

COMMENTARY

No.91

Monday, 24 December 2012

Israel and Hamas:

How Biases Are Driving the Conflict To the Precipice?

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Listening to Israeli and Hamas officials about the nature of their conflict and what precipitated the current conflagration, one comes to a definite conclusion: they are both right. At close scrutiny, however, one finds that while both may indeed be “right” they also are dead wrong. Both sides have successfully managed over the years to foster public perceptions that support both their respective narratives and the notion that the other has wronged them. It is this conviction and the lack of unbiased and credible voices to the contrary from within and outside the region that allows this violent and self-consuming conflict to fester, pushing both sides ever closer to the precipice.

It is pointless to try to establish which side is to blame for the current flare-up. Indeed, whether it was ignited by the deliberate firing on an Israeli jeep by an Islamic Jihadist from Gaza that wounded four Israeli soldiers, or by the pinpointed air assault that killed Hamas’ al-Qassam Brigade commander, Ahmad Jabari, is hardly relevant. The tit-for-tat that followed was not simply the result of these initial attacks and the counter-attacks. These incidents simply ignited a long simmering tension that would have exploded anyway as both Israel and Hamas were determined to change the equation on the ground to their advantage at this particular juncture.

Israel was determined to end Hamas’ and other Islamists’ largely unprovoked rocket attacks (nearly 750 were fired at Israel in the past 12 months) and weaken, if not destroy, Hamas’ infrastructure. Known for his national security credentials, Prime Minister Netanyahu opted to act forcefully now not only to send a message to Hezbollah, Iran, and militants in Syria that Israel is prepared to deal with all contingencies, but also because of the Israeli general election in January 2013 and his determination to consolidate his political base.

Hamas, on the other hand, has several objectives in mind. First, it aims to demonstrate its resolve and strength against the weaker Palestinian Authority (P.A.), which has achieved little for its peaceful posture toward Israel, and undermine the P.A.'s efforts to seek U.N. Observer State status as the representative of all Palestinians. Hamas also wants to test the affinity and the commitment of the new Islamic Egyptian government and the extent to which it will rally behind their cause. In addition, Hamas wishes to garner the support of other Arab and Muslim states in the wake of the Arab Spring. Finally, Hamas aspires to alleviate the plight of the Palestinians in Gaza by refocusing the world's attention on the Israeli blockade.

From the Israeli perspective, Hamas is a terrorist organization and is recognized as such by the U.S. and the European community. It is an irredentist foe, irredeemably committed to Israel's destruction, and openly calls for and relentlessly supports other Islamic jihadists that attack Israeli targets. Hamas is further seen as the conduit for Iran's regional misadventure; it has no interest in peace and, to the contrary, Hamas devotes much of its resources to buying weapons, especially rockets (instead of feeding their people) and plots to undermine Israel's security while fostering and exploiting regional instability.

Hamas sees Israel as a ruthless occupying power behind the plight of the Palestinian refugees that have been languishing in camps for more than six decades. They view Israel's settlement enterprise as a clear manifestation of its intentions to continuously usurp Palestinian land and prevent them from establishing their own state. They accuse Israel of deliberately limiting the Palestinians' mobility while enacting discriminatory policies that stifle the Palestinians' growth and prosperity. Moreover, Hamas views the Israeli blockade around the impoverished Gaza as inhumane, as it forces people to live in poverty and denies them the basic right to live with dignity.

A cursory review of Israel and Hamas' perceptions of each other suggests that their respective citizenry commonly accepts their assessments. The daily denunciations and the portrayals of each other in evil terms have done nothing but deepen their distrust, intensify their hatred and hostility, and shatter any hope for reconciliation. It is no wonder then that this mindset evolved into a siege mentality leaving no room for any mitigation, moderation, and certainly no accommodation. Yet both sides know deep inside that the other exists and will continue to exist. The death and destruction of recent days will leave nothing more than deeper scars and haunting nightmares. A new ceasefire will eventually be established in the wake of the current violence, even if it were to follow a major Israeli incursion into Gaza. Unless the new cease-fire is established on a different basis, it will more than likely follow the pattern of previous ceasefires that served as nothing more than respites to prepare for the next round of ever-more intensified violence.

Hamas may think that they are riding high and will seek to gain politically from the ashes of the destruction and death of men, women, and children whom they use as human shields. Hamas impresses itself by the outcry of relatively few Palestinians who want revenge and the show of support by the Arab states, but Hamas is deaf to the voices of the majority of Palestinians in Gaza who want to live in peace. They are sick and tired of being subjected to the whims of extremist leaders who wage wars in their names while destroying the very fabric of the society they presumably seek to protect. Hamas has done nothing but use the people as sacrificial lambs to promote its blind ambitions that will do nothing but bring greater havoc, helplessness and hopelessness to the people.

The Israeli government, on the other hand, pretends to walk the high moral ground when in fact it too subjects its own people to a long and protracted conflict that has robbed the country of much of the values upon which it was founded. The occupation is a curse that justifiably portrays the historically oppressed Jews as oppressors. Israel has created intolerable conditions in the territories by expropriating land, erecting barriers, building new (and expanding existing) settlements, uprooting olive trees, and depriving ordinary people of living normal lives. By its own actions, Israel is planting the seeds of discontent and extremism among the Palestinians and then blames them for their militant and violent behaviour.

Neither side can or will change their attitudes toward the other overnight, not only because of the lack of trust and open hostility that have been ingrained in their psyche, but because they have their own agendas that preclude the right of each other to exist in their present form. For these reasons, it is not enough to establish a new ceasefire to end the cycle of violence, as this limited objective will only, as in the past, be violated time and time again. Both Israel and Hamas have legitimate claims and each must meet the other's basic requirements in order to chart a new course that can be sustained in the long run.

Israel is correct in demanding that a more permanent security arrangement be established that will prohibit the firing of rockets in the future by Hamas or any of its surrogates. Israel is also seeking some assurance that Hamas will be prevented from acquiring more sophisticated rockets. In return, Israel must agree to lift the blockade, albeit in stages, conditional upon complete cessation of hostilities and allowing international monitors to join Israeli inspectors to inspect all cargo going in or out of Gaza. The international monitors will also be charged with ensuring that steel and cement are used strictly for building homes, hospitals, government institutions and infrastructure, not bunkers or tunnels. Only a full adherence to a ceasefire and the expansion of trade (which is ongoing even as the fighting continues) between the two sides will allow, however gratingly, for the gradual building of trust which is sorely absent. This will also permit the creation of a new environment conducive to peaceful co-existence, as the United States is

currently pushing for, while building the foundation for bilateral relations and leaving the prospect of a peace agreement a possibility sometime in the future.

None of this can happen without the direct and indirect support of Egypt, who can exercise tremendous influence on Hamas, and the United States who likewise can persuade Israel to accept a deal based on mutuality of interest. Both Egypt and the U.S. have major stakes in ending the conflict. Notwithstanding his public condemnation of Israel, the last thing that President Morsi seeks, regardless of his ideological and religious leanings, is to entangle his country in the Israeli-Hamas conflict that could spin out of control and place Egypt in a terrible bind. Egypt has a profound national interest in maintaining the peace treaty with Israel and is in dire need of the U.S.' financial and political support. If President Morsi wants to survive as president he must first and foremost focus on the Egyptian economy. Paying lip service to Hamas is the minimum he must do to calm his own public, but he remains the central figure that can effect a real change in Hamas' behaviour toward Israel. In the main, President Morsi must, at one point or another, pressure Hamas to permanently forsake violence as the tool of choice to achieve its "political objective," which must be based on a two-state solution.

The United States, on the other hand, is the only country that can exert the kind of influence necessary to modify the policy of any Israeli government to look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a different perspective and work in earnest toward a permanent solution. The U.S. can exercise tremendous leverage on Israel as it is the only country that supports Israel financially, politically, and militarily, as well as economically. Israel trusts the United States to watch its back and ensure its ultimate national security. The new Obama Administration must now, however, assume a direct and active role and remain relentless in supporting peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's mission at this moment of crisis must not end with the establishment of a ceasefire but with the beginning of a renewed and sustained American effort to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, however long and difficult it may be.

Hamas might feel emboldened by the wide range of political support it has received from the Arab states, Turkey, Iran and other countries, but it also knows that rhetoric is not equal to real politik. No Arab or Muslim state will venture to confront Israel militarily only to save Hamas' skin. In the final analysis, Hamas will be left to wallow in its own mess while the Palestinians in Gaza will continue to suffer from their leaders' misadventures. Israel on the other hand must too come to terms with the reality on the ground. Hamas cannot be wished away and even if Israel succeeds in destroying Hamas' infrastructure and decapitating its leadership, Hamas will rise again.

The current bloody and destructive conflict can serve both Israel and the Palestinians, including Hamas, well if they only let reason and reality dictate their future course of action.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal.

Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/israel-and-hamas-how-biases-are-driving-the-conflict-to-the-precipice/>

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