meant ignoring the fact that she was among the first to call for making Palestine a fully sovereign state.

One should not exaggerate the impact of these reactions. They confirm longstanding attitudes and anger, but they do inevitably complicate the US role in the war on terrorism, in Middle East and Islamic world, in dealing with issues like Iran and Iraq, and in countering the Taliban and dealing with an Islamic Pakistan. One has to wait for the outcome to see how much impact the fighting will have on public opinion polls, but the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has consistently been one of the three major problems the US has in dealing with Arab and Islamic state – vying in importance with the Iraq War and perceptions that the US war on terrorism is anti-Arab and anti-Islamic.

How Well Can the IDF Do Against Hamas?

What is less predictable is whether Israel can make any lasting gains, and/or whether the fighting results in anything approaching either peace or a prolonged pause in the fighting. One should not underestimate Israeli success in purely military terms. The IAF flew roughly 150 sorties on December 27th, the first day, and over 100 the next three days. Hamas quickly dispersed both its personnel and weapons and equipment, but the IAF has continued to have excellent targeting support from its UAVs and other technical intelligence assets, and support from anti-Hamas elements inside and outside of Gaza.

The IAF may not be able to find and hit every target, and some tunnels and sheltered areas, but Hamas has clearly lost some key leaders and is losing most of its key facilities and much of its equipment. It may be able to fire limited numbers of rockets indefinitely into the future, but it will lose a significant amount of its weapons, as well as its training facilities and communications facilities.

It is equally dangerous to discount IDF ground operations. Hamas is not Hezbollah. It has not fought the IDF for years. Its forces are limited in training and experience, and do not seem to have had anything like Hezbollah's access to the more modern and lethal manportable and crew served weapons – although it may well have some anti-tank guided weapon and manportable surface to air missiles in reserve. For all of the talk about the difficulties of house-to-house fighting, it is important to note that most urban combat is over quickly unless both sides have extensive combat equipment and support capabilities, and that insurgent defenders generally take massive losses relative to the attacker.

Hamas may inflict casualties in a few clashes, but it also has not yet demonstrated that it can bring together any kind of broad Palestinian resistance that has any effectiveness. This would probably require Fatah's supporters to decisively support Hamas, and so far, Fatah seems more willing to wait and take advantage of any IDF defeat of Hamas. This situation is unstable, and a mass Palestinian resistance would both be much more of a challenge to the IDF and create far more political backlash as a result of civilian casualties and collateral damage. It is important to note, however, that it is a possibility and not a probability.

Moreover, the IDF does not need to fight its way into every Hamas stronghold. It can secure and isolate such strongpoints, attack only those strongpoints that have key value, and use airpower instead of house-to-house fighting. The problems the IDF faces because it was committed to a static war against far better defended areas long the Israeli-Lebanese border do not apply in Gaza, and Israel has had two years in which to retrain and improve its capabilities for joint warfare. Unless its political leadership repeats the mistakes of 2006, it does not need to fight the wrong kind of urban warfare.

While no one should judge the outcome of any clash or series of battles before they are over, the more serious question will be whether IDF tactical successes have lasting strategic value, and produce any kind of stable political outcome. The deafening silence of the Israeli government in describing the broader goals behind Israel's operations raise much more serious questions here than its military operations to date.

One More Step in a War Process that is Escalating to Nowhere?

Israel cannot achieve peace or even political stability by turning Gaza into even more of a defeated, hopeless Palestinian prison camp. This, however, has been the end result of each flare up in the fighting to date.

For all of the talk of a "peace process," however, history has been more of a "war process." The only question is when to date its beginning. Arab violence before World War II, the fighting in 1948, the largely passive Palestinian role in the Arab-Israeli conflicts involving warfare with Arab states, the post-1967 struggles between a rising Palestinian movement and Israel, the first Intifada, or the far more serious conflict that began with Sharon's visit to the Dome of the Rock in 2000 and Arafat's choice to respond with violence.

Even the signature of the Oslo Accords in 1993 can be seen as having eventually become an extension of war by other means. As one leading Israeli military analysts said shortly after the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, "You will not see peace for territory, you will see settlements for terrorism." The direct human cost has been high. The new cycle of

conflict that began in 2000 has varied in intensity. It peaked in 2002 with over 1,000 Palestinian and 400 Israeli dead. It never, however, produced less than 200 Palestinian dead between 2000 and 2008, and the sharp reduction in Israeli dead from 2004 onwards came at the cost of virtually surrounding Israel in security barriers and vastly increasing its problems in negotiating a real peace.

The Once and Future Prison?

The Hamas coup in Gaza in June 2007 – a coup that succeeded far more because of the almost total ineptitude of Fatah forces than Hamas’s capabilities – did much to reinforce the “war process” at the expense of the peace process. The fighting began under Arafat and Fatah, however, and it is far from clear that any decline in Hamas’s present fortunes will not leave Gaza a festering prison for Palestinians with no clear economic hopes and without a meaningful state.

This so far has been the forgotten dimension of the war. The issue is not just civilian casualties in the fighting; it is the lack of any credible future for a Gaza. It is easy to forget that 1.5 million people have been crammed into a tiny enclave of only 360 square kilometers, isolated by a 51 kilometer border with Israel and an 11 kilometer border with Egypt, and with a 40 kilometer coastline with no real port and whose waters are controlled by the Israeli navy. Gaza has never had a working civilian airport, and since 2000, it has only had episodic ability for its citizens to move in and out of the Gaza.

Gaza also has seen a decline in educational standards and career opportunities for an extraordinarily young population. Some 45% of its population is 14 years of age or younger, and roughly 40,000 men and women become eligible to enter a labor force each year that the CIA estimates totals under 300,000 mature working adults.

Unemployment has averaged at least 40% since 2006. The end result is that most of those who do work (70%) only work because of aid and subsidies and do so in service industries with little or no economic value even in a future Palestinian state. Gaza has no competitive manufactures of its own, and Israel’s economy has become virtually independent of Gazan labor and is being structured to eliminate future economic ties. Water and other problems severely limited Gazan agriculture, which has been severely affected by past fighting and only provided some 8% of the GNP before this fighting took place.

While such claims are political and biased, pro-Palestinian sources claim that the average per capita income in the Gaza Strip is around two US dollars a day, that the unemployment rate reached 70 percent before the current fighting while the poverty rate rose to 80 percent. They also claim that one million Palestinians in Gaza live on the modest assistance provided by the UNRWA and FAO in addition to other Arab and Islamic charitable organizations; 60 percent of Gaza children suffer from diseases caused by malnutrition; and 70 percent of the population obtains water for eight hours every two days a week. They also claim that 140,000 Palestinian workers in Gaza joined the unemployment line and 3,900 factories, workshops and stores were shut down since 2000.

Such claims are probably more important for their political impact than their economic validity, but they are broadly correct in pointing out that Gaza is currently a liability, not an asset, to any future Palestinian state. The World Bank is not biased and warned of economic collapse in Gaza in 2007, and that it faced a cash crisis and the collapse of its banking system just weeks before this round of fighting. It also seems difficult to believe that any military outcome that leaves Gaza far more damaged than even these numbers suggest is going to have a population that is not more anti-Israeli and whose young men are not even more vulnerable to extremism and terrorism – regardless of the immediate post-fighting impact on Hamas.

How the Fighting Could End: Changing the Probable Outcome

It is unclear that there are real world probabilities that even the most serious Israeli tactical gains will do anything more than isolate an even weaker Gaza. It is equally unclear that if Hamas does survive, it will not be stronger simply because of its ability to capitalize on the suffering it helped to create, or that the Arab and Islamic worlds will not become more angry as continued Palestinian suffering grows worse.

One can count on international rhetoric and pledges to the contrary, but they have consistently proved hollow in the past. In short, the most likely answer to the question of how the fighting ends, is that it doesn't. If so, the risks go beyond Israel. They will further empower Iran and the Hezbollah even if they do not make token or real efforts to actively support Hamas. They will aid Al Qa'ida and its ilk. They will divide moderate Arab regimes from their people, reinforce Arab anger against the US, and make long term and lasting solutions to the broader Arab-Israeli conflict even more difficult.

There are four options for changing this situation. Each can be pursued individually, but each is mutually reinforcing and the sheer scale of the problems in Gaza may demand a concerted approach.

- *First, reintroduce a Fatah government in Gaza.* It has never been clear that Hamas would seriously negotiate with Israel or with Fatah. It seems much less likely could do so now. According to ABC reporting, TV, Mahmoud Zahar, Hamas's second-ranking political leader, has responded to the fighting as follows, "... "by killing our children you legitimize us killing your children; by bombing our mosque you legitimize us bombing your synagogue; by bombing our hospitals you legitimize us bombing your hospital... We will remain on the right path until we liberate all of Palestine. This is the tax we pay for victory. We tell all people who demonstrated all over the world against the aggression that we won't let them down. The peoples of the world have proven that they are not supporting the policies of their government and rulers. We salute the resistance men. We are establishing for a future without occupation, aggression or oppression. The Israeli enemy in its aggression has written its next chapter in the world which will have no place for them.... We cling to national unity and we warn the collaborators from trying any schemes. I call on all members of the Palestinian people to show solidarity and help each other. The conspiracies at the UN proved that they are acting against the Palestinian people. We are confident of our victory and God won't let us down."
- An Israeli occupation would be a nightmare for both sides. Imperfect as Fatah is, it is Palestinian, it has improved since Arafat, and even if it comes as a result of action by the IDF, it is far more legitimate and offers more hope. Such a government could not hold elections, but it could win support through aid and simply by opening Gaza up to hope.
- *Second, rush in a massive international aid program.* Gaza cannot be made into a viable entity, but life can be vastly improved by rushing in economic aid, by creating even short-term reconstruction jobs, by modernizing and improving the educational system, and by helping to create effective security forces and the rule of law. Such an effort would also give the US and moderate Arab states the opportunity to show they really cared about Gaza's future, and Europe the ability to put its money where its mouth is.
- *Third, revitalize the peace process.* It is tempting to back away from a major US and outside peace effort at time that neither Palestinian nor Israeli domestic politics support peace, or to offer gestures rather than substance. Only a truly major, high profile and sustained effort, however, can have an impact given the hollow efforts since 2000.
- *Fourth, create a limited Palestinian state.* No matter how serious new peace negotiations are, it seems likely that such efforts are going to find that any final settlement is as difficult as in the past, and will take years to accomplish. One way to move forward, therefore, would be to look beyond conventional wisdom and offer the Palestinians limited sovereignty before a peace process – preserving all of Israel's security needs but elevating any Palestinian government that recognized Israel and was committed to peaceful negotiation to the status where it could be represented in international organizations, deal with Israel on a sovereign basis, and have options like granting passports to Palestinians who now live in Gaza and the West Bank.

These options require a level of vision and international coordination that may well be lacking. They also are no panacea that guarantees that there will be a meaningful end to this round of fighting. It seems very unlikely, however, that any amount of Israeli tactical success can – by itself – bring an end to the war process. It is time to look beyond the fighting and take advantage of every other option that is available.

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