Reviving a Regional Approach

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Despite the physical demarcation of the zone of the recent military confrontation between Israel and Hamas, the broader context went well beyond the geographical area and the ranges of the rockets shot from it. The operation illustrated the convergence of interests between Israel and Arab states, chiefly Egypt under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, which is once again playing a central and influential role in the efforts to promote a ceasefire. Moreover, after the operation, Israeli cabinet ministers spoke of the need to promote a regional initiative, either to achieve a long term solution concerning Hamas[1] and/or as an alternative to bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.[2]

Has a foundation been created for a paradigm shift – from a framework of bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians to multilateral regional dialogue? Israel's official stance toward the Arab Peace Initiative, which is a proposed framework for multilateral engagement, has remained rather skeptical, and many still see it as a prescription for surrender more than an invitation to negotiations.[3] On the other hand, those who support a regional format believe that the Arab initiative is meant to leverage interests common to Israel and some of the leading Arab states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates), and that to this end, it should be reexamined as a framework for negotiations.

The Arab Peace Initiative was announced in 2002, just before Operation Defensive Shield, and has since been ratified repeatedly at the annual Arab League summits. The initiative proposed an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict in exchange for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a agreed solution to the refugee problem. This initiative is not necessarily the only format for regional

dialogue. However, Israel ought to announce that with concrete reservations, it is adopting the principles of the initiative as part of the framework for negotiations to end the Arab-Israeli conflict in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular.

Hamas as a Regional Challenge

According to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Hamas is an enemy of any peace-loving entity. Indeed, Hamas has demonstrated this well: beyond the fact that Hamas fires rockets and mortar shells at Israel, the General Security Services exposed a Hamas military infrastructure in the West Bank intended to be used for attacks against Israel and even a coup against the Palestinian Authority (PA).[4] PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas has accused Hamas of working against the Palestinian consensus, of being behind the abduction and murder of the three Israeli teenagers in June 2014 – which started a chain of escalation leading to Operation Protective Edge, and of strengthening ties with Muhammad Dahlan, Abbas' political rival.[5] At the same time, Abbas presented his independent plan to Khaled Mashal in Doha to unilaterally establish a Palestinian state and was even reported to have received Mashal's signature on it.[6]

The current Egyptian regime under el-Sisi sees Hamas, a subsidiary of the Muslim Brotherhood, as a radical terrorist organization that aspires to undermine stability at home. Cairo blames Hamas, inter alia, for attacking the Rafah crossing and abducting Egyptian soldiers in Sinai. During Operation Protective Edge, Egyptian journalists supported the operation and called for IDF operations in Gaza to be intensified. Hamas is not even mentioned in the ceasefire agreement that Egypt brokered, and above all, Cairo recognizes the PA as the only entity authorized to help the future reconstruction efforts in Gaza, in coordination with Israel and the international community.[7]

Saudi Arabia supports Cairo's tough stance against Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. In March 2014, Riyadh declared Hamas a terrorist organization[8] – a decision with direct political implications for the group. Similarly, since December 2013 Hamas has been an unwanted guest in Jordan,[9] and even Qatari pressure to allow Hamas to reopen its offices in Amman was to no avail.[10] However, unlike Egypt, Jordan expressed concern that the fighting in Gaza would undermine the stability of the kingdom, and therefore it allowed demonstrations to enable the disgruntled population to let off steam.

It would appear that key regional players characterize Hamas according to their respective local-national interests, and not with a regional perspective. Thus, for example, Israel used force against Hamas in order to remove an intolerable threat the organization posed along Israel's borders and to the Israeli civilian population, and Egypt is taking a hard line intended to preserve stability at home and security on its borders. Jordan and the PA in the West Bank are acting in kind. Hamas as a current threat could encourage security coordination between Israel and the countries of the region, but the coordination on this issue is usually localized and does not set overt regional processes in motion.

At the end of the day, the support Israel received from the leaders of the Egyptian-Jordanian-Saudi bloc during the campaign in Gaza was limited in time, scope, and context. During the first three weeks of the operation, Arab leaders did not criticize the military operation against Hamas, but strong criticism developed as the fighting progressed because of the extent of the death and destruction in Gaza. Thus, for example, Saudi King Abdullah claimed in early August that the operation in Gaza is a war crime, and his Jordanian counterpart stated that the extensive harm to the civilian population contradicted Israel's claim that the war was justified. The Egyptian Foreign Minister also spoke out against continuing what he called the "inhumane" blockade of Gaza.[11] This criticism – primarily lip service, which is also how Israel relates to it – stems from the need of the Arab regimes to appease public opinion in their respective countries. Obviously, this approach prevents open regional cooperation with Israel.

Nevertheless, Progress toward a Regional Process

Even before Operation Protective Edge, the last round of talks between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, which took place under the direction of US Secretary of State John Kerry, deepened the mistrust between Israeli and Palestinian leaders and between the two societies. The Netanyahu-led government evinced a lack of confidence in the political process with the PA, and its actions and statements eroded Palestinian trust in Israel's intentions concerning political progress toward a settlement. In tandem, Abbas' actions and lapses, along with his unilateral international diplomatic activity, have eroded public support in Israel for the political process and reinforced the rejectionist image of the PA in the minds of many.

In his speech to the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed certain threats common to Israel and the Egyptian-Jordanian-Saudi bloc, led by radical Islamic terror – Sunni and Shiite – and the fear of a nuclear Iran. The threat of terrorism, according to Netanyahu, is directed against all religions and ethnic groups, including Muslims.[12] This threat indeed constitutes a sufficiently concrete danger in the eyes of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and they have thus joined the US coalition against the Islamic State (IS). Pilots from these countries, the UAE, and Bahrain are participating in attacks on the organization's bases and its strongholds in Syria and Iraq. El-Sisi has also announced that Egypt, even though it is not a member of the coalition, "will do whatever is required" to help the forces fighting IS.[13] Israel is not participating in the fighting, but it is providing intelligence as part of the strategic cooperation between Jerusalem and Washington.[14] The Arab involvement in the coalition is also noteworthy against the background of the US refusal to include Iran in this effort. This refusal is connected in part to Iran's support for the Assad regime and its intentions to develop a military nuclear program. In the Prime Minister's opinion, this situation constitutes an opportunity to build an axis for broader regional cooperation than what has existed until now.[15]

According to Netanyahu, the active involvement of Arab countries could lead to a settlement with the Palestinians. However, regional frameworks such as the Arab Peace Initiative, while they cannot serve as an alternative to bilateral negotiations, can constitute an incentive to complete them.[16] Prince Turki al-Faisal, former head of Saudi intelligence, addressed this when he noted that Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries would support an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty, but that the treaty would be achieved only through negotiations between Jerusalem and Ramallah. He also added that Israel could ask to discuss the clauses of the Arab initiative, but would have to recognize the proposal and show genuine willingness to progress on the Palestinian issue.[17]

Indeed, a regional process would presumably not be possible without genuine progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Therefore, Israel could announce that in principle, it recognizes the Arab initiative as a basis for dialogue and as part of the framework for negotiations for ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, it should consider initiating regional economic and security arrangements to form an axis based on interests it shares with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf emirates, with support by the US and

the Quartet. In this way, Israel could discuss its reservations to the initiative with countries in the region, and thus there would also be an opportunity to formulate points of agreement on graduated solutions to the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this context, a multi-level mechanism for dialogue with the following elements could follow, specifically:

a. A regional channel: to promote negotiations between Israel, the PA, and other members of the Arab League on the basis of the Arab initiative or other regional initiatives and support negotiations on long term settlements.
b. An Israeli-Palestinian track: to promote negotiations with the PA that would gradually lead to permanent settlements through interim agreements, constructive independent steps, and partial agreements.
c. An implementation mechanism: to ensure the success of the blueprint for rebuilding Gaza, implement understandings reached during the negotiations on other tracks, demilitarize the future Palestinian state, and create a real change on the ground, while strengthening the moderate Palestinian leadership, continuing to build the institutions of the Palestinian state, and rebuilding the economy.

Conclusion

Operation Protective Edge brought to the surface an intriguing set of interests shared by Israel and Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the PA, both collectively and on concrete bilateral bases. Those organizing themselves along this axis are working, each in its own way, against Hamas, radical Islamic terror, and certain aspects of the Iranian issue that affect Israel as well. Nevertheless, the congruence of security-political interests alone does not indicate that there is a joint regional approach ensuring an axis for long term multilateral dialogue. At the time of this writing, it is still too early to say whether the government of Israel will decide to adopt a regional approach, in whose context significant progress can be made on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

While the frequent changes in the Middle East create new opportunities, the ability to take advantage of them depends on whether the leaders, the centers of power in the region, can set in motion regional political processes and mobilize their respective constituencies. This is a difficult process, given the starting conditions: 80 percent of Palestinians support rocket fire at Israel if the blockade of Gaza is not lifted and 60 percent claim that the two-state solution is no longer practicable.[18] Similarly, there is continued

Israeli construction in Judea and Samaria, and bills on annexing territories or applying Israeli law to settlements in the West Bank have been proposed. However, in order to ensure a Jewish majority in democratic Israel within its sovereign territory and block the possibility of a bi-national state while fighting terror and other threats to Israel, the government would do well to adopt a sophisticated and creative regional approach.

Notes

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