

# Waging useless war?

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## Hamastan or just Gaza?

A few things are certain. After Hamas won the Palestinian Legislative elections fair and square at the end of January 2006, the Islamic group was boycotted by Israel and the international community; its members were hunted down and imprisoned by Israel; the Gaza Strip was besieged. The militant operation in June 2006, leading to the killing of two and kidnapping of another Israeli soldier, sparked Israeli bombardments of Gaza, which helped instigate a cross-border raid by the Lebanese Party of God (Hezbollah) in northern Israel. The subsequent destruction of Lebanon is well-known, and like the current devastation of Gaza, the U.S. and other international actors allowed the bombardments to be prolonged in order to eliminate Israel's enemies. The recurrent problem is that these "terrorists" cannot be deleted with bombs.

A few other things are certain. Israel's military operations have not retrieved the kidnapped soldiers, neither in Gaza nor in Lebanon. On the contrary, incremental deaths and the targeting of infrastructure have led to more resentment from the respective Arab populations. The reckless rage of suicide bombing is always terribly worrisome, but particularly when it entails grandmothers, such as the shahida (martyr) and haja (pilgrim) Fatima Jama'a, blowing themselves up. Demonstrated by the growing number of women willing to become martyrs, the radicalisation of the female population is a tragic repercussion of the bloodshed in Gaza. Also worrisome is the fact that this latest Israeli-Palestinian war will most probably lead to another round of hostilities between Israel and Lebanon, especially after some missiles were lobbed into northern Israel in solidarity of the Palestinians of Gaza.

Other regional realities also exist. Repeated cease-fires were made and broken by both sides, with the usual mediators, particularly Egypt, each time rowing desperately to patch up the tears between the warring parties, and to remain the primary mediator. Saudi Arabia did negotiate the Mecca Accord, creating a national unity government for a few months in the spring of 2007. Yemen also came out with a Sanaa Declaration in early 2008. And Qatar, the rising star of the Arabian/Persian Gulf that negotiated the Doha Agreement between the different parties of Lebanon, attempted to intervene diplomatically, until Egypt once again called the Palestinian factions to Cairo to reconcile their internal differences in November 2008. Fearing the regional influence of Iran, it is probable that Israel would have bombarded Gaza regardless if Cairo had failed again or not. To divide and rule is much easier than to make permanent peace.

And one paramount thing is for sure: Hamas controls Gaza. No matter what political pundits claim, Hamas will not be dislodged from Gaza by a few weeks of Israeli Air Force bombardments. Israel, after all, helped create Hamas back in the 1980s. As an extension of the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood, the Palestinian Hamas declared itself as an official group and as perpetrator

of the initial phase of the intifada (popular uprising) in December 1987 in the northern Gaza refugee camp of Jabalya. Israel turned a blind-eye to the creation of grass-root Islamic youth and social centres during its occupation of the Strip since 1967 because a vehement Islamic group would provide an internal counterforce to Arafat's attempts to monopolise power. Arafat never was able completely to reign in these "terrorist" elements of Palestinian society. A term he was tainted with until his dying days in his squalid headquarters in Ramallah.

In June 2007, Hamas pre-emptively mobilised and took-over important Fatah positions, namely the crossing points with Israel, where PA President Mahoud Abbas was trying to deploy his Presidential Guard. Fatah was rapidly routed, but Hamas continued. The Islamic movement took over the police and the judiciary. Hamas did not however issue shari'a (Islamic law), and the incremental wearing of the hijab (headscarf) would come as a result of inter-female pressure. Contrary to general belief, this was not inflicted by the male-dominated society. Nor were there instances of caning or public executions as in Afghanistan with the Taliban - honour killings were a different issue, a family matter. But above all, the scarf-wearing was a sign of respect and solidarity with the resistance.

Hamas also subdued prominent clans, such as the Dughmush and Hellis families in southern and northern Gaza, respectively. It was the Dughmush clan, not Hamas, that created the Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam), with supposed unconfirmed Salafist ties to unfounded Al-Qaeda infiltrations. Hamas strived to restore a degree of law and order, by professionalising the Palestinian police, for example. Hamas also moved quickly to eliminate petty crime, drugs, and prostitution. The UN Beach Club was closed and pleasure houses along the sea front were also forcefully shut down - no booze, no girls. Hamas is not endorsed uniformly amongst Palestinians, but they enjoy being "cleaner" than Fatah and closer to the people. Many Palestinians view Hamas' religious agenda as overly rigid, but many find emotional satisfaction in having a force stand up for their trampled dignity, particularly in the thin piece of land (some 40 by 8-6 kilometers, around 350 square kilometers) along the Eastern Mediterranean, simply called Gaza.

## Another testing time

Israel's Operation "Cast Lead" launched on December 27, 2008 needs to be seen against the backdrop of its national elections in February 2009. Not entirely convinced by the effectiveness of the airstrikes and subsequent land invasion, Israeli minister of defense, Ehud Barak, sent the order and now enjoys resounding popularity with foreign minister Tzipi Livni against the hawk, Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu. Bibi is dreaded for his ability to postpone any possibilities of peace with the Palestinians, as was the case when he was prime minister between 1996-1999, which contributed to augmenting general Palestinian frustration with the peace process and the violently revived 2000 intifada.

But Barak also had his hand in deterring peace. Widely recognised for the proximity of peace almost attained at Camp David II in July 2000 during his stint as Prime Minister, he imposed three red lines that were not to be contested by the Palestinians: no borders, no statehood, and no sovereignty. Arafat was corrupt, but he would not sign away the rest of Palestine, as he had largely done at Oslo in 1993. Barak's other achievement was the unilateral withdrawal from all South Lebanon in May 2000, except for Ghajar village and Shebaa Farms, which remain under dispute. The sudden military withdrawal was not coordinated with official Lebanese Army counterparts - Hezbollah rapidly filled the vacuum and claimed victory for the armed resistance. Just as Hamas would do when Israel hastily withdrew from the Gaza Strip in August/September 2005.

With the Gaza 2009 War, Barak, once a “dove”, is now a “hawk”, a political line that has become increasingly blurred when referring to Israeli policy with the Palestinians. Similarly, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is generally constant regardless of whether a Republican or Democrat is President. Anyone hoodwinked into believing that Clinton’s double term (1992-2000) was a particularly peace-oriented Presidency would do well to look into Somalia, Rwanda, the Balkans, and the sanctions of Iraq. The transition period from the Bush to Obama administrations provided an ideal setting to see whether the 44th U.S. President’s policies will diverge from his predecessors. This Gaza War was not overly pre-mediated, but the timing of the transition was convenient: the Bush administration would not stop Israel, and Obama would be presented with another quagmire upon entering office on January 20, 2009.

This testing time is commonly used by Israel to see how far to push international actors. This was the case with the German assumption of the Maritime Task Force of UNIFIL off the coast of Lebanon. Germany was stereotypically stern and was able to establish a no-fly zone over its naval area of operations. (Israeli overflights of South Lebanon do persist unabated and unprecedented.) Other international monitors fared less well: UNIFIL has suffered many casualties during recurrent Israeli invasions; the Temporary International Presence in Hebron also lost staff; and the European Union border assistance mission (EUBAM) at the Rafah crossing has served as a technical tool for Israeli closure policy of the Gaza Strip. Since the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) pre-emptively defeated the National Liberation Movement (Fatah) in July 2007, EUBAM-Rafah was officially suspended and downsized to a minimum.

Hamas’ control of Gaza helped Israel to justify its siege, bombardments and invasion of the Strip. Israel claims to be confronted with a merciless foe bent on destroying the Jewish State. The Palestinians are labelled unanimously – if not by words then by the blanket aerial bombings – as “terrorists”: as of mid-January 2009, the Palestinian death toll exceeded 1000, including over 300 children. And home-made “Qassam” missiles made by Hamas or other militant groups have hit the furthest ever in Israel. The Israeli media machine claims that Hamas wants to create an Islamic state in all of Israel, in what was Palestine. As this vicious cycle continues, another hopeful statement by Obama is awaited. He may not fall for the facile proclamation of a date for a state called Palestine in the near future. Bush fell for that one a few too many times.

## On border management

Israel controls all land, air and sea access to Gaza. Only the tunnels to Egypt provide respite to intrepid traders. Egypt only occasionally opens its side for some humanitarian aid to enter and to relieve some public pressure, and has built a wall along the southern border of Gaza to prevent the Hamas effect from spilling over. Managing Hamas thus irrevocably has to do with border management. Of course, the cessation of Palestinian rockets has to do with lifting the Israeli siege, but this is only a temporary tahdi’a (“period of non-belligerence”) since neither really stop: the Israeli siege will continue as long as rockets are fired, and rockets will persist as long as the Israeli siege does. The real issue is the terms for a hudna (truce), which can be achieved by effective border management. But since Hamas controls Gaza, Israel refuses to lift the siege and since Hamas refuses to relinquish full control to Fatah, the violent tit-for-tat continues.

Hamas states repeatedly that it would work openly with Fatah to manage Gaza’s borders, but make no mistake: Hamas says that meaning that it maintains control. The head of police was a former Fatah member: Tawfiq Jaber had little function compared to the operational roles of his two deputies – two former Executive Force leaders, Abu Bilal and Abu Udayda, closely linked

to the higher echelons of Hamas' armed wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. (Tawfiq Jaber was killed in the first airstrike that hit police headquarters in Gaza; he was graduating a police officers' training course.)

Another example of Hamas' willingness is the head of Gaza's borders, Colonel Shahine, a former Fatah National Security Forces leader. Most Fatah members in Gaza still receive salaries from the Ramallah-based PA: civil servants and security officers are paid to not work under the Hamas-led PA. Those who do work with Hamas are seen as having defected even if they honestly believe in the higher Palestinian goal of achieving a functional and unified state system.

Contrary to what many may think, Hamas is not averse to having President Abbas deploy his guards at the various crossing points around Gaza. The problem is when Abbas deploys his U.S.-trained Presidential Guard to assume control of the crossings without coordinating with Hamas, as in the spring of 2007; then Hamas sees him as an Israeli stooge and launches pre-emptive strikes. Hamas would accept a power-sharing formula, based on an equitable distribution of decision-making. Hamas, for example, accepted that Abbas negotiate the future of Palestine with Israel.

Equally important now, Hamas would also consider the deployment of an international monitoring group along its border with Israel, precisely to verify that both sides abide to the cease-fire and have the ability to denounce and reprimand violations diplomatically. Deploying a naval force off the Mediterranean coast of Gaza could also be envisioned, as long as Israel does not have the final say on the passage of people and goods, as was the case with the Europeans at the Rafah crossing with Egypt: Israel would deny access to the European monitors regularly due to security concerns.

Hamas claims Gaza as sovereign Palestinian territory and will push to exert sovereignty, with or without Fatah. Ironically, Hamas thus abides to the two-state solution, not to an Islamic state in all of Palestine, as many believe, or even to have pan-Islamic jihadist tendencies, as some promote. Hamas is much more pragmatic and agrees implicitly to the Beirut 2002 Arab peace initiative, revived in Riyadh in 2007, which calls for an Israeli return of territory to the 1967 lines in exchange for comprehensive peace with its neighbours and the 22 members of the Arab League. Israel is still considering the offer. Hamas will continue to fight for long overdue Palestinian statehood. When will Israel be able to subsist without an enemy at its gates? As ever, the outcome will depend on what Israel refuses for security reasons and what the Palestinians could accept as a state.

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