

# No Good Options

**Gerald M. Steinberg**

The on-again, off-again, coordinated but unwritten ceasefire or temporary truce between Israel and Hamas may or may not be over for now. With such a thin foundation, no direct communications between leaders and divisions among factions within both the Hamas and Israeli leaderships, the uncertainty and confusion is understandable.

Beyond the fiery threats from Hamas leaders and the brutal psychodramas focusing on kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, as well as Israeli election rhetoric, this quasi-truce has served the interests of both sides. The rocket and mortar attacks during the previous year had brought the Israeli town of Sderot and its neighbors to the breaking point and perhaps beyond. In Gaza, Israel's responses were causing damage to Hamas. There were good reasons for a brief respite.

But this truce was also problematic. Hamas, as a revolutionary fundamentalist group linked to the Iranian agenda, has placed itself on the front lines. If it were to reach a long-term accommodation, tacit or more formalized, Hamas would be ideologically or politically indistinguishable from Fateh.

From the Israeli perspective, the Gazan version of Hizballah, with similar weapons and strategy, is also viewed as highly threatening. Israel depends on deterrence through the threat of effective response to attack, and in this regard the 2006 Lebanon campaign was not successful. Allowing Hamas to acquire a supply of rockets with increasing range has exacerbated this weakness. In addition, the failure to obtain the release of Gilad Shalit as part of the original ceasefire is subject to increasing criticism among the Israeli public, and has become an election issue for Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defense Minister Ehud Barak.

Indeed, the Olmert government's strategy toward Gaza following the latter's coup against the Palestinian Authority and Fateh is generally seen as a failure. The policy of isolation and blockade did not lead to a collapse, as had been hoped. And following Arafat's lead, the Hamas leadership did not start to act "responsibly" and take the welfare of its citizens into account after it took power. In addition, Israeli reliance on Egypt also failed as Cairo proved too weak to stop the flow of arms and explosives or influence the Hamas leadership.

On this basis, for many Israeli decision-makers the argument for a large-scale ground operation to disarm Hamas and destroy its leadership has become stronger, particularly as Sderot is again being bombarded and Ashkelon is likely to follow. If an IDF incursion is necessary, it is better to get it over with earlier, including likely military and civilian casualties as well as international

condemnations, rather than waiting for Hamas to accrue even more deadly missiles. Since there are political costs in waiting until the Obama presidency begins, such an operation may come before January 20. And if it is successful, a greatly weakened Hamas will also help President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority regain power in Gaza.

But those who urge caution note the potential for major Israeli casualties and the absence of an exit strategy. Israeli re-occupation of Gaza would be very costly diplomatically, militarily and economically, while a quick exit would be seen as a victory for Hamas. In other words, if Israel launches a major operation to end the missile attacks it will need a clear-cut success and will have to accept the accompanying costs.

As an alternative, some analysts have suggested that an international force be sent to keep the peace in Gaza. But this is highly unrealistic: any foreign "peacekeepers" would quickly become targets for terror attacks as well as for political manipulation. Here again, the Lebanon example is instructive--the "new and improved" UNIFIL, operating under UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and European command, is no more capable than the pre-2006 model. Furthermore, in discussing international forces in Gaza the Palestinians and their allies would insist on including the West Bank in this mandate, thereby creating a conflict with Israel.

A few other participants in this debate continue to call for "talks" and negotiations with Hamas, citing the progress in relations between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland or between China and Taiwan. But these cases do not involve radical Islamist factions: the nature of the core conflict is very different, as is the regional environment. The governments of the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom cooperated to bring about negotiated settlement, but in the Middle East most of the outside governments, such as Iran, Syria and Libya, are part of the conflict.

The bottom line is that there are no good options. But if Hamas remains undeterred and the rocket attacks continue, Israeli leaders will have to choose a military scenario, with the hope that their objectives can be achieved.

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