

# The Wrong Lesson from Gaza

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Aug 26, 2005

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**A**fter Israel's pullout from Gaza, the secretary general of Hamas, Khaled Mashal, declared that the withdrawal was an Israeli defeat and a victory for violence.

Mr. Mashal made clear to reporters in Beirut that suicide bombings inside Israeli cities and mortars fired at Israeli towns were effective. He proclaimed, "The resistance and the steadfastness of our people forced the Zionists to withdraw," adding that Hamas would continue this approach since "the armed struggle is the only strategy that Hamas possesses."

Senior Palestinian Authority officials also have widely termed the Israeli pullout to be a "victory" and have suggested this was accomplished through violence.

But there's a fatal flaw with this argument: It's not true.

In fact, there is an inverse correlation between terror attacks and Israel's willingness to withdraw. Israeli soldiers did not drag settlers out of their homes because of suicide bombs. Israel offered Gaza at Camp David in 2000, which occurred during a three-year relative calm. Not even the most radical Palestinian interpretation of those days would argue that Israel wanted to hold onto Gaza. If a deal had been struck then, we would be celebrating the fifth anniversary of the end of Israeli occupation in Gaza, not to mention Israel's withdrawal from the vast majority of the West Bank.

Contrary to what Hamas and others believe, violence makes Israelis less accommodating rather than more. They calculate risk and reward. When there was quiet and a chance for peace, Israel elected Labor leaders such as Yitzhak Rabin in 1992 and Ehud Barak in 1999. When bombs went off, Israel elected Likud leaders Yitzhak Shamir in 1988, Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 and Ariel Sharon in 2001 and 2003.

The Palestinian intifada in September 2000 certainly didn't hasten the move toward Israeli withdrawal; it set it back. Amram Mitzna, who ran as head of the Labor Party in January 2003 while the intifada raged, campaigned on a platform whose centerpiece was a unilateral pullout from Gaza. He suffered the worst electoral drubbing in Labor's history.

Contrary to Hamas' claims, Israel's departure from Gaza was driven by the defeat of suicide bombers during the intifada rather than a surrender to them. The establishment of Israel's security barrier over the northern part of the West Bank, where many of the attacks occurred, sharply reduced the infiltration of dozens of suicide bombers, just as the fence around Gaza prevented all but two suicide bombers from successfully entering. When Israel won back control of West Bank cities in 2002, it became even more successful over time in halting attacks.

In 2002, according to the Israeli army, there were 59 "successful" suicide attacks. By 2004, the number dropped by 75 percent. With this decrease, Israelis gained political breathing space that enabled them to accept the idea of withdrawal when Mr. Sharon embraced it in a way that they rejected when proposed by Mr. Mitzna. The political center in Israel, which supported "land for peace" in the 1990s but was crushed with suicide bombings, began to re-emerge.

It's the return of the center as a political force that has made a difference. It is displaying renewed tentative interest in a two-state solution plus concern that demographic realities left unchecked would be the real reward for Hamas' Greater Palestine. Together, this has given Israel the requisite support needed to leave Gaza.

It's possible the Palestinians will learn the wrong lesson from Gaza and begin to use violence in the West Bank. But this strategy would be counterproductive, let alone morally wrong. It would have a devastating impact on Palestinian goals and again engulf the area in blood. Hamas will justify importing rockets in the West Bank aimed at Israel with the goal of winning broader sympathy, alleging that violence against innocents is a legitimate and effective means to address a grievance.

If faced with rocket attacks from the West Bank, Mr. Sharon has made clear that his response will be harsher than ever, and the Israeli political system would, true to form, move toward the right. Such a strategy by Hamas -- whose grievance is Israel's existence, not its occupation of the West Bank -- would be likely to make Mr. Netanyahu Israel's next leader and Israelis unwilling to make further territorial concessions, believing such moves make them more vulnerable rather than more secure.

Hamas' claims of victory through violence will prove to be self-defeating. Peace, not terror, leads to a better future.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the author of **[Engagement Through Disengagement: Gaza and the Potential for Renewed Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=221)** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=221>).



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