

# Crafting a Constructive Gaza Policy

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AP Photo/Khalil Hamra

TEL AVIV — “The situation for 1.5 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip is worse now than it has ever been since the start of the Israeli military occupation in 1967,” according to “The Gaza Strip: A Humanitarian Implosion.” The report, published by a coalition of non-government organizations, describes an alarming shortage of humanitarian and commercial supplies in Gaza. Drinking water and electricity fall well below demand. Sewage flows into the Mediterranean Sea. With unemployment around 40 percent, the economy is collapsing.

Nevertheless, the report professes optimism: “The current situation in Gaza is man-made, completely avoidable and, with the necessary political will, can also be reversed.” The authors advocate formal condemnation of Israel’s blockade; greater pressure on Israel to open border crossings and increase the supply of fuel and other necessities; and resumption of a peace process that will “insist that the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority as well as Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups adhere to their human rights and international humanitarian law commitments.”

Sponsored by Oxfam — along with Amnesty International UK, CARE International UK and other aid organizations — the report appeared in 2008.

Ten years later, many believe — including Israel’s defense establishment— that Gaza’s humanitarian crisis is even worse now. In 2018, as in 2008, many international observers adopt the Oxfam-report perspective on what has gone wrong. Ignoring the principal “man-made” cause of Gaza suffering, they primarily blame Israel or assume a moral equivalence between Hamas’s determination to attack Israel and Israel’s determination to defend itself.

Gaza’s rehabilitation would not only benefit its long-suffering Palestinian residents. It would also enhance regional stability. And it would serve American interests by enabling Israel and pragmatic Arab states to collaborate more effectively in the struggle against Iranian aggression. But Hamas’s interest in maintaining its iron-fisted theocratic rule and its jihadist ambition to wage war against the Jewish state — notwithstanding Israel’s 2005 withdrawal to pre-June 1967 borders — limit the options.

Hamas continues to seek rockets and missiles to bombard Israeli civilians and to construct cross-border tunnels to perpetrate atrocities. That’s the reason Israel must maintain its blockade and has undertaken three major military incursions into Gaza over the last 10 years.

Hamas continues to transform Gaza’s cities into battlefields by positioning headquarters, military bases, weapons caches, and rocket launchers near, in, or under civilian buildings. That’s the reason the fighting into which Hamas has drawn Israel has injured and killed thousands of Palestinian noncombatants and inflicted substantial damage on basic infrastructure.

Hamas continues to foment hatred of Israel through the media and schools, to use Palestinian misery as a tool of radicalization, and to persuade Gazans that what is now Israel rightfully belongs to them and will someday, through force of arms, be theirs. That’s the reason Hamas was able last spring to assemble thousands of fighters, women, and children along the border, week after week, threatening to breach Israel’s security fence. It’s also why Hamas could mobilize Gazans throughout the summer to cast aloft incendiary balloons and kites which, blown into Israel by the sea breeze, produced extensive damage by setting Israel’s fields ablaze. And that’s the reason Israel — which, like any self-respecting nation, must safeguard its borders and prevent its territory from going up in flames — has been compelled to use force against a mixture of combatants and ostensible non-combatants, whose wounds and corpses Hamas exploits to mobilize recruits and elicit international support.

Were it not for Hamas’s resolute acts of war — which, in targeting Israeli civilians and using Palestinian civilians as shields, constitute flagrant violations of international law — Gazans would not face today an appalling scarcity of electricity and potable water; rivers of untreated

sewage polluting beaches and ground water and spreading parasites; and a decimated economy.

The authors of “Ending Gaza’s Perpetual Crisis: A New U.S. Approach” published this month, aim to change course.

A joint product of two blue-chip Washington think tanks — the centrist Center for a New American Security and the center-left Brookings Institution — the report maintains that over the last decade the United States has pursued a permanent status agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority at the expense of Gaza, from which Hamas expelled the PA in 2007. The CNAS-Brookings report calls for “a proactive U.S. policy” to extricate Gaza’s nearly 2 million residents from poverty and deprivation, to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace, and to reduce conflict in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula where, since 2011, the government has battled ISIS-inspired jihadists.

The new approach consists of stabilizing Gaza through humanitarian relief and reintegrating it into the Palestinian Authority so that Gazan and West Bank Palestinians can cooperate to establish an independent state embracing both territories. To achieve these objectives, argues the report, the United States must undertake “vigorous diplomacy.” The extensive multilateralism the report envisages encompasses not only Hamas, the PA, and Israel but also the U.N. Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Europe, Jordan, and Turkey.

The report elaborates several useful recommendations — involving cooperation among Hamas, the PA, the United States, Israel, and the international community — for increasing water and electricity in Gaza, and for improving waste management. It laudably decouples these practical, near-term measures for relieving the worst of the humanitarian crisis from the attainment of a comprehensive peace.

Yet despite its ambition to break with the mistakes of the past, the CNAS-Brookings report embodies the old approach — the same one that informed Obama administration Secretary of State John Kerry’s frenetic diplomacy — on steroids.

First, by offering anodyne formulations about the “cycle of violence” that blur the difference between Hamas’s desire to destroy Israel and Israel’s desire to be left alone, the report obscures the abiding sources of Gaza’s humanitarian crisis.

Second, while acknowledging the “abnormal complexity of the situation,” the report envisages a “coordinated diplomatic effort” that is abnormally complex. It is doubtful that the Palestinian Authority leadership — which rejected peace proposals advanced by President Bill Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Camp David in 2000, by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2008, and by Kerry in 2013-14 — will cooperate with the elaborate scheme devised at CNAS and Brookings to end the Gaza crisis. The report also glosses over the political hurdles faced by the many other countries with conflicting concerns, including

Israel, to which the report assigns crucial roles. And the report fails to identify any element in Hamas's mindset or strategic outlook to which diplomats might appeal to induce it to relinquish administrative power, allow the PA back into Gaza, and combine security forces — all of which CNAS-Brookings experts deem essential.

Third, the report blames the Trump administration for damaging relations with the PA by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, moving the American embassy there, and cutting aid to the PA and to UNRWA (a U.N. organization that provides Palestinians social, economic, and educational services). But Jerusalem is Israel's capital. Pretending otherwise encourages Palestinians to indulge unrealistic expectations and advance extravagant demands. And coddling the PA and overlooking UNRWA's corruption and anti-Israel propagandizing are bound up with the decades-long blighting of Gaza. Disincentivizing bad conduct offers the prospect of reducing it.

Good intentions and political will are never enough. To craft a constructive policy for Gaza — as elsewhere — the United States must resist fantasizing about the interests that ought to motivate regional actors and instead grasp those that do.

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