

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Mr Yang Razali Kassim.

Behind the Gaza ceasefire: Israel and Hamas talk potential peace

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Israel and Hamas have significantly moderated their attitudes towards one another despite official denials. Indirect talks in Cairo designed to achieve a lasting ceasefire between the two war weary parties effectively constitute negotiations about the parameters of a potential future peace agreement.

Commentary

Wars inevitably spark change. That is no truer than in the war in Gaza no matter what Hamas and Israel say. The signs of changing attitudes of Israel and Hamas towards one another go significantly beyond the fact that the two sworn enemies who refuse to recognize one another are negotiating even if only indirectly. They also go beyond the fact that the road to the Cairo talks was paved in part on indirect negotiations between Hamas and the United States, which like Israel has declared Hamas a terrorist organization. While some European officials have been urging Israel to negotiate directly with Hamas.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced changed Israeli attitudes towards Hamas when he defined Israel's goal in the Gaza war as the weakening of Hamas military capability, if not the demilitarization of the group, rather than his long standing objective of total destruction of the organisation. While Israel seemed to be indiscriminate in its risking of civilian casualties during the war, Hamas' senior leadership in the Strip has emerged from the fighting unscathed.

Not nice guys but looking good

The negotiations despite their cyclical breakdowns do not only acknowledge Hamas as a key player in any long lasting arrangement with Israel but also constitute a recognition of the fact that the Islamist group looks a lot better than other militant Palestinian groups in Gaza such as Islamic Jihad, which has often played the role of an agent provocateur trying to force conflict in an environment in which both Hamas and Israel would have wanted to avoid military confrontation. Even if Hamas does not comprise the moderate Palestinians that Israel and its western backers prefer to deal with, it looks better than the Islamic State which occupies significant chunks of Syria and Iraq.

Israel's acknowledgement of Hamas as the best of a bad bunch is evident in the substance of the

Cairo talks: the building blocks of a future state and a two-state resolution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict – rule by a Palestinian national unity government, open borders, a sea port, extended territorial waters, and an airport – in exchange for military and security arrangements that ensure the security of both Israel and the Palestinians.

Anat Kurz, director of Tel Aviv University's Institute for national security studies, which has close ties to Israel's government and security establishment, reflects the changed attitudes in official Israeli thinking. "Israel does not want to destroy Hamas. There's a shift in the Israeli position ... Israel wants to leave Hamas enough capability because it is the most organised force in the Gaza Strip," Kurz told *The Guardian*. She acknowledged that the labelling of a group as terrorist often serves as a way of avoiding negotiations that could involve painful compromises.

Mirror images

Ironically, Kurz's articulation of changed Israeli attitudes mirrors statements by Hamas leader Khaled Mishal, including his assessment of Israel's demand that Hamas first recognize the Jewish state and denounce armed struggle before any potential direct talks. In a lengthy interview with Al Jazeera, Mishal described the Israeli demands as a tool to evade negotiations, noting that the United States and the Vietcong negotiated an end to the Vietnam War while the fighting continued. "The argument throws the ball into the Palestinian court ... We will not surrender to Israeli blackmail," Mishal said. He noted further that a quarter of a century after Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat first renounced violence and then recognized Israel Palestinians have yet to secure their rights.

More importantly, both in his explicit remarks and in the tone of his interview Mishal made clear that Israel had signed on to a two-state resolution that would end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. "We accept a state with the 1967 borders but Israel doesn't. That makes a solution difficult to achieve," Mishal said referring to the borders before the 1967 Middle East war in which Israel conquered the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Lack of political will

Changed Israeli and Hamas attitudes however do not automatically lead to a solution. Nevertheless they are a sine qua non for any longstanding arrangement whether a ceasefire or a final peace agreement. So far neither Israel nor Hamas has demonstrated the political will to build on the change in the way they eye each other. Intractable hostility suited both Israel and Hamas until the last Gaza war.

The change is nonetheless significant. Hamas has clearly stated what it has long been signalling: Israel is there to stay. Mishal has downplayed the Hamas charter that calls for Israel's destruction, saying that it is "a piece of history and no longer relevant, but cannot be changed for internal reasons."

His number two, Mousa Abu Marzouk, noted that "the charter is not the Quran. It can be amended." Their statements echo the words of the late Israeli Defence Minister Ezer Weizman who stood in front of his Likud Party emblem that showed Jordan as part of Israel and said with regard to the charter of the Palestine Liberation Organization that at the time called for Israel's demise: "We can dream, so can they."

*James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at 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.*
