

Gaza: The Next Israeli-Palestinian War?

I. OVERVIEW

Will the next Middle East conflagration involve Israelis and Palestinians? After the serious escalation of the past week in which eight Gazans, including children, were killed in a single day, and the 23 March 2011 bombing in Jerusalem, that took the life of one and wounded dozens, there is real reason to worry. The sharp deterioration on this front is not directly related, nor is it in any way similar to the events that have engulfed the Middle East and North Africa. But the overall context of instability and uncertainty undoubtedly has made a volatile situation even more so. Israelis' anxiety is rising and with it the fear that outside parties might seek to provoke hostilities to divert attention from domestic problems and shift the focus back to Israel. Hamas has been emboldened by regional events and is therefore less likely to back down from a challenge. The combination, as recent days have shown, has proven combustible.

In this context, the priority is to achieve an effective cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, without which the situation soon could spin out of control. True, periodic escalations have become part of what passes for normal in Gaza and adjacent Israeli territory. But the current round of violence has the makings of something more and far worse. As in the weeks preceding Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli attack on Gaza that commenced in December 2008, neither Hamas nor Israel seems intent on provoking an intensified or extended conflict. But the combination of civilian casualties, regional events and continued paralysis of Palestinian politics has created the conditions for a rapid deterioration toward the kind of clash to which neither side aspires, for which both have carefully prepared and from which they will not retreat quickly.

II. A BUILD-UP TO WAR?

If the precise reasons behind the escalation between Israel and Hamas remain unclear, the precipitating events and motivations of the parties are not. In recent months, Israel increasingly has targeted Hamas for rocket attacks launched by unaffiliated groups – particularly Islamic Jihad and

various Salafi-Jihadi militants – to force the Islamist movement to rein them in.¹ Israel by and large achieved its goals, as Hamas sought, with a fair degree of success, to contain the groups; Hamas also generally refrained from responding to Israeli attacks, viewing them as provocation for a fight for which it was not yet ready.² That seemed to change when, on 16 March 2011, in response to a rocket that targeted the Sdot Negev Regional Council that morning, Israel killed two fighters from Hamas's armed wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, at their training ground. A movement leader argued that these actions violated what Hamas had considered reasonable rules of the game: that when Palestinian projectiles hit open space – as did the ones launched on 16 March – Israel aims at open space in response.³ Two Qassam dead thus were deemed to warrant retaliation.

On 18 March, an anti-tank missile was fired at an Israeli patrol and, the following day, Hamas – for the first time in many months – fired and immediately claimed responsibility for a large-scale attack, some 33 mortars aimed at what it alleged were four Israeli military bases. In so doing, the movement was sending a message that it would not allow Israel to unilaterally change the rules without a response.⁴ The military wings of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Islamic Jihad also launched a variety of projectiles, including Grad rockets that reached

¹ The issue of Hamas's relationship with Salafi-Jihadi groups in Gaza is the subject of extensive treatment in the forthcoming Crisis Group report, *Radical Islam in Gaza*.

² In repeated interviews since 2008, Qassam members have told Crisis Group that the movement undertook a review and reform of its military preparedness. They explained that Hamas was not yet ready for another round with Israel and that it was a mark of its political and military maturity that it would not be drawn into a fight for which it was not yet prepared. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza and Damascus, 2008-2011. As seen below, that assessment seems recently to be changing.

³ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, March 2011. A former Israeli official agreed with the Hamas assessment that Israel's response constituted changing the rules: "We knew they would perceive it as such". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 23 March 2011.

⁴ "They are using mortars – precisely the weapons against which we have no defence". Crisis Group interview, former Israeli defence official, Jerusalem, 23 March 2011.

the outskirts of Ashkelon. According to the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), all in all 56 mortar shells and rockets were launched on the 18th from the Gaza Strip and landed in Israeli territory.⁵

Another threshold was crossed on 22 March, when a total of eight Palestinians were killed by Israeli artillery in two separate incidents. Among the victims were five members of a single family, including two children, in the Gaza City neighbourhood of Shajaiyya. This brought the total for the week to ten dead (including five under the age of eighteen) in addition to 38 wounded (including fifteen under the age of eighteen). Prime Minister Netanyahu “expresse[d] his regret that innocent civilians in the Gaza Strip were unintentionally hit as a result of IDF shelling”, emphasising that “the shelling was carried out in response to Hamas fire at Israeli civilians”.⁶ But the damage was done, and Hamas immediately announced its intention to exact further retribution.⁷

Writing in *Yedioth Achronoth*, an Israeli journalist expressed alarm at the turn of events:

Yesterday, the Southern Command committed errors of judgment. Both in the decision to use an inaccurate weapon like mortars in a populated area, and in the way these mortars were used. Similar errors were made in the past when artillery fire was employed as responsive fire near civilians – and all the lessons learned appear in the command books. Now, after we have apologized, we must prepare for the possibility that at the next stage, Hamas will not fire in response volleys of mortars at the Gaza perimeter, but rather volleys of Grad rockets deep into Israel. This in turn will require the IDF to ratchet up its response another notch. They are contemptible – and we are playing into their hands.⁸

As of this writing, several more rounds of attack were taking place: on 23 March, Gaza militants fired Grad rockets at the southern cities of Be’er Sheva and Ashdod and

mortar shells fell on the western Negev and elsewhere. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility; the IDF responded. On 24 March, Israel targeted a variety of sites around Gaza and more rockets fell in Israel, including in Yavneh, 25km from Tel Aviv. As this report goes to press, no group has claimed responsibility for today’s attacks.

III. A COMBUSTIBLE CONTEXT

The situation between the Gaza strip and adjoining Israeli communities has been tense for years, and occasional surges in violence occur. To an extent, the current flare-up is one more instance of this pattern, with the unleashing of a retaliatory cycle fuelled by attacks and counter-attacks. Hamas is seeking to deliver a message to Israel that it will not be intimidated and that it too can control the timing, pace and scope of the confrontation. The same is true for Israel, intent on demonstrating its continued deterrent power. An Israeli official said:

The mortar fire is real escalation – the fact that nearly 60 projectiles were fired in one day, which is a third of the total amount during the last three months, is significant and Israel will treat it as such. The same goes for a Grad missile reaching Ashkelon’s outskirts. Had it hit Ashkelon itself we would have seen a much stronger reaction.⁹

Still, while this pattern has been seen before, the specifics of the current escalatory cycle and the mindset of the two protagonists provide reason for greater concern than usual.

□ **Civilian casualties:** In Israel, the grisly 11 March attack on the West Bank settlement of Itamar – in which five members of a single family, including three children, were murdered – stoked passions and reinforced in Israeli minds the enduring nature of the threat they face. The attack might have been on the country’s eastern not southern flank, but the images of Gazans celebrating the murder of Jews could not but stoke passions and constrain Jerusalem’s margin of political manoeuvre regarding violence emanating from the Strip. The 23 March Jerusalem bombing only further exacerbated these sentiments and led Israeli officials

⁵ See <http://idfspokesperson.com/2011/03/22/in-response-to-rocket-fire-iaf-targets-several-terror-activity-sites-across-the-gaza-strip/>.

⁶ Statement by Prime Minister Netanyahu, 22 March 2011. Military officials contended that the deaths of the three civilians in the Shajaiyya neighbourhood were accidental; according to them, the IDF commander had ordered troops to fire at Palestinians who were launching missiles into Israel. One of the four mortars fired by the IDF missed its target and hit a house about 80 metres away. Among the dead were a thirteen and a sixteen year-old boy.

⁷ Hamas spokesman Ismail Radwan said, “the brutal crime of today will not pass without a response by the resistance”. *Haaretz*, 22 March 2011.

⁸ *Yedioth Achronoth*, 23 March 2011.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 21 March 2011. The notion that Hamas was the one to escalate was contradicted by two Israeli journalists: “[Hamas] actually has good reasons to believe that Israel is the one heating up the southern front. It began with a bombardment a few weeks ago that disrupted the transfer of a large amount of money from Egypt to the Gaza Strip, continued with the interrogation of engineer and Hamas member Dirar Abu Sisi in Israel and ended with last week’s bombing of a Hamas training base in which two Hamas militants were killed”. *Haaretz*, 24 March 2011.

to vow a forceful response.¹⁰ In mirror image, and notwithstanding the different circumstances involved, the killing of several Palestinian civilians – including young children – inevitably prompts more serious retaliation and likewise limits Hamas’s options. Ultimately, civilian casualties will be a key in determining how far Hamas and Israel will go, as both have very low tolerance for them.

- **Hamas’s domestic considerations:** In recent days, Gaza’s (and, to a lesser extent, West Bank) authorities have confronted rare popular protests – led by a coalition named 15 March, for the day the demonstrations officially began – calling on Hamas and Fatah to reconcile and end the West Bank-Gaza division. In a regional context marked by growing popular dissatisfaction, mobilisation and activism, Hamas did not take the developments lightly – all the more so since demonstrations in Gaza were much larger than those in the West Bank,¹¹ and insofar as Fatah actively protested in Gaza while Hamas sat at home in the West Bank. Convinced that Fatah was behind the unrest and trying to stir chaos,¹² Gaza authorities worried that protests could get out of hand and so responded firmly.¹³

Although difficult to establish with any certainty, the timing of Hamas’s attacks, their exceptional scope – and the fact that the movement immediately took responsibility – suggests that its motivations might have extended beyond retaliation. It may arguably have sought to shift attention back to Israel, reminding Palestinians of this greater threat and signalling that any weakening of Hamas would redound to their enemy’s benefit. Under this logic, renewed sympathy for the resistance would make up for whatever loss of support Hamas might suffer by suppressing demonstrations.¹⁴ The cross-border fighting – regardless of where blame lies – offered Hamas an opportunity to do away with street protests and rally the people to its side.

- **Responding to the Salafi-Jihadi challenge:** As further detailed in a report Crisis Group will publish in the next days, Hamas has been under pressure from would-be challengers – such as Islamic Jihad and Salafi-

¹⁰Netanyahu said, “we have established a clear policy regarding security issues – a resolute reaction to every attempt to hurt our citizens and systematic, resolute preventative steps against terror”. Quoted in *Haaretz*, 23 March 2011.

¹¹Gaza City saw the participation of tens of thousands; in Ramallah, only 3,500 turned out. Crisis Group observations, Gaza and Ramallah, 15 March 2011.

¹²“The target is Hamas, not the division”. Crisis Group interview, Hamas activist, Gaza City, March 2011.

¹³On 15 March, Hamas supporters and security personnel on motorcycles violently broke up a protest in Gaza City’s Al-Katiba Square, chasing the demonstrators with sticks. The following day, a group of students at Al-Azhar University tried to demonstrate inside the campus. They were prevented from doing so and beaten by Hamas-affiliated students, who were subsequently joined by the police. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 19 March 2011. Security officials denied entering the campus but admitted that students were prevented from demonstrating outside and claimed that what happened inside was a fight among students. Crisis Group interview, police officer, Gaza, 19 March 2011. An interior ministry spokesman offered the same version. Crisis Group interview, Gaza, 19 March 2011. Further demonstrations continued during the following days. On 18 March, protesters demonstrated at the UN office, and were dispersed by Hamas; movement leaders negotiated the peaceful exit of demonstrators who had entered the compound. On 19 March, demonstrators sought to organise a sit-in at Unknown Soldier Square; a few hours before it was to start, the police came out in force, heavily armed. Demonstrators were harshly dispersed, and many who refused to leave were arrested and reportedly beaten. They were released only after signing a pledge not to participate in further demonstrations. Crisis Group observations and interviews, Gaza, 19-20 March 2011. Hamas’s

harsh response prompted mixed reactions in Gaza. Some appeared convinced that the street protests were designed to undermine the movement rather than promote inter-Palestinian unity and thus viewed them sceptically. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza, March 2011. Others – including some Hamas members and supporters – were highly critical of the interior ministry’s handling, fearing it would negatively affect the movement’s image. Some said they wished Hamas would evince the same “maturity” as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza, March 2011.

¹⁴Some observers have speculated that Hamas’s calculations could be related to developments regarding possible reconciliation with Fatah. On 15 March, Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniya invited Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss unity. The next day, Abbas offered to travel to Gaza to agree on a national unity government of independent national figures to prepare for parliamentary, presidential and Palestinian National Council (the legislature of the Palestine Liberation Organisation) elections under international supervision within six months. He emphasised that he would go not for dialogue but to “realise an agreement”. *Al-Ayyam*, 17 March 2011. Haniya’s invitation allegedly was not coordinated with other parts of Hamas’s leadership, notably in Damascus, which believed the time was ripe not for reconciliation with Abbas but for a broader effort at “national unity” whose primary focus would be elections for the Palestinian National Council. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader in exile, March 2011. Under this reading, Abbas’s immediate acceptance of Haniya’s invitation wrong-footed the Islamist movement, which, fearing to be out-manoeuvred, saw in the escalation an opportunity to change the topic and reclaim the initiative. An Israeli foreign ministry official backed this interpretation: “Our understanding is that Hamas’s motivations are triple: first, dodging reconciliation-related pressures by using Israel as a scapegoat, secondly, ensuring that in spite of popular protest in the Arab world Gaza is not forgotten; and thirdly, preparing international public support for the upcoming [Gaza-bound] flotillas despite the absence of a humanitarian crisis”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 22 March 2011.

Jihadi groups – to demonstrate its continued commitment to resistance. Several among the movement's rank-and-file have become disenchanted with its de facto, open-ended ceasefire and resent Fatah's oft-repeated charge that it has grown so enamoured of the privileges that come with governing that it is no longer willing to risk confrontation with Israel. In this context, Hamas arguably has opted to act as it has at the current time because its military rebuilding program, even if not complete, has advanced to a point where it is willing to risk a larger confrontation to secure its goals. Indeed, in the past several months, Qassam members have told Crisis Group that their military preparations were "almost done" and that there was "not much left to do".¹⁵ That does not mean that Hamas is eager for an all-out war; it almost certainly is not.¹⁶ But it is in a stronger position to assume risks.

- **Israel's uncertain regional environment:** Jerusalem has its own reasons for not dodging a fight. During the last few months, Israelis have felt the regional landscape shifting uncertainly and, as they see it, to their disadvantage; they fear that the so-called Arab Spring could come to mean open season on Israel. The toppling of neighbouring regimes is stimulating the country's inherent risk aversion and deepening its characteristic emphasis on self-reliance.¹⁷ Officials expressed displeasure at the U.S. abandonment of long-standing allies¹⁸ and – somewhat paradoxically – lament that international intervention on behalf of the beleaguered has been weak.¹⁹ Meanwhile, weapon smuggling to Gaza continues – indeed, might well be intensifying, as suggested by the interception of a ship carrying sophisticated weapons, purportedly from Iran and bound for Gaza.²⁰

Israelis feel on the defensive in more than one theatre. In Gaza, Hamas seems emboldened. In the West Bank, security seems more tenuous than conventional wisdom has it, as evidenced by the killings in Itamar; the 23 March bombing attack in Jerusalem further exacerbated this sense. Internationally, negotiations with the Ramallah-based Palestinian leadership have broken down, and Israel is bearing much of the blame; pressure in international venues (and the prospect of a greater number of governments recognising a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders) is mounting. This state of affairs arguably leads Israel to tread cautiously so as not to further inflame the situation; it also knows that the last thing the U.S. administration wants is an Israeli-Palestinian war that might negatively affect regional developments.²¹ But the situation also leads Israel to reinforce deterrence that its foes might feel has been eroded and needs to be reinforced, vis-à-vis not only Hamas but also Iran.²² In the words of an Israeli official:

The current international context is indeed less favourable to Israel than it was during Operation Cast Lead. At the time we had eight heads of state visiting the prime minister *during* the operation. However, though the current context is less convenient now, at the end of the day nothing will stop Israel from reacting if it is fired at. We do not want another round of violence but there is a sense that Hamas is

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Gaza, February-March 2011.

¹⁶ The Qassam Brigades offered on 21 March to implement a ceasefire "if the enemy stops the escalation and aggression against our people". Al-Jazeera, 22 March 2011. Hamas since has multiplied calls for international intervention to prevent further escalation. Gaza government press release, 22 March 2011.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, March 2011. An Israeli official agreed: "We do not believe Hamas wants a new round of violence. They prefer to strengthen their hold over Gaza. However, they have already miscalculated in 2008, and Cast Lead was the result. This may happen again". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 22 March 2011.

¹⁸ "Israeli critics open up on US 'abandonment' of Mubarak", *The Jerusalem Post*, 31 January 2011.

¹⁹ An Israeli defence official said, "the West's intervention in Libya sends a limited signal, not as strong as I would like to see. It does not convey that the West will prevent such acts of violent oppression at any cost". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 21 March 2011.

²⁰ The IDF seized the *Victoria*, an Alexandria-bound ship it believed was carrying weapons for Gaza militants. A full list of

the weapons found onboard – including anti-ship missiles, that Israeli security officials believe "would shift the strategic balance" – can be found at <http://idfspokesperson.com/2011/03/16/list-of-weaponry-found-on-the-victoria/>. Crisis Group interview, Israeli defence official, March 2011. Another official said: "Iran's attempt to supply Hamas with Surface-to-Sea missiles via the *Victoria* is a clear example. If Hamas will have such missiles or shoulder rocket launchers or the ability to produce Grad rockets within Gaza it will become much more aggressive". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 21 March 2011.

²¹ Some officials express concern about the diplomatic environment, as Ehud Barak did when he said, "we stand to face a diplomatic tsunami that the majority of the public is unaware of". *Haaretz*, 13 March 2011. A former defence official noted that while regional events could mean less international attention, they also imply that Israel cannot push too far and must remain "under the international radar". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 23 March 2011.

²² An Israeli foreign affairs official said, "Hamas should realise that we are not equal parties. We are the stronger party, and they need to acknowledge this and exercise restraint". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 22 March 2011. An Israeli official said the role played by Islamic Jihad raises suspicions of Iranian involvement. Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, Jerusalem, March 2011.

no longer deterred. The events of the last few days seem to indicate that Hamas's memory is short.²³

Finally, unrest in Syria has prompted some officials to speculate that Damascus might see an advantage in provoking hostilities with Israel via a third party as a means of shifting attention back to the Arab-Israeli conflict.²⁴

IV. A CEASEFIRE AND MORE

The most urgent step is for both sides to implement a ceasefire between Gaza and Israel. This is necessary to protect civilians, not only because of the inherent value in doing so, but because civilian casualties typically have been a gateway to escalation. They are thus not only of human but also of supreme political importance, as both parties are extremely sensitive to them and, when faced with loss of life, find it difficult to exercise restraint. Hamas should continue to enforce the ceasefire on recalcitrant groups, which – especially given their less precise weapons – may be more likely to cause the sort of casualties that could precipitate a massive clash.

There are some hopeful signs, albeit fragile. On 23 March, a Qassam fighter told Crisis Group that instructions to

cease fire had been issued²⁵ and Hamas leadership said that it had already asked the same of the factions, which reportedly agreed to stop firing if Israel does.²⁶ Asked if the smaller factions would comply, a Qassam fighter said, “if we stop, they will stop. They cannot face the onslaught themselves”.²⁷ A ceasefire also means in particular that Israel should refrain from targeting farmers and those collecting rubble in the buffer zones that the Israeli army enforces on the Strip's perimeter.

Egypt, taking stock after the uprising and searching for a new diplomatic role, likely will emerge as a crucial player. Many expect its regional profile to diminish in the short term as it deals with internal matters, but already it reportedly has reached out to Hamas regarding resuming reconciliation efforts.²⁸ The fighting on its border, logically, appears to have shifted its immediate priorities. Cairo now has an opportunity to demonstrate that it can be an effective player in the Palestinian arena while reassuring Israel of its commitment to regional peace and security. Reportedly it has contacted Hamas to urge a rapid de-escalation of the clashes, while calling on Israel to stop its attacks.²⁹

Dealing with the broader context also is important. However desirable a complete cessation of violence, it is unlikely to be achieved in the foreseeable future. To minimise the risk that whatever violence occurs may spiral out of control, several steps should be taken in parallel.

Normalising life in Gaza. Gaza continues to suffer the effects of an access regime that is best defined as neither siege nor blockade, but rather as an assault on a normal, dignified existence and an engine of impoverishment, social isolation and political disaffection. Since Israel lightened access restrictions in June 2010 in the wake of the “Freedom Flotilla”, greater quantities of commodities have flowed in and, more recently, a highly limited number have begun to flow out.³⁰ With this change³¹ and con-

²³ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 21 March 2011. He added: “The precise reason why they are firing is not important. What matters is the amount of bombs and rockets they fire and the targets they hit. Things then take a life of their own. Israel cannot explain to itself Hamas's motivations every time it fires at us and avoid reacting. We need to maintain deterrence, and this is done by reacting”. Another official echoed the view: “On the one hand, Hamas believes the current Israeli government is a ‘mad dog’ which will react more quickly than previous governments. On the other hand, they think that after the Goldstone Report [which said Israel may have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in its conduct of the 2008–2009 Gaza war] and the flotillas Israel will be reluctant when it comes to another round of violence. They are wrong if they think Israel will restrain itself if – to use a cliché – an Israeli kindergarten is hit”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 22 March 2011. A former defence official added that other regional considerations militated in favour of a more assertive posture. He mentioned the need for Israel to prove that changes in Egypt, and the prospect of a relationship between Cairo and Gaza, would not prevent it from acting and the desire of the new chief of staff, Benny Gantz, to prove he is no less decisive than his predecessors. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 23 March 2011.

²⁴ According to *Haaretz*, “the Israel Defence Forces are readying for the possibility that Syria might create a provocation along the northern border to divert attention from the growing protests against President Bashar Assad's regime. Nevertheless, the defence establishment views this as unlikely”. *Haaretz*, 22 March 2011.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 23 March 2011.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, 23 March 2011.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 23 March 2011.

²⁸ *Al-Masriyun*, 23 March 2011; *Felesteen*, 23 March 2011.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, 23 March 2011. A Qassam member confirmed that orders to this effect had been passed along. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 23 March 2011.

³⁰ “The partial lifting of import restrictions in the context of this package increased the availability of consumer goods and some raw materials, allowing a limited reactivation of private sector activities. However, due to the pivotal nature of the remaining restrictions, this relaxation did not result in a significant improvement in people's livelihoods, which were largely depleted during three years of strict blockade”. “Easing the Blockade: Assessing the Humanitarian Impact on the Population of the

tinued operation of the tunnels, the supplies of many goods in the Strip are adequate – though plagued by the uncertainty of Israeli restrictions and the vagaries of illicit movement – but other items, particularly building materials, are in short supply. Given the lack of economic opportunity and extreme poverty, many lack the ability to purchase even the most basic provisions, including food.³² The electricity and medical sectors are beset with critical shortages that are particularly embittering. Hamas leaders hold that the coastal strip, like their movement, has weathered the worst of the siege and will be able to ride out the rest. Still, they acknowledge that they are “administering a crisis” rather than governing,³³ much as they were doing in the more difficult days after their June 2007 takeover.

Although Gaza’s isolation is not a direct trigger for violence, it contributes to an environment in which many Palestinians feel they have little to lose by engaging in it. Besides, as Crisis Group long has argued, it has neither weakened Hamas nor convinced it to change its political positions. The movement repeatedly has demonstrated that it will not be brought to heel through pressure, and there is little reason to think that perpetuating the current situation – in which Gaza and Hamas are under considerably less pressure than they formerly were – will reverse that.

Particularly after the toppling of President Mubarak, expectations are growing that Gaza’s economic future will be oriented toward Egypt rather than Israel.³⁴ With the February closure of the Karni crossing in the north west – formerly the main crossing point for goods – only the Kerem HaShalom terminal remains operational; although

its capacity has been enhanced, it is inadequate to move bulk materials today and power what Gazans hope someday will be a normally operating economy. Hamas, sceptical that Israel will ever allow the crossings to operate freely and opposed to having its future held hostage to Israeli policies³⁵ has long pushed for the border with Egypt to become Gaza’s lifeline to the world.³⁶

There are downsides to orienting the economy exclusively toward Egypt – dangers both for Cairo, which in the past has demonstrated reluctance to assume responsibility for the Strip,³⁷ as well as for the prospect of the West Bank’s and Gaza’s eventual reunification. What is more, any opening would need to be coordinated with Israel, lest it perceive the emergence of a security threat that could provoke further military action.³⁸ But normalising access to Egypt is far better than not normalising any access at all. From a political perspective and in order to increase Gazans’ stake in calm and stability, deciding which crossings will be used is less important than making sure some are.

Palestinian unity. Normalising life in Gaza would yield practical benefits but not solve the inter-Palestinian political problems that have played a part in the current upsurge in violence. That was never going to be easy. With time, it has only become more difficult. With one party entrenched in the West Bank and the other in Gaza, the two appear more intent on manoeuvring and playing tactical games than living up to their calls for reconciliation or unity. They act as if time is on their side. Hamas – feeling empowered by regional events and particularly the prominent position that the Muslim Brotherhood appears poised to assume in Egypt – seems content to wait for its regional star to rise. President Abbas appears de-

Gaza Strip”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), March 2011, www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_special_easing_the_blockade_2011_03_english.pdf.

³¹ Changes are planned for the Kerem HaShalom terminal, located at the southeast corner of the Gaza Strip, at the nexus of Gaza, Egypt and Israel. By April 2011, capacity is planned to reach 400 trucks per day for imports and 50 trucks a day for exports. This is sufficient to meet demand at the current economic level but is two thirds of pre-June 2007 import capacity and 13 per cent of the export level defined by the Agreement on Movement and Access, brokered by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in November 2005. Ibid, p. 14.

³² In the first half of 2010, 52 per cent of Gazan households were suffering from food insecurity and another 13 were classified as vulnerable to food insecurity. The UN estimates that these numbers have not varied much despite changes to the access regime. They likely have worsened given the increase in global food prices. Ibid, p. 10.

³³ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, January 2011.

³⁴ An official in the Gaza government claimed that Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil al-Arabi had called the lifting of the siege and renewing movement at Rafah “priorities” for the new government. *Al-Wafd*, 23 February 2011.

³⁵ “To control your political decision-making, you must have economic independence. So long as Israel can blackmail us and use the crossings as bargaining chips, we cannot make independent decisions”. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, January 2011.

³⁶ On 22 March, after Israel killed eight Gazans in a single day, Prime Minister Haniya reiterated this call, asking for Egypt to respond by permanently opening Rafah. Gaza government press release, 22 March 2011.

³⁷ A senior Egyptian official, before Mubarak was toppled, said, “we cannot open Gaza alone. Rafah cannot provide for all of Gaza’s needs. What would happen to the two-state solution then? Our concern, obviously, is that Israel will be discharged of any responsibility toward Gaza. Gaza would remain a separate entity, and Egypt would gradually assume responsibility”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2010. A senior Arab official agreed with this assessment: “Part of occupation is control, from a legal perspective. If goods and people flow freely via Egypt, Israel can make the argument that it cannot be held accountable. Egypt has a point to that extent”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2010.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Israeli analyst, Jerusalem, March 2011.

terminated to push for bilateral recognitions of a Palestinian state and its admission to the UN, a strategy for which unity with Hamas can only be a liability. As a result, the two sides are focusing on different – and irreconcilable – objectives.

The PA and Fatah are calling for a process leading to parliamentary and presidential elections, a prospect that Hamas rejects, complaining it has not been permitted to govern, that restrictions in the West Bank make a fair poll impossible and that this agenda neglects reform of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).³⁹ For Hamas, the main goal is to restructure and integrate the PLO, a step it sees as the only guarantee that the national political equation will truly change and one that (insofar as the diaspora in principle would be involved in electing its governing body) could redound to its favour.

Overcoming this divide will require changing the outlook of two movements that have become ever more frozen in their positions. But outside factors could help. The first is growing popular impatience with the division and mobilisation around the call for unity. Both Fatah and Hamas might fear such activism and – in the case of the Islamists – suspect it is being fuelled by their rival. Even if popular activism to force unity has been unable to gain much traction, the movements ignore this aspiration at their peril. Political actors across the regime are changing, and new Palestinian forces could help reinvent the national movement and put an end to the current schism.⁴⁰

The international community also has a role to play. Any meaningful reconciliation will need to be premised on Hamas's right to govern before the next election, either in Gaza or as part of a national unity coalition. This would require a different approach by international actors, Western countries in particular, which should pledge to work with any government that adheres to a ceasefire.

As noted, Egypt, too, could soon resume (and, one hopes, both strengthen and improve) its role. Insofar as both Hamas and Fatah will have an interest in establishing a positive relationship with the new leadership, Cairo could enjoy additional leverage. Already, Hamas leaders indicate that Cairo has expressed interest in pursuing Pales-

tinian reconciliation within a matter of weeks;⁴¹ it should do so at the earliest opportunity and put forward a new initiative that addresses the two sides' core concerns. The elements of such a package might include allowing both sides to govern in their respective strongholds for a transitional period; delaying resolution of the contentious security file until after PA elections; significant restructuring of the PLO – in accordance not only with Hamas's demands but also with the position of youth activists – to comprise popular elections for the Palestinian National Council conducted in the West Bank, Gaza and the diaspora; and, ultimately, broad Palestinian agreement on a new national strategy.

Missing from all this, of course, is any mention – let alone a realistic prospect – of a meaningful effort to achieve peace. The importance of such an endeavour remains. But, amid chaos and tectonic shifts throughout the region, a divided Palestinian movement, an unwilling Israeli leadership and a U.S. administration that – on this issue at least – has lost much of its credibility, it appears, alas, that it will have to wait.

Gaza City/Jerusalem/Brussels, 24 March 2011

³⁹ Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad put forward a plan (also touted by Fatah Central Committee member Nabil Shaath) to form a single national unity government for the entire West Bank and Gaza, which would remain under separate security regimes pending elections. The government would be led by Fayyad, something Hamas does not accept on the ground that it won the last elections. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader in exile, March 2011. Hamas has not formally rejected Fayyad's plan, but in private the opposition is clear.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, independent Palestinian activists, March 2011.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, March 2011. *Al-Masriyun* reported on 23 March 2011 that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces reportedly instructed Foreign Minister Nabil al-Arabi to reactivate the Egyptian role in ending the division, even if that means putting pressure on Hamas and Fatah; that Cairo informed Hamas its reservations to Egypt's reconciliation proposal would be taken into account but that it must engage seriously with the Egyptian effort; and that Egypt would invite high-ranking officials from Hamas to a meeting with Field Marshall Mohamed Tantawi, Nabil al-Arabi and the head of intelligence, Murad Muwafi.

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