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Gaza War: New Palestinian Resolve Changes Paradigm

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The latest Israeli-Palestinian conflagration in Gaza constitutes a watershed with Israel struggling to counter mounting international criticism of its disproportionate use of force and Palestinians' increasingly united refusal of agreements that do not take into account their interests. A new paradigm could emerge involving Palestinian civil disobedience to force Israel to seriously negotiate an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Commentary

EXTOLLING THE virtues of a ceasefire in the Gaza war that collapsed barely two hours after it took effect, US Secretary of State John Kerry inadvertently highlighted the root cause of the failure of international efforts to silence the guns in the Palestinian territory and resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Under the ceasefire Israel would have been allowed to continue destroying tunnels built by Hamas, the Islamist militia that controls Gaza, while Palestinians "will be able to receive food, medicine ... tend to their wounded, bury their dead ... travel to their homes ... [and] take advantage of the absence — hopefully, hopefully — of violence," Kerry said.

Palestinian fighters perform

While the ceasefire was likely doomed because it did not enforce a complete halt to hostilities, its speedy collapse reflected a new-found Palestinian resolve to ensure that its interests are accorded an equal weighting in any arrangement with Israel. That resolve is rooted in a measure of reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestine Authority headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, Hamas' transition from an embattled group, unable to pay public sector salaries prior to the Israeli assault, into a resistance movement with street credibility, and in the absence of Arab support in the Gaza war, a realisation that Palestinians will have to rely on their own resources.

Palestinian resolve is further strengthened by the performance of Palestinian fighters on the ground. Palestinian rockets have been able to target urban centres deep inside Israel even if they have been unable to defeat the Jewish state's Iron Shield anti-missile system. Moreover, Palestinian fighters have on several occasions reached Israel through their tunnels killing a significant number of Israeli soldiers - on Israeli soil.

In addition, international public opinion is turning against Israel as casualties in Gaza mount and the recognition seeps in that Hamas will have to be a party to any lasting ceasefire or credible effort to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Similarly, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are seeing reduced whatever street credibility they had because of their silent endorsement of the Israeli assault on Hamas which they view as an extension of their effort to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood; at the same time Qatar is gaining popularity with its support of Hamas, an offshoot of the Brotherhood.

A third Intifada?

The newly-found resolve has translated into Palestinians across the board demanding that any lasting ceasefire be linked to their political demands, first and foremost among which a lifting of the seven-year old Egyptian-Israeli blockade of Gaza. The demands are endorsed not only by Hamas but also the Palestine Authority, which, incapable of coming to the aid of the embattled population in Gaza, has been weakened and appears helpless as Hamas fighters take on the Israelis.

With mass protests in support of Gaza across the West Bank, both Hamas and the Authority need to be watchful that the demonstrations do not turn against them given that their seven-year old feud has rendered Palestinians ineffective in peace efforts and effectively played into Israel's divide-and-rule strategy.

While some analysts believe that economic progress on the West Bank makes it unlikely that its residents will want to risk their well-being with a third Intifada or popular revolt, both Hamas and the Authority may see a civil disobedience campaign as a way to keep Palestinian anger focussed on Israel.

Gaza may have aligned the interests of Hamas and the Authority and this was reflected in the little-noticed Palestinian demand that Israel recognise the reconciliation between the two groups as part of any lasting ceasefire. Israel had denounced a reconciliation agreement that earlier this year created the basis for the formation of a national unity government backed by both Hamas and Al Fatah, the backbone of Mr. Abbas' Palestine Authority. The primary motive of Israeli assault on Gaza is widely believed to have been the undermining of the reconciliation.

That effort has clearly backfired and, if anything, strengthened the basis for a greater degree of Palestinian unity. "Hamas is no longer a terror group carrying out attacks, it's a mini-army in a mini-state," said Amir Oren, a columnist for Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz.

Paradigm shift

The turning of international public opinion against Israel; the private, if not public, dismay in Western capitals at the heavy handedness of the Israelis in Gaza; Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu's potentially politically damaging post mortem of the war; as well as the strengthened Palestinian resolve; all have the makings of a paradigm shift in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

How the shift plays out will depend on whether the war in Gaza sparks a third Intifada as well as on developments in Israel, including the fallout of the post-mortem and the impact in Israel of the loss of significant empathy in international public opinion as well as among its most important allies, the United States and Europe.

In a bid to manage a unilateral Israeli end to the fighting in Gaza, Netanyahu and other Israeli officials have already embarked on their 'victory campaign' claiming significant damage to thousands of alleged terror targets; the destruction of dozens of tunnels; a strengthening of ties with Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia; and a warning that if Hamas continues to attack Israel Palestinians will pay an intolerable price.

That narrative could be easily punctured by a Palestinian attack once the guns have fallen silent. As another Ha'aretz columnist Yossi Verter warned: "The dangers facing (Netanyahu) are immeasurable: if the rocket fire on the south continues even after IDF (Israel Defence Forces) forces withdraw from the (Gaza) Strip, he is likely to be held responsible for national humiliation, which would cause him to lose support from within his coalition, his party, and ultimately, the Prime Minister's Office as well."

The question is whether this would lead to the formation of an Israeli government more inclined to make the painful concessions necessary for an Israeli-Palestinian peace - or one that is even more intransigent and hard line than the one Netanyahu heads. Whichever way, it would together with the newly-found Palestinian resolve, constitute a paradigm shift.

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