

Israel's "Operation Status Quo": a preliminary assessment

By Mouin Rabbani

■ Executive summary

Israel's massive onslaught on the Gaza Strip in July-August 2014 has been a military and political fiasco. A regional superpower, it failed to impose its will on an isolated enemy operating in a besieged territory without advanced weaponry. Its sub-standard military performance was matched by a failure to reverse Palestinian reconciliation or deepen Palestinian fragmentation, and its overall strategic position has grown weaker. Led by a government too extreme to seize the initiative with proposals that will enjoy sufficient international support, Israel will continue to provoke challenges to a status quo it seeks to maintain amid a growing inability to confront them. With the country being entirely dependent on continued U.S. and European support, shifts in public opinion, particularly in Europe, may soon begin to influence government policy in foreign capitals. Hamas, which was facing an existential crisis on the eve of hostilities, has managed to recoup key losses experienced during the past two years. Yet it cannot claim success in the absence of the removal of the illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip. While it is prepared to wage a war of attrition to achieve this, this could lead Israel to adopt the organisation's removal from power as a policy objective. With its various adversaries determined to ensure that the Islamist movement does not emerge strengthened from this crisis, new arrangements currently being negotiated aim to bolster both the Palestinian Authority and the Oslo framework. The status quo could thus yet be strengthened through the back door.

Despite the absence of an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire agreement and with the prospect of further conflict before one is reached, both Israel and Hamas have already proclaimed victory in the July-August 2014 Israeli offensive in Gaza. In Israel's case this amounts to little more than a pro forma declaration: it can hardly be expected to confirm that it is in an indisputably weaker position than on the eve of hostilities. However, if Hamas for the moment appears closer to achieving its goals than does Israel, it may yet discover success to be a poisoned chalice.

Israel: background and objectives

Although Israel failed to announce a clear political objective at the outset of its offensive in Gaza, this essentially consisted of preserving the status quo in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, i.e. colonial expansion in the West Bank (particularly East Jerusalem) facilitated by Palestinian politico-geographic fragmentation and the illusion of a peace process.

Two recent developments cast a shadow over Israel's ability to maintain this state of affairs without meaningful opposition. In late April the latest round of U.S.-mediated Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy collapsed amid widespread international – including U.S. – identification of the Netanyahu government as the primary culprit. With the world increasingly losing patience not only with Israeli policy towards the Palestinians, but also Washington's seemingly limitless indulgence of Israel, and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) taking incremental steps towards the reinternationalisation of the conflict, Israel stood to lose the political cover that had since 1993 been critical to the project of consolidating its control over the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Secondly, in contrast to its predecessors, the latest reconciliation agreement between Palestinian rivals Fatah and Hamas bore fruit when on June 2nd 2014 a new Palestinian Authority (PA) government endorsed by both parties assumed office. Essentially no different from the outgoing Ramallah government, it pledged commitment to the

Quartet conditions and continued security collaboration with Israel in the West Bank. More alarmingly for Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, both the U.S. and European Union accepted this government as a legitimate counterpart.

Against this background Netanyahu immediately claimed that the mid-June disappearance of three Israeli youths in the southern West Bank was a Hamas operation conducted to negotiate a prisoner exchange and a direct result of the Palestinian reconciliation agreement. The fact that the Israeli military had in the months prior to the Fatah-Hamas agreement claimed to have foiled at least a dozen abductions in the West Bank, that the youths were known to have been immediately murdered, and that senior Israeli security officials did not believe it was a Hamas operation was simply ignored or suppressed by the Israeli government. Similarly, Netanyahu sought to change the narrative from colonialism to terrorism: standing the argument that Palestinian self-determination is a precondition for a peaceful resolution of the conflict on its head, he insisted that control of occupied territory is integral to Israeli security.

Whipping up a popular anti-Arab frenzy in Israel that seasoned observers characterised as unprecedented, Netanyahu and his associates demanded that Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas disband the new PA government, and that Washington and Brussels boycott it. On the pretext of conducting a hostage rescue operation, the Israeli military went on an organised rampage throughout the West Bank. Involving raids against numerous Hamas-affiliated institutions, the arrest of scores of Hamas leaders (including members of parliament and prisoners released in a 2011 exchange mediated by Egypt), and the demolition of the homes of Hamas activists, it was deliberately designed to provoke the Islamists in the Gaza Strip – and amply succeeded in doing so. That PA security forces in the West Bank fully cooperated with their Israeli partners against their Palestinian brethren was a bonus that Israel hoped would lead Abbas or Hamas to renounce their recent agreement.

In this context Israel's initial military objective of "restoring quiet" to Israeli border communities fails to withstand scrutiny. As the result of an Egyptian-mediated 2012 ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, according to Nathan Thrall of the International Crisis Group 2013 was the quietest year these communities had enjoyed since the first projectile from Gaza landed in Israel more than a decade earlier. Rather, Israel's purpose can be identified as what it terms "mowing the lawn" (i.e. carrying out regular operations to maintain the status quo) by dealing a significant blow to Palestinian military capabilities, enhancing Israeli deterrence vis-à-vis armed groups in the Gaza Strip and reminding the general Palestinian population that resisting Israeli policy comes with an intolerably high price tag.

Achievements

Given an Israeli military doctrine that essentially rejects the notion of Arab civilian non-combatants, and that furthermore deliberately targets civilian populations and infrastructure in order to exert political pressure on military adversaries; given Israel's overwhelming military superiority; and given the extreme population density of the Gaza Strip, a horrific Palestinian civilian death toll was a foregone conclusion. That it reached staggering proportions, with entire families being wiped out on a daily basis and whole neighbourhoods reduced to rubble in the space of hours, is testament to a strategic military failure on Israel's part of the most embarrassing sort.

In light of Israel's absolute control over the Gaza Strip and its population from 1967 until at least 2005, the latter's virtually hermetic isolation from the outside world for the past decade, the territory's miniscule size and flat (and thoroughly exposed) terrain, and the absence of advanced weaponry in Palestinian hands, it is difficult to conceive of more ideal conditions for a regional superpower to make short shrift of a subjugated enemy. To put it mildly, the Gaza Strip is not Vietnam and Hamas is not the Viet Cong.

Yet despite several weeks of unrelenting bombardment that included thousands of air raids, the firing of tens of thousands of artillery shells (by contrast 8,000 were fired in 2008-09, half of them for illumination) and a reluctant ground invasion, Israel was unable to deliver a serious blow to Palestinian armed groups or their morale. Their command, control, communications, intelligence and logistics capabilities remained intact, while there was no interruption of their ability to fire projectiles throughout Israel. Very few senior Palestinian military or political commanders were killed and at most a few cadres were imprisoned. Perhaps most importantly, Palestinian armed groups continued to take the fight to the Israeli military rather than focusing exclusively on defence, to the point where Israeli casualty levels became germane to Israeli calculations. Unlike the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead in 2009, in 2014 Israel is unable to unilaterally cease hostilities with the assurance that a bruised and battered Hamas will ensure quiet on its side of the border.

All of the above suggests not only a substandard Israeli military performance, but, more importantly, a critical intelligence failure that exceeds the inability to anticipate Palestinian preparations. Given the military outcome of Operation Protective Edge, one suspects even the Pentagon and Egyptian mediators find Netanyahu's demand for the disarmament of the Gaza Strip laughable. The old adage about the Israel Defence Forces – "First World weapons, Second World army, Third World enemies" – appears ripe for revision, and it seems rather doubtful that Hizbullah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah – whose perception of such matters is an Israeli obsession – feels more deterred today than he did in May.

In sum, the latest Gaza offensive has been a military and political fiasco for Israel. Not only has Palestinian reconciliation weathered the storm, but Hamas's leverage in this relationship has been considerably strengthened.

The Hamdallah government, even if largely invisible, remains in office, and in Cairo Israel is negotiating with a unified Palestinian delegation that cannot act without Hamas's consent. In doing so, Israel has effectively legitimised a government it has urged the world to reject. While the surge in West Bank protests does not amount to an organised and sustained "Third Intifada", the West Bank and Gaza Strip are today more united in spirit and purpose than at any point since the death of Yasir Arafat.

Consequences

In the diplomatic arena relations between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government are more strained than at any time since the two assumed office in 2009. Netanyahu and his associates seem incapable of missing an opportunity to give renewed offence to Washington, and as recent delays in weapons deliveries suggest, this is beginning to have an impact on the relationship. If in the aftermath of this crisis the U.S. responds with a renewed diplomatic initiative, it is unlikely to cut Israel as much slack as in years past. If it decides not to engage – and perhaps reduce its protective embrace of Israel while Netanyahu remains prime minister – the prospect that the Palestinians and others will attempt to fill the vacuum with an agenda that seeks to end the occupation is greater than at any point since the 1993 Oslo agreement. The possibility that this Israeli government can pre-empt such scenarios with a diplomatic initiative enjoying significant international support is zero.

There is also growing global recognition that Israeli impunity in its dealings with the Palestinian people needs to be addressed and that the failure to hold Israel's leaders accountable for past onslaughts emboldened them to strike even more aggressively this time. In this respect we may soon reach a point – particularly in Europe – where public opinion will begin to have an impact on foreign policy.

Its substantial failures notwithstanding, Israel was by no means defeated. It additionally continues to enjoy solid U.S. and European support for waging war against the Palestinians. Yet its leadership has been so indulged by the West that it has become thoroughly oblivious to reality, operating in a cocoon of fantasy and fanaticism so detached that close allies habitually appear as sworn enemies. It is no coincidence that the present Israeli government is the most extreme (and among the most dysfunctional) in Israel's history; compared to their cabinet colleagues, Netanyahu and Minister of Defence Moshe Yaalon – inflexible territorial maximalists by any standard – can rightfully be characterised as pragmatists. This Israeli government and its likely successors are virtually certain to provoke renewed challenges to the status quo while remaining incapable of confronting them.

Hamas: background and objectives

Hamas was facing a severe and arguably existential crisis on the eve of Israel's Gaza offensive. When the ongoing upheaval in the region commenced in late 2010 it quickly emerged as a key winner, suddenly as welcome in Tunis and Cairo as in Damascus and Tehran, and in many cases more welcome than Abbas and his Fatah movement. When in late 2012 Israel launched Operation Pillar of Defence, Arab officialdom – which during Operation Cast Lead had declined to even convene – collectively beat a path to Gaza City for selfies with Prime Minister Ismail Haniyya.

The Palestinian Islamists' subsequent fall from grace was among the most spectacular in modern Middle Eastern history. In 2012 it lost the patronage of Syria and Iran, and in the following year was openly identified – and dealt with – as a primary enemy by the new regime in Egypt. Israel, for its part, largely reneged on a 2012 ceasefire agreement mandating a relaxation of the blockade. Not only the economy of the Gaza Strip, but the public sector budget stood on the brink of collapse. Hamas's sole remaining friends, Qatar and Turkey, were unable – and to some extent unwilling – to provide meaningful relief.

More isolated locally, regionally and internationally than at any point since it seized power in the Gaza Strip in 2007, Hamas sought to save itself by reneging on key political principles, much like the PLO had done in 1993. But if the Oslo agreement at least restored the PLO to political relevance, Hamas's reconciliation agreement with Fatah failed to reverse or arrest the decline of conditions in the Gaza Strip. Hamas therefore had a clear and unambiguous agenda from the outset: a definitive removal of the illegal blockade. Although it was fighting Israel, the demand applied equally to Egypt and Western states that had obstructed the transfer of funds to the Gaza Strip. Unlike Israel, throughout the July-August 2014 offensive and during the subsequent ceasefire negotiations Hamas maintained this core demand.

Achievements

Given that its motives were so transparently factional, Palestinian criticism of Hamas has been notable for its absence, even among its bitterest critics. Hamas has successfully presented itself as standing up to Israel on behalf of all Palestinians, a task made easier by the indiscriminate nature of Israeli violence and a punitive blockade that hurts the civilian population more than the movement ruling them, and by the visible passivity of the leadership in Ramallah. Continued Hamas support for the reconciliation government despite – perhaps because of – the latter's truancy has furthermore prevented Abbas and PA leaders from voicing public criticism.

Militarily, Hamas's fighting capabilities have incomparably improved. What had been a rather unsophisticated militia is rapidly transforming into a professional guerrilla army – an accomplishment all the more remarkable given

conditions in the Gaza Strip. While Hamas remains incapable of defeating Israel, it seems that the latter has concluded that any attempt to partition or reoccupy parts of the Gaza Strip would exact a prohibitively high price.

In demonstrating that during the past several years it has been doing more than enjoying the perks and privileges of power, Hamas has also taken the wind out of the sails of more radical Islamist movements. Gaza's burgeoning jihadi Salafist groups, who thrived on denunciations of an allegedly complacent Hamas even as they showed as little interest in battling Israel as their regional counterparts, will take years to regain lost political and moral ground. Operational and political coordination with other movements and armed groups in the Gaza Strip, such as Islamic Jihad and various PLO factions, has been solid and suggests an agreed division of labour.

Growing rifts within the Hamas leadership – a perhaps natural outcome of a situation in which key leaders remain in exile while the movement governs physical territory – appear to also have temporarily eased. There is today much greater balance in the relationship between Fatah and Hamas than a few months ago. The current Egyptian regime, which had hoped to see Hamas destroyed or at least rendered incapable of continued control over the Gaza Strip on account of the Israeli offensive, is dealing with the movement as a legitimate interlocutor for the first time since 2013. Hamas was additionally able to pay salary arrears in early August. None of this would have been possible if Palestinian armed groups had not successfully stood their ground against Israel.

Consequences

Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups have insisted that they will reject any ceasefire arrangement that does not encompass a definitive end to the blockade of the Gaza Strip, and that if necessary they will launch an open-ended war of attrition to achieve this objective. Given Hamas's demonstrated staying power and the substantial damage already inflicted on a weakening Israeli economy – Operation Protective Edge, for example, came at the height of the tourist season and effectively aborted it, while agriculture in southern Israel has taken a body blow – it is a serious policy statement. It is also a high-risk strategy: initial success could lead Israel to end the blockade by acting to remove Hamas from power. No less seriously, it could face growing popular opposition if the costs of continued conflict fail to produce tangible achievements. This would be particularly so if other forms of resistance that exact a substantially lower cost in Palestinian blood and treasure develop in the West Bank.

The isolation that motivated Hamas to respond to rather than retreat from Israeli escalation is also its Achilles heel. If there is one objective that unites its enemies, adversaries and rivals, this is to ensure that any agreement that ends the Israeli offensive weakens rather than strengthens

Hamas's control over the Gaza Strip. With Egypt monopolising the negotiations and having, in coordination with Israel, marginalised Qatar and Turkey, and with the UN Security Council as the only potential alternative to Cairo, efforts have focused on two objectives. The first is to assign the PA as the sole Palestinian implementing party of any agreed arrangements. The second is to base these arrangements on the existing provisions of the Oslo agreements, which means everything is subject to Israeli-Palestinian agreement and therefore an Israeli veto.

Thus far Hamas has accepted the first – it already did so in the context of the April reconciliation agreement – and also consented to phased implementation, but rejected the second. If Egypt or other mediators manage to square this circle, they will effectively have ensnared Hamas in Oslo's tangled web. It would be a highly ironic conclusion to a campaign waged to challenge the status quo and reduce Israeli domination of Palestinian lives.

In the larger scheme of things such arrangements pose little imminent threat to continued Hamas control over the Gaza Strip. It can legitimately claim to be part of the PA and thus demand a role in at least oversight of any new arrangements. More importantly, the security forces in the Gaza Strip remain under Hamas command, while the Qassam Brigades are not going to either disband or disarm. The prospect of PA security forces rounding up Hamas leaders in the Gaza Strip at Israel's behest as they do in the West Bank is therefore non-existent.

Abbas will also find it difficult to capitalise politically on either the removal of Israeli restrictions or reconstruction, for the simple reason that he contributed so little to bringing them about. So long as Palestinians, particularly in the Gaza Strip, can point to tangible achievements and conclude that these justify their sacrifices – neither of which are foregone conclusions – Hamas appears to have little cause for concern. The above notwithstanding, the presence of security forces loyal to Abbas on Gaza's boundaries could become relevant if a vacuum is engineered that needs to be filled. The risk of hubris also remains: if Hamas or a faction within it pursues unattainable objectives or uses the negotiations to settle accounts – for example, with Cairo or Ramallah – rifts that have been gradually closing are likely to reopen with a vengeance.

For Hamas, as for the Palestinians generally, the key challenges remain national and political rather than factional or transitional. An agenda that remains limited to the PA and related matters such as governance and trade, important as they undoubtedly are, cannot but fail to provide a lasting reprieve from Israeli control. As has been the rule during the Oslo process, significant Palestinian achievements will thus be undermined and eventually reversed. In order to effectively overcome the current state of fragmentation, rival Palestinian movements should set their sights on rebuilding the national movement on the

basis of a coherent political programme that leapfrogs Oslo, and mobilises Palestinians and a growing international solidarity movement around an agenda that seeks to terminate Israeli occupation once and for all.

By way of conclusion, it remains unclear whether a negotiated ceasefire will be achieved in the short term and unlikely that Palestinian armed groups will respond positively to a unilateral Israeli cessation of hostilities that offers them only a peaceful blockade in return for quiet. For a variety of reasons it also does not seem that Israel is prepared to live with a situation of prolonged low-level

conflict along the Gaza boundary as it did along the Lebanese border during the 1970s. The more likely outcome is therefore one in which – whether through diplomacy or violence – the situation is resolved in the coming weeks. Given the potential costs and consequences, the international community, and particularly those with unconsumed influence such as Europe, would do well to encourage a political resolution of the current crisis and use it as a foundation to address the larger issues that produced it.

This article was completed before the August 19th collapse of the Cairo ceasefire negotiations.

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