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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Israeli Assault on Gaza: Another International Test Failed by the Obama Administration

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Aug 2014

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Israel and the United States: Background Positions

At the start of Israel's July 2014 offensive on the Gaza Strip the Obama Administration announced its support for "Israel's right to defend itself." At the same time, however, the United States paid lip service to the need for Israel to show the highest levels of self-restraint towards civilians, revealing the White House's desire that there be no large-scale Israeli military operation. Indeed, less than two days after the offensive began, Obama called Netanyahu to express his unease at the military escalation against Gaza. Obama also told his Israeli counterpart that the United States was ready to undertake diplomatic activity to reinstate the 2012 agreement, under which the United States and Egypt's ex-president Mohammed Morsi acted as mediators to bring about a ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip.

Circumstances, however, would see the United States take a more biased stance than last time. The quick escalation of Israeli military action, an improved Palestinian resistance that surprised both Israel and the United States, and domestic politics that saw Obama caught between Republican criticism and Congressional pressure over support for Israel, all conspired to push American politics toward Israel. This can first be seen in the decision to hold Hamas entirely responsible for the violence, and then in the rush to ask Congress for hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of additional funding to enhance the Israeli Iron Dome missile defense system, which had been put in place as a measure against the missiles of the Palestinian resistance. At the beginning of August, the Senate approved the allocation of 225 million US Dollars in urgent funding for that system, and though Congress failed to pass the bill, Obama himself approved it in short order. The US Department of Defense had earlier in July announced that Israel would be allowed to obtain ammunition from local stocks of American weapons. This came as part of a program run by the US military known as the "War Reserve Stockpile – Israel" to resupply its ally in the Middle East with heavy weaponry, including old stockpiles of 40 mm and 120 mm shells due to be replaced. According to a Department of Defense spokesman, Washington was also processing further Israeli requests for American-manufactured ammunition.

The history of the American-Israeli alliance trumps any internal American partisan differences. The Obama Administration is no exception in this respect. What distinguishes this government's bias towards Israel, however, is that it comes more from the administration's impotence than its conviction. The White House has noted on several occasions the negative impact that Israel's hardline stance on a peace deal has

had on its own interests in the region. Indeed, despite unprecedented pressure on Israel to move forward, the Obama Administration has found only intransigence bolstered by the American media, as well as the country's political, economic, and religious forces. These have helped to rein in the Obama administration's "intractability" towards Israel and further weakened its stance. Having dramatically failed to exert pressure on Israel, Obama necessarily, and even enthusiastically, accepted defeat.

America's Belated Intervention: The Wider Context

Within the current global political landscape, the Obama administration's belated move to contain the escalation in the Gaza Strip can be read as a sign of the government's fatigue. There were also, however, a wider set of realities in the Arab world to be taken into account.

First, the feeble efforts came despite open American channels between both Israel and the Arabs, particularly via Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. These avenues might have been used, as they were in the past, as a mechanism of asserting regional influence via Palestine-Israel. This time, however, the task of de-escalating was left in the hands of Egypt, with Israel's support.

When it came to Egypt, Sisi was given space to convince Hamas and the other Palestinian resistance factions to agree to his Egyptian initiative and for a truce between the two sides to be enforced. Sisi's mediation efforts, however, failed on all fronts; officials neither consulted the resistance factions, nor did they take into account the level of death or destruction that the attacks had wrought. Sisi's truce did not acknowledge the uneven nature of the violence, and his proposal for "quiet in return for quiet" and to be followed by discussion of other issues, did not cut muster. While waiting for Sisi's failed truce project slowed an American reaction, the power of the resistance sped it up. The significant improvement in the tactics and arms of the Palestinian resistance movements meant that in the days after the ground invasion the factions caused significant Israeli military losses despite massive attacks from land, sea, and air. When Egypt gave up mediation, the Obama administration had no choice but to act directly.

Two weeks into the Israeli offensive, on July 21, US Secretary of State John Kerry visited the region. His visit came after the deaths of hundreds of Palestinian civilians as Israel continued the targeting of population centers in the small and densely populated strip. Both Kerry and Obama condemned the targeting of civilians and the mounting

death toll, but were unable to make political moves to preserve life or curb Israel's military action. Obama, at a White House press conference on the same day that Kerry arrived in the region, expressed his outrage at the extent of Palestinian civilian losses and his deep anxiety over the situation, but followed the condemnation with reasserting "Israel's right to self-defense." Kerry had done the same thing a day earlier when, during a television interview with Fox News, a microphone picked up his telephone conversation with an aide. Kerry was recorded as he scoffed at Israel's claim that the military was not targeting civilians, but rather carrying out pinpoint strikes against combatants. Whether the conversation was recorded by chance or was intended as a means of putting pressure on Israel, it was certainly an expression of the administration's feeling that Israel had gone too far in its assault on the Gaza Strip. Despite such a clear conviction, however, the Obama administration was unable to say it openly. What were the ideas contained in the Kerry document, which was leaked by the Israeli government to the Hebrew press in a way that annoyed the Americans and that Kerry described as "damaging behavior"? And how did it differ from the Egyptian initiative?

Because of the administration's weakness, efforts to curb Israeli violence were limited to mediation and Kerry's work to craft an alternative ceasefire deal. When a draft of Kerry's alternative plan was leaked prematurely to the Hebrew press, American reaction was again limited, calling the move simple "damaging behavior." This humiliated Kerry personally, and embarrassed the Obama administration overall. The embarrassment came not only at the hands of Israel but also from the Arab allies who had sought the space for Israel to destroy Hamas. Indeed, some Arab regimes had learned to ally themselves with Israel during the Arab uprisings believing that Israel understood the region better than Washington. The regimes particularly appreciated that the threat to their rule was also a threat to Israel.

A Change in Landscape: Allies and Israel

Nowhere has the change in the political landscape been more pronounced than in Egypt, where in what may be a precedent in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the country officially stood with Israel and against the United States. The alliance explains the failure of Kerry's efforts, and evidence of the new partnership came on July 27 when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told American news channels that the only initiative acceptable to Israel was the Egyptian one. Egyptian officials reciprocated the Israeli stance, saying they would not accept any modifications to the original

ceasefire initiative even after Kerry's visit to Cairo and American efforts for a more acceptable agreement.

The question remains: what was in Kerry's "Framework for a Humanitarian Ceasefire in Gaza," that was so staunchly opposed by both Egypt and Israel? According to the leaked proposal, the document proposed that both sides cease fire for one week beginning on July 27. Forty-eight hours after the ceasefire came into effect, the plan would have had Cairo invite Israel and the Palestinian factions to enter into negotiations over "a sustainable ceasefire" and an "enduring solution" to what the document termed "the crisis in Gaza." According to the framework, this would include arrangements to secure the opening of border crossings, allowing the entry of goods and the movement of people, ensuring the social and economic livelihood of Gaza's population, and permitting the transfer of funds to Gaza to pay the salaries of government employees. The leaked document also proposed that during the humanitarian ceasefire, all parties would refrain from any military or security operations targeting the other side and permit the delivery of humanitarian aid. The Kerry draft considered and worked in the concerns of the international community, including the UN, the EU, the US, Qatar, Turkey, and others. The demands of these parties, and for the Kerry document, were that any ceasefire must meet the immediate needs of the people of Gaza.

Three particular phrases were used as part of an American gamble that sought to overcome any objections from Israel and Hamas. First was the suggestion that while in Cairo for talks the parties would "address all security issues." That was for Israel. For Hamas, the document promised "a sustainable ceasefire" and "enduring solution." The rationale appeared to be that Hamas would read these references as ensuring an end to the siege on the Gaza Strip, while Israel could read the document as a call for the disarmament of the Palestinian resistance in Gaza.

However, Israel rejected the initiative, viewing its language and demands as equating the country to Hamas. Israel was indignant, particularly over the absence of any reference to the tunnels, which had played such a big part in its military casualties. This was despite the fact that the document made no mention of the need for Israel to stop searching for these tunnels and destroying them during the initial week-long ceasefire.

Another dilemma confronting Kerry in this context came in the form of the pressure being exerted by Egypt and its allies among the so-called moderate Arab states not to "rescue" Hamas from its "difficulties." These states preferred the Egyptian initiative, which called for an effective surrender for the Palestinian resistance. Cairo was annoyed

at Kerry for bringing an alternative plan, and their annoyance was increased by the Paris meeting of July 26. This meeting brought together Kerry, the foreign ministers of France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Qatar, and Turkey, as well as the EU foreign minister. Notably absent were Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority. Washington justified its invitation to Qatar and Turkey based on the need for communications channels with Hamas. While the Americans continued to stress Egypt's "central role" in striking a truce, and that the Egyptian initiative formed the framework for the US initiative, this did not change the position of Egypt or of Israel. Both knew that Sisi's initiative would offer opportunities that the American version never would. For Cairo this was a proxy war against the Muslim Brotherhood, with Hamas seen as a splinter group.

From the start, then, the Americans were not welcome. The former Israeli ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, even said publically that Kerry was "not invited" to ceasefire talks, following news that the US Secretary of State would head to the region. The aftermath of the Arab Spring, the overthrow of the Morsi government in Egypt, and the new Islamist groups on the ground in the region, all meant that the Americans had few moves to make when it came to a ceasefire deal.

Prospects for a Settlement

In view of the escalating human toll arising from Israel's offensive and the increasing volume of an international outcry, Israel will not be able to end the fight it started. At the very least, it will not be able to end the latest aggression on its own terms. Egypt too, given the intrepid Palestinian resistance and Sisi's inability to force his hand, will not win out this time. To save face, the Americans will have to pressure Egypt to modify its initiative in cooperation with Qatar and Turkey, forcing it to respond to some of Hamas's conditions. In the current context, this will involve an easing of the siege on the Gaza Strip and new mechanisms for opening Gaza crossings. This may be facilitated by the national unity government that Fatah and Hamas formed in April, which was then implicitly recognized by Obama. Though Egypt will be involved, the deal will not be what Sisi had in mind, and though it will respond to some conditions of the resistance, it will largely favor Israel.

In the longer term, the agreement should be seen as a temporary truce before the situation explodes again. As long as the Israeli occupation continues, the Arab scene remains fragmented (and its regimes complicit), and the United States remains intent

only on “firefighting,” the next explosion seems inevitable. Until forces biased toward Israel are able to apply pressure, the status quo will remain in place.