



# *Israel Debates No. 16*

11 November 2014

## **Following the war between Israel and Hamas: New political horizons for the peace process?**

Dear readers,

For this issue of Israel Debates we have once again asked two authors to discuss the political consequences of this summer's war between Israel and Hamas. These hostilities triggered heated debates in Israeli society and politics, focusing on Israel's future prospects in a region characterized for decades by stable instability.

The political debate is split down the middle. On the one side are those who cannot envisage a future for Israel unless it is based on military deterrence and strength, particularly in the light of the regional changes in the years since the Arab Spring. For **Efraim Inbar**, Director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Israel has no choice other than to continue to live by the sword for many more years. There is a majority in Israeli society that supports this position, which is also reflected clearly in surveys, showing that a majority have more faith in Prime Minister Netanyahu than any other candidate.

On the other side, **Shaul Arieli**, one of the prominent representatives of the Geneva peace initiative who has been involved in a number of negotiations between Israel and Palestine, argues that new diplomatic horizons have emerged for solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. True, this presupposes that the Israeli government, and in particular Prime Minister Netanyahu, will have to send out unequivocal messages giving the go ahead for the two-state solution. Although there is a relative majority in the Knesset for a two-state solution, in current surveys their representatives received fewer seats than previously.

Both authors are skeptical about the political conditions for a peace agreement on the Palestinian side. Arieli presupposes that Hamas would accept a two-state reality, but only as an interim solution on the way to achieving its long term goal: the liberation of Palestine from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. This latest

war has changed nothing, he argues. True, Hamas's relative political position within Palestinian politics has been strengthened, while Mahmoud Abbas and the PLO have tried to inject new impetus into the peace process through a United Nations resolution.

For Shaul Arieli, a Security Council resolution is the best chance of exerting positive influence on the internal political processes in Israel and with the Palestinians, thereby enhancing the chances of opening up new diplomatic horizons. In Efraim Inbar's view, given the other threats in the region in the shape of the Islamic State and the disintegration of Arab nation states, the international community is not interested in bringing pressure to bear on Israel and the Palestinians to change the status quo. His presupposition is that most of the world's countries can live with an unresolved Palestine question. He also views the political Left in Israel and Europe as having been manifestly weakened and lost its legitimacy as a result of the failure of the Oslo process. For Inbar and Arieli alike, at the moment the West's priority is tackling the military and political situation vis-à-vis the Islamic State, and not solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Dr. Werner Puschra,  
Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Israel

Herzliya, 11 November, 2014

## After the War in Gaza

By Efraim Inbar

### Introduction

The most recent military operation in Gaza, “Operation Protective Edge” (July-August 2014), was the longest war in Israel’s history, lasting 50 days. Its main goal was to stop the indiscriminate fire directed at Israel by Hamas, a radical Islamist terrorist organization. Gaza has been ruled by Hamas since its military coup of June 2007. Since, rather than focusing on state building, Hamas acted on its ideological commitment to destroy the Jewish state and has launched many thousands of rockets on Israel. Israel responded by a blockade and occasional military measures trying to put an end to Hamas fire. This article presents an analysis of the outcome of this war. Subsequently it looks at the appropriate policy option in a region that is descending into an increasingly brutish Hobbesian reality.

### Initial Assessment of the Gaza War

Hamas was defeated by Israel in “Operation Protective Edge,” but not destroyed. Its destruction was not a goal of Israel’s military campaign due to its inhibitive cost and length. Moreover, Israel merely wanted a weakened Hamas to continue to rule Gaza, as opposed to having a single entity ruling over both Gaza and the West Bank. The separation between Gaza and the West Bank serves Israel’s interest in weakening the Palestinian national movement, which has been and remains a mortal enemy (not a peace partner), at least for the foreseeable future. A large majority (over 70%) of the Israelis do not believe that the Palestinian Authority (PA) is capable of reaching a historic compromise with Zionism (the Jewish national movement). As long as the PA and Hamas continue to educate their

children to hate Jews no peace is within reach. The PA is also engaged in a delegitimization campaign that seeks ultimately to bring an end to the State of Israel, as exemplified by Mahmoud Abbas’ recent speech in the UN.

In July 2014, following yet another recurrence of rocket fire launched by Hamas on Israel’s civilian population, Israel decided once again to engage in a massive military operation in Gaza under the assumption that it is engaged in a protracted intractable conflict where a patient strategy of attrition is needed to significantly degrade the capabilities of Hamas to harm Israel. This was achieved. About one third of Hamas’ missile arsenal and most of its missile production infrastructure was destroyed. It is presumed that most of the attack tunnels (32) were demolished, and almost one thousand Hamas fighters and a few of its leaders were eliminated. More targeted killings and an earlier removal of some of the self-imposed constraints upon Israel on the use of airpower might have speeded Hamas’ acceptance of a ceasefire and might have spared Gaza much destruction.

On August 25, Hamas finally capitulated to the Egyptian cease fire proposal that it had previously rejected since July 15. The unlimited ceasefire, as Egypt and Israel demanded, constituted the precondition for future negotiations, and it had no input from Qatar and Turkey, both Hamas supporters, who were interested in gaining a foothold in the negotiations. All crossings into Gaza will continue to be controlled by Israel and Egypt, making sure that the rearmament of Hamas will not be easy.

---

For this strategy, see Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, “Mowing the Grass: Israel’s Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37 (February 2014).

Egypt even forced Hamas to swallow a bitter pill such as the presence of the PA at the Rafah crossing. The Hamas “victory speeches” cannot erase the fact that Hamas eventually gave in unconditionally to Egyptian-Israeli pressure.

Despite wholly unjustified international criticism of Israel’s “disproportionate” use of force, Israel was allowed a 50 day period, quite extensive in comparison to previous rounds, to pulverize Hamas installations and their surroundings. It was clear that a large number of Arab states tacitly supported the Israeli endeavor to administer a heavy blow on Hamas. Important international actors, such as India, China and Russia, were rather mute on the Gaza issue for their own reasons. Moreover, the US, the EU, and parts of the international community also joined the demand for demilitarization of Gaza. This is of course unattainable without collecting Hamas weaponry by force, but it delegitimizes Hamas’ violence, while lending legitimacy to Israel’s defensive measures.

The Israeli “Iron Dome” anti-missile system neutralized almost all rockets fired at Israel’s population centers. Most of the country was little affected by the Gaza war, although the sound of sirens probably had a negative psychological effect. Disciplined behavior on the part of the civilian public minimized the loss of lives. But the death toll was 72 (over sixty soldiers) and hundreds of wounded. Limited damage was caused primarily to Israeli property in the proximity of Gaza. As a whole, the direct and indirect costs of the war, amounting to several billions of dollars, are bearable for the strong Israeli economy.

The caution and the reluctance to use ground forces displayed by Israel were useful in

gaining domestic and international legitimacy, but might have a corrosive effect on Israel’s deterrence in the long run. Such qualities, commendable in a democracy, do not enhance Israel’s deterrence in the Middle East. Eagerness to fight, determination and ruthlessness are the prerequisites for building deterrence in a tough neighborhood.

Unfortunately, the military campaign against Hamas underscored tensions in US-Israel relations. The ambiguous attitudes and actions toward Israel on the part of the US administration signaled a lesser willingness to back its Middle East ally. Moreover, the US was largely irrelevant in the Gaza outcome, as it foolishly tried to involve Turkey and Qatar in management of the crisis and it failed to perceive the centrality of Egypt in the Gaza equation. The Gaza war was yet another example of the confused Obama administration’s foreign policy towards the Middle East. The American misfortune is also an Israeli loss as Jerusalem needs and prefers a strong and relevant America.

“Protective Edge” left Gaza in Hamas’ hands. There is a widespread feeling of unease among Israelis with this outcome. The frustration is understandable, but unwarranted. It shows, however, that Israeli society is ready to fight and sustain casualties to attain important goals. Yet, it is beyond Israel’s abilities to impose its preferred leaders on its Arab neighbors. The bitter truth is that Palestinians, in great numbers, like Hamas and its violence against Jews. But it is not easy to come to terms with the thought that there is no resolution to the conflict in sight and with the realization that another round of violence is around the corner. Nevertheless, polls have shown for some time that most Israelis understand this predicament, and during the war

Israeli society displayed tremendous resilience and solidarity. Indeed, routinization of the protracted conflict remains a main challenge for Israeli society.

The domestic political impact of the Gaza war will depend upon the length of the period of calm achieved in its aftermath. The longer calm will prevail, the more Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will be its main beneficiary. The next scheduled election is in November 2017, which is plenty of time for Netanyahu to recover, if the calm holds. If deterrence does not hold and Hamas decides to challenge Netanyahu by firing into Israel over the next three years, the Prime Minister may be forced to “mow the grass” again and more vigorously.

### **Israel's Policy**

The Gaza War underscores the depressing Middle East reality. The Palestinians failed to establish a state due to their inability to maintain monopoly over the use of force – the Weberian prerequisite for statehood. One militia, Hamas, took over part of the Palestinian territory by force. This reflects a larger phenomenon of Arab states disintegrating before our very eyes – Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, as did Somalia and Lebanon several decades ago. The destruction of the statist structures, one aspect of a colossal failure of modernization in the Arab world, only reinforces the appeal of radical Islamists among the poor and oppressed Arabs. Hamas is again a reflection of this trend in the Palestinian context, while the civil war in Syria displays similar traits. The rise of the Islamic State, a brutal organization like Hamas, but with more ambitious goals, elicited a stronger response from the US – an air campaign (not unlike Israel's in Gaza) – to contain the Islamic State's expansion. But the US has realized that it cannot fix Iraq or

Afghanistan in its own image: Despite its great might, Washington cannot change the way the Arabs conduct business in the Middle East.

The Israeli government harbored no illusions about the “Arab Spring” having a positive impact on Arab societies. Moreover, it does not believe that it can affect in any way the dysfunctional politics of its neighboring societies. Jerusalem is, of course, concerned about potential deterioration along its borders, but it realizes that not much can be done about it. It shares strategic interests with Egypt— still the most important Arab state— Saudi Arabia, Jordan and most Gulf states against the Muslim Brothers and its offshoots (Al-Qaeda, Hamas, Nusra, Turkey etc.) and primarily against Iranian nuclear aspiration. This meeting of interests is useful in case Israel decides on unilateral military action for defensive purposes, but is not a military alliance.

Some government officials, particularly those leaning towards the Left, have spoken about the need for Israel to “do something.” Activism is unquestionably a trait that is admired in Israel. Zionist-rooted rhetoric such as “we have to determine our borders and destiny on our own” indeed falls on receptive ears.

Nevertheless, probably the wisest course of action for Israel is a patient and cautious “wait and see” approach. Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict anytime soon is impossible, but attempting to manage it in order to minimize both the suffering to both sides and the diplomatic costs to Israel – is within reach.

Secretary of State John Kerry's initiative has ended in failure this spring. But the sky has not fallen. There is no sense of alarm or fear of a great impending crisis in the region or elsewhere

in the world. Pressure on Israel to change the status quo is unlikely. Actually, it serves Israel's interests to keep the status quo in order to hold on to its bargaining cards. The assumption that time is running against Israel is simply wrong. As a matter of fact, democratic and prosperous Israel grows stronger, while the Arabs become weaker. Moreover, the Palestinian issue is likely to become less salient in the international arena over time.

After the Kerry debacle and the diplomatic impotence shown during the Gaza War, Washington is trying to digest what happened and is pondering how to proceed. Its current instinct is to stay away from interventionist initiatives. The US, drained by two wars (Afghanistan and Iraq) and blessed with new energy finds, does not want to get dragged into further conflicts in a Middle East that seems less central to its interests. So the Obama administration may be less inclined to intervene in the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict than ever before. Even if the US obsession about Palestinian statehood persists for some reason, it is still better for Israel to wait and learn Washington's next moves in order to devise an adequate response.

Moreover, in light of America's great importance to Israel, uncoordinated unilateral steps by Israel are not advisable. Israeli statements expressing a commitment to future peace negotiations, coupled with restraint in building beyond the settlement blocs, might be enough to keep America at bay and reluctant to intervene.

The US is also unlikely to be confronted with Arab pressure to focus on the Palestinian issue if Israel does not engage in drastic steps. The Arab world is undergoing a tremendously difficult

economic and socio-political crisis and is busy dealing with domestic problems. Moreover, the Iranian nuclear threat continues to be the most urgent foreign policy issue, putting most Sunni states in the same strategic boat with Israel. The moderate Arab states, just like Israel, do not want the Islamic State, nor the Palestinian issue, to divert attention from Iran. Even the Palestinians do not take Arab lip service on their behalf seriously.

In all probability, most countries of the world can also live with an unresolved Palestinian issue. There are many simmering territorial conflicts all over the world. It is more than likely that in the coming months and years, many human and political tragedies will divert attention away from the Palestinian issue.

Significantly, the Palestinians have no impact on truly important strategic issue such as nuclear proliferation or energy that might galvanize powerful states into action. Once, they were an important actor in international terrorism. This is no longer true. Nowadays, Palestinians are highly dependent upon international aid. Rocking the boat by using too much violence threatens the livelihood of Palestinians receiving PA salaries and benefits, as well as risking strong retaliation by Israel. Hamas is quite isolated. Simply put, the Palestinians have only limited international leverage and are vulnerable to Israel's potentially harmful countermeasures.

Moreover, the Palestinians have an excellent record of "shooting themselves in the foot." The unity agreement between the PA and Hamas a few months prior to the recent Gaza War is the latest example of this. Going to the UN will bring them no good. What counts are the facts on

ground and not the resolutions of a morally-bankrupt institution.

Whatever some pundits say, Israel is not isolated in the international community. Israel is a strong country, possessing a remarkable web of international interactions. Significantly, Israel's relations with the world at large are only marginally affected by its conflict with the Palestinians.

The political actors most obsessed with the Palestinian issue, the Israeli political Left and the Europeans, are in decline. The Oslo process, with whom the Israeli Left was associated, has utterly failed, delegitimizing its initiators. Europe and the Eurozone are facing acute problems, further reducing their limited ability to be a true strategic actor. The ability of these weakened political actors to push the Palestinian issue to the top of the international agenda has become increasingly curtailed. Contemporary international circumstances could lead to further marginalization of the Palestinian issue.

Some Israelis, like many misguided Westerners, too-often succumb to counterproductive hyper-activism. Doing almost nothing on the diplomatic front, however, might bring about better results in preparing for emerging threats than activating unilateral plans of all kinds. Meeting these threats requires a strong Israel with a modern, large and versatile military.

## **Conclusion**

The Gaza War ended with an Israeli victory by points. Yet, Gaza remains a security problem. Hamas, an Islamist radical organization that is anti-Western and opposed to modernity, oppresses the Gazans and dooms them to poverty and ignorance. This epitomizes the

Middle East predicament. In such an environment Israel must adopt modest policy goals. In the absence of the possibility to influence the behavior of its neighbors, it has no choice but to focus on their abilities to cause it harm. If needed, such military potential must be degraded. While the Arab world is in turmoil, Israel does recognize that the main threat to regional stability and security is Iran. This understanding is shared by several Arab capitals. The war in Gaza also demonstrated great national resilience by Israeli society and the understanding that Israel has no choice but to live by its sword for many years to come.

***Prof. Efraim Inbar** is Director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He serves as Professor of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and a Fellow at the Middle East Forum.*

## **Islamic State before Palestinian State**

by Shaul Arieli

Operation Protective Edge, which ended on 26 August, was, at 50 days, unusually long. With 12 ceasefires rejected by Hamas and humanitarian ceasefires every few days it was also unusually fought. Furthermore the operation was costly without precedent: 4,594 rockets and mortar shells were fired towards Israel, while the IDF attacked 6,231 targets in the Gaza Strip, damaging 10,590 buildings and totally demolishing 4,024. In Israel, 67 soldiers and five civilians were killed, and 1,620 soldiers and 837 civilians injured.

For the Palestinians, it was the deadliest event in the Gaza Strip since its inception. 2,203 Palestinians were killed during the operation, of them between 1,068 and 1,408 armed militants, and more than 11,000 Palestinians were injured. In addition, dozens of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip were executed by Hamas on suspicion of collaborating with Israel, and 132 Fatah militants were shot in their legs by Hamas. Between 300,000 and half a million residents of the Strip were displaced. In Israel, buildings and vehicles were damaged and many residents of the Gaza-border communities were forced to leave their homes. The operation cost Israel an estimated NIS 11 billion and the final damage to the economy has yet to be calculated, but estimates put it at NIS 15 billion. The growth forecast for the coming year is zero, and the shekel is expected to devalue.

Despite these harsh numbers, Operation Protective Edge ended with nothing more than an agreement by the sides to reach an “arrangement.” The purpose of this term is to avoid granting either side political gains. It aims in essence and by definition, at most, to maintain

the ceasefire in return for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip by the Palestinian Authority. This result is unsurprising and indicates both sides’ entrenched policies and positions.

In order to estimate whether there is a new diplomatic horizon for Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians, given the policy fixation, we must take another look at the sides’ basic conceptions towards the resolution of the conflict, the positions of the Israeli and Palestinian political systems and the struggles within them, and how they play out in the context of the current array of regional geostrategic factors, which also involve the conflict’s main mediators, the United States and Egypt.

### **Basic Conceptions**

The Palestinian and Israeli choice to change the pattern of conflict between them in order to attain their goals, as expressed by the Oslo Accords in 1993, emphasized the “no choice” attitude, which led the sides to abandon the armed struggle and replace it with a search for a diplomatic compromise. The “no choice” attitude was created by a combination of old and new insights on both sides. For the Israeli side these included the threat to Israel’s Jewish identity in the absence of a Jewish majority between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, and the first intifada, which broke out in 1987; for the Palestinian side, these were the collapse of the patron Soviet Union in 1988 and a recognition of the limits of the Palestinian struggle in a world that does not accept the way of terror.

The failure of the negotiations to lead the sides to sign a permanent agreement for over two decades is the result of many factors which we will not discuss in this paper. But we are witnessing a weakening of the “no choice” attitude, mainly on the Israel side, and a rise in



the power of those on both sides laying claim to the entire country. There are several reasons for this development:

The security situation in Israel and the West Bank in recent years allows the Israeli public to feel there is no urgency, despite the inherent instability of the situation.

Hamas, maintaining its rule in Gaza, sees the lack of an agreement and the rise of Islamic movements in the Arab world as a historic opportunity to inherit the leadership of the Palestinian people from the PLO, and therefore actively maintains the rift on the Palestinian side.

The erosion of Israel's image and credibility in international public opinion are interpreted by some of the Israeli public as "the same old anti-Semitism in a different guise." The opposition to Israel's continued control of the occupied territories and the process of delegitimization of the settlement project are described in terms of "reckless incitement" and "a failure of public diplomacy."

In view of the regime changes in some of the Arab countries, various political elements in Israel wish to see Jordan turn into the Palestinian homeland. There are even those who see the next confrontation as an opportunity to deliberately push the population of the West Bank to the other side of the Jordan River, ignoring the repercussions this would have on the peace treaty with Jordan, which is beneficial for Israel's security.

For many Israelis, domination of another people, a people without civil rights, is no longer seen as contradicting the democratic regime and threatening Israeli society's moral fortitude.

Many in the Israeli public believe that Israel's disengagement from Gaza means it has been

removed from the demographic playing field. There are also those who claim that the true number of Palestinians in the West Bank is one million less than claimed, and therefore there is no "demographic threat" to Israel's Jewish identity.

Therefore, one might say that only under conditions different from the present reality, can the "no choice" attitude gain renewed currency and move the majority towards further compromises than they are ready to make today. These conditions would be the following: both sides' gaining understanding as to the way to maintain and attain their vital interests – a democratic state with a Jewish majority for Israel, and an independent state for the Palestinians – and/or clear and vigorous international involvement with patterns of rewards and punishment for both sides.

## **Political feasibility**

### **Israel**

To advance the two-state idea, Prime Minister Netanyahu needs to be the first to make a decision to endorse it. But in principle his position negates the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, and he has to maneuver between that position and his commitment to agreements Israel has signed and international pressure to resolve the conflict, spearheaded by the United States and Europe.

During his second and third terms, Netanyahu declared his willingness to pursue a two-state solution, while actually rejecting the parameters on the basis of which negotiations were held between Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas in 2008. Negotiations between Israel and the PLO in August 2013 were renewed for nine months primarily due to heavy American and European pressure on Netanyahu, and the Israeli interest in

rallying the international community against the threat of a nuclear Iran.

Israel's current government never made any official decision regarding the two-state solution as an outline for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Forming the government involved signing three coalition agreements in which there was no explicit reference to the government's position on the two-state solution, due to the Jewish Home party's fierce opposition to the idea, as well as the opposition of most Likud ministers and legislators.

Analysis of the Israeli government ministers' positions finds there is a majority of twelve ministers opposed to a permanent agreement versus nine who support it in principle. It should also be noted that the primary opposition to an agreement is led by the seven deputy ministers, who do not have a vote in government decisions but do have the ability to greatly affect the atmosphere in discussions and the ministers' votes.

In terms of the principled positions of the 19th Knesset's factions, it appears there is a majority in favor of the two-state solution, comprising 56 seats, but most of these are in the opposition. The opposition to this solution comprises 46 seats, all of them in the coalition.

Despite the support for the two-state solution as an outline for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, among the Israeli public and to a lesser degree among the Palestinian public, polls indicate that the sense of threat on both sides and the degree of mistrust towards the other side are very high. These are expected to pose a barrier for translating support for the two-state solution into actions, on both sides.

In conclusion I would say that, barring new elections, the political feasibility of promoting a

permanent resolution in Israel might change only under three cumulative conditions, all of which are highly unlikely at present: a "leap of faith" by Prime Minister Netanyahu to earnest support of an agreement, a split in Likud, and Labor replacing the Jewish Home party in the coalition.

## **Palestine**

Any attempt to sketch the Hamas positions regarding the details of the two-state solution has to range across the spectrum from the organization's principled-ideological positions as written in its constitutional documents – the Hamas Charter – and its present political positions – the speech of the head of the Hamas political bureau Khaled Mashal at a conference of the Palestinian research center Al-Zeitune in Beirut.

Hamas is willing to accept a reality which it considers temporary but to which it will never reconcile itself in principle, except as a stage on the way towards achieving the long-term goals of liberating Palestine from the river to the sea. Therefore, even if Hamas consents to a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, this would not mean signing an agreement ending the conflict and the claims or relinquishing the return of Palestinian refugees to Israel.

On the face of it, the positions of Fatah and its leaders on the central issues identified with the two-state idea, mainly the June 1967 borders as the basis for an agreement, the issue of armed struggle, the end of the conflict, the matter of the Palestinian refugees, the future of Jerusalem and the Arab Peace Initiative (API), are identical to those expressed in the agreements signed by the PLO as well as the declarations and mediation proposals accompanying peace talks since 1993, but in practice they are not. There are often differences between internal position papers and

regulations which reflect historical Fatah positions and contradict the PLO positions. The senior Fatah members who lead the PLO sometimes say things in Fatah forums which are profoundly different from the positions they express in forums in which they represent the PLO position.

The ability of Mahmoud Abbas to move towards an agreement is inhibited by personal opposition within Fatah (Mohammed Dahlan and Marwan Barghouti) and from the religious national opposition of Hamas. His ability to reach an agreement depends on the agreement being within the framework of the international decisions, and receiving the support of the international community and of the Arab states involved in the issues of security, Jerusalem, and refugees, first and foremost Jordan and Egypt.

In summary, the first point of decision is with the Prime Minister of Israel, and Netanyahu has ostensibly decided in favor of peace talks, but in practice his government's policy and its actions on the ground entirely contradict what he says.

On the Palestinian side, we are now witnessing a window of opportunity in which Mahmoud Abbas still holds the reins, while at the same time Hamas is weakened due to the regime change in Egypt. Abbas can be said to have made the historic decision to realize the two-state idea, but he will undoubtedly meet many difficulties, internally and externally, in its approval and implementation according to the known parameters, especially regarding the issue of refugees.

## **Regional developments**

### **“The Islamic State”**

The Sunni terror organization “the Islamic State” is now considered by the United States, the Arab

world, and Europe, to be the most significant and urgent threat to be dealt with, taking priority over all other matters. All parties are arranging themselves in a political and military alliance to eradicate this extreme organization, except for Israel which will merely provide intelligence cooperation.

Fear of this organization growing in power, especially in Iraq and Syria at this stage, is paramount to the Arab states and affects their readiness to be more actively involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Abbas, as well as Mashal and Haniyeh, hear and understand the Arab world's priorities and try to act accordingly. Hamas talks about the need for a partnership with the Palestinian Authority in managing matters of state as a precondition to consenting to a state within the '67 borders, and Abbas adds that resolution of the conflict opens the way for stability in the entire region and will obstruct radical groups as well. But Hamas and Fatah both understand at this stage that the most they can attain is donations to rebuild the Gaza Strip, and that too only if they succeed in overcoming internal divides.

Israel does not see the Islamic State organization as an immediate threat, but seeks to prepare for the possibility that this organization might not be impeded by the international coalition that was created, and might occupy threatening positions on the Syrian border on the Golan Heights and even in Jordan. Meanwhile, the organization serves Israel to justify its claims about the need for many years of Israeli security control in the Jordan Valley, until the unstable situation in the east stabilizes and becomes clearer.

President Obama's administration is focusing its efforts on organizing and managing the coalition against the Islamic State, so that US Secretary of State John Kerry is unable to simultaneously do

a lot more on the Israeli-Palestinian channel, beyond “arrangements.”

### **Israel-Hamas**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s conduct in Operation Protective Edge and the moves that led to it testified that his political purpose, even if not officially defined as such, was simple: returning to the “status quo” as soon as possible.

The “status quo” is what keeps Netanyahu at the head of a government in which most ministers consistently act on the following policy: expanding the settlement project, especially outside the blocs, increasing Jewish presence in East Jerusalem, especially in the “historical basin,” opposition to true negotiations with Abbas, fostering the rift between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority and continuing the siege on Gaza in collaboration with the al-Sisi regime.

But the status quo on which Netanyahu’s policy has been based in recent years does not reflect a true state of balance, nor political or security stability, but rather the very opposite. It is an expression of the prime minister’s deep-seated fear of making diplomatic progress. The status quo was in fact an expression of the rigid thinking on the Israeli side which maintained the conditions allowing Hamas to repeatedly set in motion the next conflagration.

Hamas entered Operation Protective Edge from a position of weakness. In recognizing the new unity government, without its representatives in it, it relinquished its symbolic assets and looked forward to a change in the status quo, starting with paying back wages to its security apparatus, opening the Rafah crossing to Egypt, and partially lifting the Israeli siege. In the next stage, this shift would have included full partnership in the PLO, paving the way for Hamas to take over the representation of the Palestinian people in

the accepted ways. When none of this happened, the escalation was underway, whereby Hamas was concerned first of all with its military and organizational survival, even at the price paid by the residents of the Gaza Strip under the organization’s responsibility.

This is the approach that gave birth to the concept of “arrangements.” This is a hollow linguistic construct without the validity of an agreement, but requiring negotiations whose results are as binding as an agreement, but probably without the legal penalties for breaking an agreement. This flexible expression is probably designed to replace “understandings,” which frightens those who refuse to reach “understandings” with a terror organization, not to mention an “agreement,” which would entail fully recognizing the other side as not only equal in standing but also trustworthy to uphold the agreement.

The sense of mistrust between Israel and Hamas is mutual, but only Hamas requires Arab and international guarantees for the implementation of every “arrangement.” Israel, already mistrustful of Arab guarantees and not interested in Western countries vouching for Hamas’s conduct, which would lend Hamas international recognition, will make do with guarantees to be given by Egypt. This trust in Egypt is a necessity as Israel assumes that Egypt’s position, vis-a-vis Hamas in particular and Gaza in general, is separate from what goes on in the occupied territories or in the Middle East, and that Egypt would not seek to leverage its involvement in Gaza to further the comprehensive peace process, from which Israel has escaped.

### **Israel-PLO**

Israel continues to strive to maintain what it perceives as the “status quo,” while Abbas seeks

to change it by turning to the UN to set an end date for the Israeli occupation. He presented a three-year plan and even used threatening language about turning to UN institutions and even dismantling the Palestinian Authority.

Abbas, given a cold shoulder by the Americans, emphasizes the importance of diplomatic measures and the importance of coordination with the Arab states, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In September the Arab League decided to support Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's diplomatic initiative, based on ending the occupation and founding a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders on the basis of the API. The Arab foreign ministers who convened in Cairo also called on the international community and the UN to work towards implementing those parameters. As expected, Abbas also garnered the public support of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. But despite Abbas gaining the Arab umbrella he had worked to attain over the past two weeks, Abbas and his diplomatic initiative will be forced to wait for now, because as far as the Arab states are concerned, the war on the Islamic State comes before founding Palestine.

Within its efforts to maintain "the status quo," Israel will want to maintain the rift between Hamas and the PLO, Hamas's control of the Islamist organizations in Gaza, and the continuation of Egyptian policy towards it. Therefore, it is likely that Israel will attend the upcoming negotiations in Cairo, to prevent an Egyptian-Palestinian agreement with the blessing of the international community and perhaps even UN recognition.

In summary, Operation Protective Edge cannot be seen as a turning point in the many-faceted Israeli-Palestinian relationship. After delivering an initial response to the threat of the Islamic State,

the mediators will be able to attend to the Israeli issue, but the parties' basic attitudes and political systems will make practical progress difficult, unless the international community takes a determined position.

A Security Council resolution including and stipulating the following conditions – an unlimited ceasefire, the reconstruction of Gaza, lifting the siege, containing Hamas, and renewing the negotiations based on the international parameters – might set in motion internal processes in Israel and among the Palestinians that could create an opportunity for a diplomatic horizon.

***Shaul Arieli** served as a senior officer in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Under several Israeli governments he participated in Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations. He is one of the most prominent representatives of the Geneva Peace Initiative. He published several books and numerous articles on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

Responsible:

*Dr. Werner Puschra*

*Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Israel*

Authors:

*Prof. Efraim Inbar*

*Shaul Arieli*

*Homepage: [www.fes.org.il](http://www.fes.org.il)*

*Email: [fes@fes.org.il](mailto:fes@fes.org.il)*