



## February 6, 2009

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**News Blurb:** The director of operations for the UN's refugee agency in Gaza criticizes both Israel's blockade and Hamas' leadership (1). The Christian Science Monitor examines how Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's angry remarks at the Davos conference may have damaged his credibility as a go-between (2). After accusing the Hamas government of stealing hundreds of tons of food supplies intended for civilians, the United Nations suspends all shipments of aid into Gaza (3). With Israeli elections set to take place next Tuesday, speculation about outcomes continues to grow as the gap between the parties appears to have narrowed considerably (4) (11). Recently released poll results show that Israel's Gaza offensive has boosted Palestinian support for Hamas (6), as the political divide between Hamas and Fatah continues to grow (10). The National looks at Egypt's role as regional mediator (9). A commentary article in the Daily Star by ATFP Senior Fellow Hussein Ibish examines the rise in Arab political discourse of the myth of "the martyrs versus the traitors." (13).

### U.N.'s Gaza Refugee Director Criticizes Israel and Hamas

**Article Author(s):** Neil MacFarquhar

**Media Outlet:** The New York Times

**Date:** February 5, 2009

**Source Link(s):** <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/06/world/middleeast/06nationsweb.html?partner=rss...> [1]

John Ging, the director of operations for the United Nations refugee agency in Gaza, said Thursday that Israel's blockade was creating growing misery there by choking off basic humanitarian supplies like food, medicine, clothes and blankets as well as school supplies.

He also criticized the leadership of Hamas for letting its police force run wild, attacking a distribution center for the needy to cart off supplies.

"We are neither getting in the volume nor the range of supplies that we need here," Mr. Ging told reporters at the United Nations, speaking via video link-up from Gaza. "This is creating a lot of misery among the people."

In one example, Mr. Ging said that the teachers in the schools run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency had worked throughout the three-week Israeli bombardment that ended Jan. 18 to create a new human rights curriculum. But because Israel was blocking paper supplies, the textbooks and workbooks could not be printed, so some 60 percent of the children in United Nations schools lack books.

The human rights curriculum was designed to combat extremism, he said, a growing problem in the wake of the Israeli bombardment. Ordinary Gazans are particularly frustrated, he said, because they have seen

news reports about generous donations from around the world stuck just outside the enclave. It is premature to talk about Gaza's reconstruction until the issue of access for basic humanitarian supplies is fixed, Mr. Ging said.

Israel has maintained a strict blockade of Gaza since Hamas took power there in a brief civil war with its secular rival, Fatah, in June 2007.

As to Hamas, Mr. Ging called on its leadership to rein in its rank and file after armed policemen looted blankets and food from a United Nations compound. While senior Hamas leaders remained in hiding, "those above the ground seem bent on acting in a reckless manner," he said. It was the first such incident, he said, and the agency will halt all distributions if it continues.

## A setback for Turkey as Mideast broker

**Article Author(s):** Yigal Schleifer

**Media Outlet:** The Christian Science Monitor

**Date:** February 6, 2009

**Source Link(s):** <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0206/p01s01-wome.html> <sup>[2]</sup>

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent outburst at the World Economic Forum, where he berated Israeli President Shimon Peres for Israel's attack on Gaza, has won him unprecedented popularity in the Arab world.

Mr. Erdogan's tirade may help Turkey reconnect with the region after decades of being estranged. But it could also damage Turkey's aspirations to be a mediating power in the Middle East, particularly between Israel and its neighbors.

"The cost [of his actions] was possibly the loss of something that was starting, but that hadn't matured, and that was Turkey's emerging role in the Middle East," says Semih Idiz, a columnist who writes on foreign affairs for the Milliyet newspaper. "Erdogan made his position very apparent, and it's hard to see how he will be an honest broker at this stage."

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is expected to visit Turkey Friday, according to Turkish newspapers. Also this week Turkish President Abdullah Gul made a three-day visit to Saudi Arabia Thursday.

One of the topics expected to be on the agenda was the recent war in Gaza, during which Mr. Erdogan's criticism of Israel was especially harsh — stronger than that of most Arab leaders.

The prime minister accused Israel of committing "crimes against humanity" and said it should be barred from the United Nations for ignoring a Security Council resolution calling on the fighting to stop.

At the Davos panel, which also included UN head Ban Ki Moon and Secretary-General of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, Erdogan responded angrily to Mr. Peres's defense of Israel's actions. "When it is time to kill, you know how to kill well. I know well how you kill children on beaches, how you shoot them," Erdogan told the Israeli president, wagging his finger. Erdogan also accused Israel of violating the sixth of the Ten Commandments — "Thou shalt not kill."

The performance earned him plaudits at home and throughout the Middle East. In Gaza, thousands gathered the next day to honor Erdogan at a rally festooned with Turkish and Palestinian flags.

The cheers in what was once an Ottoman territory were an important indication that Turkey's effort to reconnect with the Arab world after years of being cut off, was bearing fruit.

'Honest broker' image takes a hit

Still, analysts warn that the mood on the street might not reflect that of the region's leaders.

"I think certainly, in the eyes of the Arab street, Erdogan is now very popular. But it doesn't improve his mediating role anywhere else but in Syria," says Henri Barkey, a Turkey expert at Pennsylvania's Lehigh University.

Erdogan's rhetoric may have been especially costly, experts warn, in terms of Turkey's continuing role in working to bring Israel and Syria together. Playing on its good relations with both countries, Ankara facilitated a series of indirect talks between the two countries that it hoped would lead to direct peace negotiations.

But those talks are unlikely to continue under the new Israeli government due to be formed after Feb. 10 elections because the figures involved in the talks will depart, says Alon Liel, a former Israeli diplomat in Turkey and chairman of the Israel-Syria Peace Society, a group working toward the resumption of talks between the two countries.

"From the Turkish side, the mechanism has not only collapsed but we have entered a situation in which I have a lot of doubt that an incoming Israeli government will look at Turkey as a reliable mediator," Mr. Liel says.

"We took a big hit on the Israeli and Turkish side of the triangle, but we now have an American aspect to this that we didn't have before. Everyone is waiting for a signal from Obama," he adds.

Erdogan has said that part of his anger at Israel stems from the fact that he believes Turkey was close to getting Israel and Syria to enter direct negotiations and that the Gaza attack scuttled that. But many experts believe the indirect talks had already reached a plateau before the war in Gaza.

"The fundamental issues were not bridgeable by Turkey. For that, you need the United States," says Mr. Barkey.

"The issue is that the Turks expected to be sitting at the table once the Americans picked up the ball, that they had earned it. The question is, Have the Gaza events dealt Turkey out of this?"

Turkey: needed to 'rehabilitate' Syria

But some warn that cutting Turkey out of the peace process, particularly when it comes to Syria, would be a mistake. Joshua Landis, codirector of the Center for Middle East Studies at Oklahoma University and author of the "Syria Comment" blog, says that Ankara's improved relations with Damascus have helped attenuate the link between Syria and Iran.

If Syria and the US were to start talking, Turkey could act as a "handmaiden," Landis says.

"Turkey is going to help rehabilitate Syria. That is Erdogan's entire strategy: 'It's not that we are siding with Syria and Iran against Israel. It's that we are going to help Obama. We are the key to the Islamic world

because we are the enlightened Muslims. We can be the crucial go-betweens,' " he says.

"There's a lot of power to that argument."

Trying to undo rhetorical damage

For now, there appear to be some signs that Ankara is trying to step back from Erdogan's fiery rhetoric. Speaking to reporters after a recent cabinet meeting, Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Cicek said: "We give special importance to our bilateral ties with Israel, and we want to preserve ties with that country."

"We are now looking towards the future. Turkey is not targeting Israel and the Israeli people," he said.

But some observers expressed concern that, ultimately, the substance of Turkey's message ? that it should be seen as an important part of the equation in resolving the Middle East conflict ? is being lost in the way it is being delivered.

"For the long run, the style and the rhetoric of Erdogan are unsustainable," says Soli Ozel, a professor of international relations at Istanbul's Bilgi University.

## UN halts Gaza aid over 'thefts'

**Media Outlet:** BBC News

**Date:** February 6, 2009

**Source Link(s):** [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7875171.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7875171.stm) <sup>[3]</sup>

The UN aid agency in Gaza says it has suspended all aid shipments, accusing the Hamas government of seizing hundreds of tonnes of food supplies.

Ten lorries carrying flour and rice were taken from the Palestinian side of the Kerem Shalom crossing, the UN's Relief and Works Agency (Unrwa) said.

Hamas admitted a "mistake" had been made and says it will return the goods.

But Unwra says deliveries will not restart until it has assurances that such seizures will not happen again.

Gaza is facing a humanitarian crisis after Israel's three-week offensive.

About half the population is dependent on UN food aid.

Israel intensified a blockade on the territory 19 months ago when Hamas took over the territory.

The lifting of the blockade is among Hamas' demands for agreeing a long-term truce with Israel.

On Friday the group's exiled leader, Khaled Meshaal, told a rally in Syria that Israel still had not given the necessary undertakings for such a truce.

Second incident

Unrwa said the food had been imported from Egypt, and had been due to be collected by its staff at the Kerem Shalom crossing in southern Gaza on Friday.

"The food was taken away by trucks contracted by the ministry of social affairs," the agency said in a statement.

It said aid deliveries would only be resumed if Hamas returned all the aid and provided "credible assurances" that it would not happen again.

It was the second incident in three days. On Tuesday, 3,500 blankets and more than 400 food parcels were seized at gunpoint from a distribution centre in Gaza, the UN said.

The Hamas government's social affairs minister, Ahmed al Kurd, ordered "the aid to be returned to the agency if it turns out it is indeed its property", Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum said, according to AFP news agency.

He said no Hamas or Unrwa representatives had been present at the crossing when drivers loaded up the aid supplies, and the drivers had assumed they belonged to the Hamas government.

Although the UN, as an organisation, does not negotiate with Hamas, its relief agency in Gaza has to have some contact with the faction for practical reasons, says the BBC's Aleem Maqbool in Gaza City.

### UN-Hamas tensions

Earlier in the week, Mr Kurd warned Unrwa not to "become a political player in Gaza". He said all aid should be distributed through Hamas.

But Hamas's rapid attempt to rectify the situation - at least once Unrwa announced its suspension of imports publicly - suggests it does understand how crucial the UN's aid work is, our correspondent says.

Hamas itself has given very limited financial assistance to some of the thousands of Gazans whose homes were destroyed in the Israeli offensive.

The perception of many in the territory is that the group is only helping its own supporters, he adds.

The UN has increased its food distribution in recent weeks to cover 900,000 of Gaza's population of 1.5 million following Israel's offensive against Hamas that began in December.

## Israeli race tightens with Livni gains

**Article Author(s):** Tobias Buck

**Media Outlet:** The Financial Times

**Date:** February 6, 2009

**Source Link(s):** <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/dc233248-f443-11dd-8e76-0000779fd2ac.html> <sup>[4]</sup>

The race to become Israel's next prime minister has tightened, with the latest polls showing the right-wing Likud party under Benjamin Netanyahu is losing ground to his centrist challenger, Tzipi Livni.

Ms Livni, Israel's foreign minister, has led her Kadima party to a late sprint that has seen it catch up on Likud. Polls show that Kadima is not only gaining ground, but that Likud is losing support to the far-right Yisraeli Beiteinu group.

Neither Kadima nor Likud will have sufficient strength to govern on their own, and analysts predict a complex and prolonged period of coalition talks after election day on February 10. According to a poll released on Friday by Haaretz, the Israeli newspaper, the Likud party is set to win 27 seats and Kadima 25 seats. However, with a record number of undecided voters, that gap could narrow further still.

It is customary for the president to ask the leader of the largest group in parliament to form a government, but there is an outside chance that he will turn to whoever enjoys the most support from other groups. This has led to frantic efforts both by Ms Livni and Mr Netanyahu to woo other party leaders ahead of next Tuesday.

?A few weeks ago, Likud seemed to have victory sewed up. Now it is in real danger of losing out to Kadima,? Haaretz commented.

Another poll, published in the Yedioth Ahronoth daily, also showed a distance of just two seats between the two front-runners.

Ms Livni and Mr Netanyahu have very different political agendas. The Kadima leader has been at the forefront of efforts to reach a peace deal with the Palestinians, and has vowed to make the pursuit of a two-state solution aimed at ending the Middle East conflict a central plank of government.

Mr Netanyahu, in contrast, argues that the creation of a Palestinian state would be detrimental to Israel?s security interests, because such a state would become a haven for radical Islamists.

However, both leaders have promised to build broad coalition governments with parties that do not necessarily share their core political beliefs. With any government likely to need the support of at least three or four parties, Mr Netanyahu and Ms Livni will be forced to compromise no matter what the precise result of the 2009 election turns up.

## **Israeli politicians offer territory swaps and tunnels to solve the endless crisis**

**Article Author(s):** James Hider

**Media Outlet:** The Times

**Date:** February 6, 2009

**Source Link(s):** [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle\\_east/article5671848.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article5671848.ece) <sup>[5]</sup>

Israel's hard-fought election campaign is throwing out a number of grand plans reminiscent of some of the treaties that carved up the Middle East in the 20th century, including a scheme to transfer Jewish-held areas of the West Bank to Israel in exchange for Arab-populated territories.

As well as extreme right-wing plans to redraw boundaries Ehud Barak, the Labour Party leader and current Defence Minister, has proposed digging a 30-mile tunnel between the blockaded Gaza Strip and the occupied West Bank, to allow Palestinians the territorial continuity they are demanding in any peace deal.

?The preferred way to do it would be to dig a tunnel that would be under Israeli sovereignty, but under totally free and unobstructed use by Palestinians,? said Mr Barak.

The election front-runner Binyamin Netanyahu, of the hawkish Likud party, has said that when he takes office he will make a point of enacting forcible regime change in Gaza to topple the Islamist leadership of Hamas, although he has stopped short of promising a state for their secular rivals, Fatah.

He has clashed with Tzipi Livni, the centre-right Kadima party leader and incumbent Foreign Minister, who wishes to explore the possibility of dividing Jerusalem to allow the Palestinians a capital in the city, sacred to both sides.

Perhaps surprisingly, Yisrael Beitenu, the hard-right nationalist party led by Moldavian-born Avigdor Lieberman, is in favour of allowing some of the Arab-dominated outlying areas of northern Jerusalem to become a Palestinian city, although it is unlikely to be enough to please the other side.

Mr Lieberman has also developed one of the most sweeping plans of all the schemes being put forward to tackle the endless crisis, and one that his supporters hope will also shore up Israel's demographics in favour of the Jewish population, which has a slower birth rate than the 20 per cent Arab minority.

That plan involves exchanging an area close to the West Bank, where tens of thousands of Arab-Israelis - descendants of Palestinian Arabs who stayed in their homes when the Jewish state was formed around them in 1948 - for two large Jewish settlement blocks in the West Bank, Ariel in the north and Gush Etzion to the south of Bethlehem.

The party also wants to consolidate a large settlement community east of Jerusalem called Maale Aduumim, effectively surrounding Arab East Jerusalem with Jewish settlements.

Mr Lieberman has referred to Israeli Arabs as the enemy within, with sympathies closer to their Palestinian brethren than Israel, and has even proposed forcing them to swear an oath of allegiance to the Jewish state.

Such ambitious plans - recalling the British redrawing of post-Second World War maps with green pencils - do not go down well with the Arab residents of Umm al-Fahm, at the heart of the so-called Triangle of Arab towns close to the green line dividing Israel from the West Bank.

‘Lieberman wants to use transfer against Arabs but he has no right,’ said Jamal Ighbariya, 42, an unemployed labourer in Umm al-Fahm, the second-largest Arab-Israeli town.

‘How can someone who came here a few years ago from Russia use this argument against people here, whose grandparents lived here? Lieberman should go back to Russia.’

‘This is racism,’ said one of his friends chatting on the town's main street. ‘This is their education system, encouraging racism.’

Israeli Arabs already complain that the Jewish state treats them like second-class citizens.

Despite having a population of about 50,000, Umm al-Fahm has no hospital or courthouse of its own, and residents complain of having to travel to nearby Jewish towns to take advantage of basic government facilities. Despite those complaints, Arab Israelis are also not keen to be grafted on to the West Bank, where they believe their living standards would drop even farther.

‘It's a better life here,’ said Diaa Mohammed, 28, a housewife. ‘Women have no rights there,’ said an older woman. ‘Everything over there depends on wealth and status.’

Mr Lieberman's faction may not be invited into the national unity government Mr Netanyahu is planning to

form - senior Labour officials have already balked at sharing power with his party.

But Mr Netanyahu has extreme nationalists within his own ranks to contend with, and the more seats he wins, the more hardliners he will have to deal with from his own faction in the Knesset.

One of them, Moshe Feiglin, has suggested taking Israel's defence budget and using it to pay Palestinians up to \$250,000 per family to leave for countries in the Gulf, Europe and the Americas. He cites surveys he said were carried out by Palestinian universities suggesting that up to 60 per cent of Palestinians are so dispirited by Israeli occupation and harsh living conditions that they want to get out.

## Gaza offensive boosted Hamas, poll concludes

**Article Author(s):** Tobias Buck

**Media Outlet:** The Financial Times

**Date:** February 6, 2009

**Source Link(s):** <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/33aa0c12-f3c2-11dd-9c4b-0000779fd2ac.html> <sup>[6]</sup>

Palestinian support for the Islamist Hamas movement has soared in the wake of Israel's three-week offensive against the Gaza Strip, according to a poll released on Thursday.

The survey, by the independent Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, also found that the majority of Palestinians thought the group had emerged victorious from the conflict. Almost one in two Palestinians said Hamas won the Gaza war, while less than 10 per cent said Israel had triumphed.

The finding is at striking odds with Israeli perceptions of the conflict. The government called an end to the military campaign on January 17, claiming the offensive against the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip had achieved its goals by weakening the group, curbing rocket attacks and restoring Israel's power of deterrence.

Thursday's poll found that Palestinians in the West Bank were more convinced of a Hamas victory than their counterparts in the Gaza Strip, where more than 1,300 Palestinians were killed and thousands of buildings destroyed by Israeli forces. In Gaza, 48 per cent said neither Israel nor Hamas won the war, and only 35 per cent said Hamas was the victor. In the West Bank, 53 per cent said Hamas won, while 31 per cent said neither side was victorious.

Israeli officials argue that Hamas has been severely weakened by the recent offensive, and say the group lost much of its military capability. Several Israeli leaders have also claimed that the war served to strengthen 'moderate' Arab and Palestinian movements, while weakening Iranian-backed Islamist groups such as Hamas and the Lebanese Hizbollah.

However, in political terms Hamas itself appears to have benefited from the war - at the expense of the western-backed Palestinian Authority, which is headed by Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah party.

The JMCC poll found that if elections were held on Friday, Hamas would win 28.6 per cent of the vote, up from 19.3 per cent last April. This would put it ahead of the rival Fatah party, which has seen its support plummet from 34 per cent last April to 27.9 per cent on Friday.

Ghassan Khatib, the director of JMCC and a former minister in the Palestinian Authority, said: 'This war

has caused further radicalisation within Palestinian public opinion.?

He added that, far from weakening militant Islamist groups and their sponsors, ?the war weakened and undermined to a very large extent the moderates ? not only in Palestine but also in the region?.

## Rise of the moderates

**Article Author(s):** Antony Lerman

**Media Outlet:** The Guardian

**Article Type:** Opinion

**Date:** February 6, 2009

**Source Link(s):** <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/feb/06/jewish-opposition-gaza> <sup>[7]</sup>

Each and every Jew who protested as a Jew against the Gaza war had a personal Jewish imperative for doing so. Some simply expressed dismay; most demanded action to end the carnage. To say that we failed is neither an expression of despair nor a statement that dissent wasn't worthwhile. Realism suggests that it was inevitable.

Let's be clear: diaspora and Israeli Jewish support for the war was extensive - and extremely dispiriting. It raises the question: critical Jewish voices may have increased, but can we ever trigger decisive change in mainstream Jewish opinion? An unsentimental look at developments may give reason for hope.

First, there's been activity in many countries and support for Jewish peace groups has increased. European Jews for a Just Peace, a 10-country federation of such organisations, reports numerous initiatives in Europe. Independent Jewish Voices, Jews for Justice for Palestinians and other UK groups demonstrated, lobbied, placed newspaper ads and joined demonstrations. IJV groups in Canada and Australia issued statements. Jewish and Israeli protesters in Toronto, Montreal and Boston occupied Israeli consulates. US peace groups have been increasingly active. Together with activity by Israeli groups, this amounts to an undercurrent of protest that is rattling establishment Jewish leadership.

Second, some groups of Jews have taken significant stands. On 11 January, the Observer made front-page news of a letter from rabbis, academics and prominent community figures at the centre of UK Jewish life, calling for a ceasefire. In Germany, a letter from 35 supporters of the group Jewish Voice for a Just Peace, demanding an end to "the murder in Gaza", was published on 17 January in the Süddeutsche Zeitung - a major newspaper in a country where expressing public criticism of Israel is difficult for anyone, let alone a group of Jews.

But most significant was the strong anti-war stand taken by J Street, the new American liberal "pro-peace, pro-Israel" lobby, which is effectively challenging the influential, rightwing Israel lobby Aipac. Heavily criticised by Rabbi Eric Yoffie, a prominent US peace camp leader, for being "profoundly out of touch with Jewish sentiment", J Street stuck to its guns and attracted increased support. It then warmly welcomed President Obama's appointment of George Mitchell as Middle East envoy, positioning itself to have clout in Washington. The positive consequences for further legitimising Jewish dissent in the US and beyond could be crucial.

Third, there are signs of underlying disquiet in the middle ground of normally solid pro-Israel Jewish opinion. On 2 January, Anshel Pfeffer wrote in Ha'aretz: "Extremely disturbed and hurt by the level of

civilian deaths and destruction ... [these Jews] say, there must, there has to be another way of doing this. And they live with those doubts, often unexpressed, even among families and close friends, because the worst thing they find is that others around them don't seem to discern between the different nuances, and can't find in themselves compassion for the dead and wounded on the other side." Pfeffer is not alone in sensing this mood, which suggests Israel is perilously close to the line beyond which even some of its strongest supporters cannot go.

Two encouraging conclusions can be drawn. First, although it seems most Jews shrink from the truth and embrace the Orwellian "war is peace" propaganda, doubts are growing. For Jewish dissenters who seek an appropriate language to persuade mainstream Jewish opinion that Israel is going in the wrong direction, the effort may produce results.

Second, dissenting peace groups can be stubbornly independent and make a virtue out of minor differences. But effective coordination during the Gaza war proved empowering. It's surely worthwhile attempting to create a critical mass, united around key objectives, and expressed in language that can connect with mainstream Jewish opinion.

Israel is heavily dependent on what Jews think. Its leaders turn to their support whenever they face an internal crisis or need cover for some new military adventure. But it's now not too far-fetched to think Jewish opinion could turn decisively against Israel's current path. This would shake the government and help change Middle East realities. So, out of the rubble of Gaza and the political failure it represents, Jewish dissent may emerge a more potent force.

A final cautionary note: Jewish opposition to the Gaza war was not qualitatively different from anyone else's. And it's not more important than the horrendous experience of the people of Gaza. But were that opposition to be translated into a rolling tide of Jewish opinion, it may have a moderating influence on Israel. This would benefit Palestinians, who deserve an immediate end to siege and occupation, and Jews, who deserve an immediate end to the antisemitism, highlighted in these pages by Jonathan Freedland, which Israel's war has provoked. And ultimately lead to an Israel living in peace with its neighbours.

## Egypt savours peace mediator role

**Article Author(s):** Matt Bradley

**Media Outlet:** The National

**Date:** February 6, 2009

**Source Link(s):** <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090206/FOREIGN/300077225/1002> <sup>[8]</sup>

Representatives from more than half a dozen Arab nations may have met this week, but the fact that they all agreed to a plan drafted by Egyptians has not been lost on analysts here.

After years of watching Saudi Arabia take the lead in the Middle East peace process and after more than a month of facing the collective anger of the Muslim world for its refusal to open its border crossing with the Gaza Strip, Egypt, many here say, has once again taken its seat at the head of the Middle East's diplomatic table.

There's been kind of a concentrated attack on Egypt's role by Hizbollah, Syria and Iran. In a sense, I think that Egypt is trying to rescue its role as a mediator between the factions and the Arab moderates are

supporting it," said Nadim Shehadi, an associate fellow for the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, a London-based think tank. "Egypt relies on western support to survive. If Egypt loses that role and becomes irrelevant to the [Middle East] equation, then it will be a bitter blow to the regime."

The Abu Dhabi agreement was in some ways the culminating point of Egypt's gathering leadership clout among a bloc of moderate Arab nations whose agendas have focused primarily on fostering peace and security in the region by promoting the Palestinian Liberation Organisation as the only legitimate leader of the Palestinian people.

That common agenda draws as much from their collective ideology as from their shared sense of regional threats. The Egypt-led bloc, which includes Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the Palestinian Authority, was gathered in opposition to a competing group of nations that are seen to be closer to Iran. That bloc includes Qatar and Syria, which plays host to Hamas's leader-in-exile, Khaled Meshaal.

Prof Shehadi calls the two new policy camps "an Arab Cold War".

"If Syria manages to hijack the role of Egypt, then Syria will come out much stronger and Egypt will come out much weaker," said Prof Shehadi. "If Hamas doesn't want to play with Egypt, Egypt will lose a lot of its prestige and a lot of its role and it will become irrelevant. So one of [Egypt's] main foreign policy goals is to continue the dialogue."

But while Egypt hopes to become the steward of a successful peace negotiation, its leadership role comes with a fair amount of political risk. To be successful, Egypt must effectively straddle two sets of complementary negotiations: Talks between Israel and Hamas and talks between Hamas and the PLO. Maintaining the trust of all the parties involved has been a delicate game for Egypt.

"Egypt knows that for all reasons, particularly practical reasons, there must be some kind of agreement or accommodation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority," said Abdel al Raouf al Reedy, a former Egyptian ambassador to the United States.

Mr al Reedy said that while Egypt has "dealt" with Hamas for decades, the question of distributing aid and reconstruction funding means "everybody is forced to recognise Hamas as the de facto authority in Gaza".

That reality is awkward for Israel and the PLO. Israel has gone to great lengths to isolate Hamas. In addition, the Jewish state has stipulated that aid money and supplies can only be distributed through the PLO. Last week, Mr Meshaal, the leader of the Islamist group, said the PLO, which has been the Palestinians' internationally recognised representative body since 1964, "does not represent anymore a point of reference for the Palestinians". He called for a new, more inclusive representative body.

Such internecine fighting has divided the Palestinians geographically ever since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, leaving the larger West Bank under the control of the PLO.

But prestige is hardly Egypt's only motive in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Egyptian leadership, said Prof Shehadi, is afraid that opening the border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip will provide an opportunity for the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition party and the organisation that founded Hamas in 1987.

During the fighting in late December and January, Egyptian police arrested more than 700 Brotherhood members during protests throughout the country over official refusals to open the border and provide relief for the besieged Gazans, said Mohamed Habib, the first deputy chairman of the Muslim Brotherhood. Dr Habib echoed Mr Meshaal's views of the PLO and said the Egyptian government's support for the West

Bank-based organisation was misdirected.

‘The PLO is just a dead image,’ said Dr Habib. ‘Egypt has made it a condition that Hamas should stop fighting and give all of its support to Fatah. That’s why Egypt was so ineffective as a peacemaker during the fighting last month in Gaza, he said.

Egypt, like some of the more moderate Hamas leaders in Gaza, would prefer to see Hamas share power with the Fatah party, which currently governs the Palestinian Authority, said Gamal Abdel Gawad, an analyst at the semi-official Al Aahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo. Far from endangering a unity agreement among the two Palestinian factions, Cairo hopes to capitalise on Israel’s attacks to bring both sides to the negotiating table. The three weeks of bombing and ground attacks have weakened Hamas, he said, and may have also tempered their extremist ideology.

‘The reading here in Egypt on the impact of the Gaza war was that it allowed a kind of shift in Hamas policy, more toward a kind of moderate policy,’ said Mr Gawad. ‘A softening of Hamas’s position would allow for national reconciliation again.’

As evidence of a softer position, Mr Gawad cited Hamas continuing their negotiations even three weeks after the ceasefire in late January, as well as the Islamists’ consideration to allow Palestinian Authority guards to police Gaza’s border with Egypt. The anti-PLO statements by Mr Meshaal show divisions within Hamas’s ranks: Some members of Hamas’s leadership who actually suffered through Israel’s attacks have since disavowed their leader’s opinion of the PLO.

## Political Divide Between Hamas, Fatah Deepens

**Article Author(s):** Mel Frykberg

**Media Outlet:** The Middle East Times

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**Source Link(s):** [http://www.metimes.com/International/2009/02/06/political\\_divide\\_between\\_hamas\\_f...](http://www.metimes.com/International/2009/02/06/political_divide_between_hamas_f...) <sup>[9]</sup>

Hamas security men are back on the streets, directing traffic and trying to restore some semblance of law and order following isolated incidents of looting in the wake of Israel's 23-day military assault on Gaza.

Operation Cast Lead left over 1,300 Palestinians dead and nearly 500 wounded, most of them civilian, and also left the infrastructure of the coastal territory decimated.

The smuggling of weapons, and everyday essential items, into Gaza and sporadic rocket fire on Israel has resumed.

Israeli warships off Gaza fired at Palestinian targets the first day of the cease-fire provoking retaliatory missiles.

While Israel might have left the Islamic resistance organization bruised and bleeding, it is far from broken. Much to the chagrin of its erstwhile foe and arch enemy, President Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority (PA), which controls the West Bank.

Tensions between the two main Palestinian political factions have increased following the cease-fire between Israel and Hamas.

Hamas won free, fair and democratic elections, which were monitored by international observers including ex-U.S. President Jimmy Carter, in January 2006 unsettling the PA's political monopoly.

In June 2007 Hamas preempted an attempted coup by Fatah strongman Mohammed Dahlan and his supporters to oust Fatah's fundamentalist rivals, and established itself as the sole government in Gaza.

Dahlan and his men were armed, trained and financed by the Israelis and the CIA under the auspices of American security advisor General Keith Dayton in an attempt to rid Gaza's unity government of the Islamist faction.

Numerous media reports, including interviews with Dahlan, reported convoys of weapons and ammunition entering the Gaza Strip, with the approval of the Egyptian authorities, prior to the bloody infighting between Hamas and Fatah.

Since then the PA, which is affiliated to Fatah, has carried out an arrest campaign, which has included torturing and mistreatment of Hamas activists in the West Bank.

Many Hamas sympathizers, even those not involved politically or militarily, have been jailed according to human rights organizations.

Simultaneously Hamas has abused, beaten and arrested Fatah activists in Gaza. But the level of abuse rose sharply during Israel's military operation into Gaza.

The PA accused Hamas of carrying out extra-judicial killings, beatings and torture of a number of Fatah men.

Allegations of Fatah fighters being held in make-shift detention centers including schools and mosques also came to light. Several human rights organizations confirmed the allegations.

Hamas in turn accused Fatah members of providing the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) with logistical information which enabled it to target Hamas leaders and military targets during Cast Lead.

A PA spokesman in the West Bank denied these accusations and denounced them as a cynical attempt to justify the abuse of Fatah men in Gaza.

Deepening the divide between Hamas and the PA is the rising popularity, according to recent polls, of Hamas in both the West Bank and Gaza following the war.

Many Palestinians have become disillusioned with the peace process as they believe Israel has given nothing to the PA in return for huge concessions made by Abbas.

New Israeli settlements are being built while other are being enlarged in the West Bank, contrary to the road map and the Annapolis agreements. Israel is creating facts on the ground which will render the territory a divided Bantustan consisting of several cantons.

Additionally, due to what Palestinians perceive as Abbas' weak-standing toward Israel, as Israel's brutal assault on Gaza continued unabated, his popularity has dramatically declined.

A recent survey by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center used face-to-face interviews of nearly 1,200 Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

When asked if parliamentary elections were held today, the percentage of those who would vote for

Hamas rose to 29 percent in this poll compared with 19 percent last April. The popularity of Fatah declined from 34 percent last April to 28 percent in the poll.

This change was also reflected in the level of public trust in the two movements. Trust in Hamas rose from 17 percent last November to 28 percent in the poll. Trust in Fatah fell from 31 percent to 26 percent in the same period.

The poll also suggested that the Palestinian public prefers "resistance" as a strategy over the high-level political negotiations preferred by Fatah.

While to most Western observers the political infighting between Hamas and the Palestinian National Authority is merely a power struggle, it is in fact far more complex than this.

Power struggles within the two organizations, switching loyalties based on political expediency, and powerful clan struggles, revolving around extortion and business racketeering, as clan chieftains fight to retain their turf are all part of the murky political underworld in the Palestinian territories.

"To the international supporters and the financial backers of Abbas, or Abu Mazen as he is better known, he is the good guy due to his moderation while Hamas are considered the bad guys because of being 'Islamic fundamentalists,' " Moshe Ma'oz, a professor (Emeritus) of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, and senior fellow at The Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, told The Middle East Times.

"To a large degree Hamas managed to establish law and order on the streets of Gaza and kidnappings ceased. They are regarded as clean politically, not corrupt like Fatah," added Ma'oz.

Further muddying the political waters are the myriad of powerful clans in Gaza who under the previous PA leadership became both powerful and rich as they cornered specific business and black markets. In return they swore allegiance to the PA.

The notorious Dugmush clan, who were responsible for the kidnapping of BBC reporter, Alan Johnston, grew wealthy by trading in black market cigarettes and cement.

Under the guise of Islamic piety, as a cover for their criminal activities, and purportedly operating for al-Qaida, the Dugmushes and a number of other new fanatical Islamic organizations have challenged Hamas's leadership.

They have repeatedly sought to embarrass Hamas by bombing beauty salons, Internet cafes and other establishments associated with Western "decadence."

It would appear that the possibility of a Palestinian state remains even more elusive under the current Palestinian leadership, or some would argue lack of leadership. And Israel appears happy to play the sides off against one another as the divide and conquer strategy comes into full fruition.

## **Haaretz Poll: Kadima, Likud are neck-and-neck with 4 days to go**

**Article Author(s):** Mazal Mualem

**Article Author(s):** Yossi Verter

**Media Outlet:** Haaretz

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**Source Link(s):** <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1062138.html> <sup>[10]</sup>

Likud and Kadima are in a neck-and-neck race to be the next Knesset's largest party, according to the latest Haaretz-Dialog poll.

The poll, the last to be published before next Tuesday's election, showed the gap between the two parties continuing to narrow: It is now down to only two seats in Likud's favor.

In contrast, Avigdor Lieberman's far-right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party continues to surge: The latest poll, which surveyed 1,000 people - double the usual number - showed it winning 18 seats, up from 15 last week. If this forecast proves accurate, Labor will be relegated, for the first time in its history, to the fourth-largest party, with only 14 seats.

The close race between the right-wing Likud and more centrist Kadima has finally injected some long-overdue excitement into the campaign. A few weeks ago, Likud seemed to have victory sewed up. Now it is in real danger of losing out to Kadima.

But when it comes to forming a coalition, Likud still has a clear edge over its rival: Even in the unlikely event of Lieberman choosing to throw his support behind Kadima chairwoman Tzipi Livni rather than Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu, the only coalition Livni could form would be highly unstable. And without Lieberman, she has no coalition at all.

Over the course of the campaign, both Likud and Kadima have lost seats. Likud, however, has lost more, mainly to Lieberman - in part thanks to Kadima's vicious attacks on Netanyahu. Netanyahu therefore plans to spend the last few days before the election in a major drive to win these votes back, primarily by warning that a vote for any smaller rightist party increases the chances of Kadima becoming the largest party and being given first crack at forming a government.

With regard to the overall right-left split, however, the right has maintained a consistent edge throughout the campaign. Out of a total of 120 seats, the latest poll gives the leftist bloc only 54 seats, including eight for the Arab parties, which would not actually be included in any government - and which dislike Livni as much as they do Netanyahu.

The rightist bloc, in contrast, has 66 seats. This gives Netanyahu a choice of four possible coalitions: an exclusively rightist-religious one (which he does not want), a rightist-religious one with the addition of Labor, a rightist-religious one with the addition of Kadima, or a government with both Labor and Kadima plus a few smaller parties.

However, if Likud indeed wins fewer than 30 seats, none of these configurations would make a stable coalition: Likud would have little ability to impose its own agenda, and the coalition might well fall apart swiftly. As a result, Likud officials are already up in arms about the mismanaged campaign, and even if the party wins, the knives are liable to come out afterward.

Twenty-nine percent of respondents said they had not yet decided who to vote for. The real rate, according to the poll's supervisor, Prof. Camil Fuchs of Tel-Aviv University, is probably closer to 15 percent. That is still equivalent to 18 seats - theoretically enough to radically change the outcome of the vote.

However, most of the movement is likely to be within blocs rather than between them, meaning the rightist bloc will still probably emerge with an edge.

This may be why, despite the increasingly close race between Likud and Kadima, most of the public remains convinced that Likud has the victory sewed up. Only 30 percent of respondents said they want Netanyahu to be the next prime minister. But 64 percent said they think he will be.

If Yisrael Beiteinu does become the third largest party, Lieberman will be able to demand a senior ministerial portfolio for himself - defense, finance or foreign affairs.

Labor, in this scenario, would not be able to veto the larger party's participation in the government, which is why Labor chairman Ehud Barak has been careful to say that he does not rule out sitting in a coalition with Lieberman. With only 14 seats, however, Barak is likely to have trouble overruling members of his party who would prefer to have Labor remain in opposition.

## **Gaza aftermath: IDF bides its time, Hamas leaders hide out, everyone awaits truce**

**Article Author(s):** Amos Harel

**Article Author(s):** Avi Issacharoff

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**Source Link(s):** <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1061969.html> <sup>[11]</sup>

Just days before the Knesset elections, the decision on whether to continue the confrontation in the south lies in the hands of Hamas. If the organization accepts the Egyptian cease-fire initiative, this will likely restore calm to the region along the border with the Gaza Strip, at least for a few months; a negative reply will set Israel back on the road of assassinating Hamas leaders, eventually leading to a new round of hostilities.

Despite the clear outcome of last month's military confrontation - the Israel Defense Forces entered in full force, and Hamas retreated and sustained heavy losses whenever its activists chose to fight - the difficulty of translating the military advantage into a political achievement is becoming increasingly clear. Hamas has succeeded in upholding its narrative, according to which the organization acquitted itself honorably in the face of the massive IDF steamroller.

The agreement proposed by Egypt, which dictates tough concessions to be made by Hamas, also constitutes de facto recognition of the group's status. Until Israel receives Cairo's reply, the alliance between Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi is proving to be (as before and during the operation) the central axis of decision-making in Israel. When the two reached the conclusion, late in the day, that a large-scale operation was needed, the war was launched. When they thought the time had come to stop it, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert acceded.

The "kitchen cabinet" decided a week ago to allow the IDF to mount a powerful attack, but as of midday yesterday, such an attack had not been launched. The official excuse was the lack of an "operational opportunity." In other words, the top Hamas officials are in hiding and the IDF cannot get at them. But in the backdrop was Barak's belief that it is best to let the prospect for an agreement play itself out before re-escalating the conflict. There is logic to this view, but it also has a clear shortcoming: Israel's restraint in the face of ongoing rocket fire is gradually eroding what remains of the operation's achievements.

## Collective punishment

In January 2006, immediately after Hamas' victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, Israel closed the crossings through which goods are brought into Gaza. The goal was to prevent Hamas from enabling the population to lead a normal life. That act constituted collective punishment for 1.5 million Palestinians. Israel's assumption was that economic distress would bring down the Hamas regime. After the abduction of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, in June 2006, the Rafah crossing was also closed, following Israeli pressure on Egypt. Israel conditioned the lifting of the siege on Shalit's return and allowed only humanitarian provisions into Gaza.

When the tahadiyeh (cease-fire) agreement was approved last June, a new stipulation emerged: the opening of the crossings in return for a full cease-fire. When rockets were fired, Israel closed the crossings; at the same time, Hamas rejected Israel's attempt to continue to tie Shalit's fate to their opening. Israel continued to prohibit the import of iron and construction materials, which could be used to manufacture rockets or build fortifications. But among the banned products were also some which the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories described as "luxuries," such as Coca-Cola and cigarettes. Hamas felt it had been cheated. The promise it received from Egypt - that the crossings would be fully opened - was not met. That was a key reason for the organization's decision to end the cease-fire in December by firing rockets, which led to the IDF incursion into Gaza.

Discussions about a new cease-fire agreement are also reverting to the question of goods. Israel apparently wants to preserve the ban on iron and construction materials, with certain limitations on "luxuries." The impression is that Israel has not yet fully abandoned the belief that exerting economic pressure on the population will induce it to shake off Hamas. So far, this approach has achieved the exact opposite effect. The conclusion reached by Gazans is that Israel is trying to undermine Palestinian democracy, while Hamas is merely demanding what it was promised. At the moment, it seems more likely that the closure of the crossings is actually strengthening Hamas, not weakening it.

## Ethics and 'zero risk'

A sign posted by the master sergeant of the Golani Brigade's reconnaissance unit in its temporary base near Gaza bears a wise message: "Today's compromise is tomorrow's norm." That approach is implemented by the IDF in all spheres but one: the killing of Palestinian civilians and the destruction of homes during Operation Cast Lead.

Israel did not perpetrate systematic war crimes in the Gaza Strip. Even if all Palestinian descriptions of events are reliable (which they are not), it appears that the IDF is less brutal than other armies that encounter similar problems. The real question, which is not being considered in depth, is different: Are we not witnessing an ongoing erosion in combat ethics that were once self-evident, in the face of a terrorist enemy who is becoming more sophisticated and more wicked from one round of warfare to the next? How did it come about that what was considered absolutely prohibited a decade ago is now permissible and justified?

The IDF prefers to hide behind the rather small figure of Col. Pnina Sharvit-Baruch, head of the international law unit in the military advocate general's office. She became the target of a campaign against allowing her to teach at Tel Aviv University's Faculty of Law. The reactions of the past week clearly indicate the people are with Sharvit-Baruch. However, it is possible to agree that she was wronged, but still ask: Why does the chief of staff, who formulated the policy for implementing force, not explain his reasoning to the media?

In fact, the details of two serious incidents that were reported this week - the shelling next to a school run by UNRWA (the United Nations relief agency) and the killing of three daughters and a niece of physician Dr. Ezzeldeen Abu al-Aish - heighten the need for an in-depth investigation of the killing of civilians. The results of the two investigations show that almost nothing reported in the immediate aftermath was correct. In the first case, the mortar shells did not hit the school itself (contrary to the allegations of some UN personnel), but the rockets to which the IDF was responding were not fired from the school compound (contrary to the initial Israeli account). In the case of Dr. Abu al-Aish, the IDF now admits there was no sniper fire from his home and has dissociated itself from leaks to the press stating that the girls were hit by a Hamas Katyusha.

It is possible, as the chief of staff believed, that there was no way to avoid unleashing massive firepower in the Gaza Strip; that if ground forces had entered with less firepower, 100 soldiers would have been killed, causing public panic and a quick retreat, prompting a severe domestic crisis. Was there an alternative? And if so, was it given serious consideration?

It was instructive to watch the TV interviews with the commander of the Paratroops Brigade, Col. Herzi Halevi. This brilliant officer, who also excelled in combat, categorically refuses to open the Pandora's box of moral debate. The message of the operation's justified character and its mode of execution was sometimes sweepingly translated at the lower levels into an atmosphere of zero tolerance to questions, which was projected to the soldiers before the operation and is now a cause of their frustration.

The head of the general philosophy department at Bar-Ilan University, Prof. Noam Zohar, who lectures on ethics in courses for the IDF, believes that giving priority to the lives of soldiers over the lives of civilians on the enemy side, by means of a "zero risk" approach for soldiers, "is not consistent with the document about the spirit of the IDF, which asserts that a soldier shall do all he can to avoid harm to noncombatants. It is impossible to conduct a war with a 'zero risk' approach. That is an outrageous, unacceptable norm. There is reason for concern that problematic actions were carried out on the ground, based on the spirit that was projected to the forces in the briefings."

This is certainly an argument that merits a discussion, because the IDF must now look ahead with worry to future campaigns.

## UN to probe Hamas for use of children

**Article Author(s):** Ruth Eglash

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[12]

The United Nations is ready to address Hamas's use of children as human shields during last month's IDF offensive in Gaza, the UN special representative for children and armed conflict told The Jerusalem Post on Thursday.

"We have not yet dealt directly with the human shield issue, but we will now mention it in our reports," Radhika Coomaraswamy said in an exclusive interview following a four-day visit to the region.

"It is still very difficult for us to say that it was actually happening and we still need to conduct a full investigation into what exactly took place... but we are not denying that it happened; it is absolutely possible that Hamas was using its civilians as human shields," she said.

However, Coomaraswamy said that the UN's policy not to meet with leading members of the Hamas government - because it was officially considered a terrorist organization - seriously hampered all types of humanitarian relief work in the Gaza Strip.

"It makes all our humanitarian jobs very difficult, because we cannot meet with Hamas at a political level," said Coomaraswamy, who this week met with high-level Israeli and Palestinian Authority officials, including PA Prime Minister Salaam Fayad, as well as with many children in both Gaza and Ashkelon to hear about the conflict from a more personal angle.

Coomaraswamy, who was appointed to her position three years ago and reports directly to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, said the work of UN aid agencies and other relief efforts over the past two and a half weeks since the fighting stopped meant that "basic humanitarian needs are being met" in Gaza.

However, "the children are still in urgent need of assistance, including the restoration of basic services and the immediate reconstruction of schools and hospitals," she said in a press statement later on Thursday.

"UNRWA says that in order to avoid a crisis it needs roughly 400 aid trucks a day, but at the moment only about 130-140 trucks are allowed in to meet with humanitarian needs," she told the Post.

In her press release, the UN representative also reiterated calls by the international community for Israel to open all its Gaza crossings "for regular, sufficient and facilitated humanitarian access."

"The amount and kinds of supplies allowed into Gaza must be significantly expanded for any real improvement to occur," Coomaraswamy wrote, emphasizing that "humanitarian agencies must not be hampered in assisting the population and their workers authorized easy access into Gaza."

She also stated that "Hamas must respect that humanitarian aid cannot be diverted."

Speaking to the Post, Coomaraswamy said that "some parts of Gaza have been completely destroyed."

"Many of the children I met there vividly described very troubling experiences. Besides their material needs, I think there is a much traumatized population that needs help," she said.

The situation in Gaza is still "very raw because it's only been two weeks," she said, adding that many of the children she met there on Tuesday were "obviously very angry at Israel, but they have been guided that way by their parents and others."

"My sense in Gaza is that after this conflict there seems to be greater identification with Hamas," she said.

However, she stressed, "my observations are based on only a one-day trip to the area, and many times children surprise us."

The most surprising reaction from a child was during her visit to Ashkelon on Wednesday, Coomaraswamy said.

"The scale [of trauma and destruction] is nothing like in Gaza, but that does not take away from the fact that a lot of the children we met there expressed to me a great deal of fear," she said. "We met a lot of children who were so traumatized that they did not even want to go to school."

However, "While their speeches were quite tough at first, when I asked them if they were interested in meeting Palestinian children, the response was unbelievable. They said, 'Yes, of course we want to meet with them and play with them or hear their stories.' It was a response from the heart," Coomaraswamy said.

"I believe that if we can reconstruct Gaza as quickly as possible then there will be able to be some hope for the future," she said. "Even though they bear the brunt of the conflict, children remain strong advocates for peace."

"Every child has the right to live in safety and security. Children from the region have suffered enough. They deserve a better future," she said.

## The myth of Martyrs versus Traitors

**Article Author(s):** Hussein Ibish

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The recent conflict in Gaza has the potential of becoming a transformative political event in the Middle East that allows Islamists to capture the Arab political imagination for at least a generation. Along with their familiar appeals to religious and cultural "authenticity," and dubious claims regarding good governance and democracy, Islamists are beginning to consolidate an exclusive claim to the most powerful Arab political symbols: Palestine and nationalism.

Few observers in the West evince a full understanding of the unprecedented cultural and political impact of Israel's attack on Gaza. The extraordinarily high civilian death toll and perceived helplessness of the victims, combined with atrocities such as the reported massacres outside a UN school and a house at which Israeli soldiers had ordered civilians to gather, and Israel's apparent use of phosphorus munitions in densely populated areas, have combined to paint the most enraging images Arab television audiences have witnessed in living memory.

Although Arab public opinion has been aroused by several other conflicts in recent decades, until now no hegemonic narrative has given coherent shape and political focus to this anger. During the Gaza war, we seem to have been witnessing the consolidation in most Arab political discourse and Arab media of a coherent narrative that contains both a prescription and a diagnosis: the Martyrs versus the Traitors.

In this mythology, the present Arab world is defined by a conflict between "the Martyrs," which are led by the Islamist movement and its allies, and "the Traitors," which include most if not all Arab governments, especially the Palestinian Authority, but also the governments in Lebanon (other than the ministers appointed by or allied with Hizbullah), Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The general public, especially when it becomes swept up in violent conflict, counts among the ranks of the Martyrs, but Islamist parties and militias are its vanguard.

Even if many in the West perceived Hamas to be fundamentally at fault in the conflict, questions of responsibility for initiating the fighting in the Arab political conversation have become an affront to the dead and injured. Every outrage simply adds further anger, a powerful form of political capital, to the Islamist account. They serve to identify ordinary people, and their basic interests, with the Islamist movement and

underscore the righteous victimization of the Martyrs as a category.

What gives this narrative its unique appeal and danger is its obvious programmatic corollary: the Martyrs must defeat the Traitors, for the nationalistic cause in general and for Palestine in particular. The Palestinian issue could become a decisive factor in internal power struggles within states throughout the Arab world, and prove the decisive legitimating factor in the heretofore-frustrated efforts by Islamist groups in the Sunni Arab world to capture or inherit state power.

This narrative has been developing in Arab political discourse for many years, and is based on long-standing resentments, but perceptions regarding the war in Gaza - skillfully managed from the outset by those pushing "the Martyrs versus the Traitors" mythology - could be sufficient to establish it as the defining Arab political narrative for the foreseeable future. Islamists are increasingly garnering support not only from a devout Muslim constituency, but also, and to an unprecedented degree, from Arab nationalists in general, including many self-described secularists, leftists and Christians.

Whether this narrative comes to dominate throughout the Middle East will not be decided by how the Gaza war ended. It will instead rest upon the contrast between what is offered by Hamas' commitment to confrontation until victory, versus the Palestinian Authority's policy of seeking a negotiated agreement with Israel.

Even death and devastation in Gaza, but in the guise of religiously and culturally authentic resistance, becomes more appealing than stagnation, failure and apparent surrender in the West Bank. Avoiding this will urgently require both material and political deliverables that demonstrate the efficacy of negotiations and coexistence. This means not only moving immediately to improve the quality of life in the West Bank, but also securing political deliverables such as a settlement freeze that constitute significant political victories for those who wish to talk rather than fight.

The most significant battle will be waged in the upcoming 12-18 months, when Palestinians and other Arabs will be carefully drawing a contrast between the two approaches, especially with regard to nationalist goals.

If the Palestinian cause is permanently lost to the Islamist movement, theocratic reactionaries across the region could finally acquire the broad political legitimacy and nationalist credentials that might enable them to begin to seriously threaten existing governments.

The United States and Israel must now choose which Palestinians, and indeed what kind of Arab world, they want to deal with: one in which forces of moderation have a fighting chance to rebuild political legitimacy and credibility; or one in which the political imagination is completely dominated by the myth of the Martyrs versus the Traitors.

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