The dramatic consequences of the 22-days war on Gaza are in front of us: the Israeli attack on Gaza has been the most deadly attack on the Palestinian territory since the creation of the State of Israel: 1300 people killed, 5500 wounded not to mention the damages for over 2 billion $ in infrastructural damages. Many Gazan women, children and civilians have been killed, wounded. The number of civilians affected is overwhelming; many tens of thousand lost their loved ones, houses, access to water, electricity, etc. This happened in a situation that was and still is a large prison (worse than an occupied territory such as the West Bank), where people were not allowed to flee even under aerial attacks and ground operations, creating a situation that brought to mind the Warsaw ghetto. On the Israeli side there is also a list of grievances: some people in Ashkelon and Sderot have been killed or wounded by Hamas rockets, some houses have been damaged, the Israeli population around Gaza has been frighten for years. While any loss of human life is very much regrettable, the immense disproportion between the consequences for the two camps is a very important fact whose effects will be felt for long time to come. There are also here issues of international law, as no State could massively attack civilians that are subject to its responsibility (as in the case of an occupied territory or in sealed enclave that depends completely on such State) and no State can inflict collective punishment. Things were different during World War II, but since then the international standards evolved.

Israeli-Palestinian relations are now at a lowest point. The Israeli public opinion generally perceives the war as an act of self-defense, irrespectively of the consequences. In fact there is a general insensitivity towards the material and political consequences for Palestinians, as shown by the fact the Israeli peace movement does not show any sign of life. Antipathy for Palestinians in Israel runs apparently very high. Also the Palestinian citizens of Israel are affected, as shown by the various attempts of some Israeli political leaders to limit some Arab-Israelis’ civil and electoral rights. In the Palestinian camp the word genocide (or attempted genocide or any synonymous of it) is more and more often heard and the peace process is seen by many as a cover-up for the not so much hidden desire of the Israelis to get rid of all the Palestinians.

In political terms is easier to name the losers than the winners. The Israeli government, like in Lebanon, killed people in the range of thousand, created enormous infrastructural damage and did not eliminate the political movements it sought to eliminate (Hamas like Hizbullah). In fact one can claim that it gave those movements a sort of twisted political boost. Chances are that Gaza will stay with most of the problems of before, as much Lebanon is still a State of “sectarian nature” with armed militias, including Hizbullah, after the Israeli 2006 massive attack. Moreover, despite the proclaimed self-defense goals, Israel has become more and more in the
eye of a significant part of the international public opinion as a State capable of immense brutality towards the Palestinians. As a result the Arab (and the Muslim) world that surrounds Israel is more hostile to Israel than ever, possibly pushing backward the prospects of normalization of relations to an indefinite future. The Arab and Muslim public opinion is outraged, to say the least. The claimed gain for Israel is that the Israeli deterrent capability against the launch of rockets on its own territory has been steeply increased. As much as it happened to Hizbullah in Lebanon, so the argument goes, Hamas will think it twice before launching again rockets against Israel. Moreover it said that Hamas, like Hizbullah in 2006, has seen its arsenal significantly destroyed as a result of the Israeli attacks. Finally another claim by Israel has been that the Palestinians in Gaza did not get any military support and even a partial political support from some neighboring Arab States, that the West has been more or less supporting Israel’s right of “self-defense”, thus pretending that Israel has a sort of free hand in punishing the Palestinians and particularly Hamas[1]. But even if we assume that the short term Israeli gains mentioned above may, at least partly, be true, Israel gained at most some breathing time, at the cost of raising dramatically the hostility of its neighborhood, of damaging, in general, its international image and of damaging the peace process. A short term aggressive strategy has been employed without caring for the long term survival goals. The illusion for Israel is that problems can be solved by prevailing in the degree of violence, while problems are, in this way, at best postponed.

Another comment on Israeli strategy is in order. The strategy employed in Gaza has been characterized, as in the past, by undeterred hard punishment of the opponent, so to guarantee overwhelming escalation dominance. Differently from the case of the cold war where escalation dominance was a theoretical concept fortunately never put into practice, in the case of Israel escalation dominance has been the constant practice of the last 60 years. First it was against the neighboring Arab State, then against non state actors of various sort. The long practice of escalation dominance has been able, up to now, to maintain Israel as a garrison State, but not to achieve peace and stability. The specific nature of the threats changed over time and Israel has been able to react strongly, while at the same time separating itself from the neighborhood with higher walls (physically, psychologically and politically speaking). If policies do not change, the heavily militarized Israeli State will be induced, by its own culture and practice[2], to react quickly and heavily against any so-called existential threat, in practice against any threat.

If Israel, with its modern arsenal that includes nuclear weapons, decides, for instance, to apply the same escalation dominance (and preemption) towards Iran, then the consequences can be really catastrophic.

The Palestinian authorities in Ramallah are also not among the winners. Their population has been attacked heavily by the same State of Israel with which they developed a long series of rather inconclusive peace talks. The peace process may be suspended for a while, but sooner rather than later the Palestinian authorities will sit again with the Israeli leaders to discuss what could be a never-ending peace process. The historical hostility between Fatah and Hamas could spur some further blame-game as neither the soft approach towards Israel of the Fatah dominated Government nor the hardliner approach of Hamas has been able to prevent the massacre of the inhabitants of Gaza. The further risk is that the security concerns of Israel, after the war on Gaza, may prevent any real softening of the occupation in the West Bank and an effective reduction or
even a freeze of the settlements, thus weakening more the Ramallah Government and the Palestinian President. The alternative here is not between peace talks and no peace talks, but between muddling through and making steps really conducive to an early end of the occupation.

The Hamas leadership can claim that it survived very hard conditions, being directly targeted by the full Israeli might. But the worsening of the life of the people in Gaza has also something to do with Hamas. Since this argument has been at the basis of the Israeli “message” to the people of Gaza “you are in trouble due to the presence of Hamas and not of Israel”, one has to be clear and avoid misunderstanding. While there is no doubt in the mind of the Gazans that Israel and not any other government or political party is the primary responsible of their misery, the doubt may exist that the presence of Hamas in the long run could be an obstacle to the normalization of the living condition. At least it is evident that the Hamas leadership (and the launch of rockets) has not been able to mitigate the Israeli fury or to induce Israel to show restraint.

Egypt has been unwilling to open the Rafah border even during the attacks, claiming constraints due to international obligations and thus showing that solidarity to Palestinians is secondary to the respect of agreements with other states including Israel. The Arab front also showed strong division, when the Qatar meeting has not been attended by Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The well known opposition of the Egyptian Government to the Muslim Brotherhood has resulted in less than warm relations between Hamas and Egypt, so de facto hindering the various mediation efforts between the Palestinians parties that have been undertaken.

Finally the United States for many days failed to exercise pressures on Israel to suspend the attack on Gaza and, given the special relation existing between the US and Israel, shares significantly the responsibilities for what happened. The European countries also have been politically weak, if not confused. They have been also largely ineffective in trying to stop the attack and their contribution will most likely be limited to footing a good part of the bill for the reconstruction of what Israel destroyed in Gaza. This will not be the best in a situation of severe economic crisis.

In an effort to define a possible way out of the present deadlock, it may be useful to go back to what could be considered as the most serious political mistake made after the 2006 Palestinian elections. The 2006 elections, that were honest and fair, gave a clear majority to Hamas. Their right to govern has not been respected by anybody (Israel, US, EU, Egypt, etc.). The motivations mentioned were that Hamas did not recognize Israel, that it did not promise to respect past agreements and that it did not give up violence. An agreement or at least a “modus vivendi” could have been found where everybody respected past agreements (Israel and the new Palestinian Government), where violence would have been stopped by a long term truce and where the recognition of Israel could have been seen in the framework of the Arab Plan of 2002. Hamas was ready to move, more or less, along these lines while Israel and the West did not seek any such modus vivendi and started a full-range boycott. Money was withdrawn or denied to the Government (against the letter of past agreements), the new Palestinian Government was not allowed to function, Gaza was sealed, deadly Israeli incursions in Gaza and launch of rockets from Gaza into Israel became a familiar scene. Attempts to form a unity government with Fatah have been unsuccessful, in fact the tension and even the armed confrontation between Fatah and Hamas has caused much extra suffering. To expect that under these circumstances radicalism
would have been calmed down was an illogical expectation. After the open hostility between Hamas and Fatah, many Hamas parliamentarians in the West Bank have been arrested, making thus things worse. In any case Israel and the West were very vocal in the support of the Ramallah Government against Hamas, while giving at the same time only very limited concessions to Abu Mazen in terms of reducing the burden of the occupation. In conclusion the efforts that have been made to split the Palestinian camp, starting with the denial of the result of the elections and proceeding with a combination of harsh punishment for Hamas, collective punishment for the people in Gaza, and modest if not almost insignificant rewards for the Fatah Government and the people in the West Bank did not produce anything but bad results and misery for the Palestinians altogether.

So the first conclusion we draw is that the talks between the various political components of Palestine should be allowed to proceed without any externally imposed impediment.

There is a strong need of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, especially taking into account the level of internal violence that has been reached. Israel should agree that the principle of “divide and conquer” does not always apply, as any Israeli interference in the internal Palestinian political process is not going to bring good results. Other countries in the region should also be helpful in this and avoid any external constraints to the communications between the various Palestinian groups. These communications may come in many forms: at the “official level” and at the “non official levels”, deal with short range issues or with the general perspectives of the Palestinian movement. All of these talks should be allowed without constraints. In particular people should be allowed to get in and out Gaza or the West Bank to have meetings. As for the attitude of the other countries towards Hamas, one has to recognize that the Bush approach to international security (dividing the good from the bad, not talking to anybody you do not like and calling terrorists those you do not want to talk with) is over. Hopefully a more nuanced approach will emerge that will assume that in order to wind down violence one has to talk with a variety of subjects that one may dislike. This argument of course applies also to Hamas vis-a-vis its relation with Israel.

The second point is that the people in Gaza have the right to have an honest and serious relief. We are talking not only about water, food and care of the wounded, but about reconstruction and having access to the means to reconstruct (such as cement, combustibles, machinery, chemicals to treat sewage, etc.). Gazans should be allowed to get in and out through the normal crossing points (mainly Rafah but also Erez). The excuse of stopping arms trafficking should not be used any more to prevent people’s freedom of movement. Systems are available (with the possible aid of the international community) to prevent arms trafficking to a degree of efficiency that is much superior to the one achieved during the time when Gaza has been sealed off the rest of the world. Israel has a big responsibility in this as it should really relinquish the past policy of collective punishment for the people of Gaza. In this unfortunately the first signs are not encouraging.

The third point has to do with the Palestinian-Israeli talks and peace process. The attack on Gaza created a strong set back and it remains to be seen how much of the damage can be repaired. Talking about a two-state solution has become, unfortunately, synonymous of talking about such a distant perspective. Quite a few now think that a one-state solution will come about. In thinking to a one-state solution Palestinians see an end game where there will be a one-man one-
vote policy, while many Israeli have a vision of a sort of permanent apartheid, motivated by security reasons. Such different perspectives are a recipe for disaster. It is imperative that, in order to save the two-state solution, the coming series of talks should be really conducive to visible results and concrete improvement of the situation of the ground. Palestinians should see the improvement directly and not just be frustrated by a sequence of long-lasting talks where hands are shaken, hugs are exchanged, promises are made, foreign dignitaries come to Ramallah and the situation stays the same.

The fourth point has to do with the role of US, the western powers, the quartet, the Arab neighbors, etc. The external actors have been, especially recently, more preoccupied with their own agenda and less with really helping the peace process per se. Fighting terrorism or the so-called terrorist movements, isolate Iran, support the role of “moderate” Arab governments are all elements that have been included into the set of priorities. This took space from the peace process itself that has been often seen as yet another tool to separate the good from the bad, the allies from the enemies in the Bushian vision of the world. The last Annapolis conference had really no other goal or result. The unconditional support given by the US to whatever its main ally in the region (Israel), decided to do, has created more long term problems for everybody, including Israel that should have been encouraged to use much more restraint (for the cause of peace and stability in the region and also ultimately for Israel’s own sake). So the external actors should hopefully be encouraged to use their influence to bring the parties to the table and to bring about results and not necessarily to take sides.

[1] Here one should keep in mind the clear distinction between some Arab Governments’ positions and the public opinion at large in the Arab and Muslim states and even consider possible gaps between Government positions and the western public opinions that came out as a result of the attack on Gaza

[2] Culture and practice of preemption and escalation dominance are not the same as a warmongering attitude. A state can be very well unhappy to enter war and at the same time be convinced that prudence and diplomacy as opposed to escalation dominance and preemption can pose unacceptable risks. This attitude is ultimately more connected with fear than with anything else, but this does not diminish the dangers associated to it.