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Prelude to a War: The Run-up to Israel's Operation 'Protective Edge'

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In 8 July 2014, Israel and Hamas entered another war following weeks of escalating tension. On the night of 17 July, Israel initiated a ground operation in the Gaza Strip. This is the first time Israel has invaded the territory since the Operation Cast Lead in December 2008 and January 2009. As these lines are being written, 21 July, the conflict has now evolved into a full-fledged war that already caused more than five hundred casualties and thousands of injured on the Palestinians side, predominantly civilians. 25 Israeli soldiers died between 19 and 21 July in Gaza, adding up to one Israeli civilian and one military that were killed in Israeli territory in the course of the first ten days of the conflict. In addition, a number of Israeli civilians have been injured. As a new war unfolds in Gaza with uncertain future prospects, it is already possible to draw some lines about the context that made it possible. This article puts forward five arguments about the conflict's background context that were decisive for shaping the course of current events.

The abductions were not the reason for the war

The great majority of commentators and analysts have mentioned the abduction and killing of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank earlier on 12 June as the factor that originated the events that are now taking place in Gaza. Having named Hamas responsible for these abductions and killings without advancing any evidence, Is-

rael initiated a large-scale operation in the occupied Palestinian territories in the West Bank, allegedly in search for the teenagers or their bodies. In the course of this search, the Israeli forces caused six Palestinian deaths and detained dozens of people not connected to the original event, including Palestinian parliamentarians and former detainees that had been previously released by Israel in 2011. The dimension of the military response – that impacted indiscriminately on the daily lives of hundreds of Palestinians in the West Bank – and the language employed by Netanyahu's government escalated the tensions in two ways: 1) they framed the broader Palestinian population as responsible for the abductions and killings, and accordingly 2) collectively punished them. For as regrettable and unacceptable the deaths of the three innocent Israeli teenagers have been, the Israeli response is hard to be framed within the limits of both the concept of self-defense and the principle of proportionality. If Israel clearly has the right to defend itself and to respond to attacks against its internationally-recognized territory, such as the massive launch of rockets from Gaza into Israel, it does not possess the same prerogative in the same terms in events occurred outside its territory. By responding to the abductions and killings of

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three civilian Israelis which occurred in the West Bank by inflicting six deaths on Palestinians and arresting dozens of them, Israel conducted a response that legally is more censurable than the events that triggered it. The explanation for these actions is therefore to be found within the realm of politics, rather than within the legal domain. In other words, the Israeli response to the abductions was based on political and strategic considerations and not on a particular interpretation of the law.

Netanyahu would not allow a Palestinian unity government

The 2nd June 2014 marked an historical day in Palestine, when a new Palestinian unity government backed by Hamas and Fatah was officially sworn in by President Mahmoud Abbas. Following years of fierce and bloody confrontation between the two main factions of the Palestinian political spectrum, this unity government was welcomed both by the US and by the EU because it constituted a fundamental and concrete step towards one of the main factors preventing a permanent solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the rivalry between Hamas and Fatah. The reconciliation between these two actors has been widely seen as *conditio sine qua non* for the creation of the Palestinian state and thus for enabling the practical viability of the two-state solution.

Yet, the Israeli government does not see this agreement from the same viewpoint. In line with its absolute refusal to recognize Hamas as a political player in the region, Israel did not accept a Palestinian government politically backed by the group. This position had been made very clear earlier in April, when the Israeli-Palestinian talks mediated by US Secretary of State John Kerry were abandoned by Israel after nine months of dialogue. The reason behind this move was the announcement of the Hamas-Fatah principle agreement on 23 April. The failure of the talks, in turn, led US

Special Envoy to the Middle East Martin Indyk to resign. It is therefore not surprising that Netanyahu's inflexibility regarding the Palestinian conciliation made his government protest vehemently when both the US and the EU welcomed the new Palestinian unity agreement.

In line with his conduct in many other occasions during his mandates as prime minister, Netanyahu exhibited unwillingness to accept concrete steps that would break the *status quo* and could allow progress toward a permanent solution for the conflict. His government failed to recognize that the Palestinian unity government explicitly adhered to the three principles imposed by the Middle East Quartet (the US, the EU, the UN and Russia) on the Palestinian side: 1) the recognition of the existence of the state of Israel; 2) the abidance to previous agreements; and 3) the renunciation to violence as a means to achieving goals.¹ Moreover, as became explicit on the 2nd June, the new Palestinian unity government had no minister belonging to Hamas. Despite this favorable setting, recognized by Israel's closest international partners, Netanyahu's cabinet was unable to overcome its resoluteness in sidelining Hamas, whatever the costs this position would bring.

El-Sisi's Egypt works against Hamas

In November 2012, the 8-day Israeli operation 'Pillar of Defense' over Gaza ended with a ceasefire brokered by Egypt. Then-President Mohamed

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¹ Speaking in Beirut in early June 2014, US Secretary of State John Kerry stated that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas "made clear that this new technocratic government is committed to the principles of non violence, negotiations, recognizing the state of Israel, acceptance of the previous agreements and the Quartet principles". "Kerry: US to monitor Hamas-backed Palestinian unity government" (AFP via *The Times of Israel*, 4 June 2014).



Morsi, leading an Islamist administration that empowered the Muslim Brotherhood, seemed to emerge from the conflict as a new regional leader after having managed to balance a position that was accepted by Israel and the Palestinians, but also by the international community. Less than two years later, the geopolitical equation in the Middle East is now very different. The coup that removed Morsi and his government from power in July 2013 brought the Egyptian support for Hamas down together with it. Egypt's President Abdul el-Sisi, in office since the 24-26 May 2014 elections, has an agenda where there is no room for the backing of Islamist movements such as Hamas. Currently, Hamas is widely perceived as a terrorist organization by the government in Cairo. Along these lines, it was expected that Hamas would not accept the ceasefire proposed by Egypt in 14 July. The ceasefire was announced to the international media allegedly without previous consultation with Hamas, a fact that had prevented this organization to impose its conditions. By openly accepting the ceasefire and implementing it for five hours in the following day, Israel achieved a diplomatic victory by signaling willingness to accept the truce contrary to Hamas who 'preferred the conflict'. This very argument was employed by the government to justify the escalation of the conflict brought by the ground operation initiated in 17 July and has been repeated on a daily basis by Israel Defense Forces' representatives.

Hamas is increasingly isolated

The victory of Hamas in the January 2006 Palestinian elections created a turmoil whose effects are felt until today. Internally, it led to a severe escalation of its conflict with Fatah, leading to the expulsion of the latter from Gaza in 2007. Since then, the region has been suffering from a blockade that prevents not only its 1.8 million inhabitants to leave the area through conventional means, but also all kinds of fundamental products to enter. Both Israel and Egypt enforce the blockade, which affects one of the most densely populated areas in the world and impacts on access to water, food, medical care, and all sorts of other goods. Even the most rudimentary activities, such as agriculture and fishing, are severely affected by the blockade. Most importantly, it also prevents the administration in Gaza from accessing and managing a substantial part of the donations received from abroad, including the funds that are used to pay the salaries of the civil servants in the Strip. Seen from Gaza, the most important outcomes of the 2014 Palestinian unity government would be to allow the payment of the salaries of 43 000 Gaza government employees and to ease the blockade. Even though the agreement was fragile and many doubts about its sustainability persisted, it was nevertheless a rare positive development that brought some optimism into an otherwise looming scenario.

In the words of Nathan Thrall, senior analyst at the International Crisis Group, the Palestinian unity government

was created largely because of Hamas desperation and isolation.² Not only did the relations with Egypt grow increasingly hostile, but also its ties with both Syria and Iran have recently been damaged by Hamas' reluctance to provide explicit support to the Assad regime in Damascus. This eventually led to the closure of its headquarters in the Syrian capital in 2013.³

The international pressure on Hamas was reflected in its marginalization from the international efforts to contribute to a permanent solution for the conflict. If one can argue that it was this pressure that led it to reach an agreement with the Fatah where the acceptance of the Quartet principles was stated, it can surely be said that better and more comprehensive solutions should have been reached long time before. For this to have happened, the international community should have creatively engaged with the ones who have been the governing authority in Gaza for almost a decade.

Hamas rockets are a weapon that eventually backfires

The hundreds of rockets and mortar shells that Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, and other groups launch from Gaza into Israeli territory constitute aggressions according to international law. Due to their lack of accuracy, they indiscriminately target Israeli civilians and they receive massive condemnation from the international community. Moreover, the target-range of the missiles departing from Gaza has widened significantly in recent years and attacks over the metropolitan area of Tel Aviv became frequent in times of conflict. By permanently launching these missiles itself and for also allowing other groups to do it from the territory it controls, Hamas jeopardizes its image at the eyes of Israel and provides the latter with arguments for maintaining the status quo against which the Islamists in Gaza fight.

It is also important to keep in mind that Hamas' rocket policy has been feeding directly into the international isolation it faces. This is testified by the mentioning of rockets fired from Gaza in all statements of international interlocutors such as the UN, the EU, the US or the Middle East Quartet. Furthermore, the rockets are decisive in making Israelis feel much more bitterly about Gaza than about the West Bank, which in turn is reflected in the lack of systematic, generalized internal social opposition to the wars in Gaza. By continuing a policy that targets civilians and military indiscriminately, Hamas indirectly brings public support to hawkish positions by the Israeli government: at the eyes of a large part of the Israeli population, the rockets legitimize actions that eventually prevent the Hamas from achieving its goals. Seen independently from debates about the proportionality of

2 Nathan Thrall, "How the West Chose War in Gaza" (*The New York Times*, 17 July 2014).

3 Mouin Rabbani, "Israel Mouns the Law" (*London Review of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 15, July 2014).

the Israeli responses, the concrete consequences of the rockets are more retaliation and destruction. A shift in this policy would only increase its political leverage and erode a substantial part of Israel's argumentation.

Conclusion

The war currently taking place in Gaza is a result of several factors that have developed in a particular political context. The five discussion points addressed here have been fundamental to shape the period prior to the war and contributed in different ways to determine the actions of the Israeli government and Hamas, the main interlocutors of yet another war. It is of course impossible to say what would have been Hamas' behavior *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian unity government, or if Netanyahu would have been able to mobilize the country into another war so quickly had the abductions and murders of the three

Israeli teenagers not existed. It is clear, though, that the structural conditions for an escalation of conflict were already in place when the Israeli teenagers were abducted. As another destructive war unfolds with an overwhelming number of Palestinian civilian casualties, the prospects for a sustainable long-term solution have vanished from the horizon in the nearest future.

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