

Arab Reaction to Gaza Conflict:

Anger at Israel, but Scant Support for Hamas

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Brief Analysis

Most analyses of the Arab reaction to the Gaza Strip conflict have generally emphasized either widespread popular sympathy for Palestinian suffering and revulsion at Israel's tactics, or political divisions about how to respond. Although both points are accurate, two important developments so far have been overlooked: only a handful of major street protests have occurred, and almost no tangible support for Hamas has materialized. Hamas's apparent rejection of last night's UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire will probably continue this pattern.

Official Statements and Diplomacy

In one important sense, official Arab reaction to Israel's assault on Gaza has repeated the pattern of the July 2006 war in Lebanon. At first, Egyptian and Saudi foreign ministers openly blamed Hamas -- rather than Israel -- for the crisis, much like they blamed Hizballah during the first week of war in Lebanon. After a week of fighting, however, as images of Arab civilian casualties mounted, this very public and official finger-pointing stopped in favor of angry outcries against Israeli "aggression" and "massacres."

Various diplomatic gestures have matched this progression, though none of much significance. From the far end of the Arab world, Mauritania recalled its ambassador from Israel, but neighboring Egypt and Jordan, the only other Arab states with such representation, have not followed suit. Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, fresh from another visit to Tehran, made a single public statement harshly denouncing Israel -- even as the Iraqi media are preoccupied with the upcoming provincial elections and other issues closer to home. Libya has issued intemperate statements about Israel and its Arab "allies," while avoiding any direct criticism of the United States. Remarks by Muammar Qadhafi's son, Saif al-Islam, apparently cost him permission to enter Egypt, but the elder Qadhafi is off on another African tour and has made only a couple of vague public statements, mostly blaming other Arabs. The Federal Consultative Council of the United Arab Emirates, an appointed advisory forum with no real power, passed a resolution condemning Israel's military operation. More significantly, efforts by Syria and Qatar to convene an emergency Arab summit have been stymied by opposition from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere.

Moreover, even after two weeks of fighting in Gaza, Arab officials are showing remarkably little support for Hamas,

even as they express strong outrage at Israeli behavior and sympathy for Gaza's civilians. Arab diplomatic efforts are focusing on negotiations for a quick ceasefire among representatives of Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority -- but not Hamas. In the past two days, midlevel officials from Hamas have finally accepted an invitation for talks in Cairo with Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Sulaiman, but these talks are being carefully kept on the margins of the official effort. Privately, some Arab officials attribute this distancing from Hamas to growing suspicion about its Iranian connections, although they very rarely voice this view in public.

Humanitarian Contributions

Early in the crisis, foreign ministers from the Arab League pledged approximately \$35 million in humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in Gaza. Since then, the Arab media is reporting donation drives and shipments of food and medicine to Gaza from various countries, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait.

Credible public reports, however, indicate that substantial new contributions to Hamas are conspicuously absent. This is in sharp contrast to earlier periods, especially in the decade 1998-2007 -- from Israel's release from prison of Hamas founder Shaikh Ahmed Yassin until Hamas's 2006 "coup" in Gaza -- when Saudi Arabia and Qatar, among others, publicized massive donation drives explicitly benefiting Hamas and its institutions to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Public Demonstrations

The best available anecdotal evidence suggests there is a large perceptual gap between most Arab governments, who privately pin the blame for this crisis largely on Hamas, and Arab public and elite opinion, which mostly holds Israel responsible. Nevertheless, in another striking contrast with earlier regional conflicts, including the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the 2006 Lebanon war, large public demonstrations have so far failed to materialize in most Arab countries. Several factors perhaps explain this inactivity: suppression or intimidation by local security forces, insufficient time for popular resentment to accumulate, and unease about the internal Palestinian split between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank. Although a few hundred protesters have gathered sporadically in Amman, Cairo, and several other Arab capitals, as well as in south Lebanon, to date, that is about all. There have been a couple of exceptions, however: one predictable, one interesting.

In Syria, the official press has reported organized public demonstrations of thousands of people nearly every day for the past two weeks, with hundreds of thousands massing in Damascus on January 8. Needless to say, these are all government sanctioned and supported events, reflecting the party line more than spontaneous popular activism. Even so, the reaction in Syria appears relatively restrained for the time being and is likely to remain so, given the regime's heightened security sensitivities.

Much more interesting was a massive protest in the Moroccan capital of Rabat in the early days of fighting. The rally drew hundreds of thousands, perhaps even a million or more participants, according to several credible reports -- by far the largest such demonstration anywhere. The reasons for this exceptional case are probably also manifold: first, King Muhammad's well-known tolerance, or even quiet encouragement, for such prodigious yet peaceful expressions of popular sentiment; second, the sponsorship of such rallies by nonopposition groups in Morocco, including the National Action Group for Solidarity with Iraq and Palestine and the Moroccan Association for Support to the Palestinian People; and third, the sheer distance from the conflict blurs the political distinction between Hamas and Fatah, and concentrates Moroccan minds on the humanitarian dimensions of the carnage in Gaza.

The Arab Media Angle

Coverage by al-Jazeera, still the most popular satellite television station in the region, has characteristically highlighted Arab suffering and civilian casualties during this crisis, but has uncharacteristically been reticent about providing a platform for Hamas spokesmen. Even Syrian media outlets have been sparing in offering Hamas officials

a direct outlet, although the influence of that country's tightly controlled media is exceedingly small. The major pan-Arab print media, reflecting their Saudi sponsors, have been quite factual in their news coverage and relatively balanced in their opinions, giving roughly equal space to columnists critical of Hamas (and also of Hizballah) as to those assailing Israel over the past two weeks. Egypt's media has actually resumed ridiculing Hizballah and its leader, Shaikh Hassan Nasrallah, for "making words their only weapons" against Israel. Although most Arab media refer to Gaza's casualties, whether civilian or military, as "martyrs" rather than as victims, there has been very little reference, except in the Syrian media, to Hamas as a "heroic resistance" or any other similar appellation.

Policy Implications

Arab anguish over the tragic situation in Gaza is very real. Yet contrary to common perception, no evidence exists that this situation is "radicalizing" or "destabilizing" the region, or even strengthening Hamas politically. The reality, in fact, is quite the opposite. So far, Arab reactions suggest that this crisis could provide real opportunity, particularly if the legitimate humanitarian concerns are addressed, to help achieve an important U.S. objective in the quest for Arab-Israeli peace: to weaken, isolate, and ultimately marginalize Hamas, unless it unexpectedly proves willing to sue for peace.

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