

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Israel, Hamas and the Complicated Middle East: Reasons for Optimism?

As I am writing this, the Gaza war between Hamas and Israel is in a quasi-ceasefire mode, but some fighting has resumed in Gaza. Difficult negotiations in Cairo have begun over the major issues that brought about the conflict. It is a complicated set of issues with many layers and tentacles that connect most of the major players in the Middle East. In addition, there is evidence that this Gaza war has further isolated Israel, especially when it comes to Western Europe. It is therefore valuable to step back and attempt to gain some perspective, which is the goal of this edition of *Issues in Perspective*.

- First of all, it is imperative to review why Israel focused so much in the Gaza war on destroying all of the tunnels Hamas had built, most of which were designed to store lethal weapons and went under the international border with Israel. Gerard DeGroot, History Professor at St. Andrews University in Scotland, has written a penetrating essay on the Hamas tunnels and why they needed to be destroyed. He writes: “Tunnels are a simple solution to an age-old wartime problem: how to attack a well-defended enemy.” During the 1st century, Germanic tribes effectively used tunnel warfare against the Roman legions. During World War I, Great Britain dug 22 mine tunnels filled with explosives under German trenches at Messines. Nineteen of these were detonated killing over 10,000 German soldiers. During the Bar Kokhba Revolt in Judea (AD 132-136), the Jewish rebels launched effective strikes against Roman legions using tunnels. The Viet Cong also used tunnels quite successfully during the Viet Nam War. In warfare, the tunnel can be a “perfect conduit for the delivery of terror.” This no doubt was the primary reason Hamas built so many tunnels—to terrorize Israeli citizens, kidnapping them as they did the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006. What Israel found in many of the tunnels they destroyed validates that this is just what Hamas was planning to do. As DeGroot argues, “The tunnel offers the insurgent an opportunity to change the rules of engagement; his opponent has to respond to the threat the tunnel represents.” However, the primary benefit of the tunnel is its propaganda value. It becomes a symbol of solidarity and struggle. But rarely does it alter the course of a conflict: “It’s difficult to find instances when tunnel tactics have fundamentally altered the course of a war. They are, by nature, tactics born of desperation.” Hamas was not able to strategically use these tunnels because Israel focused like a laser beam on destroying them, which it has apparently done. What Hamas has learned from this is anyone’s guess right now.

- Second, why did Hamas begin this war by firing its rockets into Israel? When the Egyptian Army overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas lost its key ally in the Middle East. [Hamas is the official Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.] Furthermore, Hamas has also alienated its principal supporter, Iran, when it opposed Bashar Al-Assad in the Syrian Civil War. Finally, there is considerable evidence that the people of Gaza were turning against the Hamas leadership due to corruption, lack of economic opportunity and the priority Hamas has of spending its tax revenue and considerable foreign aid on its ongoing war with Israel. Thus, Hamas did what it has done in the past—provoke Israel, which would logically produce significant civilian casualties and thereby increase support and empathy for the Hamas position worldwide. It matters little to Hamas (and to Israel’s critics apparently) that Israel has a legal right as a sovereign nation to defend its border and its people from Hamas rockets and the labyrinth of tunnels designed to kill and kidnap Israelis. But, the Hamas strategy may be faulty this time. As *New York Times* reporter, David Kirkpatrick, demonstrates, Egypt has actually led a coalition of Arab states—including Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—to oppose Hamas, and in effect side with Israel in its opposition to Hamas. These Arab states remain vehemently opposed to political Islam and the various facets of the so-called “Arab Spring.” More significantly, Egypt and other Arab states, especially the Persian Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are aligning with Israel in common opposition to Iran, which has been funding Hamas. When Secretary of State John Kerry turned to Turkey and Qatar for help in mediating the Hamas-Israel war, he offended Egypt and these other Arab states and seemed to be less hostile to Hamas and thus less supportive of Israel.
- Third, why was everyone so stymied by Secretary Kerry’s outreach to Turkey and Qatar? Last week, John Kerry was in the Middle East, flying between various capitals but then decided to fly to Paris to negotiate with Hamas allies, Turkey and Qatar. The Palestinian Authority and Egypt were excluded from these initial talks. In talking with these nations, Kerry was undermining Egypt’s cease-fire proposal, which Israel had accepted and which the entire Arab League had backed. These negotiations with Turkey and Qatar in Paris in effect met all of the Hamas demands. This is why virtually everyone was so enraged by Kerry’s actions. The best and wisest strategy for the US, argues columnist Charles Krauthammer, is “to endorse and solidify this emerging axis of moderate pro-American partners (Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf States, as well as the Palestinian Authority [under Mahmoud Abbas]) intent on seeing Islamist radicalism blunted and ultimately defanged.” It defies credulity why Kerry did this, but it explains why virtually everyone in the Middle East (and both conservatives and liberals in America) were incensed. All of Kerry’s efforts with Turkey and Qatar failed. The parties are now back in Cairo, discussing the original Egyptian proposal.
- Finally, one of the reasons why the Gaza War could be a turning point in the complicated politics of the Middle East is the growing hostility in Europe toward Israel. The “BDS” campaign [boycott, divest and sanctions against Israel] calls not only for an end to the occupation of the West Bank and for equal rights, but also for the right of return of all Palestinian refugees to Israel—which would mean the end of Israel as a Jewish homeland.

In some parts of Western Europe, pro-Hamas protesters are attacking synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses. Such developments are part of a larger movement called “delegitimization,” which involves labeling Zionism as racism and calling into question the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state, as a homeland for the Jewish people. Such frightening developments emphasize the urgency and necessity for Israel to reinforce this Arab coalition that stands opposed to Hamas and to garner support for the relatively moderate Palestinian Authority under Abbas. The Palestinian Authority must be given the primary authority in Gaza and be given the overall responsibility for the rehabilitation of Gaza. As columnist David Ignatius speculates, another aspect of the agreement being negotiated in Cairo involves the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its US trained security service assuming responsibility for policing the Rafah crossing from Gaza into Egypt. The PA would also begin paying the salaries of Palestinian civil servants in Gaza. Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, working with these various Arab coalition governments mentioned above, has a tremendous opportunity to neutralize the power and grip of Hamas in Gaza and establish a relatively secure border to its West. It involves risks but it is a significant opportunity that the Gaza War has produced. Let us pray that all of these details can coalesce into an agreement that significantly weakens Hamas and strengthens the more moderate Arab forces of the Middle East.

See *The Economist* (2 August 2014), pp. 7, 15-18; Charles Krauthammer in www.washingtonpost.com (4 August 2014); David D. Kirkpatrick in www.nytimes.com (4 August 2014); Gerard DeGroot in www.washingtonpost.com (28 July 2014); David Ignatius in www.washingtonpost.com (6 August 2014); and Joe Klein in *Time* (4 August 2014), p. 24.