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Gains and losses of the Gaza war (Part 2)

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The diplomatic efforts of John Kerry and Ban Ki-Moon during a month-long series of attacks failed politically to reduce the pressure on Israel, and reach a reasonable formula to extract Tel Aviv from its predicament. In fact, Hamas used this diplomatic failure to dig in its heels because it has nothing more to lose.

Netanyahu's political rivals did not waste any time either, and began a fierce political attack on the feasibility of the war in the first place, and doubted Netanyahu's ability to achieve the goals he promised at the launch.

Israeli Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, who is also a constant contender for the position of prime minister, recently proposed an initiative to gather any political gain Netanyahu failed to achieve. The plan essentially calls for a ceasefire, immediate humanitarian aid to Gaza, recognition of Palestinian Authority (PA) rule in Gaza, creating a system in the PA to guarantee assistance reaches civilians not resistance leaders, opening border crossings with Gaza, and simultaneously creating a system to prevent raw materials, such as cement, from being used for what Livni described as terrorist activities. Finally, re-launching peace talks with the PA.

Livni's initiative is an attempt to benefit from the impact of the stone of "war" that was thrown in the stagnant waters of the Gaza issue. It is a proposal for a new system of governing Gaza that includes Egypt, Israel and the PA, and politically isolates Hamas even more.

For a moment it seemed Hamas could play its limited political cards to achieve the greatest political gains in the post-war phase, so it raised its ceiling of demands for a ceasefire. It tried to introduce new regional players (Qatar and Turkey) to the fray to strengthen its position politically in the post-war phase, especially because it no longer has Syrian-Iranian support. It tried its best to neutralise Egyptian mediation because of tensions resulting from the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi's regime last year. It showed political resilience with the aim of earning unexpected strategic gains when it arrives at the negotiating table.

This is why Hamas rejected the Egyptian initiative when it was first introduced, although it is similar to any other proposal for an immediate ceasefire suggested by any mediator other than Egypt. In fact, it is exactly the same as the initiative Egypt proposed under the previous president.

Strategically, Netanyahu's government failed to stop Palestinian reconciliation from happening, and Israel's dramatic setback on this track is clear. Tel Aviv, which one month ago announced its absolute refusal to deal with the PA and its head Mahmoud Abbas after Palestinian factions reconciled, today finds itself forced to accept many understandings about Gaza with the PA after the July 2014 war. It is bound to turn a blind eye to the fact that the government of the PA at this moment, and according to the conditions of reconciliation, will be a hybrid of Fatah and Hamas members – even if Netanyahu's government has officially announced the contrary.

Israel is forced to give the PA a bigger role in the reconstruction process, according to what Netanyahu said recently: "It is important that when rebuilding Gaza, guaranteeing humanitarian aid, and on security questions that arise, we must have these conversations and coordinate with them" – meaning the PA.

Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi have pledged money to rebuild Gaza as long as they can monitor its use in coordination with the PA to ensure the money reaches the civilian sector, and is not used for resistance activities. This is a certain part of the Cairo talks, although the identity of who will rebuild the Gaza Strip is still being debated between Hamas and the other parties. Hamas is using this issue as leverage, but knows that in the end it will have to give in. Thus, it wants to make it appear as a victory for the Israelis when in fact it does not need reconstruction funds to rebuild its defensive capabilities.

The director of the Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University Efraim Inbar asserts that Hamas will continue arms smuggling even if Egypt and Israel were in control of all border crossings, because it is impossible to defeat Hamas once and for all and forever – as some Israeli ministers are demanding. "Palestinians like Hamas; what can we do?" Inbar stated. "I don't believe we can uproot an organisation that has the support of 35 percent of the population. At least not in the short term."

After eight years of single-handed rule in Gaza, Hamas realises the difficulties of continuing in the same role as the siege grows tighter on all fronts. Meanwhile, there is an unprecedented

escalation of attacks in the region on the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is a member, most prominently in Egypt after 30 June last year. It began, and with surprising flexibility, to search for an exit strategy to avoid the fate of the mother organisation in Egypt. It succeeded in this by concluding the conciliation deal and reintegrating in all of the Palestinian territories, instead of being isolated to the Gaza Strip.

On the grassroots level, the recent war on Gaza deepened on the sense of Palestinian unity and healed many of the wounds caused by the 2006 fracture. Hamas has escaped, even if only temporarily, from judgment by the people for its years in power in Gaza. The uprising in the West Bank, mass Palestinian activism in the heart of Jerusalem and protests by 1948 Arabs, which all ended in direct clashes with Israeli forces, confirm that all Palestinians are united in the face of an onslaught that targets any part of their land – irrespective of which Palestinian faction is in control there.

The experience of Lebanon's Hezbollah seems very pragmatic and realistic for Hamas now. The PA will be the front for managing all matters of daily life for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and Hamas will take a step back but be very influential on the ground while holding on to its weapons for future confrontations.