

# Forget about taming or disarming Hamas: cut it a deal it can't refuse

By Rosemary Hollis

## ■ Executive summary

In Europe and the U.S., reactions to the July-August 2014 Gaza war range across a spectrum of positions, but are more polarised than hitherto. The near absence of a peace camp in Israel and the intolerance of many Palestinians of dealings with Jewish Israelis that could be deemed “normalisation” of the status quo mean there is little middle ground on which to build a compromise solution.

A radical solution that places Hamas at the centre of negotiations is worth consideration, if only as a way to escape further time wasting on already defunct or moribund formulations. The key to this radical approach would be the Hamas demand for a seaport in Gaza. The logic behind Hamas's thinking on this is clearly that such a facility would relieve Gazans of dependence on either the Israelis or the Egyptians, with or without Palestinian Authority involvement, and provide access to the outside world.

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In addition to Hamas, among the parties meeting in Egypt to find a way forward there are two broad camps, neither of which can command a decisive lead because of the existence of the other. In the one camp are those who see Hamas as the central problem and want to deal it a deadly blow from which it cannot recover, and in the other are those who see the crisis as an opportunity to tame Hamas by binding it into a ceasefire agreement that subordinates it to the leadership of its rivals in the Palestinian Authority (PA) headed by Mahmoud Abbas.

Both camps talk about demilitarising the Gaza Strip as an objective, but this is beyond the capacity of either the Israeli military or the PA, whether the idea is supported or not by the U.S., the Europeans, the Egyptians and other Arabs. The destruction of Hamas by the Israeli military would require a

reoccupation of the Gaza Strip that would expose Israeli soldiers to the kind of urban guerrilla warfare that would exact too high a price for the Israeli public to tolerate.

Were the PA to try to introduce its security forces on the ground in Gaza to prevent continued Hamas resistance to Israel in return for a lifting of the blockade on Gaza, this would only represent a temporary fix, pending a return to internecine warfare among the Palestinians – unless the PA could plausibly argue that its leadership can deliver by negotiation what Hamas has failed to deliver by violence. The collapse of the U.S.-brokered peace process earlier this year demonstrates that no such argument holds water.

A revival of the Arab Peace Initiative can no longer be a game changer either, since such unity as there was among Arab leaderships around this initiative in 2002 and 2005 has been shattered by the war in Syria and collapse of the Iraqi state. Saudi Arabia's erstwhile champion of the initiative, King Abdullah, is ailing and barely able to conduct the business of state for more than a few hours a day.

The Jordanians have much more pressing problems to deal with than the reconstruction and demilitarisation of Gaza

because of the mayhem across its eastern borders and the advance of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. And as for the Egyptian government, which, under the leadership of President Sisi is even more opposed to Hamas, which is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, than was the Mubarak government, it is not going to relieve either the Israelis or the PA of the task of running the Gaza Strip.

We are therefore where we have been before – with each of the parties wanting someone else to shoulder the burden of Gaza. Even before the current crisis, the World Bank had warned that by 2020 life for the inhabitants of this narrow and overcrowded strip of coastland would become untenable, given the dwindling fresh water supplies and damaged waste disposal system.

All this being so, there is, however, one party that has been prepared to lead in Gaza and still could. This is Hamas, and therein lies a potential solution, provided that the other parties overcome their aversion to dealing directly with the Hamas militants.

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The proposal being mooted here is that an international team responsible to the UN secretary general would propose to the Hamas leadership that it cooperates in the development and running of a new port facility on condition that it renounces violence and the smuggling of weapons

for a set period, say ten years, while Gaza is rebuilt, offshore facilities constructed, fishing permits extended out to sea and the gas field off the Gazan coast is developed.

Certainly, Hamas would enjoy a reprieve – a reward even – for its stance hitherto, but at a price – namely an end to resistance to Israel, while the 1.8 million or so inhabitants of Gaza are enabled to achieve some sort of quality of life hitherto denied them. If they are left to fester, they will produce ever more militants, and Hamas will seem like moderates compared to the ideologues of the future.

There is no exact precedent for this proposal. The Israeli government will not like it, because it will not be in control, but by its own logic it has relinquished the right to determine who rules Gaza and how by evacuating the place in 2005. The PA would not like it, nor many other Palestinians, because such a plan would effectively maintain the division between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, but the organisation must know that its reinsertion into Gaza in the name of unity would only make the organisation the stooge of Israel and Egypt.

In fact, if the formula delivered a better life for the Gazans and a better future, it could pave the way for better cooperation with West Bank Palestinians in the future. And in the meantime the Israelis could not use Gaza as an excuse not to address the legitimate aspirations of West Bank Palestinians.

The alternative is another humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and very likely another violent confrontation between the Israelis (exercising their right to self-defence) and the people of Gaza (exercising their right to live in freedom) that will pose an even greater problem for the international community than any seen thus far. ■

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