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Israeli Press Declares Victory for Hamas

Deciphering the Ceasefire

By Ulrike Putz

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sought to claim Wednesday's ceasefire deal as a personal success. But not many seem to agree. Influential commentators in Israel believe that Hamas came out ahead -- and that the Islamist group has now been elevated to the status of negotiating partner.

If you believe Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Gaza offensive, which just came to a halt as a result of the Wednesday evening ceasefire agreement, was the jewel in the crown of his political career. "We need to navigate this ship of a state in stormy waters with responsibility and wisdom, that's how a responsible government acts," he said in praise of himself during a statement to the nation on Wednesday. "We've executed a military action but also stayed open for a diplomatic solution."

His comments were anything but brief, but the message was not a complicated one: Israel won, in part due to the brilliance of the prime minister. A leader, the subtext continued, who deserves to be re-elected in the January 22 vote. His statement, wrote the *Jerusalem Post*, "effectively ended an eight-day military campaign and began an election one."

Unfortunately for him, however, the Israeli press is not joining Netanyahu in praising Netanyahu. To be sure, most analysts agree that the current ceasefire bringing the Israeli Gaza operation "Pillar of Defense" to a halt is a positive development due to the return of calm to southern Israel. But in the Israeli press, Netanyahu's name was not among the victors listed on Thursday morning. Rather, leading commentators in the country agree that the primary beneficiaries from the week-long clash are the Hamas leadership and Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, who negotiated the truce.

A member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Morsi's summertime election had led to significant distrust in the West. Now, writes Anshel Pfeffer in the influential Israeli daily *Haaretz*, the crisis has propelled Morsi into the role of an important regional statesman. The proof: As the ceasefire was being finalized this week, US President Barack Obama telephoned with Morsi multiple times.

Minor Victories

Pfeffer emphasized that even Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman saw it necessary to thank Morsi for his role in bringing about a truce. Given Lieberman's hard-line stance, such a move counts as a mini-sensation in Israel. After all, the Israeli foreign minister is hardly a fan of Egypt or Hamas, having in the past called for the bombardment of the Aswan Dam and demanded that the Gaza Strip be treated as the Russians do Chechnya.

Hamas too has managed to extract minor victories from the conflict, according to analysts. For one, the Islamist leaders of the Gaza Strip inserted a clause in the ceasefire agreement which calls for at least a partial lifting of the blockade Israel imposed on the Palestinian area after Hamas came to power in 2006. Furthermore, the fact that the Hamas leadership didn't collapse in the face of heavy bombardment, along with the fact that their rockets continued to rain down on Israel throughout the conflict, has been interpreted as a success.

But even more important for the Islamists, according to *Haaretz*, is that their rockets were able to hit both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. And they were able to position themselves as a negotiating partner for the Israeli leadership, guaranteeing them a role as an actor in the Middle East for at least the immediate future.

Indeed, one could argue that the Netanyahu administration has marginalized moderate voices in the Palestinian Territories in the last three years and prepared the groundwork for a Hamas resurgence. Simon Shiffer, the veteran writer for Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*, writes that Hamas has now become the most influential Palestinian power because Netanyahu has undertaken negotiations with them while ignoring the Palestinian Authority and its President Mahmoud Abbas.

A Failed Adventure?

Shiffer's colleague at *Yedioth*, Alex Fishman, would seem to agree. " Hamas has morphed from the enemy that must be brought down to the enemy that is the lesser of two evils," Fishman writes. Although Israel's official position remains that of not recognizing Hamas as a potential negotiating partner, he writes, Israeli leadership has now used the group to exert control over even more radical groups in the Gaza Strip. "Until just a few days ago, such ideas would have been considered blasphemy," Fishman writes.

The deal struck between Israel and the Islamists calls for an immediate stop to all aggression, to be followed by talks aimed at a lasting ceasefire. Border crossings into the Gaza Strip are also to be reopened soon. The goal is to make it easier for both goods and people to cross into the coastal territory following years of Israeli blockade. Hamas has said that the border crossings are to be opened within 24 hours of the beginning of the ceasefire. Egypt has been charged with monitoring the deal.

In the Gaza Strip, thousands took to the streets on Wednesday evening to celebrate what they see as a victory over Israel. Foreign journalists reported chaotic scenes of joy involving Hamas fighters firing machine guns into the air. Hamas chief Khaled Mashaal, currently in Egypt, has also claimed victory. The government in Jerusalem, he said, had failed with its military "adventure."