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Gaza Fallout Weakens Israel, Strengthens Nationalists

By: Nadia Hijab · November, 2012

Whenever Middle East tensions rise, observers wonder whether the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt will weather the storm. It is no different this time. Asked at last Friday's daily briefing if the peace treaty was "in jeopardy", State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland, assured correspondents that the U.S. had no indications from Egypt there was "any difficulty on that question" and believed it "very important for Egypt to live up to its international obligations."

The newly invigorated Egyptian street would beg to differ with Ms. Nuland. True, the last thing Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi needs is a definitive break with Israel or – more importantly – its U.S. patron. But he may find it hard to sustain even a cold peace in the face of the already great devastation and bloodshed Israel has visited upon the besieged Gaza Strip, whose deliberately impoverished Palestinian population has nowhere to run from the bombing and was only just beginning to recover from Israel's 2008-9 assault.

Israel's decision to launch a full-scale military operation that risked spiraling out of control will have fallout not just on the battlefield but also in the political arena, putting at risk its two greatest geopolitical gains of the past 30 years – the Camp David Accords with Egypt and the Oslo Accords signed with the Palestinians.

The value of these accords to Israel has been immeasurable. With Egypt definitively out of the Arab-Israeli military equation, Israel has been able to

dominate the Middle East without fearing all-out war on multiple fronts.

And with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Palestinian Authority (PA) domesticated, Israel has been able to aggressively colonize the occupied territory with minimal obstruction, while the PA security forces – financed by the United States and European Union – play a lead role in ensuring the security of Israel's occupation. Israel was also able to nurture new relationships in the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf.

Israel presumably factored the risks of undermining these accords into its calculations. It excels at scanning the political environment, and recalibrating its strategies accordingly, even if its policies often backfire over the longer term. Yet in the changing regional context of 2012, Israel would be foolish to presume that it alone is in a position to capitalize on opportunities produced by such dynamics.

Palestinian and Egyptian activists have for months been demanding a break with Camp David and Oslo, and similar voices are heard in Jordan regarding the Wadi Araba agreement. The Israeli offensive against Gaza gives them an opening to push further, while making it harder for the rulers of these three nations to resist calls for a clean break.

That is not to say that such activists necessarily want war with Israel. They simply want to terminate agreements that have brought neither peace nor justice, and that have tied their nations' hands politically as well as economically. Think, for example, of the deal that obliged Egypt to sell gas at cut-rate prices to Israel. Or the Paris Protocol that gave Israel the right to collect Palestinian tax revenues and then hand them over, or not, at will. Or the Jordanian market compelled to open its doors to Israeli produce while Jordanian farmers' products spoil.

The Egyptian response has been quick and visible. Morsi recalled his ambassador to Israel and sent his prime minister to visit Gaza. He was spared having to expel Israel's ambassador by the fact that the latter quietly fled before Israel's

commenced its assault. Egypt worked intensely to secure a ceasefire, even though Israel assassinated its main Hamas interlocutor, Ahmad Ja'abari, after a two-day Egyptian-mediated truce that was respected – in part due to Ja'abari's efforts – by all Palestinian factions. The inevitable Hamas response provided the pretext for Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense.

The PA/PLO response has been less visible than that of Egypt, but perhaps more dramatic when compared to its stance during Israel's Operation Cast Lead in December 2008 – January 2009. At that time, the PA/PLO resisted attempts to bring about an immediate ceasefire largely to please the U.S. It still had hopes that the U.S. support would give Palestinians a fair two-state solution. It also hoped that Israel might terminally defeat Hamas and that Fatah could regain control of the Gaza Strip – lost to Hamas in June 2007.

The PA/PLO's foot-dragging during Operation Cast Lead was so pronounced that the then-president of the UN General Assembly, the Nicaraguan priest Father Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, effectively accused it of complicity in damning words: "I wanted to help Palestine, but those who should supposedly have been most interested denied their support for reasons of 'caution' that I was incapable of understanding. I hope that they were right and that I was wrong. Otherwise, we face an ugly situation of constant complicity with the aggression against the rights of the noble and long-suffering Palestinian people."

By contrast, during the latest assault PA/PLO head Mahmoud Abbas loudly urged Arab and international action to bring about an end to the fighting and spoke of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. True to form, the PA/PLO security forces began by brutally cracking down on some of the West Bank demonstrations protesting Israel's assault on Gaza, particularly those that looked as though they might reach nearby Israeli forces. But they were forced to change their tactics as the conflict escalated and demonstrators repeatedly clashed with Israeli soldiers.

Moreover, as the conflict raged the PA/PLO had to live with a major demonstration in Ramallah largely made up of Hamas forces, whose green flags dominated the event. And neither Palestinian nor Israeli forces were able to stop determined Palestinian activists from getting into the illegal Israeli West Bank settlement of Beit El despite beatings and arrests by both Israeli and Palestinian forces. Eight Palestinian women even managed to scale the settlement wall.

There is no question that Pillar of Defense has further weakened the Fatah-led PA/PLO. It has nothing to show for its participation in the U.S.-led Oslo-framed peace process that, as revealed by Al Jazeera's Palestine Papers, reached almost slavish subservience. The aid-dependent economy that was booming in the West Bank at the time of Cast Lead is now practically on life support.

Abbas and Fatah still have control of the PLO, which is internationally recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people – and, of course, they still have those well-armed security forces. Abbas' bid for non-member observer state at the United Nations on November 29 will help keep him and his allies in the picture, but the weaker they get, the harder it will be for them to hold the line in defense of the Oslo Accords, which Hamas refuses to recognize, at least explicitly.

Moreover, the PLO will soon be placed in the position of having to show the value-added of its upgraded UN status by seeking membership in the International Criminal Court so as to hold Israel accountable for its violations of international law, including in Gaza. This would be a major departure. Abbas' team made no use of an important legal victory, the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, which could have been used to stop other states from dealing with Israel's settlements and put a brake on its colonization, among other things. And they deliberately undermined the Goldstone Report – the UN Human Rights Council fact-finding mission findings on Cast Lead.

Meanwhile, no matter how great Palestinian losses in life, limb, and infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, Hamas will emerge strengthened simply by surviving, as Hizballah did after Israel's 2006 attack on Lebanon, when Israel developed its Dahiya Doctrine of using disproportionate force to crush its enemies without heed to civilian casualties. Hamas has in addition won important shows of support from Arab states, some of whose envoys joined Egypt in visiting Gaza during Israel's offensive. And, of course, it still has its own powerful security forces.

Hamas can taint its "victory" by transforming it into a partisan show of strength with Fatah, as its supporters were quick to do in the recent Ramallah demonstration. Such an attitude flies in the face of the resurgent movement to redefine the Palestinian national struggle as one that transcends factionalism in the quest for self-determination, freedom, justice and equality.

Hamas may use its stronger position vis-à-vis Fatah to push for full PLO membership, breaking Fatah's longstanding stranglehold on the umbrella movement. Indeed, Fatah may find that the only way it can stay relevant is by bringing Hamas into the PLO fold while Fatah can still negotiate a significant share of seats in the Palestinian National Council and on the PLO Executive Committee. If Hamas joins the PLO while maintaining its refusal to recognize the Oslo Accords, that will be a further nail in Oslo's all-but-sealed coffin.

Thus, Israel may find that it emerged from Operation Pillar of Defense with its military reputation relatively unscathed – only relatively because rockets that can hit Tel Aviv will never completely disappear and Iron Dome is not 100% secure – but with its ability to manage its neighborhood seriously weakened. Without a PA/PLO to mediate its West Bank occupation, Israel will have to manage it directly. Israel may also find its hitherto unfettered colonization of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) severely constrained by determined Palestinian activism – an own goal for Benjamin Netanyahu who made settlement building a priority of his current premiership.

This is how, by pursuing military victory at any cost in the short term, Israel sets itself up for political failure in the longer-term. Its options are bleak: to maintain the present apartheid system of rule over the OPT and within Israel itself, while "thinning out" the Palestinian population to the extent possible.

In so doing, Israel faces growing world opprobrium and isolation in the Arab and Middle East regions – an Arab League meeting on Gaza called for "a moratorium" on normalization with Israel. It also faces possible PLO-led legal action against its occupation policies, continuing demonstrations and instability in the OPT and Israel, an increasingly effective campaign for boycott, divestment and sanctions that is exacting a moral and economic price, and, potentially, a movement for full civil and political rights in the part of Palestine that became Israel in 1948 as well as the Palestinian territory occupied in 1967. These are the openings Palestinians will be using to scale up the fight for their rights.

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