

## Gaza 2014: Hamas' Strategic Calculus

---

Glenn E. Robinson

**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes Hamas' strategic and political calculations during the 2014 conflict with Israel in Gaza. I argue Hamas did not plan the conflict, which came mostly in response to Israel's crackdown on Hamas in the West Bank (Operation Brothers Keeper). However, Hamas sought to use the conflict to reverse its increasingly weak strategic position, and had some success in doing so. However, given Gaza's continued physical and regional isolation, Hamas' enhanced position coming out of the conflict is not likely to be long-lived.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the strategic calculations Hamas made during the Summer 2014 conflict with Israel.<sup>1</sup> While Hamas is categorized by both the US Government and the European Union as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), its leaders have a long history of making rational calculations (and sometimes miscalculations) seeking to maximize advantages to Hamas as an organization and social movement.<sup>2</sup> Even groups that engage in terrorism are typically rational actors seeking to advance their causes. By now, we have an extensive body of work analyzing Hamas' rise, history, politics and decision-making.<sup>3</sup> Using a rational actor model, my central argument is that Hamas sought to use the 2014 conflict to reverse its overall weak position within Palestinian society and did, in fact, succeed in making significant – but likely short lived – political gains.

More broadly, my argument is as follows. By the Spring of 2014, Hamas' position as the pre-eminent Palestinian power inside the Gaza Strip had weakened substantially. Years of isolation and regional changes brought on by the "Arab Spring" worked against the interests of

---

1 Author's Note: my thanks to Omar Shaban and the anonymous reviewers of *Parameters* for their helpful comments. This is based in part on several weeks of fieldwork in the West Bank in September-October 2014 on a parallel project on Palestinian governance. The reviewers and my Palestinian interlocutors are not responsible for any of my conclusions or mistakes.

2 An EU court removed Hamas from the EU list of terror organizations, largely on a technicality. It is widely assumed that Hamas will be put back on the list during 2015. For an argument on social movements and how Hamas is best seen in this analytical framework, see Glenn E. Robinson, "Hamas as Social Movement," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

3 The first generation of scholarship on Hamas includes: Ziad Abu-Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Hisham H. Ahmad, *Hamas: From Religious Salvation to Political Transformation: The Rise of Hamas in Palestinian Society* (Jerusalem: PASSIA, 1994); Glenn E. Robinson, "Hamas and the Islamist Mobilization," in *Building a Palestinian State: The Incomplete Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); and Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000). A second generation of scholarship on Hamas includes Jeroen Gunning, *Hamas in Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Sara Roy, *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Beverly Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *Hamas: the Islamic Resistance Movement* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010); and Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*, 2nd Ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

Glenn E. Robinson is an associate professor of defense analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and is also affiliated with the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. He has published widely on Arab politics and security issues, and especially on Palestinian politics.

Hamas. Israel's embargo of the Gaza Strip, in place since 2007, further immiserated an already impoverished population. Gaza's isolation only intensified as regional changes lost important external support for Hamas from Egypt, Syria, and Iran. Indeed, the Fatah-Hamas agreement in April 2014 signaled Hamas was no longer willing and able to rule Gaza alone, and essentially had to yield to Palestinian Authority (PA) demands.

Hamas did not plan to engage Israel militarily in Gaza in 2014. The series of events between the April agreement with Fatah and the start of the shooting were not planned by Hamas leadership. However, that leadership sought to take advantage of the opportunity to strengthen its position *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian Authority and Fatah, and even more broadly in the region. Hamas was able to alter the strategic status quo in its favor as a result of the conflict, but its successes will most likely not be permanent.

After providing some background, this article examines Hamas' strategic position with regard to the Palestinian Authority, Israel, and the region, and why Hamas calculated the conflict with Israel would advance its interests with each of those parties.

### **Hamas' Rule in Gaza, 2006-2014**

In a surprise outcome for the Bush administration, which had pushed the Palestinian Authority hard to hold new elections, Hamas won a plurality (44%) of the national parliamentary vote in 2006. Given the odd "hybrid" system the PA adopted for elections, Hamas was able to parlay its plurality into a supermajority of seats in parliament. Almost immediately, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the United States, and the European Union adopted a rejectionist posture toward any Hamas participation in Palestinian governance, with Israel arresting many Hamas officials and members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC, or parliament). The United States, led by Elliot Abrams, and Fatah (the PLO's largest faction, and the party of most of the PA leadership), led by Muhammad Dahlan, began to organize a PA-led coup against Hamas, which ended disastrously in 2007 when Hamas drove Fatah from the Gaza Strip after a brief but bloody battle.<sup>4</sup> Hamas has ruled over Gaza ever since.

Hamas' rule in Gaza has had mixed results. Certainly, the obstacles Gaza has faced since 2007 have been daunting. Israel's continuous embargo against Gaza, including the closure of Gaza's coastline to imports, has meant that only minimal amounts of food and material have entered Gaza via Israeli land crossings. Israel's policy, in the infamous words of longtime Israeli official Dov Weisglass, was "to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger" as long as Hamas ruled the strip.<sup>5</sup> A Turkish group's widely publicized attempt to

---

4 Both Hamas and Fatah accuse the other of planning a "coup." However, it is clear that Fatah, urged by the United States and others, sought to reverse the electoral results of the 2006 election by driving Hamas from power. For details of how this plan evolved, disasterously, see: David Rose, "The Gaza Bombshell," *Vanity Fair*, April 2008, <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/04/gaza200804>.

5 Summary of the Weisglass episode available at: Jonathan Cook, "Israel's Starvation Diet for Gaza," Opinion/Editorial, *Electronic Intifada*, October 24, 2012, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/israels-starvation-diet-gaza/11810>.

challenge the embargo against Gaza in 2010 prompted Israeli commandoes to commandeer the ships in the Mediterranean and divert them to Israel. The Mavi Marmara affair resulted in the deaths of eight Turkish citizens and one American, and represented the nadir of Israel's once-friendly relations with Turkey.

Israel's embargo against Gaza, which began after Hamas' electoral victory, has been largely matched by Egypt on its short border with Gaza near Rafah. Neither Hosni Mubarak's nor Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's regimes supported Hamas, seeing it as an extension of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and both mostly kept the border closed as a result. Egypt, unlike Israel, did turn a blind eye toward a flourishing "tunnel economy" through which many basic supplies flowed into Gaza from Egyptian territory. Only during the yearlong rule of Muhammad Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo did the Egypt-Gaza border witness the relatively unhindered flow of goods across it.

While the embargo of Gaza has been a major and constant source of impoverishment for Palestinians there, the periodic open warfare with Israel wreaked significant physical destruction and loss of life in the Gaza Strip. Although each of the three conflicts – in 2008-2009, 2012, and 2014 – had specific precipitating events, in each case the broader strategic rationale was the same as the ongoing embargo: to keep Hamas weak and, it was hoped, to prompt impoverished and angry Palestinians to blame Hamas and remove it from power. Public opinion polling suggests Israel's strategy has not paid dividends, as Palestinians invariably blamed Israel for their predicament. That said, just as Hamas came to power with a plurality of the vote (not a majority) opinion polling confirms Hamas has not been able to garner majority support in Gaza (no one faction has been able to garner majority support).<sup>6</sup> For example, in a poll released in January 2015, only 10 percent of Palestinians had a favorable view of conditions in Gaza, but the Hamas leader in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, outpolled PA President Mahmoud Abbas amongst Gazans, 54 percent to 44 percent. In the same poll, Gazans supported Hamas over Fatah 42 percent to 34 percent, and 58 percent of Gazans say that Hamas won the 2014 conflict with Israel.<sup>7</sup>

While Israel's goal of destroying Hamas through embargo and military conflict has not succeeded, Israel has been able to weaken Hamas' limited military capabilities through these periodic conflicts by killings hundreds of armed militants and destroying or rendering useless many of the thousands of rockets Hamas accumulates. This occasional "mowing the grass," as these conflicts with Gaza have come to be known in Israel, will likely continue in the future provided no significant changes occur.<sup>8</sup>

Hamas' rule inside Gaza has likewise had mixed success. By no means has Hamas been a force for democracy; it has not allowed any national or municipal elections since coming to power. The Palestinian Authority in the West Bank has been little better, but did carry out municipal elections in 2012. Hamas has not protected free speech or

---

6 The best source of public opinion polling in the West Bank and Gaza is done by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, <http://www.pcpsr.org>

7 "Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No 54," *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/600>.

8 Daniel Byman, "Mowing the Grass and Taking Out the Trash," *Foreign Policy*, August 25, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/25/mowing-the-grass-and-taking-out-the-trash>.

the right to assemble, nor advocated women's empowerment and human rights. Deepening democracy, per se, has simply not been an ideological or policy goal of Hamas in Gaza. On the other hand, once in power in 2007, Hamas improved the security situation in Gaza, which had been chaotic and violent in the previous years. Clan violence in particular was reined in by Hamas through a combination of force and shrewd politics.<sup>9</sup> Yezid Sayigh, a smart observer of Palestinian politics, argues Hamas' governmental and administrative track records in Gaza were reasonably positive when compared to the PA's track record in the West Bank.<sup>10</sup> Nathan Brown reached similar conclusions.<sup>11</sup> Thus, both public opinion polling and scholarly analysis suggest Hamas' rule in Gaza presents a more complex picture than perhaps most Americans think. By far the biggest problem in Gaza – the ongoing turmoil with Israel – was largely blamed on Israel, not on Hamas.

### **Hamas Back-Peddles, April 2014**

While Hamas' own track record of rule in Gaza was mixed, the regional dynamics in the Middle East several years prior to the 2014 conflict worked strongly against Hamas' interest. Indeed, its position had weakened so much that in April 2014, Hamas signed an agreement with Fatah in which it agreed to give up direct rule of Gaza in favor of a technocratic government under the presidency of Mahmoud Abbas. This move was rightly viewed as a major political setback for Hamas.<sup>12</sup>

How did this happen? Four regional trends worked to undermine Hamas' political position by the spring of 2014. First, and most important, was the Muslim Brotherhood's fall from power in Egypt in July 2013. In 2011, Hamas had been buoyed by the removal from power of Hosni Mubarak, a ruler long suspicious of Hamas and the larger Muslim Brotherhood movement. There was an immediate easing of border controls at Rafah as a result. Prospects brightened even further in June of 2012 when Muhammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood won the runoff election for president. For 13 months, Hamas had a strong supporter and friend in power in Cairo, even if much of the Egyptian military and security apparatus were not particularly sympathetic. Border restrictions at Rafah eased substantially, leading to significant, if short term, improvements in the quality of life in Gaza. General Sisi's coup in July 2013, following weeks of huge anti-Morsi protests, brought to power in Cairo a regime that was militantly anti-Muslim Brotherhood and anti-Hamas. Rafah's border was immediately sealed, with even the tunnel economy reduced to only a trickle of what it had been.

A second regional loss for Hamas came with Syria's civil war. The regime in Damascus had been Hamas's most important Arab ally for

---

9 Report on reining in clan violence in Gaza by Hamas: International Crisis Group, *Inside Gaza: The Challenge of Clans and Families*, Middle East Report No. 71 (Washington, DC: International Crisis Group, December 20, 2007), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/israel-palestine/071-inside-gaza-the-challenge-of-clans-and-families.aspx>

10 Yezid Sayigh, *Hamas Rule in Gaza: Three Years On*, Middle East Brief No. 41 (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, March 2010), <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB41.pdf>.

11 Nathan J. Brown, "Gaza Five Years On: Hamas Settles In," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 11, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/11/gaza-five-years-on-hamas-settles-in>.

12 Tom Phillips, "Will the Fatah/Hamas Deal Pay Off for Abbas?" *Chatham House*, April 28, 2014, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/199204>.

years. Damascus hosted Hamas' regional headquarters, and the Asad regime provided political protection to Hamas as part of the larger "rejectionist front" opposed to Israeli and American designs on the region. Neither the "Alawi" (i.e., Shi'a) nor secular nature of the Asad regime represented a stumbling block for the Sunni Islamists of Hamas. With the onset of the civil war in Syria, the Asad regime began to kill large numbers of Sunni Islamists who shared Hamas' political philosophy. Pressure grew on Hamas to renounce the Asad regime and pronounce solidarity with the Sunni protestors seeking the overthrow of the Alawi regime in Damascus. In 2012, Khalid Mash'al, Hamas' top leader in Damascus, quietly left Syria and moved to Qatar, thereby signaling Hamas' break with the Asad regime. This split between Hamas and the Asad regime proved highly contentious internally, as it meant Hamas had lost a major regional supporter without gaining an equivalent replacement ally.

Hamas' split with Damascus also spoiled its relations with Iran, which viewed support for Damascus as a litmus test. Although Hamas was never as important to Tehran as Hizbullah, relations between the two had been relatively warm prior to 2012. But after Hamas broke with Damascus, Iran started to view Hamas as an unreliable ally. Ties between Tehran and Hamas cooled considerably thereafter. Furthermore, the stiff sanctions regime in place against Tehran by the United States and other allied international actors meant Iran was simply less able to provide support to Hamas than it had been before.

A fourth regional development resulted from Riyadh's growing influence over Qatari foreign policy. Doha had stood up as a regional supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood – in Cairo, Syria, and Gaza – much to the chagrin of Saudi Arabia, which preferred Sunni monarchs, Salafists, and moderate nationalists. Relations between Doha and Riyadh were frosty during much of the Arab Spring, given the competing actors each supported. Qatari government support of Al Jazeera television – whose Arabic service was widely seen as taking a pro-Muslim Brotherhood slant – only fed the tension between Doha and Riyadh. Events in Egypt and Syria during 2013 and early 2014 tended to break in Riyadh's direction, with Doha making the required adjustments. One of those tweaks was to moderate its support of Hamas, compelling Hamas to be more flexible politically. Thus, one by one, Hamas lost the support of all of its regional allies: in Cairo after the fall of Morsi; in Damascus after the split with Asad over the civil war; in Tehran because of the split with the Asad regime; and, to a lesser degree, in Doha due to pressure from Saudi Arabia.

As a result of these regional developments, Hamas' growing weakness led it to accept terms with Fatah it had previously rejected. The April 2014 agreement compelled Hamas to give up direct control of government in Gaza in lieu of a technocratic government under the control of PA president Mahmoud Abbas. Now the PA, not Hamas, was supposed take ownership of the enormous problems in Gaza, relieving Hamas of those responsibilities.

## Hamas' War Calculations

The rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah greatly troubled the Netanyahu government in Israel, which went on a diplomatic offensive to undermine their relationship. While Netanyahu's rhetoric was reliably overwrought, the Israeli Right's primary concern was the prospect of actual Palestinian unity and the subsequent inevitable pressure on Israel over the West Bank.<sup>13</sup> In other words, if the agreement proved workable and led to political unity among Palestinians, it would put significant pressure on Netanyahu to get serious about negotiating a two-state solution, which was something the Likud party and others in the Revisionist camp rejected. Netanyahu responded, by trying to poison the well of Fatah-Hamas reconciliation. Denouncing the April accord, Netanyahu's government immediately announced a new round of sanctions against the PA, as well as 1500 new settlement units in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup>

On June 12, 2014, as relations deteriorated, a Hamas cell in Hebron, apparently acting on its own, kidnapped and murdered an Israeli soldier and his two companions who were hitchhiking in the West Bank. Although Israeli officials had strong evidence within hours of the kidnapping that the three Israelis were already dead, they launched Operation Brother's Keeper, ostensibly to find the missing teenagers. In reality, the operation was designed to weaken Hamas in the West Bank through the arrest of hundreds of its leaders and the destruction of Hamas infrastructure. Such action predictably put significant strain on the new Fatah-Hamas reconciliation accord. Israel announced on July 1, 2014 that the bodies of the dead Israelis had been recovered the day before. In revenge, a random Palestinian teenager was kidnapped and burned alive by Israeli vigilantes, as the cycle of violence intensified.<sup>15</sup>

The Israeli crackdown on Hamas in the West Bank presented the Gaza leadership with a conundrum, but also an opportunity. If it failed to respond to Israel's provocations, the Hamas leadership would be viewed as weak, unable to defend its organizational and larger Palestinian national interests. On the other hand, if Hamas in Gaza did respond militarily, Israel would be handed a *casus belli* to repeat its earlier attacks in Gaza, which could threaten Hamas' control there. Put another way, depending on one's view of Hamas, its leaders either fell into a trap set by Netanyahu, or took advantage of an opportunity to break out of their political isolation. The trap argument holds that Netanyahu left Hamas little choice but to respond militarily, which would inevitably fragment Hamas' reconciliation agreement with Fatah, and perhaps even lead to regime change in Gaza if events broke right. Netanyahu set the trap, and Hamas walked into it. Conversely, the opportunity argument holds that, wittingly or unwittingly, Netanyahu provided Hamas with an opportunity to reverse its slide from power given the regional events, and to re-establish its credibility as the leading force for resisting

---

13 For example, comparing the agreement to the start of a new Holocaust: "Netanyahu: Hamas Is Trying to Start Another Holocaust," *YnetNews*, April 27, 2014, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4513668,00.html>.

14 Isabel Kershner and Jodi Rudoren, "Israel Expands Settlements to Rebuke Palestinians," *New York Times*, June 5, 2014.

15 Jonathan Freedland, "Liberal Zionism After Gaza," *The New York Review of Books*, July 26, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/jul/26/liberal-zionism-after-gaza/?insrc=rel>.

Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands. While Netanyahu's public rhetoric focused on weakening Hamas, in actuality, he strengthened it. The weight of evidence suggests the later argument has more explanatory power. Hamas calculated it could improve its strategic position as a result of the 2014 conflict with Israel. In any case, Hamas did indeed retaliate with rocket fire into Israel; and Israel responded with both air attacks and, ultimately, a ground invasion of Gaza.

This third round of "mowing the grass" in Gaza was by far the most deadly and destructive. About 2,200 Gazans were killed, over 60 percent of whom were civilians, and whole swaths of the strip were destroyed.<sup>16</sup> About 15 percent of Gaza's population was internally displaced. The Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR) calculated that nearly \$8 billion would be needed to rebuild Gaza.<sup>17</sup> While a relatively small number of Israelis were killed (72, almost all soldiers) much of the country was subjected to thousands of rockets, necessitating regular visits to local bomb shelters. Although most of Hamas' rockets were crude and inaccurate, and only a handful got past the Iron Dome anti-rocket system, they were effective in creating some psychological fear in Israeli society.

### Strategic Calculations *vis-à-vis* the PA and the PLO

While Hamas's record of government in Gaza since 2007 was decidedly mixed, so was that of the Palestinian Authority. Public opinion polling suggests that Palestinians did not think very highly of either government. Still, Hamas was, on balance, losing ground to the PA in terms of power and influence. Israel's policy of isolating Gaza through embargo may have constituted collective punishment against a civilian population, but it was also reasonably effective in preventing Hamas from reversing the deepening impoverishment of Gaza, where unemployment was at an all-time high and nourishment at an all-time low. Although the PA lacked the ability to change Israel's policy toward Gaza, it is fair to say that the PA leadership was quietly on board with Israel's isolation of Hamas. PA employees in Gaza continued to get paid by Ramallah, even if most had long since been fired by Hamas (many for failing to show up for work at the PA's insistence) and replaced by Hamas loyalists.<sup>18</sup>

As noted above, regional dynamics during the Arab Spring had worked against the interests of Hamas, as it lost its regional patrons. Furthermore, while western countries put no significant pressure on Israel to ease its stranglehold on Gaza, they continued to subsidize PA rule in the West Bank. For example, the United States typically underwrote the PA to the tune of \$400 - \$500 million per year.<sup>19</sup> The financial disparities between Hamas and the PA continued to grow.

---

16 Associated Press, "Report Finds High Civilian Death Toll During Gaza War," *Haaretz*, February 13, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.642397>.

17 State of Palestine, *Gaza Strip: A Reconstruction & Development Plan* (Palestine: Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction, PECDAR, September 2014), <http://www.pecdar.ps/new/userfiles/file/PECDAR-Gaza-English-spr.pdf>.

18 For an overview of the situation of PA employees in Gaza, see Ahmad Melhem, "Gaza Civil Servants' Salaries Remain Unpaid," *Al-Monitor*, October 8, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/gaza-employee-salaries-government-deficit.html#>

19 Julian Pecquet, "Palestine Seeks Greater US 'Balance,'" *Al-Monitor*, August 10, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/lobbying/palestine>.

The April 2014 reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah was a sign of weakness for Hamas. Hamas effectively put its rule in Gaza on the line by promising to abide by a new government under the presidency of Mahmoud Abbas, and it agreed to new elections, which could legally terminate its authority in Gaza. Even before the shooting war began during the summer, there was plenty of skepticism that Hamas would actually follow through and step away from power, but its overall weakness and the impact of public opinion (which is an important factor in Palestinian politics) both suggest that Hamas was serious in its commitment. Perhaps most of all, the April agreement allowed Hamas to disown responsibility for the deteriorating conditions in Gaza, and place that responsibility squarely on the PA's shoulders.

The summer conflict with Israel, however, enabled Hamas to recalibrate its balance of power with the Palestinian Authority to its advantage. Hamas could once again position itself as the only serious fighting force confronting Israel, and favorably compare its posture of resistance to the PA's posture of accommodation and defeatism. Hamas could revitalize support among Palestinians not just in Gaza but also in the West Bank (and beyond), strongly at first with the "rally around the flag" effect of the summer war, but hopefully (from Hamas' perspective), in the longer term by further discrediting the PA's and PLO's strategy of negotiating with Israel. According to Hamas' narrative, its armed resistance forced Israel out of Gaza in 2005, just as Hizbullah's armed resistance forced Israel out of Lebanon in 2000 after nearly two decades of occupation. The PLO, by contrast, opted for fruitless negotiations that not only never produced a Palestinian state as promised, but also saw the tripling of the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank, while negotiations dragged on to no avail. Hamas had all along made a "trap argument" for the Oslo peace negotiations: Israel set a trap for pointless negotiations that would never lead to independence, which Yasir Arafat walked into. The 2014 Gaza conflict served to sharpen the contrast between Hamas fighting Israel (*muqawama*) and the PLO talking fruitlessly (*musawama*).

To borrow from Henry Kissinger in his analysis of the Vietnam war, Hamas won the 2014 conflict by not losing, and Israel lost it by not winning.<sup>20</sup> The Palestinian Authority, as something of an ally of Israel in its posture toward Hamas, also came out badly. As long as Israel did not succeed in overthrowing Hamas or decimating its leadership, Hamas could (and did) plausibly claim victory. Hamas' ability to stay in power, to keep its leadership intact, to bloody Israel, and even to garner broad international support for its call to ease Israel's embargo of Gaza, all enhanced Hamas' power and prestige vis-à-vis the PA.

Indeed, the Palestinian Authority's push at the end of 2014 to get UN Security Council recognition of the State of Palestine, and its joining the International Criminal Court in early 2015 were, in part, attempts by the PA to regain the political initiative within Palestinian society from Hamas. Negotiations with Israel had clearly failed to deliver independence for Palestinians, or even to end or significantly ease Israel's occupation, and the PA needed to demonstrate it was still relevant, and its political strategy could still yield results for the Palestinians. Hamas' "victory" in the summer conflict with Israel compelled the Palestinian

---

20 Henry Kissinger, "The Vietnam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 2 (January 1969): 214.

Authority to take political steps that were not well thought out. For example, the PA had not even taken the requisite steps to insure it would gain at least nine votes at the Security Council, the minimum number required to pass the recognition resolution and thus compel the Americans to veto the measure. Even Arab ally Jordan let it be known that the Palestinian Authority had poorly handled the whole affair.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, Hamas calculated it could recalibrate the internal Palestinian balance of power as a result of the 2014 conflict, and it appears to have calculated correctly, at least for a period of time. It has compelled the PA to respond politically to regain its edge, but six months after the shooting stopped, the PA's efforts have not yet born fruit.

### Strategic Calculations *vis-à-vis* Israel

During the 2014 conflict, Hamas had two sets of goals with regard to Israel. First, as noted above, it needed to win by not losing – to survive in power. Second, Hamas sought to focus international pressure on Israel to lift the embargo on Gaza, which would, in turn, greatly strengthen its domestic political position. Hamas succeeded on its first calculation, but has mostly failed on the second.

Given the periodic Israeli assaults on Gaza, Hamas was well prepared to absorb the 2014 attack and to survive. It did so primarily through three tactics. First, and most important, Hamas needed to ensure regime decapitation did not occur, and its leadership would emerge intact after hostilities subsided. In this regard, Hamas succeeded in keeping its political leadership completely intact throughout the conflict. Hamas' leaders reportedly spent most of the conflict in deep bunkers, including ones Israel had initially built thirty years earlier under the Shifa hospital in Gaza. Top Hamas leader Khaled Mesh'al sat out the war at his home in Qatar. Hamas' military leadership did suffer some losses, including, that of the shadowy leader of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Muhammad Deif, after Israel dropped a bunker-busting bomb on his home toward the end of the conflict. Deif's wife and children were killed in the bombing, and it seems Deif was also killed; however, Hamas continues to deny this, and Deif's death has never been confirmed. Three other top military commanders – Muhammad Abu Shammala, Ra'id al-Attar, and Muhammad Barhum – were also killed late in the conflict.<sup>22</sup>

Second, Hamas sought to continue firing rockets at Israel throughout the conflict in order to win a psychological victory. In this regard, Hamas succeeded. Despite heavy attempts to silence the rocket fire, Israel was never able to destroy Hamas' well-supplied, dispersed, and often mobile stocks. Hamas used or destroyed about 75 percent of an estimated 10,000 rockets with which it began the conflict.<sup>23</sup> Hamas was able to fire its rockets until the cease-fire came into effect on August 26. Indeed, in the last five days of the conflict, more than 700 rockets and

21 Jack Khoury, "Report: Amman Angered by Palestinians' UN Bid," *Haaretz*, January 5, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/.premium-1.635408>.

22 Joshua Mitnick and Asa Fitch, "Three Senior Hamas Military Leaders Killed in Israeli Airstrike in Gaza," *Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 2014.

23 Khaled Abu Toameh and Herb Keinon, "Gaza Cease-Fire Between Israel, Hamas Goes Into Effect," *The Jerusalem Post*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Palestinian-sources-Gaza-cease-fire-to-be-announced-on-Tuesday-evening-372386>.

mortar shells were fired into Israel, killing three.<sup>24</sup> From a military perspective, Hamas' crude rocketry posed no significant threat. However, from a civilian psychological perspective, Hamas' rockets proved relatively effective, and sent a message that its improving capabilities put much of Israel's population under threat.

Third, Hamas' system of tunnels included some that went under Israel's border and not detected by Israel. Periodically during the conflict, Hamas was able to send some militants into Israel itself. As with the rockets, the military impact of these raids was far less significant than the psychological impact of being able to send commando teams to strike targets inside Israel.

Thus, in the classic logic of guerilla warfare, Hamas won the war simply by surviving and showing it could inflict damage on Israel, even while absorbing significantly more damage inside Gaza. Israel, by not defeating Hamas outright, cast doubt on the ability of the IDF to win a conflict that is, after all, primarily political in nature. The 2014 Gaza conflict was in many ways a repeat of Israel's 2006 conflict with Hizbullah. In both cases, Israel was the far stronger military force, but in both cases, the target of its wrath survived and was able to hit inside Israel. Hizbullah's political stature inside Lebanon and the region soared as a result of the 2006 conflict, at least temporarily.<sup>25</sup> Hamas appears to be enjoying a similar political bump, although likely not quite as much due to the regional dynamics discussed above. Israel's primary post-war demand, for the complete demilitarization of the Gaza Strip, was successfully rejected outright by Hamas.

Hamas' second broad strategic goal in the conflict was to focus international attention on Israel's embargo, with an eye toward having it lifted. In this regard, Hamas has enjoyed less success. Similar to the *Mavi Marmara* episode, the 2014 conflict did focus a great deal of attention on the suffering in Gaza caused by the embargo and, indeed, Israel did ease the embargo a little (as it had following *Mavi Marmara*). Still, the efforts to rebuild Gaza, which would necessarily include a significant lifting of the embargo, have amounted to little more than empty promises months after the 2014 conflict. Gaza remains isolated and under economic siege by Israel (and to a lesser degree, Egypt).

In sum, Hamas succeeded in realizing most of its short-term goals *vis-à-vis* Israel: it survived the war with its leadership and power largely intact in Gaza, and it was able to inflict damage on Israel right up to the cease-fire. As a practical matter, Hamas largely replaced the PA as the most important part of the Palestinian leadership with whom Israel needed to negotiate various issues, demonstrating to all Palestinians that armed struggle against Israel gets more results and attention than the PA's political posture.<sup>26</sup> Still, these strategic victories may well turn out to be short-lived, given the continuation of the embargo against Gaza and the huge rebuilding efforts Gaza now requires which still have not gotten underway.

---

24 "Live Updates: Operation Protective Edge," *Haaretz*, August 21-26, 2014.

25 Augustus Richard Norton, *Hizbullah: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton: University Press, 2014).

26 Shlomi Eldar, "Fatah Official: Israel, Hamas in Direct Talks," *Al-Monitor*, December 9, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/israel-hamas-security-cooperation-direct-talks-abbas-fatah.html>.

## Strategic Calculations *vis-à-vis* Egypt and the Arab World

Hamas was least successful in using the 2014 conflict to ameliorate its sharp regional losses due to the Arab Spring. Hamas had hoped to use the war to ease its regional isolation, given the broad sympathy generated for Gaza due to the level of destruction. Al Jazeera's Arabic service had easily the best coverage of the war from inside the Gaza Strip and, for most of the conflict, was the only major television news service covering it on the Palestinian side. Since many Arabs rely on Al Jazeera as their primary source of regional news, the fifty-day conflict in Gaza got enormous play throughout the Arab world.

Still, popular sentiment could not reverse the major strategic losses Hamas had suffered during the Arab Spring. Egypt under its new military strongman, General-*cum*-President Sisi, did not alter its hard line against Hamas in Gaza, and kept its border at Rafah sealed. The loss of Syria could not be reversed, nor could the loss of Iran, particularly under its new president Rouhani, who was more interested in concluding a P5+1 nuclear deal with the West than helping Hamas (though talks were held in late 2014 to explore reconciliation). Even Qatar was generally compelled to toe the Saudi line in the aftermath of the 2014 conflict with regard to Egypt, Syria, and Gaza, meaning a more balanced approach to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

Thus, at the regional level, Hamas failed to improve its strategic position during the 2014 conflict, and remained a marginalized force.

## Conclusions & Implications

The 2014 Gaza conflict brought extensive destruction to the Palestinian inhabitants of that benighted strip of land, but the two principal combatants partly realized their strategic goals. The Netanyahu government largely succeeded in preventing Palestinian unity, which had loomed as a genuine possibility following the April 2014 agreement between Fatah and Hamas. The re-fracturing of the Palestinian body politic, along with the rockets fired into Israel from Gaza, once again relieved international pressure on Israel to negotiate a withdrawal from the West Bank and to end its occupation there. The Gaza conflict bought Mr. Netanyahu time to deepen Israel's grip on the West Bank through further settlement activity, which intensified after the conflict in Gaza.

Hamas also realized many of its goals through the Gaza conflict. Most important, it emerged from the conflict stronger politically *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian Authority than it was in April 2014. Once again, Hamas was at least the political equal of the PA, and its political narrative again made armed resistance appear to be the superior choice to feckless PA negotiations with Israel. By contrast, the PA looked like an impotent observer of the Gaza conflict, while Hamas exacted a pound of Israeli flesh. Hamas also largely met its strategic goals with regard to Israel, realizing the old guerilla maxim of winning by not losing. Only regionally did Hamas' weak political position remain largely unchanged as a result of the 2014 conflict. But Hamas' gains may not prove to be long-lived as its regional isolation and economic hardships did not improve after the conflict. 2015 has started out hard for Hamas, with reports

of its inability to pay some police and security forces, and a growing number of union strikes.<sup>27</sup>

The Gaza conflict also presents several lessons for US defense policy. First, as US officials have long recognized, the perpetuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict undermines American national interests in the region, as, for example, General David Petraeus testified to the US Senate in 2010.<sup>28</sup> The 2014 Gaza conflict – widely seen in the Middle East as a one-sided slaughter by Israel of hapless Palestinians – only further exacerbated anti-American sentiment in the region, given the US’ “special relationship” with Israel.<sup>29</sup> Public-opinion surveys in the Middle East by major Western polling organizations such as Gallup, Pew, and Zogby, regularly find very low levels of support for US policies toward the region, and especially with regard to the Israel-Palestine conflict.<sup>30</sup> In addition to exacerbating anti-American sentiment in the Middle East, the 2014 Gaza conflict likely pushed any political resolution even further into the future. All of this lends credence to the argument advanced by John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt and others that Israel has become a strategic liability to the United States.<sup>31</sup> Thinking through the ramifications of how this conflict negatively impacts US national interests and mitigating the worst expressions of it must take high priority within the Pentagon.

A second implication concerns the always-evolving technological arms race between Israel and Hamas. Israel, of course, has one of the strongest and most technologically-sophisticated militaries in the world, and Hamas has no actual military. Rather, the conflict moves along the logic of asymmetric warfare. Following the example of Hizbullah in Lebanon in the 2006 war, Hamas stockpiled thousands of crude rockets. However, the advances in the American-made Iron Dome system in the last two years, rendered almost useless Hamas rocketry in 2014. Hamas and other militant opponents of Israel will now need to rethink rocketry as an asymmetrical advantage to their side, or otherwise defeat the Iron Dome system. In the absence of such an advance, other tactics will likely be stressed. The success of Iron Dome has enormous implications for US defense policy everywhere in the world.

While Hamas is clearly the weaker party and will likely further decline politically inside the Palestinian community in 2015 (as it had leading up to the April 2014 agreement), it is too socially rooted to be

27 Adnan Abu Amer, “Hamas’s Choices,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 7, 2015, [http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=57649&solr\\_hilite](http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=57649&solr_hilite); and William Booth, “War Punishes Gaza,” *Washington Post*, February 13, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2015/02/13/gaza-misery>.

28 “US General: Israel-Palestinian Conflict Fosters Anti-US Sentiment,” *Haaretz*, March 17, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/u-s-general-israel-palestinian-conflict-fosters-anti-u-s-sentiment-1.264910>

29 Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch accused Israel of war crimes in the 2014 conflict, a sentiment widely echoed in the Arabic press. For one example linking US protection of Israel to shielding war crimes, see Musa al-Gharbi, “Israel, Not Hamas, Orchestrated the Latest Conflict in Gaza: Washington’s Ironclad Support for Israel Provides Effective Shield for War Crimes,” *Al Jazeera America*, July 22, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/7/israel-hamas-palestiniansconflictunitedstatesinternationalallaw.html>

30 See the most recent (November 2014) Middle East survey by Zogby: “Today’s Middle East: Pressures and Challenges,” *Arab American Institute*, <http://www.aaiausa.org/pages/todays-middle-east-pressures-and-challenges>

31 John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

defeated militarily. This has been a consistent myopia among some in both Israel and Washington, that large Islamist social movements like Hizbullah and Hamas can be militarily defeated by Israel. Despite decades of power in occupation of parts of Lebanon and the West Bank, Israel was not able to crush such groups. Indeed, just the opposite: they grew in power under Israeli occupation. Thus, a third lesson from this conflict for US defense leaders is thinking through best practices in dealing with Islamist groups like Hamas that go beyond Israel's failed policy of dealing with Hamas strictly as a terrorist organization. Without question, Hamas has engaged in frequent acts of terrorism, but it is also a politically powerful movement within Palestinian society. A more deft and nuanced approach is called for.

It should go without saying that the biggest strategic losers of the 2014 conflict were the PA and PLO, whose project of a negotiated peace with Israel looks even further removed from reality. The biggest losers of all, of course, are the people of Gaza, whose miserable lives are even worse today than they were a year ago.

