

# Occupying Gaza, Again

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Gaza has never been a good neighbour – not during the time of the Philistines, and not under the Palestinians. After the 1948 war, Egypt used the territory as base for terror attacks, and after the Israeli take-over in the 1967 war, waves of violence continued. Israel pulled out in August 2005, followed by the Hamas takeover, and the attacks increased. Since then, Gaza has become the launching pad for hundreds of missiles and mortars directed at Sderot, Ashkelon and other Israeli towns. And none of the generals, diplomats, and pundits has come up with a successful response.

The military solution is to return to Gaza, reimposing tight Israeli control, including the border with Egypt, but without the civilian settlements that complicated the situation after 1967. But after having occupied this narrow and highly overpopulated strip for almost 40 years, the IDF is in no hurry to go back in. No one wants to again be responsible for the lives of over 1 million poverty-stricken and hostile Palestinians.

When Ariel Sharon decided on the Israeli withdrawal a little over two years ago, the hope was that Egypt would prevent the transfer of weapons, with a symbolic European presence at the Rafiah border crossing. Predictably, the Europeans ran away at the first sign of tension, and Cairo never made a serious effort, either because they did not have the capability or they did not want to help prevent attacks on Israel. And when Sharon left the scene, the Olmert government responded with hesitation, still hoping that Hamas could be restrained.

But as rocket attacks expanded, and residents fled Sderot, the government tried a policy based on pressure and isolation of Gaza, in the hope that ordinary Palestinians would force their leaders to stop. Israel first threatened to stop the supply of fuel and other supplies, and then, when the threats had no impact, the policy was implemented for a few days.

Having been warned well in advance, the Hamas leadership was well prepared, and orchestrated an artificial "humanitarian crisis" that was quickly adopted by the media. In the United Nations, the Human Rights Council issued the expected condemnations of Israel, and organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch wheeled out the double standards again to declare Israel guilty of "collective punishment" and other imagined crimes.

With this wave of media and political support, Hamas blew up part of the concrete barrier along the border between Gaza and Egypt, and the Palestinian victims of the "humanitarian crisis" rushed across to buy televisions and other luxury goods. They could also bring in many more weapons for use in terror, and smuggle terrorists into Egypt. As a result, instead of being forced to reign in the rocket attacks, Hamas gained a propaganda victory while also being able to expand its terrorist infrastructure through Egypt.

In response, some pundits and arm-chair strategists are calling for talks with Hamas, in the hope of discovering a magic diplomatic solution. But talking by itself is just that and nothing more – to be effective, talks must lead to useful action. And since Hamas, like Hezbollah, is fixated on the goal of destroying Israel as part of the

wider jihad, the best that negotiations on a temporary truce can do is give the leaders in Gaza time to build up the terror capabilities for a wider assault against Israel.

For the same reason, the talk of placing international forces in Gaza is empty. If such forces (Canadian? European? Asian?) were effective in preventing Hamas from attacking Israel, they would become targets, as has happened in a few cases in Lebanon. Or such forces fail to act, they would be caught in the middle of Israeli anti-terror operations, and Israel would be blamed again.

Which leaves a full scale military operation – with all the costs involved, including casualties – as the least bad option for Israel. This will also lead to a different relationship with Egypt, more of the standard "war crimes" propaganda from so-called human rights groups, and other complications. But Israel cannot simply allow the attacks on Sderot to continue, and every other option has failed.