Gaza - The Aftermath

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Introduction

Three weeks after the start of the attacks on Gaza, the Israeli government announced a unilateral ceasefire. Although a number of governments had worked to achieve a negotiated end to the conflict, this proved impossible. The Egyptians, in particular, were hugely conscious of the radicalising impact of Hamas's actions on their own population and sought repeatedly to bring the conflict to an end. They failed, with Hamas insisting throughout the war that they would only agree to a ceasefire if all Israeli troops were withdrawn within a week and the borders were fully opened.

In the event, Israeli Defence Force (IDF) troops began to withdraw from Gaza immediately after the Israeli ceasefire, and Hamas then announced its own ceasefire, initially for one week. Within three days of the Israeli decision, and

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coinciding with the inauguration of President Obama in Washington, all the Israeli forces had been withdrawn. This was not to be the end of the conflict, and the weeks since the ceasefire have involved the firing of some rockets from Gaza into southern Israel and substantial Israeli air raids, especially against the tunnels under the Philadelphi corridor separating Gaza from Egypt.

In the wake of the main conflict, and although rockets were still being fired, the Israeli government declared a victory, stating that the threat from Hamas had been greatly reduced, and that any further substantial Hamas action would be deterred by the prospect of massive Israeli retaliation. Although there was widespread criticism of Israel across much of the world, domestic support for the conflict remained high, with substantial resentment over the level of foreign criticism. Moreover, in the run up to the General Election on 10 February, there were indications that the political mood was moving to the right, especially with increased support for the hardline Yisrael Beiteinu party led by Avigdor Lieberman. Perhaps most striking of all, one of the major features of the pre-election debate relating to the war was the widespread view that Israel halted its offensive too early. This has implications for the future of Israeli security which will be explored in this briefing.

Aspects of the War

Last month's briefing (The Gaza Conflict), written two weeks into the war, pointed to the detailed planning that been undertaken by the Israeli Defence Forces, and the intensity of the initial air assault. At that time it seemed unlikely that IDF ground forces would go into the most heavily populated parts of Gaza City and the densely-packed refugee camps, and this indeed proved to be the case. Even so, the extent of the force used resulted in substantial casualties, most of them civilian. At the end of the war the UN estimated that over 1,300

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people were killed including 412 children, and over 5,000 people injured. 4,000 homes were destroyed and 20,000 severely damaged – about 20% of the entire housing stock – and much of the infrastructure was damaged or destroyed, including government ministries, the main campus of the Islamic University and numerous agricultural facilities.

The initial Israeli air campaign was intense, probably more so than any conflict since the January 1991 start of the Iraq War. In an initial three minute forty second assault by 88 strike aircraft on 100 targets, many key Hamas facilities were damaged or destroyed – a degree of destruction that far exceeded what Hamas planners had anticipated. Neither had they anticipated a ground assault, the expectation having been of several days of air strikes.

In spite of this, most of the Hamas political and organisational infrastructure survived the three-week war and there was substantial evidence that its members were able to demonstrate their control of the territory within days of the conflict ending. There is evidence that most of the several thousand Hamas paramilitaries avoided open conflict with the heavily armed Israeli ground troops. After the initial shock of the intensive air assault, and in spite of the Israeli ground offensive separating Hamas's military organisation into four isolated components, Hamas paramilitaries had sufficient independence of action to recognise the imperative of survival as being their primary war aim.

Within the immediate confines of the war it was clear from the first day that the Israeli government had the strong and sustained support of the Bush administration. Although it was right at the end of its term of office, this was crucial for Israel and ensured that there would be little pressure from western states for an early ceasefire. Furthermore, there was some evidence of a direct US involvement in the war. On the West Bank, Fatah sought to control pro-

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Hamas protests, arresting several hundred supporters in a series of actions coordinated with the Israeli security force, Shin Bet, and the IDF, in an operation under the overall guidance of US security officials. In the war itself, there are reliable indications that some key weapons were supplied direct from US Air Force stocks.

Such aspects of the war became well known across the Middle East and reinforced a widespread belief that the war was a joint operation. In terms of the regional outlook this is a significant factor as it builds on previous perceptions. Thus the F-16 strike aircraft and the Apache helicopter gunships are seen as US aircraft in Israeli markings, and there is the memory of the airlift of military supplies from the United States to Israel at the time of the 2006 Lebanon War.

For Israel, the Gaza War was seen as an absolutely necessary response to the effects of the rockets fired from Gaza over the previous months. Last month's briefing explored the Israeli outlook, seeking to explain the unusual situation in which a very powerful state has an underlying sense of vulnerability and insecurity, even in the face of very weak opposition. The briefing pointed to the problems experienced by the IDF in the withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 1982-85, the experience of the Iraqi Scud attacks in 1991 and of the failure of the 2006 Lebanon War to provide any sustained reduction in the armed potential of Hezbollah. In this context, the crude unguided rockets being fired from Gaza had a much greater psychological and social effect in Israel than most external analysts recognised, the end result being a very vigorous assault, not just on Hamas as a political and military organisation but on much of the civil infrastructure of Gaza.

Regional Responses

In the aftermath of the three-week conflict, it rapidly became apparent that Hamas retained a capability to launch rockets into southern Israel, and its political leadership made it plain that it retained overall authority. There was also evidence of an increase in support for the movement among Palestinians. The wider regional response was also broadly favourable to the organisation. Across the Middle East, public opinion moved markedly in favour of Hamas as being the vanguard movement for Palestinian aspirations. This was also reflected in immediate offers of support for reconstruction, most notably from Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also from the European Union. One particularly significant development was the manner in which Qatar took on the role of the main Arab supporter of the movement, both in economic and political terms. Although a small state and one which has not previously been a major diplomatic force, Qatar is singularly wealthy, being hugely rich in natural gas reserves, and the ruling family appears determined to make a substantial commitment to supporting the Palestinian cause.

The Iranian links with Hamas have historically been much less than has been represented by most Israeli politicians – Gaza has had far more economic support from Saudi Arabia than from Iran – but it is likely that Iran will be persistent in its support for Hamas, including the provision of more sophisticated missiles. Such transfers might seem implausible given the reluctance of the Egyptian authorities to allow the smuggling of such weapons through the Philadelphi corridor tunnels, but it is by no means clear that Egypt has sufficient support from its own officials to be able to actually control the crossing.

Israel and the United States

Whatever the nature of the coalition that is now formed in Israel, one significant result is the displacement of the Labour Party into fourth place behind Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu Party. With the need to reflect the public mood, the new government is unlikely to be more supportive of peace negotiations with the Palestinians aimed at a viable two-state settlement. In broad terms Israel has moved distinctly to the right over the past fifteen years, a political change that has become entrenched due to several factors. These include the addition, in the 1990s, of around one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are highly security conscious and tend to support right-wing parties. There has also been a marked tendency for Israelis of a more leftist disposition to take up residence abroad, and there is the fundamental perception, already discussed, of insecurity in spite of massive conventional military strength backed up by substantial nuclear forces. For all of these reasons, it is sensible to expect that the incoming Israeli government will be suspicious of negotiations and that this attitude will persist.

Whether there is any possibility of this changing will be largely dependent on US/Israeli relations, bearing in mind that the political, economic and military support of the United States is essential for Israel. It is here that there are significant changes underway, whether measured in short- or long-term trends. As to the former, the dominant change is the end of the eight years of the Bush administration, in which Israel has been seen as a core ally of the United States in its pursuit of the war on terror. The focus of that war has already moved from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Obama administration is also seeking much improved relations with Iran, even as that country is seen in Israel as its greatest regional threat.

On the specific issue of the Israel/Palestine conflict, the appointment of George Mitchell as President Obama's envoy is significant for three quite different reasons. One is that Mitchell has family knowledge of the Middle East combined with a reputation for evenness in his work in Northern Ireland. The second is that he is not regarded as close to the Israel lobby in Washington, and the third is the manner in which President Obama made it clear that this was his initiative. Although Mitchell's appointment was announced by the new Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, President Obama was present at the occasion and gave a detailed description of the terms of reference for Mitchell. Just four day later President Obama chose to give his first major interview to any TV network to the Al-Arabiya satellite news channel based in Dubai.

All of these elements would have been unthinkable under the George W Bush administration, but they should also be seen in relation to some much longer term trends in the US/Israel relationship. This has evolved over more than fifty years, since the rise of Arab nationalism in the mid-1950s, and it was probably at its greatest intensity at the time of the 1967 Six Day War when Israel was very widely seen as fighting for its survival and winning against very heavy odds. For Americans born in the 1930s and 1940s this David/Goliath image was very powerful, aiding the development of the Israel lobby and enabling it to reach out beyond the relatively small American Jewish community.

The Six Day War was also a great boost for the Christian Zionists, being seen as part-fulfilment of God's prophecy for the Jews to be integral to God's plan for the End Days. Indeed, as support for Israel among American Jews tended to decline in the 1990s, so the Christian Zionists became more significant. After 9/11 their support increased still further and their links with President Bush, a born-again Christian, were of great help to the Israel lobby. President Obama

may be well-versed in the importance of religion in the United States, but his administration is far less dependent on evangelical Christians in general and Christian Zionists in particular. Given the liberal political leanings of the majority of American Jews, he is likely to retain their support as he seeks to promote a renewed peace process.

He will be helped by a subtle but significant change in the cultural demography of US domestic support for Israel. Put bluntly, that generation of Americans with strong memories of the era of the Six Day War is ageing, and younger Americans, indeed anybody under fifty, simply no longer have the automatic sympathy for Israel that was such a marked feature of the US political scene for several decades and was of such great assistance to the Israel lobby. Over the period that Israel has become more hardline in its attitude to the Palestinians, the crucial support of the United States that has for so long been taken for granted, may have been undergoing a steady erosion that will make it easier for the Obama administration to be more vigorous in the demands it may make, not just of the Palestinians but of the Israelis as well.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Gaza War, Israel has lost support in Europe, and Hamas has increased its status in the Middle East. Furthermore, it is by no means certain that Israel can rely on the strong support that it has in the past received from the United States. Yet, at the same time, the political mood in Israel is less supportive of negotiating a lasting settlement with the Palestinians. The further element, as last month's briefing suggested, is that the slow but steady developments in irregular warfare mean that the security of Israel is likely to decline over the next decade unless a settlement can be achieved. This aspect is only recognised by a small minority of Israeli analysts and commentators, but

that element may grow as the realisation develops that the three-week Gaza War added little or nothing to Israel's security. If, furthermore, it becomes apparent to the new Israeli government that the Obama administration regards a just and lasting settlement of the conflict to be in the security interests of the United States, given the radicalising impact of the Gaza War, then attitudes may have to change rapidly. If so, that will be an unexpected consequence of the war.

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