

The Middle East Conflict and Its Impact on the Mediterranean Region

Antoni Segura

University of Barcelona

In May of 2010, the decision was taken to adjourn the Union for the Mediterranean summit in Barcelona, where 43 Heads of State and Government were to meet, from June to November. The reason was to allow time for the indirect peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis that had begun that same month on the initiative of George J. Mitchell, President Barack Obama's Special Envoy for Middle East Peace. Soon thereafter, a crisis broke out when the Israeli Navy assaulted a fleet in international waters that was navigating towards Gaza carrying humanitarian aid, resulting in the death of nine aid workers from the *Mavi Marmara* ship.

The year 2008 had closed with Operation Cast Lead against the Gaza Strip, which gave rise to the Richard Goldstone Report for the United Nations Human Rights Council. In February 2009, elections in Israel gave rise to a right-wing government that has maintained the blockade against the Gaza Strip and authorized new settlements in the West Bank. At the same time, the division between Hamas and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) persisted and Palestine elections were postponed. Finally, the impossibility of resuming talks between Palestinians and Israelis makes a solution to the conflict seem increasingly distant.

Operation Cast Lead

On 19 December 2008, the official six-month ceasefire between Hamas and Israel expired. The ceasefire had not broken Gaza's isolation, since Israel kept border crossings closed. Moreover, on 4 November, the Israeli Army had killed six members of the Palestinian militia. In sum, in the weeks prior to 19 Decem-

ber, tension was escalating and the imminence of Israeli elections and the food crisis threatening to break out in Gaza (the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East – the UNRWA – had made an urgent call to prevent a humanitarian crisis) did not favour restraint. Between 19 and 24 December, dozens of Al Kassam rockets fell in the Negev Desert and on the Israeli cities of Sderot and Ashkelon. The Israeli government in Tel Aviv threatened to retaliate by launching an operation to punish Gaza. Tzipi Livni, the Kadima candidate for prime minister, and the Labour Party's Ehud Barak wished to show firmness in order to gain votes in a society favourable to the use of force against the Hamas administration in Gaza.

On 27 December, Israeli aviation bombed over 50 Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip, causing some 200 deaths. By 1 January 2009, the total number of Palestinian dead had risen to 400. International reaction was not sufficient to prevent a large-scale land-based invasion beginning on the 3rd. On 5 January, the Israeli army besieged the capital of Gaza and divided the Gaza Strip into three sections. The death toll by that time ascended to 575 Palestinians. On the next day, an Israeli rocket hit a UN school in the refugee camp of Jabalia (46 dead). On 9 January, the UN Security Council approved Resolution 1860, calling for the immediate end to hostilities, which was rejected by both parties. European doctors working in Gaza denounced that Israel was using illegal explosives. By mid-January, the conflict threatened to go international when an unknown group launched rockets against Israel from southern Lebanon and another opened fire from Jordan against an Israeli Border Guard patrol. On 15 January, Israeli troops entered the capital of Gaza and bombed a UNRWA refugee camp, a hospital and an international press centre. Finally, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared a unilateral ceasefire on

TABLE 9

Election Results – 10 February 2009 (and Comparison with Seats Obtained in 2006)

Party	Votes 2009 (%)	Seats 2009	Seats 2006
Kadima	22	28	29
Likud	21	27	12
Yisrael Beitenu (Israel Our Home)	12	15	11
Labour Party	10	13	19
Shas	9	11	12
United Torah Judaism	4	5	6
Meretz	3	3	5
Jewish Home	3	3	-
National Union ¹	3	4	9
Hadash ²	3	4	3
United Arab List-Ta'al	4	4	4
Balad ³	3	3	3
GIL (Pensioners' Party)	-	-	7

Source: Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 February 2009, see www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/.

1. Religious Zionism: combination of Mafdal – national religious party – and the National Union.

2. Democratic Front for Peace and Equality – Communist Party of Israel (Arab-Israeli; Arab).

3. National Democratic Assembly (Arab-Palestinian).

midnight of 18 January, although Israeli forces remained around the Gaza Strip to prevent renewed attacks. The final death toll was 1,400 Palestinians and 14 Israelis.

Elections in Israel

On 10 February 2009, elections were held in Israel, with a voter turnout of 65%. In the two previous weeks, polarization between Kadima (which split off from the Likud in 2005 under the leadership of Ariel Sharon, who remains in an irreversible coma) and the Likud and the effect of Operation Cast Lead stimulated voter turnout and dissipated the dark presages of opinion polls on a poor outcome for Kadima. Kadima's good results were not enough, however, in the face of the defeat of the Labour Party (13 seats as compared to 26 in 1999), which consolidated a downward trend that had begun in 2001 when Ehud Barak (37.6% of votes) had lost the elections for prime minister to Ariel Sharon (62.4%). This downward trend was not compensated by left-wing parties: Meretz obtained 5 seats (10 in 1999) and Hadash, the communist party with both Palestinian and Israeli members, gained 4 seats (3 in 1999). In sum, Kadima's tight victory – 28 seats vis-à-vis the Likud's 27 – was not enough to prevent a right-wing and extreme-right wing (secular and religious) coalition that, on the whole, occupied 61 seats in a total of 120 and that, through Ehud Barak's opportunism, also brought in the remains of the Labour Party to form part of the government, thus including 74 Members. Never since 1971, when

Menachem Begin won the Likud's first victory, had conservatives and the radical right had so much strength.

The Goldstone Report

The military operation against the Gaza Strip was the object of a report by the United Nations Human Rights Council called the Goldstone Report, in reference to Judge Richard Goldstone, who directed the mission that drew it up. It was submitted on 25 September 2009 and established the following:

1. The Israeli government's lack of cooperation.
2. That Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip has seriously affected the population and has caused an emergency situation that has been aggravated by the military operations.
3. That the total Palestinian death toll lies somewhere between 1,387 and 1,444 people (Israel estimates it at 1,166), the majority civilians. The Israeli dead numbered 14 (3 civilians and 11 soldiers, 4 of which under "friendly fire").
4. The Report accuses the Israeli armed forces of deliberately carrying out attacks against civilian infrastructure, the civilian population and a UN Palestinian Refugee Camp; of striking, also deliberately, the already precarious economy of Gaza, causing problems of food, access to potable water, sanitation and psychological and educational problems (destruction of 280 schools); of using white phosphorus bombs against the hospitals of al-Quds and al-Wafa;

of using Palestinian civilians as human shields; of arbitrary detention of unarmed civilians – including children and women – who represented no threat and who were sent to Israeli prisons; of degrading treatment of prisoners (beating, torture); of intensifying repression in the West Bank... In sum, repeated, serious violations of international law, humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions, some of which can be qualified as war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The Report found evidence of violations of international humanitarian law for which the government of Israel, Hamas and the PNA were unequally responsible. The Israeli government rejected the Report and Hamas and the PNA said nothing

5. It accuses the Palestinian armed groups of unnecessarily exposing the population of Gaza to danger insofar as they carried out attacks near civilian or protected buildings; the Gaza authorities of arresting, abusing or assassinating members of Fatah and civilians accused of collaborating with the former; the PNA of dismissing civil servants, practicing illegal arrests and torturing sympathizers of Hamas, at times with fatal results. All of these actions seriously violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Palestinian Basic Law.
6. According to the Third Geneva Convention, the Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, captured in 2006 by an armed Palestinian group, is a prisoner of war who should be treated humanely and be allowed to communicate with his family and receive visits from the International Red Cross Committee.
7. Since 2001, armed Palestinian groups have launched some 8,000 rockets against southern Israel. From 18 June 2008 to 18 January 2009, these rockets caused the death of five civilians and injured over 1,000 Israelis (918 during the military operations), others suffered post-trau-

matic stress disorders – above all in children – and everyday life was seriously altered. Indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population and the absence of military targets contravene international humanitarian law, as they constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity whose aim is to terrorize the civilian population.

The Report found evidence of violations of international humanitarian law, the Geneva Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as of war crimes and crimes against humanity, for which the government of Israel, Hamas and the PNA were unequally responsible. The Israeli government rejected the Report and Hamas and the PNA said nothing. Six months later, the UNRWA evaluated the needs to which the military operations had given rise in Gaza, raising previous estimates (from 240.40 to 258.05 million euros) and also estimated a deficit of 124.4 million euros, since it had only received a bit over half of the resources allocated. The majority of the million and a half inhabitants of the Strip had not recovered their earlier standards of living and the military operation had “significantly exacerbated the protracted socio-economic crisis facing Gaza [through] the widespread destruction of households and productive assets.” The most significant deficits related to shelter and non-food items (53.8 million euros) and food aid (33.1 million). The need for additional funding was related to Israel’s continued policies of cutbacks and isolation, which erode possibilities for recovery and increase poverty, and to the international community’s failure to protect and guarantee the human rights of Palestinians, including the refugees who represent two thirds of the population.

Peace Fleet Crisis

On Monday, 31 May 2010, in international waters, the Israeli Navy assaulted a fleet of six vessels that had departed from ports in Ireland, Sweden, Greece and Turkey with 700 aid workers on board aiming to bring humanitarian aid to Gaza. The assault on the *Mavi Marmara* caused nine deaths (all of them Turks) and international condemnation. The arguments put forth by Tel Aviv to justify the attack – i.e. that Hamas and Al Qaeda activists were among the aid workers and were transporting arms to the Gaza Strip (!) – were not credible even to the Israeli press.

Gideon Levy had stated some days before in the pages of *Haaretz* that the “propaganda machinery [of the Israeli government] has reached new heights [of] falsehood and lies,” and that it was being asserted that “there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza [...], the occupation of Gaza has ended [...], the flotilla is a violent attack against Israeli sovereignty....” After the assault, in the same newspaper, Yossi Melman did not hesitate to state that the aim of the peace fleet had not been very different from that of the organizers of the *Exodus* in 1947: to break the blockade. A blockade which, in the case of Gaza, could cause a humanitarian crisis, as indicated by different international organizations and the UNRWA.

The initial opposition of the Netanyahu Administration to accept an international investigation was interpreted as indicating that the assault had been a warning to all those who attempted to break the blockade on Gaza. The Israeli Navy’s action isolated the Netanyahu Administration more than ever and, as the Head of the Mossad, Meir Dagan, declared that “Israel is gradually turning from an asset to the United States to a burden.” Indeed, the operation questioned Obama’s Middle East policy, and the reaction of the international community and of Turkey, one of Washington’s premiere allies in the region, do not advise provoking Netanyahu again. Turkey was, moreover, the main Muslim ally of Israel and in consequence, Tel Aviv’s actions offer Hamas arguments to equate the harshness of the blockade with that of the Israeli armed forces against international aid workers. In sum, a blunder that has damaged the image of the Netanyahu Administration even more.

Political Situations and Conclusions

The end of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas (December 2008) caused an escalation of violence that Ehud Olmert, Tzipi Livni and Ehud Barak took advantage of to undertake an operation to punish Gaza: the final aim was to stop rockets from being launched against southern Israel; the non-official one, to turn unfavourable public opinion polls to their favour. Operation Cast Lead cost the lives of some 1,400 Palestinians, the Goldstone Report refers to war crimes, and it exacerbated the economic and food hardships in the Gaza Strip. European mediation was insufficient to prevent the ag-

gression and Washington was too occupied with the change of presidents to intervene. Until 19 January 2009, Israel refused all requests for a new ceasefire. Peace negotiations were ever more distant. Even more so after the results of the 10 February elections and the formation of a Benjamin Netanyahu Administration that included the extreme secular and religious right.

Operation Cast Lead cost the lives of some 1,400 Palestinians, the Goldstone Report refers to war crimes, and it exacerbated the economic and food hardships in the Gaza Strip

Shortly before that, Hillary Clinton, Obama’s Secretary of State, made the new administration’s position public: close relations with Israel and cooperation with the new government, support to Mahmoud Abbas, the creation of a Palestinian State, ending the demolition of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem and new settlements in the West Bank, inclusion of Syria in future talks, with the Golan Heights in the background. The distancing was visible on Netanyahu’s visit to Washington in May 2009. For Obama, the priority was to settle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, with a concerned eye on Iran’s nuclear program; for Netanyahu, who had approved new settlements in the West Bank, the priority was Iran. Moreover, he did not commit to accept the creation of a Palestinian State and his Foreign Affairs Minister, the ultraconservative Avigdor Lieberman, asserted that Israel did not feel bound by the Annapolis Agreements (November 2007), which had established the creation of two States. Obama’s rapprochement with the Arab world through his Cairo speech made this distancing even more evident. Netanyahu responded on 15 June 2009: he accepted the future creation of a Palestinian State, but with no military capacity nor control over air space; he considered the status of Jerusalem as the capital as non-negotiable; he only promised a moratorium (a promise that had been broken on earlier occasions) in the approval of new settlements and demanded that the PNA eliminate Hamas. Mahmoud Abbas asserted that the speech demonstrated Netanyahu’s wish to sabotage any possibilities of negotiation.

In September 2009, Netanyahu authorized the creation of 455 homes in the West Bank, to be added to the 2,500 already under construction. In the summer of 2009, a total of 300,000 Israelis were living in the West Bank and 200,000 in East Jerusalem. In March 2009, coinciding with the visit of US Vice President Joseph Biden, Netanyahu announced the construction of 112 settlements in the West Bank and 1,600 in East Jerusalem. At the same time, the Mossad's supposed responsibility in the assassination of the Hamas leader, Mahmoud al Mabhuh in Dubai (19 January 2010) isolated the Netanyahu Administration even more and the assault on the *Mavi Marmara* made an enemy of the only Muslim ally Israel had had in the region.

As “collateral damage,” the lack of a solution to the crisis has a direct effect on the EU’s Mediterranean policies and greatly hampers the implementation of the Union for the Mediterranean process

At the same time, Mahmoud Abbas' position was weakening, while Operation Cast Lead, the assault on the peace fleet and the corruption of the PNA strengthened Hamas. The sixth Fatah Congress – two decades after the previous one and the first one in Palestine – was held in Bethlehem in August 2009. It undertook a partial renovation of the leadership, one of the most significant changes being the election into a top post of Marwan Barghouti, a political leader educated during the occupation and imprisoned in Israel. Abbas' political weakness led him to adjourn *sine die* the elections that were to be held in January 2010. Netanyahu contributed to this weakening with Israeli army incursions into the West Bank and the construction of new settlements. In August 2009, Hamas reasserted its control of the Gaza Strip, unceremoniously doing away with Jund

Ansar Allah, a group aligned with Al Qaeda that criticised the slowness of Islamization and the various ceasefires with Israel.

In conclusion, an end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict seems to be ever more distant, since the current Israeli government shows no inclination towards entering new negotiations that would entail concessions, nor can Mahmoud Abbas political weakness demand them, nor do Hamas' intransigence, the Palestinian division and punishment operations by the Israeli Armed Forces facilitate things. The United States and the EU cannot impose them, and the regional context doesn't help either. And in practice, the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank in a free, independent and democratic Palestinian State seems nearly impossible for the time being. As “collateral damage,” the lack of a solution to the crisis has a direct effect on the EU's Mediterranean policies and greatly hampers the implementation of the Union for the Mediterranean process. The EU's capacity to have an impact in settling the conflict depends on the positions adopted by the Quartet (the UN, EU, USA and Russia), as well as on the reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed by the war operations, the provision of food aid, hampered by the blockade of Gaza, the support of the PNA and bilateral diplomacy towards aligning positions among Palestinian factions and between the latter and Israel.

Bibliography

- UNITED NATIONS, *Human Rights in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories: Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict*, United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/12/48, Human Rights Council, 25 September 2009: www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hr-council/docs/12session/a-hrc-12-48.pdf
- UNRWA, *Updated Quick Response Plan for Gaza: An Assessment of Needs Six Months After the War*, UNRWA 60 Years, 2009: www.unrwa.org/userfiles/20100119144213.pdf