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Middle East Conflict: Need for Credible Mediator

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The need for a credible universally-accepted mediator between Israelis and Palestinians has never been greater. Despite Israel's devastating bombardment of Gaza the two sides for the first time agree on what a long-term arrangement should be. Both want a long-lasting ceasefire but need a third party to negotiate the terms.

Commentary

AMID THE death and destruction raining down on the Gaza Strip there is a sliver of hope. Seldom have the makings for a mutually-agreed long term arrangement that would give both parties a degree of stability and security and allow for Palestinian as well as Israeli economic growth, been better than today.

In fact, in a perverse way, the Israeli assault on Gaza has improved chances for such an arrangement by politically strengthening Hamas, the Islamist militia, which is no match for the Israeli military but has already scored a psychological victory. Hamas demonstrated its ability to reach major Israeli cities with its rockets, infiltrate Israel proper, persuade international airlines to halt flights to Tel Aviv, and put up fierce urban resistance inside Gazan towns.

Israel's military victory but political defeat

Israel hopes to weaken and demilitarise Hamas but not totally eradicate it because that could open the door to more militant Islamist groups taking control of Gaza. In its view, a weakened Hamas would strengthen Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and either undermine the Palestinian position or render it incapable of negotiating a final solution of the conflict on terms remotely acceptable to Palestinians.

This would spare Israel the painful decisions it would have to take that are necessary for any definitive peace settlement to work such as the dismantling of Israeli settlements on the occupied West Bank and a shared future for East Jerusalem, both of which it conquered during the 1967 Middle East war. As a result, Israel's preferred solution for the medium, if not, the long term, is the status quo with effectively full control of the West Bank and a defanged Hamas.

Although for very different reasons and on different terms, Hamas shares with Israel the goal of a

longer term arrangement that would not force it to make political concessions such as recognition of Israel and renunciation of the armed struggle. Hamas has repeatedly called for a ten-year ceasefire.

It recognises that Palestinians are in no position to persuade or impose on Israel terms that would guarantee a truly independent Palestinian state alongside Israel that would be anything more than a militarily weak adjunct of its powerful neighbour.

Nevertheless, as in most armed confrontations with Palestinians and Arabs since the 1967 war, Israel wins militarily but loses politically. If anything that trend is even more pronounced in the current conflict against a backdrop of improved Palestinian military performance, however limited, and mounting international unease not only with the toll in civilian lives but with Israeli policy towards Palestinian territories at large.

Hamas' growing street credibility

In addition, Hamas has increased street credibility while Abbas has been rendered even more ineffective than he already was. Using the death of three kidnapped teenagers as a pretext, Israel went on the offensive against Hamas even before it attacked Gaza to undermine the one effort by Abbas and Hamas for the formation of a national unity government that could have enabled the Palestinians to negotiate a final solution to the Palestinian problem.

As a result, with neither party really interested in a final resolution, a long-term arrangement is potentially the best deal on the table. Nevertheless, a deal on a long-term ceasefire could well be stranded on issues such as the future of the seven-year old Israeli blockade of Gaza that impairs its ability to freely import goods.

Other issues are Palestinian demands that it be able to build an airport and a port - requirements for economic growth that would complicate Israeli control. Only a mediator trusted by both parties would be able to explore whether those hurdles can be surmounted.

Interlocutors talk to interlocutors

And that is where the problem lies. No single mediator – the United States, the European Union, Egypt, Qatar or Turkey – is able to talk with any credibility to the two key parties, Israel and Hamas. The US and Israel as well as various European countries refuse to engage with Hamas whom they have labelled a terrorist organisation.

Egypt, while professing to sympathise with the Palestinians, is happy to see the Israelis do the dirty work for them in weakening what they see as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, the group it has banned as terrorists. Turkey's relations with Israel have hit a new low and Qatar has no formal ties to Israel.

What this in effect means is that interlocutors have to talk to interlocutors to reach one of the two concerned parties – hardly a recipe for the kind of success that does not simply end the immediate bloodshed but creates the basis for a longer term arrangement that has a chance of moving things forward.

The ideal solution would be to bring Hamas in from the cold. That is obviously, with the fighting on the ground, beyond the realm of the possible. US President Barack Obama's approach prior to the Gaza crisis was, after Secretary of State John Kerry's failed effort to negotiate a peace agreement, to let the parties stew in their own mess.

Letting the parties stew fails to recognise opportunity and produces calamities like Gaza. A more constructive approach would be to recognise that neither Israel nor Hamas – two parties without whom a final resolution will remain an illusion – want peace but do want a long term cessation of hostilities. Achieving that would constitute significant progress and make the massive loss of life less senseless.

James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg and the author of the blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, and a forthcoming book with the same title.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg