

# Hamas and Israel: From Isolation to Confrontation

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Moshe "Bogie" Yaalon, Israel's former defense minister and military chief of staff, was the Rosenblatt Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute in 2016.



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## Brief Analysis

On July 10, 2006, Lt. Gen. (ret.) Moshe Yaalon, David Makovsky and Dennis Ross addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. General Yaalon, a distinguished military fellow at the Institute, is the former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff. Mr. Makovsky, senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process, is author of the Institute monograph *Engagement through Disengagement: Gaza and the Potential for Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking*. Ambassador Ross, the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow, is a former U.S. Middle East peace envoy and author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

### MOSHE YAALON

After the abduction of Cpl. Gilad Shalit on June 25, Israel authorized Operation Summer Rain. The operation was launched not only in response to this particular Hamas attack but also in response to the unremitting barrage of Qassam rockets being fired from Gaza into Israeli territory. The operation was launched only after the Israeli government decided that diplomatic efforts to ensure Corporal Shalit's release had been exhausted.

Operation Summer Rain has several goals. The immediate objective is to ensure Corporal Shalit's release. This has

been done on the operational level by isolating the cities of Khan Yunis and Rafah (where he is assumed to be held) from the rest of the Gaza Strip. In addition, in order to pressure on the Hamas-led government to expedite his release, Israel has undertaken a number of steps to hold the Hamas organization accountable for Corporal Shalit's safe return. These include arresting more than eighty members of the organization, including sitting legislators in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC); forcibly closing Hamas offices in the major cities of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank; striking the offices of the Palestinian prime minister and interior minister; and attacking Hamas-run institutions throughout the Palestinian territories.

Beyond the immediate objective of securing Corporal Shalit's release, the operation's near-term goal is to disrupt and dismantle existing terrorist infrastructure. This has been done by destroying underground tunnels from Gaza into Israel (like the one used by Corporal Shalit's captors to cross the border), arresting and targeting terrorists and their headquarters within the Gaza Strip, and creating a buffer zone in northern Gaza to prevent Qaasam rocket fire into Israel. The long-term goal is to create a diplomatic consensus regarding the Hamas-led Palestinian government, wherein the international community works to assure the terrorist regime's fall from power.

This episode has elucidated several key aspects of the current conflict. First, the Hamas leadership is fragmented into factions. These include the external branch, headed by Khaled Mashal in Damascus, and the internal branch, which currently runs the Palestinian government (and is itself divided between Gaza Strip and West Bank factions). The political and military wings of the movement are also divided, with those holding Corporal Shalit reporting directly to Mashal rather than to the Palestinian prime minister, Ismail Haniyeh. Second, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas appears to be more a spectator than a policymaker; he seems to have no real control over the events that are now unfolding. Third, Iran and Syria have far greater leverage in this crisis than Egypt, and the former have yet to show any interest in deintensifying the conflict.

This conflict also provides us with a number of lessons for future action. First, freedom of movement is integral to Israeli military effectiveness; reliance on the Palestinian security system did not work even under the Oslo Accords, when terrorists were never brought to justice for their crimes. After Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, Israel retook control of its security responsibilities, and the number of attacks from the West Bank has declined dramatically. The West Bank is a much larger area than Gaza, and Israel cannot relinquish its freedom of movement in it without an effective and reliable Palestinian leadership. Since this is not the case at present, Israel must maintain its strategic presence in the West Bank. Furthermore, if terror organizations were afforded the same freedom of movement they enjoyed in the West Bank, Qassam rockets would pose a direct threat to several cities and vital installations (including Tel Aviv and Ben Gurion Airport). Second, this is no longer a conflict solely between Israel and the Palestinians. The introduction of new actors has turned the current conflict into a larger clash between radical Islam and the West. Syria and Iran are not interested in a ceasefire, and any eventual resolution should incorporate these actors into a broader regional package. Third, a two-state solution is at present not a feasible paradigm. The international community must ensure that the Palestinian government understands that terrorism is not a legitimate means to promote its national agenda.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Diplomacy in the current crisis has stalled for a number of reasons: First, the operational aspects are very difficult indeed; even when Israel had concrete information on the whereabouts of the kidnapped Cpl. Nachshon Wachsman in 1994, the ensuing rescue mission was unsuccessful. Second, the political leadership on both sides is subject to highly divergent domestic public opinion. Palestinian public opinion shows overwhelming support for the idea of exchanging Corporal Shalit for prisoners held in Israel (though overall support for Hamas has dropped significantly). Olmert, meanwhile, needs to show his constituents that Israel is undeterred by terror and that he is able to confront terrorists to the same degree as his predecessor, Ariel Sharon.

The current campaign of Qassam attacks is unacceptable to the Israeli public. Though public opinion forgets the violence that preceded Gaza disengagement, with some 5,000 Qasem and mortar attacks, and overlooks how Israel's ability to maneuver militarily in Gaza would be impaired if it had to worry about the safety of 8,000 settlers living among 1.4 million Palestinians, one would hardly expect broad support for any West Bank pullout in light of the results of Gaza disengagement. For that reason, the stakes are very high for Olmert; the outcome of the current operation will affect support for a West Bank initiative. Aside from completely dismantling Hamas (which may involve a more protracted conflict), the most realistic outcome would seem to be an agreement with a framework codifying the rules for a ceasefire. If Abbas manages to put together a substantial security force to ensure calm along the border, Olmert would not only be more willing to work with him, but Abbas would also have more domestic leverage to negotiate with Israel.

The UN Security Council needs to rectify the situation that has existed since Israel ended its occupation of Gaza in 2005 but never received international recognition of its action. Such recognition would not end Hamas attacks on Israel, but it would make it easier to unite the international community behind efforts to delegitimize such attacks. A Security Council measure declaring that the occupation of Gaza is over would clear to one and all that Hamas is not firing rockets to halt an occupation, but because it has never accepted Israel's existence.

DENNIS ROSS

A central element of the Palestinian narrative is that violence is a function of occupation. Israel's withdrawal from Gaza should thus have included a firm understanding that the dismantlement of settlements and the pullback of the IDF would be met by a cessation of violence originating from Gaza. The reality has unfortunately been quite different, with rocket attacks occurring almost daily and the ongoing violence discrediting the rationale for a further West Bank withdrawal. The day before the abduction of Corporal Shalit, Abbas had met with Haniyeh and, according to Palestinians close to the negotiations, was close to forging an agreement on refashioning a Palestinian government that would be acceptable to the international community. The kidnapping came as an embarrassment not only to Abbas but also to Haniyeh—the supposed authority within Hamas. It also demonstrated the nature of Hamas as an organization. Hamas today represents both a new government and a traditional movement; when there is a tension between the two, the interests of the movement will always dominate. While the Hamas government may be concerned with the humanitarian situation and escalating violence, the objective of Hamas as a movement remains continued resistance despite the costs to the Palestinian public.

The peace process was built on the concept of land for peace, not land for nothing, and certainly not land for violence. Absent international recognition of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, the disengagement failed to offer any guarantees for Israel's security after the withdrawal. Nor were any provisions made for ensuring security enforcement within Gaza itself beyond the frontier crossing points. The consequences of these lapses are on display now; they make it difficult to contemplate an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. So far, Israel's experience in Gaza has not thwarted Olmert's commitment to a West Bank pullout whose objective is to secure Israel's future borders in the absence of a Palestinian partner for peace. However, if any kind of withdrawal is going to proceed in the West Bank, it will likely be limited to civilians, with Israel maintaining a military presence after dismantling some settlements. The removal of settlements would indicate an end to Israel's territorial claims, while an IDF presence would remain to ensure security. Alternatively, if there were to be Israeli withdrawal that included the IDF, the Palestinians would first have to demonstrate that they would handle their security responsibilities.

The United States has so far played a minimal role in the current crisis. It is impossible to recall a time when Israel was in conflict with Syria and chose to depend on Egypt and Russia to try to influence the Syrians. The United States is the only state capable of exerting real pressure on Damascus—it ought to play that role, but it cannot do so if it remains on the sidelines.

As the Israeli-Palestinian crisis deepens, there may be an opportunity for Abbas to seize the upper hand in dealing with Hamas and establish an emergency government. Recognizing that it is incapable of dealing with the economic boycott of the Palestinian Authority, Hamas may acquiesce in such a move if it would lead to an increase of international donor funds. Abbas could ensure the democratic credentials of such an initiative by declaring up front that the emergency period would last one year, after which the Palestinians would hold early elections both for the legislature and the presidency. Another essential component to an emergency government would be the creation of a professional security force answerable to the president and capable of enforcing security responsibilities, such as the cessation of rocket fire. With an emergency government and professional security force in place, Israel will be more willing to forge a package of understandings that would establish a comprehensive ceasefire (including the elimination of rocket fire from Gaza as well as attacks from the West Bank) in exchange for the end of Israeli operations in Gaza and targeted assassinations. An active American effort will be essential to forging any such understandings, which will include pressure on Syria to rein in Hamas.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by David Kugel. ❖

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