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## THE GAZA WAR: WHO WON, WHO LOST?

BY ELLIOTT ABRAMS



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# ‘The Fog of Cease-fire’

*Who won the Gaza war?*

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BY ELLIOTT ABRAMS

**F**or the moment, the Gaza war of 2014 is over. Anyone trying now to figure out who won and who lost should recall the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. Then, Israelis had a great sense of letdown because they had not “won.” They had not destroyed Hezbollah, and the organization loudly claimed a triumph: “Lebanon has been victorious, Palestine has been victorious, Arab nations have been victorious,” said Sheikh Nasrallah. An estimated 800,000 Hezbollah supporters gathered in Beirut for a rally celebrating the “divine victory.”

But Nasrallah later said he would not have started the war had he understood how strong would be the Israeli reaction, and he has kept the Israeli-Lebanese border quiet for eight years now. Looking back, it’s clear that Israel won that 2006 exchange, which lasted 34 days.

This round with Hamas lasted longer, 50 days, and it’s fair to say that “who won?” can best be answered in retrospect some years from now. As Daniel Polisar put it, it’s difficult right now to see through the “fog of cease-fire.” But there is ample justification to say that Israel won, for three reasons.

First, a good measure of who won is who achieved their war aims. Israel’s key goal was to restore “quiet for quiet,” and that is what this cease-fire deal does. Even Jodi Rudoren in the *New York Times*, whose biases against Israel are so clear in its coverage, had to acknowledge that Hamas “declared victory even though it had abandoned most of its demands, ultimately accepting an Egyptian-brokered deal that differs little from one proffered on the battle’s seventh day.” Hamas’s goals had been far greater, and it rejected that first Egyptian cease-fire proposal over a month ago precisely because those goals were not met. But in the deal just agreed on, there is no airport, no seaport,

no “end to the blockade,” no freeing of Hamas militants rearrested by Israel (after their release months ago as part of agreements with the Palestinian Authority).

What has Hamas gained by continuing the war another month? Israel agrees to extend the Gaza fishing grounds from three to six miles, and agrees to cooperate in efforts to ease humanitarian conditions inside Gaza. The former isn’t a very big deal; the latter is Israeli policy anyway. Throughout the conflict Israel kept the Erez crossing between Gaza and Israel open, kept on supplying the people of Gaza with electricity, and kept up a flow of trucks into Gaza carrying food and other necessities. Hamas may have gotten some promises from Egypt to keep the Rafah crossing from Gaza to Sinai open more often and allow freer passage of people and goods. This would benefit Gazans, but how much it benefits Hamas depends in part on whether Rafah and other crossings are henceforth manned by Hamas’s enemy, the Palestinian Authority (see below on that rivalry). And it depends in part on whether, to what extent, and for how long Egypt keeps those promises. Even a betting man would not wager much on General Sisi’s tender mercies.

If the cease-fire lasts, meetings in Cairo will begin after one month of quiet to address the “blockade” of Gaza. This will be difficult, as the United States found out when we unsuccessfully addressed the same issues in the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access that we negotiated between Israel and the PA. Today it will be even harder, because Hamas and not the PA controls Gaza. To take one example, concrete will be needed to rebuild damaged or destroyed structures in Gaza, but who will monitor its use so that Hamas cannot divert some to rebuild its attack tunnels? Who, on the ground in Gaza, will be reliable and honest and will resist Hamas threats? Posit that an EU mission will be offered, and think it through: Will the EU’s functionaries live in Gaza? Then how will they be immune from the creeping alliance with Hamas that the U.N. Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) so clearly displays? Will they instead live in Tel Aviv or Cairo and travel to Gaza each day to work? Is that practical?

The idea of a seaport in Gaza presents similar practical

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problems: Who will police it reliably and prevent its use by Hamas to import weapons from Iran? An airport in Gaza, another Hamas goal, should be dismissed out of hand. If countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland have trouble assuring airport security, an airport in Hamastan is an invitation to disaster. In fact there is a defunct airport in Gaza: It is called Yasser Arafat International and was opened by President Clinton in a gala ceremony in 1998. During the intifada in 2001, Israel “decommissioned” the place, and it remains a ruin, but its name is a reminder that terrorism and airfields cannot be allowed to mix.

The second reason to give this round to Israel is the damage that appears to have been done to Hamas as an organization. Militarily, it used up or saw Israel destroy the bulk of its rockets and missiles. Importing replacements from Iran will be much harder now that Egypt has closed the smuggling tunnels from Sinai, as will importing some of the materials needed to build more at home in Gaza. Hamas rocket fire was largely blunted by Israel’s Iron Dome defense system. Hamas’s great secret weapon, the attack tunnels into Israel, is gone. The known tunnels have been destroyed, and Israeli technology will soon be in place to discover any new tunnels being built. Perhaps a thousand Hamas soldiers were killed, perhaps more, among them several key leaders. And a good deal of Hamas’s physical infrastructure (warehouses, workshops, headquarters) was destroyed as well. Its top military leader, Mohammed Deif, may have been killed or badly wounded by an Israeli attack on August 19 and has not been heard from since that day.

Politically, it’s clear that the PA will have some role in Gaza henceforth. It will at least be the Palestinian face in all the border passages, something Hamas has prevented since it seized control of Gaza in 2007. While it is unlikely that the PA can take great advantage of this and fully rebuild its own position in Gaza, its presence is a blow to Hamas that the organization is willing to accept (like going into a national unity government with the Fatah party in June) only when there is no alternative.

The harder question to answer is the political impact of the war on Hamas’s popularity in Gaza. The claims of triumph from Hamas leaders and activists tell us nothing about what everyone else in Gaza thinks. Why did Hamas lead them into war? Was it worth the sacrifice? By what right did they make this decision? And who is “they” anyway:

Khaled Meshal, who lives in Qatar? Hamas military leaders? The consensus opinion was that Hamas’s popularity was on the decline in Gaza before the war, partly because of its failure to ameliorate Gaza’s terrible economic problems and partly because of the heavy (and Islamist) hand with which it ruled. During the war it executed people it called collaborators, often in ghoulish public ceremonies, a move unlikely to win it more real support among the many Gazans who are not backers of Hamas or the other terrorist organizations.

One factor that led Hamas to start the war was precisely that it saw no other way to change its deteriorating situation. Today it is telling Gazans that the sacrifices were worthwhile because their situation will soon change and aid will flow. Promises will lift the public mood for a while, but what if they do not come true? What if life in Gaza next

June looks no different than it did this June, before the war—except for the deaths and damage the war caused? Hamas will of course blame Israel, and perhaps to some extent Egypt, but what will Gazans be saying then about their rulers? Whether the war was a political defeat for Hamas remains to be seen, but the taste of its “victory” may turn sour fast for most Gazans.

A third reason to believe that Israel won the war is the focus now on how Hamas turned Gaza into a war machine. Henceforth the border crossings may be open longer hours

for genuine commerce and the passage of Gazans whose business is not terrorism, but that has never been a Hamas goal. The 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access was never implemented in good part because Hamas fired mortars at the crossings, leading Israel to close them down. Last September, Gazan students rioted at the Rafah crossing because Hamas was preventing their access to Egypt and through Egypt to schools abroad. During this war Hamas continually attacked the Erez crossing, delaying delivery of humanitarian supplies and movement of wounded Gazans to Israeli hospitals—and stopping Gazans planning to study abroad from traveling through Israel to Amman and on to their destinations. Hamas’s ability to control the legal and illegal passages into Gaza, from international crossings like Rafah and Erez to smuggling tunnels into Egypt, has been declining and will now decline more.

Hamas’s use of mosques, schools, hotels, and hospitals to shelter its leaders, shoot rockets, and store war matériel has been vastly downplayed in the international press—but has not been absent. It will be harder now for Hamas, not easier. The culpability of UNRWA, whose



*A Gaza building destroyed in the fighting*

schools were repeatedly used by Hamas, is now apparent. Of course, nothing will change unless some countries—Canada and Australia, maybe, if the Obama administration backs away?—demand change, but Congress will likely take a hand here. The open secret of UNRWA's collaboration with Hamas will now be much harder to avoid or deny, a good example being the fact that its employee union in Gaza is a Hamas front.

How much will change henceforth is impossible to know, because the energy and courage—and strategy—of many parties, including Israel, would have to be estimated. When Israel left Gaza in 2005, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said that any rocket fire out of Gaza would instantly be met with a tough military response. After all, Israel was getting entirely out, the occupation was over, and there was absolutely no justification for one single rocket. But Sharon did not do it. Prior to his first stroke in December 2005, rocket and mortar fire had resumed, at low levels, but Sharon did not act. In 2006, 1,247 rockets and 28 mortars were fired at Israel from Gaza.

That's a lesson Israel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should keep in mind: Zero tolerance must be enforced or it will quickly erode. Speaking soon after the cease-fire was announced, Netanyahu pledged as much: "We won't tolerate even a sprinkle of rocket fire at any part of Israel. We would respond even more vigorously than before." He should keep his word. On the civilian side, many international actors will be seeking compromises rather than strict enforcement of any deal that's made. "After all," we will hear from many governments, "the crossings into Gaza can't be policed as if they were Zurich and Singapore; end-use inspections can't be done as if this were Toronto; UNRWA does such important work and complaints can't be allowed to interfere." Down that road lies Hamas rebuilding and another round of war.

**B**ut if the objective facts suggest that Hamas gained nothing from this war and suffered great losses, that's not to say Israel paid no price. International criticism of Israel has been fierce, especially in Europe. The death toll, mostly IDF soldiers, is 70. The mobilization of 85,000 reservists disrupted the Israeli economy, as did the cancellation of many visits by tourists. Ben Gurion Airport was briefly abandoned by almost all international carriers (and whether one blames Hamas for that or the American FAA, the war was the occasion). Israel suffered the perplexing blow of being unable to stop Hamas rocket and mortar fire. And even if almost all the rockets that might have done damage were shot down by Iron Dome, mortar fire meant that many border towns became ghost towns and repeated alerts had hundreds of thousands of Israelis running to

shelters day and night. The fact that there is a serious debate about who won the war means that Israel paid a price many Israelis think was far too high.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and IDF chief of staff Dan Halutz never recovered from the Lebanon war in 2006. Speaking a year later of the fact that the war had lasted a whole 34 days, Halutz said, "Without a doubt I recognize that at the end of the day that was the most blatant non-achievement or failure." The Gaza war of 2014 lasted more than two weeks longer. Halutz resigned just months after the war with Hezbollah ended; Olmert hung on for several years but his popularity ratings remained in single digits. That's a bad portent for Netanyahu, and a recent survey showed a gigantic drop in his own numbers. On July 23 his approval rating was 82 percent; last week it was 38 percent in one poll.

This is not surprising. Netanyahu avoided the trap Olmert created for himself in 2006 by announcing fantastic war aims (crushing Hezbollah and removing it from southern Lebanon); instead Netanyahu said what he wanted was quiet, meaning an end to rocket fire. Still, the war lasted far longer than Israelis anticipated, the IDF death toll was six times higher than in Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2008, and Hamas survived to hold street celebrations and claim victory. Netanyahu will pay a price, especially because there was another path and he rejected it.

The Israeli journalist Haviv Gur put it best:

At the conclusion of Operation Protective Edge, it is fair to say that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu unequivocally won the war he set out to fight—but not, perhaps, the war the Israeli public expected him to fight. . . . Netanyahu's strategy has much to commend it. It recognizes and addresses the challenges posed by terrorism and irregular conflict—the civilian toll, the political traps, the importance of the psychological battlefield.

But it may suffer from one overwhelming flaw: in the minds of Israelis, it doesn't look like war. It is hard to explain to millions of Israeli voters under rocket fire, to the families of dead children and dead soldiers, to a nation that expects decisive action from its leaders in wartime, why an enemy as derided and detested in the Israeli mind as Hamas can sustain rocket fire on a country as powerful as Israel for 50 days.

This gap is starting to have political consequences for Netanyahu. The growing chorus of critics, and the plummeting of Netanyahu's approval rating, show the extent of the disparity between the government's Gaza strategy and the nation's expectations.

Several members of Netanyahu's coalition cabinet, led primarily by Economy Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, urged a massive ground attack on Gaza that they said would destroy Hamas once and for all. Israel would reoccupy and rule Gaza and root out the terrorists. Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yaalon (a former IDF chief of staff) chose instead to prosecute an air war with minimal ground elements. It's possible to

say that the “reoccupy and crush” route would have been nuts, that ruling Gaza would have been an endless headache and cause of IDF fatalities, and that the damage done in Gaza while conquering and ruling it would have elicited a tidal wave of international criticism, but you can’t prove it because Israel did not take this route. Lieberman, Bennett, and many in Netanyahu’s own Likud party will continue to claim that he has proved to be a weak leader, unwilling to crush Hamas when he had the chance. Netanyahu didn’t put this new cease-fire to a vote in his cabinet, perhaps for fear he wouldn’t have a majority. Even if most Israelis disagree with the hard-line criticism, Netanyahu is the leader of Israel’s right, not its left or center or center-left, and he will now have plenty of trouble with his own base. Sharon faced similar difficulties when he left Gaza, and in the end he quit Likud over them.

Polls in Israel today are mixed, and if one showed Netanyahu at 38 percent, several others put him above 50 percent still. This won’t help him sleep better if all the “yes” responses are coming from supporters of the left while his own base is unhappy. But polls taken before the war showed that if Bibi was not widely loved, no other figures got within hailing distance of him when Israelis were asked who should be prime minister. That remains his ultimate strength: no really credible challengers. The interesting political question is whether the war changed that, and changed it permanently.

From the left in Israel, Netanyahu is being attacked not because he didn’t prosecute the war fiercely enough, but on the ground that had he reached a peace agreement with the Palestinians the war would never have happened. Labor party leader Yitzhak Herzog is calling for new elections and arguing that Netanyahu must show the “diplomatic courage” to negotiate peace with the PLO.

But if Netanyahu faces possible political danger from the outcome of the war, one other casualty is less debatable: the “peace process.” A comprehensive peace requires, after all, that Israel pull out of the West Bank—or at least most of it. Considering the ability of Hamas to launch rockets into Israel from Gaza, how many Israelis are willing to risk Hamas control of the West Bank—from which it could easily lob rockets and mortars into Ben Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem? It’s about 11 miles from the West Bank to Tel Aviv, about 5 miles from the border to Ben Gurion Airport, and basically zero miles from the West Bank to Israel’s seat of government in

Jerusalem, where the Knesset and prime minister’s offices are.

Why would it be easier to negotiate peace now, after the Gaza war, than it was when Secretary of State John Kerry’s efforts collapsed? Are issues like the future of Palestinian “refugees” and the so-called right of return easier now, or is the future of Jerusalem? Is PLO chairman (and PA president and Fatah leader) Mahmoud Abbas more likely to accept compromises he and Yasser Arafat have been rejecting since the Camp David talks in 2000? In fact, the end of the Gaza war may present some opportunities, but those would be to jettison such utopian hopes and work on

realistic opportunities to improve life: in Gaza, if Hamas will permit it, and in the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority conducted itself responsibly during the war, engaging in a rhetorical contest with Hamas at times to see who condemned Israel more fiercely but doing all it could to prevent violence from erupting in the West Bank. Could this be the predicate for better political, security, and economic cooperation between the PA and Israel? There are plenty of steps that could be taken, if the Israeli left (or what remains of it),

the EU, and the Obama administration could turn away from dreams of comprehensive peace deals and toward practical improvements.

For now, it’s clear that Hamas achieved nothing of value in this war while imposing a huge cost on Gaza. It may be possible to help Gazans, and help the PA, while preventing Hamas from rebuilding its military strength, if the relevant parties make up their minds to do that. We can pretty much count on Egypt and Israel to be committed to that outcome. The real worry is Paris, Berlin, London, and Washington. Will we in the West be tough enough to demand that UNRWA be unwrapped from Hamas’s clutches, crossings closely watched, travelers and cargo in and out of Gaza closely inspected, construction materials carefully recorded and kept out of Hamas hands—month after month, year after year, despite Hamas pressures and demands and crocodile tears on behalf of the poor Gazans?

That’s unclear. So the best answer to “who won the Gaza war of 2014”—Hamas, Israel, the PA, Palestinians, Gazans, Abbas, Netanyahu, the IDF, terrorism—is probably “ask me in six months and then again in six years.” For now, that “fog of cease-fire” is impenetrable. ♦



*Netanyahu discusses the cease-fire, August 27.*