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## Gaza's Future

### Henry Siegman

The breaching of the barrier between Gaza and Egypt by Gaza's imprisoned population dramatised two fundamental realities about which Israeli and US policymakers have been in complete denial. First, that sooner or later Gazans would seek to break out of their open-air jail. That they have done so should be applauded not condemned. It would have been a sad comment on the human spirit had Gaza's citizens surrendered to their fate.

Israel's claim that the strangulation of Gaza was intended to provoke its population into overthrowing Hamas is absurd – and offensive. It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that the draconian restrictions imposed by Israel on Gaza's civilian residents redirected against their Israeli tormentors what anger existed among them towards Hamas for its ideological rigidity and its refusal to halt rocket assaults on Israel. As recent opinion polls have found, the suffering caused by the Gaza closures produced greater solidarity not greater divisiveness. It even moved Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad to public displays of anger (however disingenuous) against Ehud Olmert's government.

Olmert's statement, made shortly before the breakout, that Gaza's residents could not expect to lead normal lives while missiles from Gaza were hitting Israel would have been perfectly reasonable if Gazan residents had indeed been allowed to live 'normal' lives before the most recent tightening of the noose and if it were the case that Gaza's civilian residents had any control at all over the firing of the missiles.

As Olmert knows, neither is the case. The siege of Gaza was imposed by Israel

because Israel's government and the US administration intended to undo the results of Hamas's victory in the elections of 2006. Initially, they thought they could achieve this by arming Fatah's security forces and encouraging them to promote anarchy in Gaza in a way that would discredit Hamas. When Hamas ousted Fatah security forces, Israel blockaded Gaza in the hope that its population would overthrow Hamas. The Qassam rockets were the consequence, not the cause of these misguided Israeli and US manoeuvres.

It is not even true that the siege of Gaza and the boycott of Hamas were necessary to get a peace process with Abbas and his Fatah party underway, as Bush and Olmert claimed when they met in Washington in June 2007. Hamas had announced its willingness to submit to a popular referendum any agreement that resulted from permanent status talks between Fatah and Israel. Israel boycotted Hamas because it did not want Hamas to play any role in a peace process, fearing that this would exact a far greater price than negotiations with Fatah from which Hamas was excluded.

Ironically, Abbas probably has far less flexibility in negotiations with Israel when he is in an adversarial relationship with Hamas. As long as Fatah and Hamas are at war, Hamas will condemn any compromise as Abbas's collaboration with the enemy. In the best of circumstances it would be hard to conceive of the terms of a peace accord acceptable to both sides: they are entirely out of reach so long as Fatah and Hamas remain unreconciled.

Certainly the peace process the US and Israel have promoted following the break between Fatah and Hamas has not produced anything other than empty rhetoric and emptier promises. On the ground, absolutely nothing has changed: not in anticipation of the Annapolis conference; not at the conference itself; not following the conference's conclusion; and not following Bush's visit to Jerusalem and Ramallah. For all the pomp and ceremony of that occasion and the uplifting talk of adherence to Road Map obligations, not a single so-called illegal outpost has been removed, and the checkpoints that Israel solemnly promised to reduce have in fact been increased. (Whether the intention to deny all new construction in East Jerusalem and in the settlements announced by Olmert's office as I write these lines will suffer a similar fate remains to be seen.)

Yet Abbas and Fayyad have pretended that they are engaged in a significant peace process with Israel that could produce, in Bush's words, 'a viable, contiguous, sovereign and independent' Palestinian state by the end of this year. Presumably they know better. If not, the big difference between Fatah and Hamas is not so much that one is committed to a political process and the other to violence, or that one is secular and the other Islamic, but rather that the former lives in a world of fantasy

and the other does not.

Does the situation in Gaza justify the relentless missile and mortar assaults that continue to target Israeli civilians in Sderot? To argue, as Hamas's leaders do, that these primitive Qassam rockets have resulted in no more than two or three Israeli deaths over the years, while Israeli retaliations cause the daily killing not only of militants but of innocent men, women and children, is not a justification for Hamas's targeting of Israeli civilians. That Qassam rockets have not fallen on a kindergarten full of children in Sderot is not the result of skilful humanitarian targeting on the part of Islamic Jihad and Hamas militants. It is simply extraordinary luck.

On the other hand, the immorality of Hamas's assaults on Israeli civilians is not a licence to bring Gaza's civilian population to a state of near starvation. The insensitivity that prevents Israelis from seeing that their behaviour towards Palestinian civilians – whether in Gaza or in the West Bank – is not very different from the Palestinians' targeting of Israeli civilians could not have found more unfortunate expression than in Olmert's assurance that while Israel 'will provide the population [in Gaza] with everything needed to prevent a crisis, we will not supply luxuries that would make their life more comfortable.' What UNRWA's commissioner-general Karen Abu Zayd sees as a people 'intentionally reduced to a state of abject destitution' is seen by Olmert as a people deprived of 'luxuries'.

In the face of such criticism, Israelis angrily respond that instead of condemning Israel's policy towards Gaza, their critics would be better advised to demand that Gaza's citizens remove their Hamas-led government. The absurdity of such a suggestion aside, one has to wonder how Israelis would respond if they were told by Palestinians that instead of condemning Hamas's terrorist assaults on Israeli citizens, they should remove their own government for failing to end the occupation.

That said, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the breach in the barrier between Gaza and Egypt has created a new strategic situation. Of course, the barrier separating Gaza from Egypt will be closed again, but it is highly unlikely that the status quo ante can be restored and the absolute closure on Gaza's population reimposed. As *Ha'aretz* suggested in an editorial of 24 January, the crisis in Rafah is an opportunity to pursue policies that are 'more creative than assassinations and starvation'.

Which brings me to the second of the fundamental realities. The current goal of isolating Hamas and negotiating a peace agreement with Fatah is based on the fantasy that such an agreement can be implemented despite Hamas's opposition.

Hamas is a movement with deep roots and a significant role in Palestinian politics that opposition from Israel and the US can only strengthen. New border arrangements to prevent a serious breakdown between Israel and Egypt cannot be implemented without somehow involving Hamas. And for domestic reasons, it is inconceivable that either Abbas or the Egyptian government would consent to the creation of a new cross-border regime that aims at the continued strangulation of Gaza's population.

The inevitability of four-party discussions between Israel, Egypt, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas presents the US with an opportunity to change course and to encourage Israel to engage Hamas in talks aiming at a ceasefire, the only way to end the Qassam assaults. The talks could then address the question of the acceptance by Hamas of the Arab peace initiative. Of course, there can be no certainty that Hamas would agree: what is certain is that it will never agree while Israel and the US seek its overthrow, and without negotiations that deal with both sides' grievances.

Equally important, the issue of Hamas's recognition of Israel should not be expanded by Israel beyond normal international practice. Israel's requirement that this recognition include a pronouncement on the Jewish state's legitimacy, or on its ethnic and religious character, is gratuitous and inappropriate. A simple statement of recognition of Israel's statehood should suffice. No US government has ever asked anyone to affirm the legitimacy of the dispossession of America's Indians as a condition for the establishing of normal relations.

If the Bush administration were to take advantage of the new situation in Gaza to promote internal Palestinian reconciliation it might yet lay the groundwork for an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. If it maintains its current posture, it will remain essentially irrelevant, with far-reaching implications for all the parties to the conflict – not to mention the rest of the world.

*25 January*

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