

How to Engage Hamas

On Monday, March 3 Israel Policy Forum held a conference call with David Kimche, the former Director General of the Foreign Ministry and Deputy Director of the Mossad, and the current President of the Israel Council for Foreign Relation. Kimche also serves on the Israel Police Forum's Advisory Council. The following is a summary of his remarks:

We, in Israel, are in a crisis situation in Gaza. Qassam rockets are continuing to hit our towns daily. This has created a very severe internal problem for the Israeli government, as more and more people are saying, "Hey, what's going on here? The government is not doing anything to protect its citizens." In the last two weeks, in fact, there have been demonstrations in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv calling for the government to do something; that something is a major military offensive.

The government has been extremely reluctant to engage in a major offensive because it is likely to end the Annapolis talks, because it will be very difficult to get out of Gaza once we're in, and, of course, because there would be many casualties.

In addition to those who are in favor of a military operation, a majority of Israelis are saying that we should talk with Hamas. The situation is not black and white, and there are pros and cons to such a decision.

The pros are very clear. A ceasefire with Hamas would put an end to the rockets; it would bring peace and quiet; it would also help the peace talks by ensuring that Hamas will not try and sabotage the talks with violence. From every point of view, these possibilities sound good.

The cons of a ceasefire, however, are more complicated. A ceasefire would strengthen Hamas by giving it a sense of victory; it would, therefore, weaken Fatah and the chances of making peace with President Mahmoud Abbas; a ceasefire would also enable Hamas to bring in weapons, such as the Grad missiles that have been hitting Ashkelon. In such a situation, it would be only a matter of time before Hamas would start using its increased strength against us.

This is a difficult problem. We should be talking to Hamas through indirect channels, but with a certain condition: that a ceasefire would not only include Hamas and Israel but be a part of a threesome—a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation on one side and a Hamas-Israel deal on the other. This type of arrangement would enable Fatah to once again have a say on Gaza.

President Abbas would support such a deal because he understands that he can't go ahead on the peace talks with Israel for a significant length of time as long as the present situation continues. He needs a ceasefire in order to reach a peace agreement with Israel. Abbas knows that you cannot clap with one hand, and you cannot have a peace agreement with the West Bank and go to war with Gaza.

On Monday, President Abbas said that there should be a ceasefire, and that he would be willing to be a part of it. Therefore, if we are serious about Annapolis, and the Palestinians are serious about Annapolis, then we have to reach some sort of ceasefire agreement that includes Fatah and Abbas. We have to change the current hostility between Fatah and Hamas, and we have to reach some sort of a deal with Hamas.

It's not easy to talk to Hamas. Incidentally, the hard-liners inside Hamas do not want to talk to us in any sort of meaningful manner. These hard-liners, furthermore, are willing to accept casualties in Gaza in order to show that they are fighting Israel. They also believe that they are gaining in popularity by hitting Israel militarily. The fact is that they are suffering casualties, but nevertheless continuing to fire on us. This strengthens their standing among certain people in the Arab world, and I don't think that the fear of major military action will cause them to stop firing rockets easily.

On the other hand, Hamas wants a ceasefire. Hamas is desperate, in fact, to have a ceasefire. It is not able to rule Gaza the way that it wants to. The people of Gaza are hemmed in. They don't get enough food. This has caused them to say, "Okay, we have Hamas rule but we don't have any form of a normal life." Hamas would very much like to get out of that particular predicament. And, strange as it may seem, Hamas has a good track record of keeping ceasefires. Israel has had ceasefires with them before and they have kept them.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has so far been very cautious about the possibility of dealing with Hamas. He has a coalition government, as well as a Defense Minister and Defense Ministry that have been very hesitant about going down that particular road. But, if the Defense Ministry, including Defense Minister Ehud Barak, knew that Fatah was a part of the deal, and that the only other alternative was a large-scale military offensive that reoccupied the entire Gaza strip, they would likely change their minds.

Since neither Hamas nor Israel would like to engage in direct talks, a third party, such as Egypt, should mediate. There is no love lost between Hamas and Egypt. Egypt fears Hamas' influence on their own Muslim Brotherhood and is upset over their breach of the Gaza-Egypt border, which made it look foolish. If Egypt could, it would gladly work to weaken Hamas. But, Egypt understands that there is no magic wand to make Hamas disappear. Egypt is willing, therefore, to try and arrange a ceasefire.

The Americans have been against talking to Hamas. However, if President Abbas was clearly involved in the arrangement, the Americans would understand that the choice is between Annapolis and moving forward to a peace, or continuing the violence of the past week.

The United States wields an influence over Israelis and Palestinians that is crucial to getting them to continue and move forward in their talks. U.S. ability to use that influence, of course, could be contingent on what happens in Gaza in the next few days.

We have learned from history that you have to keep all your options open, and that you shouldn't close yourself up in a box. Sometimes, you have to think outside the box. The current reality, in which rockets are fired on Ashkelon and Sderot, has become untenable for the Israeli government and the Israeli people. We, therefore, have to look clearly at the options.

While I don't believe that a massive military conquest of the Gaza Strip will necessarily solve the problem of the rockets, and I think that a ceasefire without Fatah and President Abbas would be counterproductive, I believe in a ceasefire that includes Abbas and would give Israel sufficient time to make progress on the Annapolis peace talks. Those peace talks, I believe, would, in turn, strengthen Fatah and weaken Hamas.