

[John Bell](#)

For all its disastrous and tragic human toll, today's crisis in Gaza is yet another futile manifestation of the lurking phantoms in the Middle East, manipulating leaders and citizens alike into war and violence. Beneath the current crisis are the sediments of decades of trauma, suffering and longing. The names are many: Nakba, Holocaust, occupation, terrorism, Jerusalem, right of return, Haven, Home. Each still lives deeply in the people of the region, if not always visible, as unresolved needs for dignity, security, and normality.

Gaza is Chapter II of the most recent deadly dance of power that too often serves as politics in the Middle East, a choreography begun with Chapter I in 2006. It is a psychological and material struggle for power between Israel on one side and Hamas, Hizballah and Iran on the other, with citizens in the middle, an asymmetrical wrestling match where Israel has weight, and the other the regular ability to slip out of the deadly hold. In this dance, the ferocity of the Israeli attack is an attempt to re-establish the deterrence lost in 2006 to Hizballah. It remains nevertheless a short term fix to very longstanding problems, but, like many such actions, it can inadvertently lead to unplanned consequences:

Rebuilding the Palestinian House: The images of dying Palestinians, plus some large blunders by Abu Mazen early on, will somehow, if reluctantly, force Palestinians back into each other's arms. The re-emergence of a common enemy, Israel, means that Hamas and Fatah will, for the sake of their people and their own legitimacy, at least attempt reconciliation. The obstacles are many; they don't share the same program and have fundamentally different interests and the process will pose the existential question for Palestinians as a whole: Can one conduct negotiations and resistance at the same time and which road must prevail?

A Third Party in Rafah: No matter how one cuts it, the need to manage the crossing and the smuggling between Egypt and Gaza will mean a new third party force along the border and in Rafah. The arguments are currently going on fast and furious about the nature of that force but the Turks seem a natural contingent, given their relations with Hamas, their history with Israel, and their offer to be there. It may however very well be an awkward presence with a very mixed reception from Palestinians and Egyptians, as well as difficult expectations from Israel. CITPax has in fact contributed a plan to stabilize the border between Gaza and Egypt to senior officials in the region and beyond. The objective would be that the current lifeline of Gaza, the tunnel regime, would be replaced by an acceptable border regime. Stability there would also encourage Hamas and Fatah to move towards reconciliation

Hamas Emboldened?: Many argue that as long as Hamas is not completely destroyed, it will rise from Gaza claiming victory after having withstood the might of Israel's army. The flipside of this development is the glaring impotence of many Arab governments in the eyes of their people, and the implications for the legitimacy of many Arab governments are not clear today. Indeed, as long as the basics of the Middle East are not sorted out (i.e. a Palestinian state), Hamas is sure to continue to gain from injustice and violence, fortifying the idea of resistance.

More Immediate American Engagement: There is however a larger game than Hamas. Despite the hiatus between administrations and the reticence, Gaza will hasten American diplomatic involvement in the Middle East. What may have been planned for next spring or fall will now begin on January 21. The question of the nature of that engagement remains a very large unknown, but certainly the Obama administration will take in a broader perspective, trying to stitch together a strategy composed of the interlaced components of Iran, the Arab-Israeli conflict and, possibly the very survival of its Arab allies in the region. As often occurs, the Middle East has stolen front stage and this will indeed be the first serious foreign policy test for Obama and Hilary Clinton.

What is clear from the above however is that the nature and quality of the reactions will be the deciding factor. Palestinian reconciliation will be meaningless and transitory without a common understanding of where Palestinians now stand in their march towards nationhood. Much has happened since Oslo and the establishment of the P.A. and Palestinians as a whole may need a 'back to basics' approach possibly with the PLO as uniting instrument.

Similarly, an American engagement for its own sake, i.e. without a clear end goal and strategic framework, will prove hollow within six months. If, as so many say, the equation for a solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict is indeed known, then the key will be an American ability to put its weight - very "heavy" weight - behind such solutions to overcome the intransigence and accumulated habits of decades. Considering the complexity and history, the USA will do well by including in a serious way the EU, the Arab League or a renewed Quartet - it will need the help. An effective approach will mean facing Israeli leaders with some realities that no American administration has done since Baker and Bush during and after the Gulf War in 1991 - most Arab governments are already on board and will line up rapidly in such a scenario.

Sadly, if these efforts do not indeed prove qualitatively different than what has been experienced during the past 4 years, there is a great risk of "Chapter III". The next "match" may be again with Hizballah and Lebanon, spread beyond to Iran, or appear suddenly as terror attacks outside the region, forcing the USA and Europe to assess their fundamental strategy in the Middle East.

There are two logics in the region. One is macho and power-based, highly reactive and involves the use of violence to resolve problems or deter future violence. This is the game that Israel has resorted to again today and which radical groups are perfectly designed and adapted to; they thrive in this environment. The other logic, currently much weaker, asserts that all parties must live within limits and that those are reached through words and discussion, i.e. politics. Today, the latter equation, due to 'America *in absentia*' and a regional attachment to logic # 1, is comatose. The tough intervention of the USA is required to define a framework, co-opt and coerce all to abide, creating a coalition against anyone who will not abide by these limits and agreements.

If it is to have any merit, this second logic will have to address directly the lingering phantoms of the Middle East: Arab dignity in the form of a Palestinian state, and Israeli concerns regarding security through long term regional arrangements. The formulas are there and they are many; the will has been missing. Only so will the traumas of decades no longer bubble up to regularly upset the apple cart, creating misery for millions, and inching the region year by year towards a series of useless and tragic apocalypses.

John Bell, Director, Middle East and Mediterranean Programme (CITpax).

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