

The Gaza War: Antecedents and Consequences (ARI)

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Theme: When Israel launched the Gaza war on 27 December 2008, it chose an opportune moment. Nonetheless, much like the Lebanon war of 2006, Israel's strategic gains in 'Operation Cast Lead' have dissipated day by day.

Summary: Hamas has suffered serious blows over the course of Israel's 23-day war on Gaza, but the civilian population has suffered enormously. Against the loss of 10 Israeli soldiers and four civilians, more than 1,300 Palestinians have been killed in the war, of which the overwhelming majority are non-combatants, including approximately 300 children. Nonetheless, much like the Lebanon war of 2006, Israel's strategic gains in 'Operation Cast Lead' have dissipated day by day. Had Israel inflicted a fierce three or four day campaign upon Hamas and its infrastructure, the Islamist group would have enjoyed less sympathy in the Arab world and it might have been possible to restore a ceasefire under terms dictated by Israel. After 23 days of fighting, Israel has fallen well short of a clear-cut strategic victory. History's lesson is that peace in this region –if in fact that is the goal– can be imposed neither with bombs nor rockets. The Gaza war only verifies the lesson.

Analysis: When Israel launched the Gaza war on 27 December 2008, it chose an opportune moment. The rule of Hamas was wearing thin in Gaza. Living conditions were wretched thanks to a draconian Israeli economic blockade. Rockets periodically fired by Hamas and other militant groups helped the Israeli authorities to rationalise the blockade. Major Arab governments, including neighbouring Egypt, yearned for Hamas to be tamed if not quashed. The Palestinian Authority (PA) led by Mahmoud Abbas, viewed by the US and many European governments as the legitimate claimant to power, had been humiliated in June 2007 when Hamas defeated its security forces in quick order. Abbas now publicly blamed Hamas for provoking the Israeli assault. Israel could count on strong support from President George W. Bush, who would leave office in January upon the inauguration of Barack Obama. In contrast to the difficult terrain of southern Lebanon, where the Israeli army had been outfought in 2006 by Hezbollah, Gaza is as flat as a doormat and its borders are readily controlled (at least above ground). Hamas's fighters are armed mostly with small arms and, in general, are not well trained despite some tutoring by Iran and Hezbollah. In fact, the group falls well short of the professionalism revealed by Hezbollah. By scoring a victory over Hamas, Israeli military and civilian officials anticipated restoring the deterrent edge of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), as well as putting an end to the harassing rockets and mortars fired at towns (notably Sderot)

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in the environs of Gaza. In the process, it was anticipated that Israel would send an unmistakable message to its more formidable foes. Finally, in December, Hamas emphatically refused to extend a ceasefire with Israel that had been in place since the previous June and thereby provided a rationale for Israel to strike. Yet little notice has been given to the fact that Hamas did offer to extend the ceasefire provided that Israel would lift its blockade.

There is no question that Israel inflicted massive damage on Gaza over the course of its 23-day war or that Hamas has suffered serious blows, but the civilian population has suffered enormously. Against the loss of 10 Israeli soldiers and four civilians, more than 1,300 Palestinians have been killed in the war, of which the overwhelming majority are non-combatants, including approximately 300 children (credible Palestinian sources claim that 85% of the casualties are civilians). Around 10% of the population has been displaced by the fighting, and 100,000 people left homeless out of a population of 1.5 million. In all, 4,000 homes have been destroyed and 21,000 suffered serious damage. Nonetheless, much like the Lebanon war of 2006, Israel's strategic gains in 'Operation Cast Lead' have dissipated day by day. Had Israel inflicted a fierce three or four day campaign upon Hamas and its infrastructure, the Islamist group would have enjoyed less sympathy in the Arab world and it might have been possible to restore a ceasefire under terms dictated by Israel. After 23 days of fighting, Israel has fallen well short of a clear-cut strategic victory, namely, vanquishing Hamas.

In fact, the Gaza war put the spotlight on several issues that Israel, the former Bush Administration and the PA would have preferred to keep in the shadows, in particular, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza –both before and as a result of the war–, Israel's primary role in fomenting and deepening that crisis, the inherent weakness of the PA, the necessity of bringing Hamas into a coalition with Fatah if the Palestinians are to constitute a credible negotiating position vis-à-vis Israel and, if there is any prospect for the establishment of the much-avowed two-state solution whereby an independent Palestinian state would live side-by-side with Israel, then the US would have to adopt a far more balanced and assertive role than George Bush was willing to do during his presidency.

The disproportionate losses also raised serious questions about the behaviour of the Israeli army, including charges by Israeli human rights groups,¹ United Nations agencies, Amnesty International and Middle East Watch that war crimes might have been committed by the IDF. The possibility of Israeli officers being prosecuted for war crimes outside Israel prompted the government to organise an effort to deflect accusations and to defend any officer so accused.² At the United Nations, the new US Ambassador, Susan Rice, has emphasised the importance of investigating war crimes allegations against both Hamas and Israel, presenting a striking contrast with the skewed stance typical of the previous Administration.

US-Israeli Collaboration?

The level of complicity between Israel and the US in the timing and goals of the Gaza war remain to be revealed. It is known that key staff members of Bush's National Security Council were intent on toppling Hamas and providing Israel more or less with anything that it needed to do so. After Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections in January

¹ 'Israeli Rights Groups Detail Allegations of Army Abuse in Gaza', *Forward*, 15/1/2009, <http://www.forward.com/articles/14956/>.

² 'Israel to approve aid for IDF officers accused of Gaza war crimes', *Haaretz*, 23/1/2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1058215.html>.

2006, to the acknowledged surprise of President Bush and his Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, US-led efforts began to undermine the electoral result politically and militarily. A programme began with US funding and direction and Jordanian help to train a Palestinian force capable of defeating Hamas's militiamen in Gaza. These efforts are described in an authoritative April 2008 article by David Rose,³ which even includes an *aide memoire* carried by Jake Waller, the US Consul General in East Jerusalem, when he met, in early 2007, with 'Abu Mazen' (Mahmoud Abbas) to urge him to declare a state of emergency that would void the Hamas electoral victory. In June 2007, when Hamas handily defeated its rivals in Gaza –principally gunmen associated with the Fatah movement– the Islamist group thwarted US preparations to topple it.

As for Abu Mazen, an Israeli official quoted in a December 2008 report by the International Crisis Group⁴ claimed that he had 'taken the courageous decision to wipe out Hamas'. The claim cannot yet be verified, but in the first days of the war Abu Mazen's silence while Gaza burned was astonishing, and when he did speak he openly blamed Hamas for provoking 'the massacre'⁵ (Israeli officials are privately dismissive of Abu Mazen who they find a weak and unimaginative leader). Other Palestinian officials, notably Muhammad Dahlan, who headed the forces that Hamas defeated in June 2007, underlined that he was 'happy about the coup against Hamas'.⁶ To the extent that Israel benefited from the collaboration of anti-Hamas Palestinians in Gaza, it is likely that Dahlan would have played a substantial role.

The Broken Ceasefire

Hamas's strategic miscalculation in rejecting an extension to a six-month truce with Israel was a gift on a 'golden platter',⁷ as the Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit wryly noted (Aboul Gheit and other senior Egyptian officials, including President Hosni Mubarak and the Chief of Military Intelligence General Omar Suleiman were infuriated at Hamas for withdrawing from Egyptian-sponsored talks aimed at creating a Palestinian unity government under the PA in November).

Lost in most of the mainstream reportage on the pre-war period is the fact that the Israel-Hamas truce was working –a fact fully acknowledged in a December 2008 intelligence report released by Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).⁸ According to that report, 'Hamas was careful to maintain the ceasefire'. Furthermore, 'the lull was sporadically violated by rocket and mortar shell fire carried out by rogue terrorist organisations in some instances in defiance of Hamas'.

³ 'The Gaza Bombshell', *Vanity Fair*, April 2008,

<http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/04/gaza200804?currentPage=1>.

⁴ 'Palestine Divided', *Middle East Briefing*, nr 25, International Crisis Group, 17/XII/2008,

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5823&l=1>.

⁵ 'Abbas: Hamas could've prevented "massacre"', *The Jerusalem Post*, 28/XII/2008,

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1230456495581&pagename=JPost/JPostArticle/ShowFull>.

⁶ 'Hamas's 'Sole Strategy is Destruction and Chaos', *Der Spiegel*, 5/II/2009,

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,599459,00.html>.

⁷ 'Egypt FM: Hamas must stop rockets in any truce', *Ynetnews*, 1/II/2009,

<http://www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3649036,00.html>.

⁸ 'The Six Months of the Lull Arrangement', Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center, December 2008, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/hamas_e017.pdf.

A careful analysis by an MIT Professor, Nancy Kanwisher, and two of her colleagues reveals that, contrary to prevailing western opinions, Hamas had shown an ability to adhere to agreed ceasefires with Israel, and that much more often than not when the ceasefires were broken it was Israel not Hamas that typically did so.⁹

On 4 November, when the world was focused on the US presidential election, Israel effectively ended the 'lull' to which the Israeli reports refer, by attacking Gaza and killing at least six Palestinian militiamen. Hamas responded to the killings with salvos of rockets. Israel argued that the group it targeted was planning to abduct Israeli soldiers through a tunnel being dug near a border security fence, but whether Hamas wished to risk the ongoing truce and the possibility of political progress in order to abduct Israeli soldiers is debatable. The periodic rain of rockets from Gaza into Israel after 4 November provoked broad public support among Israelis for military action against Hamas. With President Bush soon packing his bags for Texas, there was also a strong incentive on Israel's part to capitalise on unblinking support from a predictably pliant White House.

Why might Israel want to end the truce? The attack on Gaza might also have deeper causes, in particular Israel's intention to maintain its domination over the West Bank. The success of the Israel-Hamas truce tacitly legitimised political dialogue with the Islamists, something that Israel (as well as the US and Egypt) vehemently rejected. Equally important, while the truce was holding there was greater talk internationally about possible negotiations and freezing Israeli settlement expansion, moves to boycott products produced in illegal settlements and growing calls for compromises that successive Israeli governments have been unwilling to make. Despite recent comments from the outgoing Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, emphasising that Israel's survival demands a withdrawal from the occupied West Bank, Israel has consistently rejected a viable two-state solution because it insists on maintaining control of the West Bank, where Palestinians are reduced to living in disconnected cantons and in subordination to an Israeli security regime.

After Hamas seized power in Gaza in June 2007, Israel tightened its blockade of the Gaza strip. Israel does not permit any shipping to reach Gaza by sea, and the strip's airport, authorised by the Oslo accords in the 1990s, has never been permitted to operate, so the crowded strip is utterly dependent on supplies arriving by truck through its borders with Israel with relatively negligible supplies passing legally over its southern border with Egypt. With 1.5 million people packed into the strip with a population density comparable to major cities such as Berlin, Paris or Los Angeles,¹⁰ Gaza requires around 400 truckloads of goods daily to meet essential needs, according to the ICRC.¹¹ Other international sources, including the United Nations, argue that 500 trucks are needed daily to meet basic needs. For instance, in May 2008 an average of 475 trucks were permitted to enter Gaza daily. By November 2008, after the ceasefire unravelled, Israel permitted an average of only six trucks to enter daily, according to data provided by ANERA, a respected American NGO with long on-the-ground experience in Gaza. In a population in which 80% of the people depend on aid, and with a pre-war unemployment rate of 50%, the impact of the Israeli restrictions was devastating. The leading western expert on social

⁹ 'Reigniting Violence: How Do Ceasefires End?', *The Huffington Post*, 6/1/2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nancy-kanwisher/reigniting-violence-how-d_b_155611.html.

¹⁰ <http://bostonuniversity.blogspot.com/2009/01/imagine-war-in-los-angeles-with-armor.html>.

¹¹ 'Q&A: "Gaza Will Take Years to Recover"', *Inter Press Service*, 27/1/2009, <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=45562>.

and economic conditions in Gaza is Dr Sara Roy of Harvard University and her publications provide systematic accounts of the impact of Israel's closure policy.¹²

One UN report published a few days after the assault began detailed conditions that were only exacerbated by the war. The report provided a glimpse of the problems faced by Gazans: '80% of the [Gazan] population cannot support themselves and are dependent on humanitarian assistance. This figure is increasing. According to the World Food Programme, the population is facing a food crisis [with] food shortages of flour, rice, sugar, dairy products, milk, canned foods and fresh meats. The imports entering are insufficient to support the population or to service infrastructure maintenance and repair needs. The health system is overwhelmed having been weakened by an 18-month blockade [and] utilities are barely functioning: the only electric power plant has shut down [leaving] some 250,000 people in central and northern Gaza [without any] electricity at all... the water system provides running water once every 5-7 days and the sanitation system cannot treat the sewage and is dumping 40 million liters of raw sewage into the sea daily. Fuel for heating... and cooking gas are no longer available in the market'.¹³

It should not be surprising that the major demands by Hamas for extending its ceasefire with Israel included that the Israel-Gaza border be opened to commerce. In fact, it is clear that if Israel had significantly eased the embargo, the rocket fire would probably have ended. The Hamas position was conveyed to Egypt in mid-December,¹⁴ and it has been confirmed by Ambassador Robert Pastor, an associate of the former President Jimmy Carter. Israel refused the demand, insisting on the release of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured by Hamas in June 2006, as a precondition for even a loosening of restrictions. Israel argued that opening the borders would allow Hamas access to materials that could be used for military purposes, as well as construction materials that could be used for fortifications. In November 2005, Secretary of State Rice expended enormous diplomatic energy negotiating arrangements for more open borders between Gaza and Israel and between Gaza and Egypt. The agreement was never implemented by Israel. After the January 2006 elections were won by Hamas, the US rarely mentioned the border agreement.

Israel, and for that matter the US as well, has often operated on the premise that Hamas would be blamed for the suffering imposed upon Palestinians. This approach is not only a presumptive violation of the laws of war, but it does not work. During Israel's two-decade occupation of southern Lebanon, collective punishment backfired consistently. Hezbollah's popular support did not erode but grew in the Lebanese Shiite community because Israel's attacks validated Hezbollah's ideological narrative and served to convince many Lebanese Shiites that they need Hezbollah to protect them from Israel. Even so, Stephen Hadley,¹⁵ the National Security Advisor to President Bush, would still pose the following rhetorical question to Palestinians during the Gaza war: 'Do you want the kind of life you've had under Hamas over the last two years, or do you want to be part of a hopeful future as part of a [an] independent Palestinian state with democratic institutions that can offer the prospect for a better life for your children'. The problem is that many Palestinians do not see the hopeful future that Hadley imagined. Instead, they

¹² Sara Roy, 'If Gaza falls...', *London Review of Books*, 1/1/2009, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n01/roy_01_.html.

¹³ 'Gaza Humanitarian Situation Report', United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 3/1/2009, http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_gaza_situation_report_2009_01_03_english.pdf.

¹⁴ 'Israel Rejected Hamas Ceasefire Offer in December', *Inter Press Service*, 9/1/2009, <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=45350>.

¹⁵ *The Wall Street Journal*, 7/1/2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123128550565059013.html>.

see an entrenched occupation and a weak, corrupt government that is, at best, an ineffectual parody of democracy. Indeed, the legitimacy of the PA was eroded further by the war, whereas Hamas has enjoyed a revival of support among Palestinians who view it as a victim like themselves, not to mention broad sympathy among the Arab masses.

Israeli War Aims

Israel was coy about its objectives in this war, but neither Israeli nor US officials hid their hope that Hamas would be toppled. The Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, speaking at the UN on 6 January, looked forward to the 'eventual' return of the legitimate Palestinian Authority in Gaza. The Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, the Kadima party candidate for Prime Minister in the February Knesset elections, was far less restrained and claimed that the war was a struggle between moderates and extremists, a chance to strike a blow against Islamist radicals in the Arab world, not least the venerable Muslim Brethren. Hamas was created by the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brethren in 1987. Since the Muslim Brethren are the most important opposition group in Egypt, the logic of Hosni Mubarak's partnership with Israel against Hamas is transparent. Livni suggests that Israel is finding a common purpose with 'moderate' Arab regimes.

Even so, Livni's illusory goal was not realised, in significant measure because Israel was undone by images of the war, despite Israel's best efforts to keep the press out of Gaza. Israeli officials' denials, in rhetoric reminiscent of Lebanon in 2006, that a humanitarian catastrophe was unfolding in Gaza only inflamed popular opinion that much more. Arab regimes that could hardly hide their glee at the prospect of Hamas being toppled –Saudi Arabia for instance–, were unsettled by the fury that the daily bloodshed was provoking. US support was crucial, of course, and the US position began to shift 10 days into the way so that on 8 January 2009, the US abstained on Security Council resolution 1860 calling for an 'immediate, durable, fully respected' ceasefire. The Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, bragged that he intervened by calling President Bush and convincing him that the US should abstain rather than vote in favour of the ceasefire.¹⁶ Rice denied the claim, but in point of fact the resolution was crafted by Rice and her associates and it would be strange for the Secretary to enlist support for a resolution and then abstain when it came to a vote. The incident illustrated how deeply embedded Israel had become in the policy process in the Bush White House.

It would be another 10 days before the fighting stopped. On 18 January, Livni and Rice signed a vague agreement committing the US to assist Israel in stopping Hamas from the further smuggling of weapons into Gaza, but it is arguable how likely those arrangements are to be successful. Israel was constrained not only by international expressions of outrage over the horrors being inflicted on civilians, and a growing chorus of Arab governments calling for an end to the fighting, but President-elect Obama's inauguration on 20 January. It was obvious from the start that Israel did not wish to mar the new President's swearing-in with a backdrop of bombing.

Emerging from Rubble

As the fighting ended, Hamas emerged from the rubble claiming to have won because it had not surrendered. It is in an unenviable situation, even if it remains in nominal control in Gaza and retains a residual rocket arsenal. A battered Hamas will struggle to restore a semblance of normal life in Gaza, where there is a very real possibility that more extreme

¹⁶ 'Olmert's Boast of "Shaming" Rice Provokes Diplomatic Furor', *Forward*, 15/1/2009, <http://www.forward.com/articles/14957/>.

Islamist groups will gain strength, vying with Hamas for control (as they already do in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon).

The IDF validated the promise that General Dan Harel,¹⁷ the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Israeli army, made as the war began: 'By the time we are finished, there won't be a Hamas building left standing in Gaza'. 'Hamas buildings' include police stations, municipal offices, gaols and the residences of all leading Hamas officials. In a *Jerusalem Post* article, the veteran journalist Herb Keinon argued that Israel's objective in Gaza was to undermine and de-legitimise Islamist power by creating a state of chaos that will make it impossible for Hamas to rule,¹⁸ hence the destruction of Gaza's infrastructure.

From Israel's perspective, the components of a sustainable ceasefire agreement are obvious, namely that Hamas stops firing rockets into Israel, Gaza's border with Egypt will be monitored to stem the smuggling of arms and the Palestinian Authority will return to Gaza, perhaps in partnership with Hamas. Given the scale of the humanitarian emergency in Gaza, Israel's embargo is now somewhat attenuated, but Israel insists that it will continue to refuse to totally lift the embargo lest Hamas claims victory. After all, it was the lifting of the embargo that was the primary unmet demand of Hamas in December when the group announced that it would not extend the *tahdiyeh* or 'lull' that had been in place since the previous June.

Given Israel's objective of cutting off Hamas's access to weapons and munitions, Israel devoted a lot of attention to destroying the hundreds of tunnels that are used to smuggle licit and illicit goods from Egypt into southern Gaza. Many of the tunnels are dug and operated by individual entrepreneurs so one can only guess at how many tunnels exist. A credible estimate puts the total at more than 400, which can be presumed to be in the right order of magnitude. Israel claims to have destroyed or badly damaged 80% of them, but damage assessments in war are notoriously unreliable. The paradox is that the Israeli blockade of Gaza provides the impetus for so many Gazans to become moles. In fact, the tunnel commerce represents a significant segment of the Gaza economy, and it probably employs an estimated 25,000 Gazans. Were the borders to open –including effective security measures– and the Gazan economy to rebound, then the rationale for the subterranean commerce would largely disappear. Without open borders, the incentives for tunnelling would remain and the financial incentives for Palestinians in Gaza and for their Egyptian partners would be likely to prevail over almost any security system. At present, the restrictions imposed by Israel include not only essential supplies and building materials, but even shekels.¹⁹ Indeed, in the first days following the war, the only significant supplies of currency in public hands was controlled by Hamas, which had smuggled the money in through the tunnels. Since Hamas took over the Gaza strip in 2007, Israel has allowed only three shipments of money to enter. Since Israeli shipments into Gaza must be paid for with currency, the currency shortage has a direct impact on trade.

¹⁷ 'Deputy chief of staff: Worst still ahead', *Ynetnews*, 29/XII/2008, <http://www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3646462,00.html>.

¹⁸ 'The Gaza operation's unstated goal: Anarchy', *The Jerusalem Post*, 1/II/2009, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1230733120252&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>.

¹⁹ 'Hamas banks credit in cash-starved Gaza', *The Financial Times*, 27/II/2009, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/8a6f779a-eca5-11dd-a534-0000779fd2ac.dwp?uid=6e3d374e-0496-11dd-a2f0-000077b07658.print=yes.html>.

Israel is trapped in a conundrum, namely that in order to create the conditions for effectively controlling smuggling in Gaza it must take a step that will be celebrated by Hamas, and by Gazans in general, as a victory. That step is to allow essential trade to resume. This is an issue that is likely to become one of the first important disagreements between the US and Israel. President Obama has already outlined the components of a durable ceasefire, which includes monitored but open borders. The situation is made more complicated by the palpable weakness of the PA in Gaza. It is difficult to imagine a monitoring mechanism that does not imply a significant ration of cooperation with Hamas, whether tacit or explicit.

The nationalist cachet of the Islamist group has been rescued and burnished by the war, while President Mahmoud Abbas has been further weakened. Hamas, which has certainly made monumental errors, will now argue that the war has validated the argument that Israel must be confronted with strength, not compromise. Many Palestinians despise Hamas, but they hate their wretched statelessness and humiliation even more. The lesson that many Palestinians are drawing from the war is that their leadership must be united, not divided.

Hamas has consistently refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of Israel's existence and it has argued that recognising the peace agreements with Israel would be equivalent to recognising occupation, particularly against a history of Palestinian concessions that not only failed to end Israeli occupation but deepened it. Hamas, despite its espoused enmity towards Israel, has indicated its willingness to negotiate. It has voiced support for the 2002 Arab League declaration offering Israel permanent peace in exchange for returning to its internationally recognised pre-1967 borders. The Hamas chief, Khaled Meshal, and Prime Minister, Ismail Haniya, similarly confirmed Hamas's willingness to accept 1967 borders and a two-state solution should Israel withdraw from the occupied territories.

President Obama moved quickly in the first days of his term to underline that the Middle East would be at the top of his foreign policy agenda. The first foreign official that he phoned after the inauguration was Mahmoud Abbas, the first interview he granted as President was with the Dubai satellite station *al-Arabiyya*, the leading competitor to *al-Jazeera*. In the interview, Obama spoke approvingly of the 2002 Arab League peace plan, and he emphasised his concern with 'the situation of ordinary Palestinians'. Less than a week after the inauguration he despatched the newly appointed Middle East envoy, former Senator George J. Mitchell, who chaired the Sharm al-Shaikh commission in 2001, and lent his name to a notably balanced set of recommendations. Mitchell's appointment was also striking because in naming the veteran negotiator, who played an important role in the Northern Ireland negotiations, Obama by-passed several candidates who are embedded in pro-Israel institutions in Washington. Leaders of pro-Israeli interest groups immediately understood that Obama was subtly signalling a more balanced orientation to the Middle East than was evinced by his predecessor.

Although neither the US nor Israel is presently prepared to endorse direct contacts with Hamas, many of the most influential policy hands in Washington already acknowledge that ostracising Hamas is a dead end. The President of the Council on Foreign Relations, Richard N. Haass, and the former lead Middle East diplomat in the Clinton Administration Martin J. Indyk, in a publication written before the Gaza war, argue that any peace process that excludes Hamas 'is bound to fail'.²⁰

²⁰ 'A Time for Diplomatic Renewal: Toward a New U.S. Strategy in the Middle East', The Brookings Institution,

Conclusions: It is far too early to evaluate how the Gaza war might change the political landscape of the Middle East. There is no question that it raises the stakes and the challenges for the new US President. The war renewed Muslim enmity towards the US. The already arduous challenges of peace-making between Israelis and Palestinians are even more difficult. The Palestinian leadership is even more deeply fragmented, and with Israeli elections scheduled for 10 February, a government might emerge that is even less ready or willing than its immediate predecessors to bow to the inevitable sacrifices that peace requires. History's lesson is that peace in this region –if in fact that is the goal– can be imposed with neither bombs nor rockets. The Gaza war only verifies the lesson.

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