



Can Hamas be defeated?

The best alternative would be for the Palestinian Authority, with Egyptian support, to retake control of Gaza

IN THE months leading up to the latest round of fighting, Hamas was in dire straits. Last year, after deserting the Iranian-led “axis of resistance” and positioning itself in the Sunni coalition against the Assad regime in Syria, it lost the backing of the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and incurred the bitter enmity of the new military rulers in Cairo. All this seriously hurt Hamas’s political, economic and military interests in the Gaza Strip and isolated it regionally.

As a result, Hamas leaders began negotiations to mend fences with Iran, its former sponsor, and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah. Indeed, they reached an agreement to continue their cooperation against Israel while differing on policy vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war.

The earlier split from the axis of resistance sparked internal opposition within the Hamas leadership. The Hamas military wing wrote to the organization’s Qatar-based political leader, Khaled Mashaal, that “Palestine will be liberated with arms and not with money,” and called for a rehabilitation of ties with Hezbollah and Iran, while criticizing Hamas’s close relations with Qatar. Moreover, the political “change and reform” bloc in Gaza led by Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud Zahar challenged the February 2012 reconciliation agreement reached in Qatar by Mashaal and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

My assessment at the time was that while its dire situation endangered Hamas’s internal cohesion and could push it into a violent outburst against Israel, it also opened a window of opportunity to exploit the organization’s weakness, Egypt’s goodwill and Iran’s restraint during the nuclear negotiations to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

If Israel is forced to end its ground operation prematurely, Arab public opinion may perceive Hamas as the winner

The main strategy, I argued, should be helping the PA to impose its authority on the Gaza Strip, dividing the Hamas movement by giving incentives to its more pragmatic leaders, and promising Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza better economic and territorial conditions in the short-term and a clear, acceptable long-term compromise.

The present crisis is a direct result of Hamas’s weakness in a dire situation it no longer controls: It is wracked by internal divisions between military and political cadres; extremist and pragmatic politicians; Gaza-based and external leaderships. There

is profound frustration in the Palestinian arena. The unity government has no Hamas representative and officially pursues peace negotiations with Israel; the PA refuses to pay the salaries of 40,000 Hamas administration officials in Gaza; the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Gaza jihadists challenge Hamas on the armed struggle front. Hamas’s isolation in the regional context is greater than ever.

In Egypt, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the political and judicial establishment, the media and also much of Egypt’s public opinion consider Hamas a dangerous extension of the loathed Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf countries support Egypt’s fight against the Brotherhood and by extension against Hamas. Qatar, which was one of the main providers of funds to Hamas, is much more cautious since the advent of the young Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and in light of the intense pressure by its powerful Gulf neighbors to cut off support for Brotherhood and jihadist forces in the region.

Finally, Iran is overstretched by its military, political and economic involvement in the Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi conflicts. It is also extremely worried that these conflicts could permeate its own ethnic and religious divides. The sensitive nuclear negotiations with the Western powers also dictate more restraint.

Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip



Erdogan remains Hamas's staunchest supporter. But he has poor relations not only with Israel but also with Cairo, so he can barely help.

In this complex situation, is there a solution for Gaza?

A COMPREHENSIVE solution to the problem of Hamas's aggression would entail conquering the entire Gaza Strip, or a large part of it, going from house to house and finding and destroying all the rockets and heavy weapons held by all the terrorist organizations operating in Gaza.

However, I do not see Israel undertaking an operation of this nature because of the harm it would cause the people of Gaza, potential IDF casualties and the harsh criticism from the international community that months or more of Israeli control would trigger, especially in light of Gaza's enormous economic, social and political problems.

Therefore, the best alternative would be for the Palestinian Authority, with Egypt's decisive support, to retake control of Gaza. Fatah still has hundreds of thousands of supporters in Gaza, who are oppressed by Hamas, and there is also an underground Tamarud movement, similar to the one that helped General al-Sisi topple the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in July 2013.

Israel cannot occupy Gaza and transfer it to Abbas as in such circumstances he would

be considered a traitor to his people. It can only be done more subtly, through the terms of a cease-fire or longer term agreement. Therefore any such agreement should include the following elements:

Immediate deployment of the PA's security forces along the Gaza/Egypt border and PA control of the Rafah border crossing point;

A clause stating that the PA will gradually regain control of the Strip;

No tunnels across the Egyptian border, with Egypt and the PA responsible for preventing weapons smuggling;

Demilitarization of Gaza and international supervision of the dismantling of the rocket arsenal;

Cessation by Israel of construction in the settlements for a period of one year to improve the political atmosphere in the West Bank and facilitate a return to peace negotiations with the PA, even if they do not achieve immediate results;

Israeli agreement to significant relief in the transfer of goods to and from Gaza; Israel will also undertake to use its influence in the West to obtain generous economic and humanitarian aid for Gaza;

Egypt will use its influence with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to provide extensive economic aid to the PA, which will be responsible for the rebuilding of the Strip;

Qatar will be denied primacy in this area because of its negative role in helping radi-

cal Islamist parties across the Arab world.

Egypt's role will be crucial in pressuring Hamas to accept this agreement and implement it.

There is, however, a potential downside. If Israel is forced to end its ground operation prematurely, on the propaganda and political levels, part of Palestinian and Arab public opinion may perceive Hamas as the winner in the present conflict, due to its successes in massive rocket firing towards most of Israel without suffering heavy casualties among its military/terrorist ranks or its political leaders. This might have a bearing on the results of future elections in the PA, if such elections take place.

It is also likely that Salafi and jihadi organizations in the region (Syria, Iraq, Yemen) will also be affected by Hamas's perceived success, and they too may try to obtain rockets to further their goals or deter the countries fighting them.

If, however, there is no immediate cease-fire agreement, Israel will have the legitimacy for a short and limited ground operation to destroy more of Hamas's military infrastructure and tunnels, hit its fighters, and press it, in the end, to accept a cease-fire on Israel's terms. ■

Dr. Ely Karmon is a Senior Research Scholar at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at the Herzliya-based Interdisciplinary Center