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The Operation “Pillar of Defense” and the Reshaping of the Middle East

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The Operation Pillar of Defense conducted by Israel against the Gaza Strip between 14 and 22 November 2012 exposed elements of a new strategic realignment in the Middle East. The agreement for a ceasefire, reached under Egyptian leadership with US support, brought back a nuanced *status quo ante* and prevents a crystal-clear interpretation of the outcomes of the conflict. However, the emergence of new actors, the social unrest in the Arab world, and the renewed US engagement in the area of conflict nevertheless allows for an analysis of new, strategic rearrangements currently taking place in the Middle East. Based on disclosed information and public sources, this article aims at highlighting new systemic factors surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to draw some hypotheses about the conflict developments over the coming months.

War and Weapons

Being attacked in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem by missiles launched from Gaza and supplied by Iran brought an enhanced and disturbing feeling of vulnerability to the Israeli people. The activation of sirens and the use of bunkers brought the collective psyche back to the time of the first Gulf War, changing the social atmosphere and arguably interfering with the bargaining power with which Israel faced the negotiations toward a ceasefire.

This might explain why the bus explosion in Tel Aviv on 21 November amid those negotiations did not prevent the ceasefire agreement. An attack like that, in the centre of the city causing more than 20 injured people, is normally followed by an intense reply by Israel.

The use of Fajr-5 missiles by Hamas and the activation of the Israeli Iron Dome anti-missile system are the most relevant innovations of the eighth-day conflict. They revealed a renewed fire capacity by Hamas and a defense system by Israel that proved to be efficient but not totally reliable. In addition to such novelties, other more common trends in the recent years of the Hamas-Israel conflict were observed as well: the killings of senior Hamas activists with severe collateral civilian casualties; the massive launching of rockets to Israeli territory, both by Hamas and other Palestinian belligerents, targeting civilians and the military indistinctively; and a severely uneven final death toll among Palestinian and Israelis: while numbers are still under dispute, the civilian casualties during the conflict amounted to at least 90 in Gaza and 4 in Israel, according to Human Rights Watch.¹ In total, the Palestinian deaths compare to the Israelis in a

¹ “Gaza: Build on Ceasefire to Address Rights Abuses” (*Human Rights Watch*, 23 November 2012).



ratio of 28 to 1: around 140 Palestinians and five Israelis.² According to University of Hull Professor Raphael Cohen-Almagor, Israel had three main objectives in this military option: 1) to degrade Hamas's military leadership; 2) to deter Hamas; 3) to force Hamas to take better control of its territory so that other terrorist groups cease their attacks on Israeli civilians. While objective 1) was directly addressed and achieved, objectives 2) and 3) remain to be confirmed. Talking on Israeli radio, Kadima leader and former Defense Minister and IDF Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz declared that Hamas had won this round.³

Key Players: Old, New, and Renewed

Iranian authorities stated publicly that Teheran had supplied technical and material support to Hamas, confirming the international net surrounding everything that happens between Gaza and the Jordan River. However, in this conflict, Iran was not *the* key external actor. The majority of the analysts agree that Egypt, and especially President Mohamed Morsi, was the pivotal international player in the process that eventually led to the ceasefire agreement. The new government in Cairo comes out of this round of conflict with enhanced political powers and a strengthened role as a leading regional player. Aware of these dynamics, Israel replied to the Gaza rockets with a strength that can be interpreted as a message to Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. More interestingly, Morsi appears to have managed to balance a position that did not derogate any of the Egypt's three main loyalties and commitments that shape its international role in the Middle East: the dependence on Washington's financial and military contributions; the peace agreement with Israel; and its Islamic/Islamist loyalty. It is worth to note that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, where Morsi's government comes from, opposed the Peace Treaty signed between Israel and Egypt in 1979 and developed its profile in the region sustaining radical positions regarding the Jewish state, thus influencing several groups in the region, including Hamas.

In addition to Egypt, its Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel Amr stated that other international actors contributed to the ceasefire agreement: Turkey, Qatar, the United Nations, the Arab League, and, naturally, the US. Recently coming out of elections, the Obama Administration is now facing a new mandate where the restart of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations should become top priority – something that was not observed during its first mandate. The decisive role played by the US diplomacy, conducted on site by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, confirms that Washington cannot refrain from guiding the negotiations if a resuming of peace talks is to take place between Tel Aviv, Ramallah, and Gaza.

This recent conflict also confirmed the total separation between the politics of the West Bank and the politics of Gaza. Few days before presenting a new statehood bid before the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority, was ignored in the negotiations that led to the ceasefire agreement. At the UN, Abbas will be proposing for Palestine the status of non-member state, the type of observer status also enjoyed by the state of Vatican. The date chosen for this, the 29 November, is not occasional, as noted by Yonatan Touval, senior analyst at *Mitvim, the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*.⁴ It marks the 65th anniversary of the approval by the same UN General Assembly of the partition of British Mandatory Palestine into two states: one Jewish and one Arab. The direct outcome of that decision was the creation of the state of Israel in May 1948, whereas the Palestinian claims in 2012 refer to that same resolution.

Although the rule being the non-interference of the Palestinian Authority on Gaza, it is still disturbing for the Palestinian wishes to observe an overwhelming separation between the governments and social realities in Gaza and the West Bank, partially legitimizing some of the critics of the opponents of the immediate recognition of the Palestinian state. Against this backdrop, intra-Palestinian reconciliation is *conditio sine qua non* for the achievement of a long-term solution for the conflict.

A New Regional Balance?

Dust will have to settle before a full assessment of the events in Gaza can be made. Nevertheless, while its geostrategic implications are not totally perceivable as yet, a few new trends seem to be emerging and will require thorough observation in the coming months. The *International Crisis Group* addresses the consequences of these events arguing for the existence of a "new Middle East".⁵ Among the three biggest powers in Middle East, Iran, Turkey and Egypt, only the two latter were directly involved – at different levels – in the definition of the ceasefire and managed to play the diplomatic card. Both Ankara and Cairo managed to overcome recent events that degraded their relations with Israel in order to step in as ceasefire brokers. As mentioned above, Mohamed Morsi emerged as a leading political figure in the outset of the events and reinforced his political role, both internally and externally. The time coincidence of the Egyptian action during the conflict and the contested upgrade of its legislative powers seem to suggest that the events in Gaza brought the government a welcomed boost of legitimacy. Morsi searched for external legitimacy in order to transform it into internal political power. As contestation in the

2 "UN human rights experts deplore high toll on civilians of Gaza-Israeli violence" (*UN News Centre*, 23 November 2012).

3 Daniel Levy, "Seven takeaways from the Gaza ceasefire" (*The Daily Beast*, 22 November 2012).

4 Yonatan Touval, "Time to Impose a Plan" (*The New York Times*, 24 November 2012).

5 "Israel and Hamas: Fire and Ceasefire in a New Middle East" (International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report*, No. 133, 22 November 2012).



streets of Cairo and in other sectors of Egyptian society increases from day to day, it is too early to know whether he succeeded in this mission.

Iran, on the other hand, remained largely in the dark. Its influence over Hamas might now become balanced by the enhanced role of Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood. The widespread regional increase of the Muslim Brotherhood is developing outside the interference of Teheran and that will lead to new trends that do not benefit the Iranian interests. It will be important to follow the extent to which the main objects of Iranian influence will be challenged by an emergent Egypt.

As many of the outcomes of the Arab Spring unfold, the adjustment of powers in the region remains unclear, contradicting many of the optimistic analyses made during 2011 and 2012. In addition, and most importantly, the current existence of conflicts and social unrest in some countries will still produce important factors of change. The everlasting conflict in Syria has naturally eroded the Assad regime's capacity of influence, but the reemergence of a powerful and ambitious power in Damascus will be a matter of time. At the same time, the current social upheaval in Jordan is producing a relevant factor of instability and has been followed by the Israeli government with increasing concern.

The Way Ahead

While a ceasefire is always a positive objective, it becomes an ethereal achievement if not followed by pragmatic and strategic measures with a longer life span. At least since the first Intifada, that lasted between 1987 and 1993, history tells that short-term measures may postpone the escalation of violence but do not contribute to a permanent solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only peace talks enable progress and stability, and for that matter all the relevant stakeholders need to be around the table.

A sidelined Hamas prevents any chances of a sustainable peace. This obstacle, already perceivable for years, has now been reinforced by the new regional balance in the Middle East. Further openness from the international community is necessary to involve the two Palestinian key players: Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. Stronger international pressure is also necessary in order to bring Hamas closer to the principles that the Quartet demands: the recognition of the state of Israel, the renunciation of violence, and adherence to previous diplomatic agreements achieved between the PLO and Israel. Some authors have pleaded for a revision of these principles. Carolin Goerzig, for instance, argues that "instead of compelling Hamas to consider compliance, the Quartet principles have in fact led the group to become more entrenched in its defiant stance".⁶ What seems to be nec-

essary, though, is a new balance between pressure and gradual recognition from the international community. It is well known that to make the ceasefire sustainable it is fundamental to address the root causes of the conflict. The reality on the ground, however, shows that the formulae used thus far have not been efficient enough. Israel's policy of isolation and containment towards Hamas did not produce the desired results, both in military and in civilian terms. Rockets kept on being launched from Gaza, threatening the civil population in Israeli cities, and the pressure over the Palestinian civilians inside the Gaza Strip did not trigger a change in the military action conducted by Hamas and other groups. The reform of Israel's isolationist approach towards Hamas has become urgent to address even for Israeli security thanks. Benedetta Berti, from the Israeli *Institute for National Security Studies*, argues that Israel should change its strategy against Hamas: "as the de facto government of Gaza, Hamas should be directly engaged through a political process leading to both a ceasefire as well a reversal of the "isolation" of the strip".⁷

The balance between international pressure and recognition towards Hamas should not impact on the Gaza population, which has been suffering severely from the economic and material pressure from the blockade imposed by Israel. A new system of opening up some crossing points in the Gaza borders should be enforced, and new players could be called for this endeavor. The European Union (EU), notoriously absent from the diplomatic process over the conflict of mid-November, would be in good position to monitor the Rafah crossing point. November 30th 2012 marks the 7th anniversary of EUBAM-Rafah, the border assistance mission launched by the EU to monitor the border crossing movements between Gaza and Egypt. Since Hamas became the governing power in Gaza, the Israeli blockade has kept the border crossing point closed the majority of time. A release of the blockade through Rafah – with EU supervision and the cooperation of Egyptian authorities – would improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza and foster a broader regional engagement with the conflict. It should be kept in mind that via the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the EU has developed deep ties with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. These bilateral relations are regulated by framework documents called ENP Action Plans. As recently as on the 24 October, the EU and the Palestinian Authority signed a new and upgraded Action Plan, deepening their cooperation and theoretically expanding the EU's presence in the region. The EU-Israel Action Plan, on the other hand, is ENP's most advanced and ambitious document.⁸ Adding to this, the EU's presence in the Quar-

6 Carolin Goerzig, *Transforming the Quartet principles: Hamas and the Peace Process* [EUISS Occasional Paper, No. 85, September 2010].

7 Benedetta Berti, "Israel should rethink its strategy against Hamas in Gaza" (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 November 2012).

8 Its upgrade, though, was frozen after Operation Cast Lead, during which Israel invaded Gaza in the winter of 2008-2009.



tet could also be explored in more creative ways. From an institutional perspective, there seems to be room for an enhanced role to be played by the EU, providing alternative measures and widening the spectrum of players contributing to a lasting solution.

Operation Pillar of Defense revealed new trends in the politics of the Middle East. Different actors have seen their roles changed during the events resulting from the Arab Spring, and the Hamas-Israel conflict was the arena where these dynamics were exposed for the first time. The future months will witness elections in Israel, developments in the Syrian war and the continuation of social unrest in Jordan and in Egypt, among other Middle Eastern countries. All these factors will influence the evolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that seems to be entering a new stage.

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