Jean-Pierre Filiu
Professor
SciencesPo (Institute of Political Studies), Paris

Israel should stop its policy of lockdown, which cuts the Gaza Strip off from the rest of the world, and acknowledge that the inhabitants of Gaza are part of the Palestinian peoples, whose official leadership is attempting to establish a state next to Israel.

Editorial in the daily newspaper Haaretz, 26 December 2014.

From 8 July to 26 August 2014, Israel’s Protective Edge offensive literally devastated the Gaza Strip. Entire neighbourhoods of this Palestinian territory, inhabited by at least 1.8 million people, were reduced to rubble. The mediation of Cairo, which had proven effective in the preceding crisis in November 2012, was neutralised by the pro-Israeli stance taken by Field Marshal Abdul Fattah Al-Sisi.

The new ruler of Egypt, appointed after an electoral farce in May 2014, effectively overthrew Mohammed Morsi, the first elected President in Egyptian history, with a background in the Muslim Brotherhood, in July 2013. Having ruled Hamas a terrorist movement, Al-Sisi then unleashed his hostility against Palestinian Islamists. Since then, the absence of an external moderator has granted free rein to the devastating logic of arms, above all during the twenty-day ground invasion of Gaza by Israeli tanks and commandos.

When the cease-fire finally arrived, the death toll was catastrophic: over 2,100 people killed in Gaza (among them nearly 500 children), the final number of victims being most certainly impossible to determine due to the quantity of human remains buried under the rubble of the bombings; over one hundred thousand Palestinians are homeless due to the total or partial destruction of some 18,000 houses. According to the UN, only 10% of the inhabitants of Gaza have guaranteed access to water 6 to 8 hours a day, while 75% only have access to water once every four days or less.

Israel cannot, however, claim more than a very relative ‘victory.’ Sixty-six soldiers died during this offensive, while Palestinian fire killed six Israeli civilians (and one Thai national). The Iron Dome system for intercepting Palestinian rockets thus demonstrated its vulnerability, even leading to the temporary suspension of flights to Tel-Aviv by several Western airlines. Hamas’ fire continued to strike deep into Israeli territory uninterruptedly until the cease-fire, and they continued throughout the conflict.

Israel can state that dozens of tunnels were destroyed, thus complicating possible Hamas infiltrations on their territory. But the very discovery of these complex infrastructures has disconcerted Israeli settlements bordering the Gaza Strip. Indeed, it only confirms the inanity of an exclusively military response to what is above all a political problem for Israel: Is the Israeli State ready to negotiate with Palestinian partners on equal footing and not in a relation of direct (before 2005 in Gaza) or indirect (since the 2005 ‘disengagement,’ itself the prelude to a series of devastating wars) occupation?

For a time, Israel believed it had found the optimal formula, from the viewpoint of security, for controlling the Gaza Strip from a distance after withdrawing both its soldiers and colonies in 2005. The occupation had but changed form, but the Tsahal (Israeli Military) was freed of the constraints of constant ground presence, although frequent incursions were necessary to deteriorate Palestinian networks.
These offensives could expand into major operations, such as *Operation Cast Lead* in December 2008 (with ground intervention), or *Operation Pillar of Defence* in November 2012. Yet Israeli strategists were forced to admit their inability to stop the Palestinian rocket fire other than through a cease-fire, negotiated via the mediation of Egyptian military intelligence. And each round of hostilities saw Hamas launching even longer-range missiles, now capable of hitting Tel Aviv or Jerusalem.

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Israel had committed the error of underestimating the adverse dynamic of the blockade, which has played into the hands of armed groups and their financial sponsors. The demand for consumer goods and construction material in the Gaza Strip cannot in fact be met by the paltry quantities admitted through Israeli checkpoints. The land blockade thus directly fosters an economy of tunnels oriented towards meeting the needs of the Gaza market.

In any case, these tunnels represent an investment too significant in digging and maintenance not to involve high value-added contraband. Hence arms and explosives trafficking has become the key to this underground economy. Moreover, the anaemia of Gaza’s trade, handicrafts and industry, the direct consequence of the blockade, inevitably steers unqualified youth towards militias, the leading ones being those of Hamas.

The blockade, far from undermining the Islamist movement, has consolidated its military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades, who have managed to expand their ranks and arsenal. With regard to the EU, it came to cover the salaries of thousands of Palestinian Authority civil servants in Gaza… on the express condition that they refuse to work for the Hamas administration.

By financing this mass technical unemployment, the EU has allowed the Islamist party to purge the Gaza civil service and only employ loyal agents.

It is thus imperative, in light of the calamitous outcome of *Protective Edge*, to learn from these seven years of blockade and war. Not only has this ruinous status quo not improved Israel’s security in the long term, but it has also plunged the population of Gaza into permanent insecurity, without weakening Hamas’ stranglehold on the territory.

The Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire of 26 August 2014 is based on reciprocal concessions: Israel has committed to easing up its pressure on the Gaza Strip, in particular by extending the fishing zone to 6 nautical miles and reducing the width of its buffer zone along the border, where it prohibits all movement inside the Gaza Strip, from 300 to 100 metres; Hamas has agreed to transfer Gaza’s border crossing points with Israel and Egypt to the Palestinian Authority. After fifty days of conflict, Israel had not attained any of the ambitious goals established for *Protective Edge*. It is therefore time to accept that the Gaza Strip is an integral part of a Palestine committed to achieving a sovereign and independent state. Only such a state will be able to ensure the peace that Israel legitimately demands. Egypt is incapable of assuming such a mission to the benefit of Israel in Gaza; one could even fear that Field Marshal Sisi would like to leave this conflict open to ensure his own strategic revenue from the United States.

The Palestinian Authority aims to resettle in the Gaza Strip, based on the agreement concluded between the PLO and Hamas in April 2014. Hamas mandated its Palestinian partners to negotiate on their behalf with Israel, a delegation process that is also valid for other third parties. Such a system has inevitably led to great tension, including anti-Fatah attacks in Gaza, but there is no other alternative to direct dialogue with Hamas, an unavoidable actor in Gaza.

This mediation is essential for allowing the EU to resume its control task at the Gaza borders as established in the Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA), concluded on the day after Israel withdrew its forces in 2005. Israel will never agree to loosen its grip on the Palestinian Territory without reliable international guarantees.

This is an incomparably more exhilarating mission for the EU than the depressing reconstruction of the area left in ruins by the most recent Israeli offensive. This is where the EU-28 will find the substance for authentic contribution towards peace in the Middle East. The establishment of a sea route between Cyprus and the Palestinian Territory under EU surveillance is even conceivable.
President Sisi, who demonstrated his reluctance to negotiate a cease-fire in the summer of 2014, returned to the forefront through the donor conference for the reconstruction of Gaza held in Cairo the following October. Egypt has accepted the official co-presidency of Norway, more favourable than the former towards Hamas, but it directs the work with an iron fist. Al-Sisi even presented the non-invitation of Israel as a demonstration of nationalistic ‘firmness,’ whereas the aim was to spare the Hebrew State’s having to pay compensation, at least symbolically, for the destruction for which it bears direct responsibility.

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The devastation inflicted on the Gaza Strip by Protective Edge is estimated at three to four times the damage of Operation Cast Lead five and a half years earlier. Donors have committed to paying 5.4 billion dollars (half of which allocated to the reconstruction of Gaza and the other to the Palestinian Authority’s budget). Qatar by far takes the prize for generosity, pledging a billion-dollar donation (the EU follows, with 570 million). But these funds will be wasted if a political process including Gaza is not relaunched. The adverse effects of the Camp David Israeli-Egyptian peace accords, concluded in 1979 at the expense of Palestinian rights, were symbolised three years later by the establishment of a fortified border through the heart of the Rafah urban area, thereafter separating the Egyptian Sinai from the Palestinian Gaza Strip.

The West’s mantra for the renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process seems ludicrous after the electoral success of Benjamin Netanyahu, who won the legislative elections of 17 March 2015 after basing his campaign on the rejection of the very principle of a Palestinian state. The European Union must necessarily move to have the siege of the Gaza Strip lifted, if only to finally allow a reconstruction worthy of the name. Otherwise, the next war that will sooner or later be waged against Gaza due to the militaristic blindness of both Netanyahu and al-Sisi will have repercussions well beyond the unfortunate Palestinian Territory.

Bibliography


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