

Hamas could have chosen peace. Instead, it made Gaza suffer.

By Dennis Ross August 8, 2014

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In the winter of 2005, Ziad Abu Amr, a Gaza representative in the Palestinian Legislative Council, invited me [to speak in Gaza City](#). As I entered the building for the event, I saw Mahmoud al-Zahar, one of the co-founders of Hamas. Before I could say anything, Ziad explained: “We decided to invite the opposition to hear you. We think it is important that they do so.”

I had not expected senior Hamas leaders to be there, but it didn't alter my main message. Israel was slated to withdraw from the Gaza Strip in several months, so I emphasized that this was a time of opportunity for Palestinians — they should seize it. I told the audience of roughly 200 Gazans that this was a moment to promote Palestinian national aspirations.

If they took advantage of the Israeli withdrawal to peacefully develop Gaza, the international community and the Israelis would see that what was working in Gaza could also be applied to the West Bank. However, I then asked rhetorically: If Palestinians instead turn Gaza into a platform for attacks against Israel, who is going to favor an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and the creation of a Palestinian state?

Much of Palestinians' history might have been imposed on them by others, I said. But this time they had the power to shape their future. If they made the wrong choice, they could not blame the Arabs, the Europeans, the Americans — or the Israelis.

While the audience was not shy about criticizing the U.S. role in peacemaking, no one challenged my main message that day.

Unfortunately, we know the path Hamas chose. Even as Israel was [completing the process](#) of withdrawing all its settlers and soldiers from Gaza, Hamas carried out a bus-station bombing in Israel. Then, from late 2005 to early 2006, Hamas conducted multiple attacks on the very crossing points that allowed people and goods to move into and out of Gaza. For Hamas, it was more important to continue “resistance” than to allow Gazans to constructively test their new freedom — or to give Israelis a reason to think that withdrawal could work. Some argue that Israel withdrew but imposed a siege on Gaza. In reality, Hamas produced the siege. Israel's tight embargo on Gaza came only after ongoing Hamas attacks.

The embargo on Gaza might have hurt the Palestinians who live there, but it did not stop Hamas from building [a labyrinth of underground tunnels](#), bunkers, command posts and shelters for its leaders, fighters and rockets. The tunnels are under houses, schools, hospitals and mosques; they allow Hamas fighters to go down one shaft and depart from another.

According to the Israeli army, [an estimated 600,000 tons of cement](#) — some of it smuggled through tunnels from Egypt, some diverted from construction materials allowed into Gaza — was used for Hamas's underground network.

At times, I argued with Israeli leaders and security officials, telling them they needed to allow more construction materials, including cement, into Gaza so that housing, schools and basic infrastructure could be built. They countered that Hamas would misuse it, and they were right. Developing Gaza — fostering a future for its people and protecting them — was not Hamas's goal.

So long as Israel exists, Hamas will seek to fight it. It was not Israel's opposition to [the reconciliation agreement](#) between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) that led to this latest round of warfare. Rather, it was Hamas's political isolation and increasingly desperate financial situation. The group was broke after [Egypt closed the smuggling tunnels into Gaza](#), Iran [cut off funding](#) because of Hamas's opposition to Syria's Bashar al-Assad, and Qatar was unable to send money through the Rafah border crossing, which Egypt controls.

The reconciliation deal relieved Hamas of the need to govern Gaza and meet its financial obligations there — without relieving it of its weapons. But the PA wasn't willing to pay the Hamas salaries, including to its security forces, so Hamas did what it does best: use force to alter the political landscape.

In the 1990s, when I was the U.S. negotiator on Middle East peace, every time we made progress or seemed to be on the verge of a breakthrough, Hamas suicide bombers would strike Israeli cities. Six months before Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in 1995, he told me that the next Israeli election and Israel's position toward the Palestinians would be determined not by anything he did but by whether Hamas carried out bombings in Israel. His message was that his security forces — and especially those of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat — had to do a better job of rooting out Hamas or our hopes for peace would be thwarted.

With its finances dwindling, Hamas initiated the recent conflict. This time, however, its leaders held the people of Gaza hostage to its needs, hoping that Egypt would feel the need to open Rafah, that Qatar would deliver money and that Israel would be forced to release Palestinian prisoners.

The Israelis will certainly resist an outcome that offers Hamas any gains. Having destroyed the tunnels that could penetrate Israel, the Israelis have [pulled out of Gaza](#) and were willing to extend the 72-hour truce that ended Friday. Hamas was not willing to do so. If Israel hopes to build broader international pressure on the group to stop firing, the Israel Defense Forces will need to avoid targets such as U.N. schools and hospitals. Of course, that is easier said than done, given that Hamas often fires rockets [from](#) or [near such sites](#).

At some point, Hamas will stop firing rockets — if for no other reason than its arsenal is depleted. For the people of Gaza, however, the price has been staggering. But Hamas's leaders have never been concerned about that. For them, Palestinians' pain and suffering are tools to exploit, not conditions to end.

When relative calm returns, there will understandably be a push for a diplomatic solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

With Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas now even less able politically to tackle the core issues, a permanent agreement between the two sides is not in the cards. U.S. diplomacy, therefore, needs to be guided by several considerations and achievable aims.

First, the new strategic alignment in the region must be recognized. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates see the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat, and they will be natural partners in denying Hamas, the Palestinian wing of the Brotherhood, potential gains and assisting the PA's reentry into Gaza.

Second, because Hamas is incapable of changing, it needs to be discredited. In the short term, humanitarian and reconstruction aid in Gaza must be managed so that Hamas cannot exploit it politically or militarily. The Obama administration should insist that the crossing points cannot be reopened until adequate safeguards are in place to prevent the diversion of the assistance. Not only would this permit the PA to reestablish itself at the Gaza crossing points, but it could also prevent Hamas from seizing materials shipped into the Gaza Strip. For the longer term, the United States should organize a Marshall Plan for Gaza contingent on Hamas disarming. If Hamas chooses arms over civilian investment and development, it should be exposed before Palestinians and the international community.

Third, it is important to build the political capital of Abbas and the PA by showing that they can deliver something in the West Bank. Consistent with its security concerns, Israel can expedite the movement of goods and materials destined for the West Bank, preventing them from needlessly getting held up in Israeli ports.

Fourth, focus on conflict management, not conflict resolution. The United States should try to broker unilateral steps that could change the dynamic between the Israelis and the Palestinians. For example, in what is referred to as Area C of the West Bank, Israel controls all planning, zoning and security. We would ask Israel to open Area C, which is 60 percent of the West Bank, to the Palestinians for housing construction and industrial parks. In exchange, we would ask the Palestinians to forgo moves in international organizations designed to symbolize statehood and pressure Israel.

Fifth, try to persuade Netanyahu to declare that Israel's settlement construction will be made consistent with its two-state policy, meaning it will not build in areas that it thinks will be part of a Palestinian state. This would not only defuse the movement to delegitimize Israel internationally, but it would also make it easier for the Egyptians, Jordanians, Saudis and Emirates to work more openly with Israel.

The point would be to create some positive movement on peace and Israel's relations with its neighbors. The United States would publicly maintain [its commitment](#) to achieving two states for two peoples. Our diplomacy after this recent conflict must foster tangible changes on the ground, not promise a vision that is unachievable. That is the essence of good statecraft, and rarely has it been more needed.

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