



THE CARTER CENTER

Israel and Palestine Conflict Analysis Report

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Escaping the Cycle of Gaza Wars

Unnamed Defense Ministry officials recently warned that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) will wipe out Hamas in the event of another Israel-Gaza war. Such a conflict is likely to be far more destructive than any of the three wars since 2008. It would likely result in a direct and bloody occupation of the coastal territory. If, instead, Israel were to open Gaza and facilitate reunification with the West Bank, future conflicts could be avoided.

After Israel's withdrawal from the interior of Gaza in 2005, a belief took hold that the pullout was answered with rocket attacks on Israeli communities. This perception ignores the fact that Israel did not give up control of Gaza when its soldiers and settlers left. Babies born in Gaza are still recorded in an Israeli-run population registry. The movement of people and goods at crossing points between Israel and Gaza is severely limited. Restrictions on "dual use" items, banned for import into Gaza, are so broad that they make the development of a healthy economy impossible. For example, in November 2015, Israel announced that it would allow Gaza to export furniture for the first time since 2007. However, in August of that year, imports of wood thicker than one centimeter were prohibited – making large-scale furniture production impossible. Approximately 40 percent of the population is unemployed, while youth unemployment hovers around 60 percent. The IDF also closes Gaza's coastline and airspace to passenger and commercial traffic. While Israel is naturally concerned about attacks from tunnels, restrictions of this nature are self-defeating. Nothing justifies Palestinian attacks against Israeli civilians. However, violence is likely to continue as long as Palestinians in Gaza lack the freedom to move, develop their economy, and trade.

This history points to a way out, for both sides. After the 2014 war, Egyptian-brokered ceasefire talks were cursory at best. As a result, the underlying issues that sparked the war, particularly the Israeli-Egyptian closure of Gaza, were never seriously addressed. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi recently announced his intention to push for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Building on Sisi's statement, which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu embraced, Israel should seek Egyptian help in finalizing a comprehensive ceasefire with Gaza. For such an agreement to work, Israel must be willing to further open Gaza's crossing and significantly ease import and export restrictions. Israel also should ensure that its security restrictions do not stymie the implementation of new Turkish aid projects in Gaza.

In addition to spurring an economic revival in Gaza, a ceasefire agreement would do much to diffuse the tensions building in the territory. Of equal importance, a comprehensive ceasefire would reduce Hamas' impetus for arming and tunneling. Egypt also would benefit. Lessening Hamas's incentive to arm, in turn, would curb its reported weapons smuggling in the Sinai, which Egypt sees as supporting the Sinai insurgency.

But Gaza needs more than economic growth. Half of the 1.8 million Palestinians there are under 18. The vast majority of Palestinian youths in Gaza have never been outside the strip. Palestinian elections are years overdue. To the extent that there is organized opposition to Hamas, it is dominated by Salafi-jihadist groups, including disillusioned young people who have been driven to sympathize with the so-called "Islamic State."

Gaza's political and social isolation – from the West Bank and the outside world – as well as the lack of any prospect of national elections, are destabilizing in the long term. To ensure a viable Palestinian partner for future peace, and to stem radicalization in Gaza in the near term, Israel should work with the international community, including the Arab world, to encourage the reunification of the Palestinian Authority and elections. This will not be easy. There are vested interests in Ramallah and Gaza that have perpetuated the

division between Fatah and Hamas. Nevertheless, if Israel made Palestinian reunification a priority, it would find allies in the U.S., Europe, and the Arab world – all of whom are concerned about Gaza. In coordination with these third parties, it would be possible to push the major Palestinian factions toward power-sharing and back to elections. If Israel cannot do this, if it continues to isolate Gaza, further violence is certain.