



# Reconstructing Gaza

Abbas hopes the PA will be able to gradually reestablish a presence in the Strip

**THE ACUTE** crisis generated by the Islamic State's advances in Iraq and Syria has pushed most other Middle East issues out of the spotlight. Nonetheless, there have been ample reminders in recent weeks that the summer's war in Gaza and the larger Palestinian-Israeli conflict remain very much a part of the international agenda.

Particularly significant was a one-day conference in Cairo on October 12 to raise money for repairing and reconstructing the Gaza region, co-organized by Egypt and Norway. The meeting was attended by representatives of 50 countries, including 30 foreign ministers.

In preparation for the conference, the Palestinian Authority's (PA) "Government of National Consensus," headed by Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, which had been officially established last April, issued a study enumerating the immediate needs facing the Gaza region. It provides a stark and sobering picture.

Repairing damaged and destroyed infrastructure, including housing, water, roads, sanitation and energy facilities, and the clearing of 2.5 million tons of rubble would cost an estimated \$1.9 billion; reconstructing the economic sector, including agriculture, industry and commerce would cost over \$1.25 billion; the social sphere, including damaged schools, hospitals and clinics, charitable institutions, 30,000 new families needing social protection and 373,000 children needing psychosocial services, requires \$700 million; and the cost of reestablishing the capacity to govern, including the ability to pay salaries to officials, amounts to almost \$200 million.

To the pleasant surprise of PA President Mahmoud Abbas, the Cairo meeting generated pledges of \$5.4 billion. Leading the way in pledges were Qatar, which promised a hefty \$1 billion; the EU (\$568 million); the US (\$212 million); the United Arab Emirates (\$200 million); and Turkey (\$200 million).

Of course, translating these pledges into reality, and insuring that the funds are used for their intended purposes, promises to be a complicated matter.

Notwithstanding the highly symbolic meeting in Gaza on October 9 of the Palestinian unity government, Hamas has no intention of relinquishing its actual authority over the territory, let alone disarming. Indeed, rehabilitating its military infrastructure, which was heavily damaged by Israel, is a declared priority.

At the same time, Hamas is acutely aware of the dire straits in which much of Gaza's 1.8 million people find themselves and thus want the aid to begin flowing. To that end, it has no interest in the resumption of hostilities with Israel and is working to ensure that smaller armed factions observe the cease-fire.

In addition, it has sought to repair relations with Egypt, which were severely damaged following the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Cairo, and reached a new low point during the recent fighting with Israel.

Israel, for its part, is already enabling the increased flow of goods to the area and has increased the number of permits for



PA President Mahmoud Abbas (right) and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi attend the Gaza reconstruction conference

Gazan workers, implicitly recognizing that its previous policy of maintaining a tight blockade was both a failure and counterproductive.

The reconstruction effort is to be administered by the UN, in coordination with Israel and the PA, through a complicated mechanism designed to ensure that building supplies are directed to vital civilian needs, and not Hamas's military infrastructure.

Abbas hopes the process will enable the PA to gradually reestablish a presence in Gaza, beginning with control of the crossing points on the borders with Egypt and Israel, and thus renew the PA's legitimacy.

In any case, many already are looking beyond the 80-year old Abbas for a possible successor – one who might be able to eventually reunify the two de facto Palestinian entities in the West Bank and Gaza.

The one immediate beneficiary of the latest developments is Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Turkey and Qatar had challenged Egypt's leadership role during the Israel-Hamas war with implicit US support. Now, the top diplomats of all three countries attended the Cairo meeting and pledged generously.

Notwithstanding criticism of Egypt's undemocratic practices, the Obama Administration has resumed normal military aid flows to Egypt, including Apache helicopters to combat jihadi units operating in Sinai.

The deeply-rooted tension in American foreign policy between realist and idealist values remains ever present but, for now, the value of a stable Egypt able to act against radical Islamists and in support of Palestinian-Israeli calm again has been recognized in Washington. Obviously, however, the situation remains fragile and requires more than stopgap solutions. ■

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