

Omar Shaban

From exchange of rockets to exchange of messages

Analysing the relations between Hamas and Israel

In the aftermath of the 2014 war in Gaza, both Israel and Hamas seem to be looking for ways to sustain a long-term truce. The war, which has had a devastating impact on the lives of Palestinians living in Gaza, is the third of its kind in less than a decade and has taken the lives of more than 2,000 Palestinians and 71 Israelis.¹ But despite the continuous tensions between Israel and Hamas – the latter refuses to recognise Israel as a state and Israel remains persistent in labelling Hamas a terrorist organisation – both parties have been increasingly in contact through indirect exchange of messages. There have also been signs of increased political will, on both sides, to pursue a more enduring ceasefire that can last for many years. Is this increased contact and the slight ease of the Gaza blockade a real sign of a more sustainable truce between Israel and Hamas? Or will it once again be a temporary bandage on a wound that needs more extensive care and a longer time to heal? This article aims to examine the possibility of direct negotiations between the two conflicting parties.

1. Hamas and Israel, 'the past and the status quo'

The Islamic Resistance Movement, or 'Hamas', originated in 1987 in the midst of the First Intifada (uprising) against the Israeli occupation. By the time of the onset of the Second Intifada in 2000, the organisation had garnered immense legitimacy as a Palestinian resistance organisation. In 2006, Hamas remarkably and, for many, unexpectedly won the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections, resulting in its first experience in

governance at the helm of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Consequently, the electoral success compelled Hamas to adjust itself into what can best be described as a dual-purposed faction that mediated its role as government alongside its celebrated status as an armed resistance.² But seeing as Hamas still refused to renounce its armed struggle while refusing Israel's right to exist, key regional powers and international stakeholders refrained from accepting the outcome of the elections, despite it being declared free and fair by European Union election monitors. At the same time, the ruling Fatah refused to engage with Hamas' call for a unity government. Consequently, the Gaza Strip devolved into a deadly civil war that resulted in Hamas neutralising an attempted Fatah-led coup (encouraged by the US) while it consolidated its authority over the coastal Palestinian enclave.³ Hamas set up a rival government in Gaza, meanwhile Fatah ruled the Palestinian Authority (PA) in parts of the West Bank.

1.1 Post-election conflict

Following the overwhelming victory of Hamas in the PLC elections and the escalation of the conflict between Hamas and Fatah, resulting in the split of the Palestinian authority, Israel and Egypt imposed an intensive blockade over the Gaza Strip – a blockade currently still intact, although recently signs of relief have been seen.⁴ The closure resulted in a state of imprisonment for the more than 1.8 million inhabitants of Gaza, with the likes of Noam Chomsky characterising the coastal enclave as "the world's largest open-air prison".⁵ Moreover, the socio-economic trials that resulted

¹ Barakat and Shaban, *Back to Gaza*, 2015.

² Sen, *Bringing Back the Palestinian State*, 2015.

³ Rose, *The Gaza Bombshell*, 2008.

⁴ Caspit, *Israel eases Gaza blockade, hopes for Hamas stability*, 2015.

⁵ Chomsky, *Gaza, the World's Largest Open-Air Prison*, 2012.

from the blockade have been further expedited by the three successive Israeli wars against the Hamas-ruled Strip and ensured the persistence of what Sara Roy once called a condition of 'de-development'.⁶

The skirmishes in the immediate aftermath of the elections ended on June 19, 2008, with Israel agreeing to an Egyptian brokered six-month ceasefire with Hamas. Until then the conflict had killed seven Israelis and more than 400 Palestinians over the 12-month period after Hamas' take-over of Gaza.⁷ The framework of the temporary truce included an agreement that Hamas would put an end to its rocket attacks on southern Israel. In return Israel would ease the blockade, making it possible for necessary supplies to enter Gaza without having to smuggle them through illegal tunnels. While both Israel and Hamas committed to the temporary truce, the Palestinian Islamist faction warned that it should in no way be perceived as a "free gift to the occupiers". The Islamic Resistance further emphasised that if Israelis did not live up to their promise, the truce would not last. While the violence decreased significantly during the ceasefire, the ease of the blockade was too insignificant to provide any significant level of respite in the everyday lives of Gazans.⁸

I.2 2008-2009: Operation Cast Lead

Immediately after the end of the truce, on December 27, 2008, Israel launched the Operation Cast Lead military offensive against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which lasted for three weeks. The official motivation of the offensive was to stop the smuggling of weapons into Gaza and prevent rocket attacks on Israel. An estimated 1,300 Palestinians, mostly civilians, lost their lives. 13 Israelis also perished, including four soldiers who died as a result of 'friendly fire'. Gaza's civilian infrastructure was ravaged during the war. Israel

ceased the offensive on January 21, 2009, declaring a unilateral ceasefire arguing that its goals were "more than fully achieved".⁹

I.3 2012: Operation Pillar of Defence

On November 14, 2012, Israel launched the second military offensive against the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip – calling it Operation Pillar of Defence – which began with an air strike that killed Ahmed Jabari, the commander of Hamas' military wing. Many wondered whether the operation was intended to underline Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's credentials as a 'provider' of security to Israel, especially since elections were only nine weeks away. Others have argued that the operation was intended as a strategic move aimed at undermining Palestinian efforts to acquire non-member observer status in the UN. This theory was buttressed by Israeli diplomats who warned the international community that Israel's government would "go crazy" if Palestine was to receive such a status.¹⁰ But with the official aim of stopping rocket fire and crippling Hamas' military capabilities, the operation ended after eight days with a ceasefire, once again brokered by Egypt. 162 Palestinians and six Israelis were killed in the operation.

I.4 2014: Operation Protective Edge

For 50 days in the summer of 2014, the Gaza Strip witnessed the third and deadliest Israeli offensive. Operation Protective Edge was officially launched with the aim of stopping rocket fire from Gaza into Israel. But, to a large extent, it appeared to be a revenge operation for the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers, supposedly perpetrated by two Hamas members on June 12. During the war approximately 2,220 Palestinians, including 1,492 civilians, were killed and another 11,231 were injured in Gaza. It is estimated

⁶ Roy, *The Gaza Strip*, 1995; Roy, *De-development revisited*, 1999.

⁷ Walker, *Gaza militants and Israel begin fragile truce*, 2008.

⁸ Maqbool, *Truce barely eases Gaza embargo*, 2008.

⁹ BBC, *Gaza-Israel Conflict*, 2014.

¹⁰ Chomsky, *Gaza, the World's Largest Open-Air Prison*, 2012.

that approximately 18,000 Palestinian housing units were destroyed during the attack. Israel lost 71 of its citizens, of whom 66 were military personnel killed during the offensive.¹¹ The war ended with a ceasefire agreement that was agreed upon on August 26, 2014 and brokered by Egypt.

II. New signs of a long-term truce

In spite of the perpetual confrontations between Hamas and Israel over the last decade, recent developments indicate that both parties are now trying to adjust their efforts in order to accommodate a more long-term agreement. While motivated by different goals, there seems to be an implicit understanding developing in Israel and in Gaza that a sustainable solution is necessary, as the patience of key international stakeholders has been waning through each successive war on Gaza. This has been especially evident in the frayed public relationship between US President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In an interview after the latter's re-election in 2015, President Obama called the status quo unsustainable and argued that the only way for Israel to continue as a democratic Jewish state was a two-state solution – a solution Prime Minister Netanyahu, prior to his re-election, had assured the voters would never see the light of day as long as he was in power.¹² Obama further announced that after the re-election of Netanyahu, the White House would need to reassess its relationship with Israel, forcing the Israeli Prime Minister to soften his pre-election stance, opening up for potential negotiations.

While Israel is being increasingly pressured by the international community to ease its policies with regards to the occupation, Hamas is gaining increased recognition from

the international community. On December 17, 2014, the European Court of Justice claimed to remove Hamas from the EU's terrorist organisations list (due to procedural errors when Hamas had been included), and Hamas has demonstrated the potential for a profound transformation ever since its 2006 electoral victory, transitioning into a dual role as resistance and government. This dual-purposed role has led to a profound change in the organisation's behaviour. Demonstrating an urge to moderate its political stance, Hamas has welcomed European delegations to the Gaza Strip. Prominent visitors within the last six months have included, among others, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, Quartet envoy Tony Blair, President of the Qatari National Committee for the Reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, Mohammed Al-Emadi, and a German diplomatic delegation.

Bassem Naim, a foreign affairs consultant for the Hamas led-government and former Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, confirmed that Hamas has received several international proposals to discuss a more long-term truce agreement between Israel and Hamas.¹³ In March, on the anniversary of the assassination of Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Ismail Haniyeh, (now the Deputy Head of Hamas' Political Bureau) declared that there was a proposal to reach a truce for five years in the Gaza Strip in return for lifting the siege.¹⁴ In April, a senior Hamas official declared to Al-Hayat newspaper that there has been indirect communication between Hamas and Israel, initiated and mediated by Western and Arab diplomatic contacts.¹⁵ He clarified that Israel has demanded that Hamas stops manufacturing arms and digging tunnels. He added: "For its part, Hamas called for crossings opening, operating the seaport and reconstructing the airport."¹⁶

¹¹ Barakat and Shaban, *Back to Gaza*, 2015.

¹² Stein, *Obama details His Disappointment With Netanyahu In First Post-Election Comments*, 2015.

¹³ Amer, *Hamas warily eyes proposal for long-term truce with Israel*, 2015.

¹⁴ Arabic News, *Haniyeh*, 2015.

¹⁵ Al Zaytouna, *Indirect connections between Hamas and Israel dealt a truce in return for lifting the blockade and the exchange of prisoners*, 2015.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Also, according to Al-Monitor, Israeli media has published details about a proposed truce agreement, which reportedly seeks to achieve a 15-year ceasefire and a lifting of the siege. Still, according to Hamas Deputy Foreign Minister Ghazi Hamad, no practical progress had been made, since Israel refuses to meet the demands listed above.¹⁷ Hamas has also recently raised the issue of kidnapped Israeli soldiers in the Gaza strip. Ahmad Yousef, a senior adviser to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, told the Palestinian Ma'an News Agency on April 26 that Israel and Hamas have had European-mediated back-channel talks on a ceasefire, the opening of seaports and the release of Israeli soldiers' bodies. However, Israeli officials have dismissed this claim by asserting that "there are no negotiations with Hamas".¹⁸ Still, recent remarks from the Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon¹⁹ and the fact that there are talks about a potential deal involving the retrieval of the bodies of two Israeli soldiers in exchange for Palestinian prisoners, indicate that there is contact between the contending partners.²⁰

Besides the change in its political rhetoric, its constructive dialogue with international officials and secret communication with Israel, Hamas has also sought to open a channel of communication elsewhere. The organisation has attempted to engage in greater public dialogue through social media by launching an #AskHamas campaign on Twitter, and it has established an English edition of the Hamas info page in order to reach a broader international audience with messages such as "Hamas believes in dialogue with others" and "Hamas believes in election and peaceful transfer of power".²¹ The use of social media

seems to be an increasingly important strategic tool for both Israel and Hamas as a means of conveying political messages and ensuring public goodwill. Although there is a deep chasm between Twitter and real political progress, such efforts ensure the visibility of the opposition's political stance to an audience that may have otherwise been oblivious to it.

III. Conclusion

Throughout this article it has been argued that a secret line of communication has been in place between Israel and Hamas through international mediators and, increasingly, through social media. Changes in discourse and behaviour among Hamas leaders, since the election in 2006, is increasingly evident as the organisation has mediated its role as both resistance and government. The international community is also beginning to acknowledge that Hamas is a key stakeholder that cannot be ignored in negotiations of truce and peace in the region – if indeed a long-term truce should be the goal of such negotiations. The implicit communication is evident and it is the assessment of the author that after the recent election in Israel it will now be time to engage further in efforts to sustain a peace agreement between Hamas and Israel. Still, as long as Israel officially refuses to recognise Hamas as a negotiating partner, a more permanent truce agreement seems far off. Consequently, one is further compelled to question the impact of the actions of the international community – especially in the wake of Operation Protective Edge – since, without Israeli approval, little change can be made to the status quo in the Gaza Strip.

¹⁷ Amer, *Hamas warily eyes proposal for long-term truce with Israel*, 2015.

¹⁸ The Jerusalem Post, *Israel and Hamas engaged in indirect talks, senior Hamas official says*, 2015.

¹⁹ Al Quds Al Arabi, «Ya'alon» *alludes to near engagement in a prisoner swap with Hamas*, 2015.

²⁰ Levy and Somfalvi, *Is a new prisoner exchange deal in the works?*, 2014.

²¹ Hamas, *Hamas Movement*, 2015.

Reference List

- AL QUDS AL ARABI, “«Ya’alon» alludes to near engagement in a prisoner swap with Hamas,” April 22, 2015, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=330725>.
- AMER, ADNAN ABU, “Hamas warily eyes proposal for long-term truce with Israel,” *Al-Monitor*, April 14, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/04/hamas-negotiations-truce-israel-lift-siege.html>.
- AL ZAYTOUNA CENTRE FOR STUDIES AND CONSULTATIONS, “Indirect connections between Hamas and Israel dealt a truce in return for lifting the blockade and the exchange of prisoners,” April 5, 2015, <http://www.alzaytouna.net/permalink/91553.html>.
- ARABIC NEWS, “Haniyeh: Hamas is not closed to any ideas of a truce with Israel in the framework of the Palestinian national project,” March 22, 2015, http://arabic.news.cn/arabic/2015-03/22/c_134087469.htm.
- BARAKAT, SULTAN AND OMAR SHABAN, “Back to Gaza: A New Approach to Reconstruction,” *Brookings Doha Center Policy Brief*, January 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/01/12-gaza-reconstruction/english-pdf.pdf>.
- BBC, “Gaza-Israel Conflict: Is the fight over?,” August 26, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28252155>.
- CASPIT, BEN, “Israel eases Gaza blockade, hopes for Hamas stability,” *Al-Monitor*, April 30, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/israel-hamas-gaza-war-blockade-netanyahu-yaalon-new-policy.html>.
- CHOMSKY, NOAM, “Gaza, The World’s Largest Open-Air Prison,” *In These Times*, November 2012, http://inthesetimes.com/article/14148/gaza_the_worlds_largest_open_air_prison.
- HAMAS, *Hamas Movement*, Twitter Account of Hamas, March 26, 2015, <https://twitter.com/HamasInfoEn/status/577563070085599232>; <https://twitter.com/HamasInfoEn/status/577562861087690752>.
- LEVY, ELIOR AND ATTILA SOMFALVI, “Is a new prisoner exchange deal in the works?,” *YNet*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4578877,00.html>.
- MAQBOOL, ALEEM, “Truce barely eases Gaza embargo,” *BBC News*, August 19, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7570605.stm.
- ROSE, DAVID, “The Gaza Bombshell,” *Vanity Fair*, April 2008, www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/gaza200804.
- ROY, SARA, *The Gaza Strip: Political Economy of De-Development* (Washington, DC: The Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995).

ROY, SARA, "De-development Revisited: Palestinian Economy and Society Since Oslo," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28 (3:1999), 64-82.

SEN, SOMDEEP, "Bringing Back the Palestinian State: Hamas between Government and Resistance," *Middle East Critique* 24 (2:2015), 211-225.

STEIN, SAM, "Obama Details His Disappointment With Netanyahu In First Post-Election Comments," *Huffington Post*, March 21, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/21/obama-iran-deal_n_6905634.html.

THE JERUSALEM POST, "Israel and Hamas engaged in indirect talks, senior Hamas official says," April 27, 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israel-and-Hamas-engaged-in-indirect-talks-senior-Hamas-official-says-399315>.

WALKER, PETER, "Gaza militants and Israel begin fragile truce," *The Guardian*, June 9, 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jun/19/israelandthepalestinians>.

All internet sources were accessed and verified on June 16, 2015.



Young Entrepreneurs in Egypt

Opportunities for cooperation and investment in new and innovative projects

Berlin, 15th October 2015

With the Egypt Economic Development Conference in Sharm el-Sheikh in March 2015, Egypt signalled its return among international investors and companies. Through its strategic location (Suez Canal), a large and emergent domestic market and a significant source of natural resources, Egypt offers extensive business opportunities for German companies in many sectors, including energy, construction, medical technology, IT and e-commerce. Tourism is also picking up again. To achieve long-term prosperity, the government is seeking to modernise the Egyptian economy, facilitate investment law and offer numerous large-scale projects. Smaller projects will also be promoted and encouraged.

As part of the 2nd meeting of the German-Egyptian Joint Economic Commission in June 2015, NUMOV and the Egyptian Junior Business Association (EJB) agreed on a cooperation for the promotion of German-Egyptian business. As an influential association of Egyptian companies, the EJB strives for a better and more sustainable economic environment in Egypt. Organised by NUMOV and the EJB, "Young Businesses in Egypt" will be an information event with a focus on B2B meetings, with innovative projects and new business ideas at the fore.

Reply: Fax 030 20641010 or email numov@numov.de

- I am/We are interested in the "Young Businesses in Egypt" event in Berlin on 15th October, 2015 and would like to receive registration details and a copy of the programme.
- I am/We are not yet a member of NUMOV and would like to receive more information.

Name, Firma, Anschrift, Telefon, Fax, E-Mail