

Islamic 'Statelet' Promises Only Horror

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Jun 15, 2007

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Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic party, now controls Gaza. The secular Fatah party has been routed. The result will be an Islamic statelet on Israel's southern border, dedicated to the destruction of the Jewish state. It will exist in legal limbo -- not occupied by Israel but having most of its borders, including its Mediterranean coastline, controlled by Israel.

The exception is its border with Egypt, across which the arms and ammunition that gave Hamas victory have flowed. It was also the route for Fatah's supplies, coming from the US with Israel's blessing. Egypt's role is now crucial. Hamas is essentially the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been victimised for years by the Egyptian authorities. Just this week Cairo held elections designed to weaken the Brotherhood's political support -- its voters found their polling stations shut.

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas now controls just his truncated territory in the West Bank. His strategy of building a coalition with Hamas has failed. His option of defeating them via his Gaza-based security chief Mohammed Dahlan has been found lacking.

Meanwhile, Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert faces the prospect of a radical insurgent base just an hour's drive from Tel Aviv. Kasseem rockets will threaten a growing circle of Israeli towns and villages. The Israeli army could re-occupy the whole of the Gaza Strip within a morning, but military success would have little political purpose.

Hamas leader, and currently Palestinian prime minister, Ismail Haniya will rule Gaza as the first quasi-independent Palestinian leader. That will be when the dust settles. In the meantime the brutality of the Gaza fighting is likely to lead to revenge killings. The innocents might try to flee as refugees, perhaps to Egypt, maybe even Israel. Even in the West Bank, Palestinians will be fighting each other as isolated Hamas cells are wiped out. The rest of the world will be able to do little other than watch in horror.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

London Evening Standard

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