

## MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

## Another Palestinian Casualty

by Jon B. Alterman

While all of Israel's military actions are focused on Gaza, the principal casualty will likely be on the West Bank. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas stands to benefit dramatically from a weakened Hamas in Gaza, and if he plays his cards deftly, he could emerge in a much stronger position. Yet, to do so, he would have to show a resolve and creativity in this crisis that he has not shown up to now. If Abbas comes out of this conflict looking like he is trying to force his way back into Gaza on the back of an Israeli tank, he will be the most visible victim of Israel's Gaza campaign.

Abbas' problem is not new, and it did not start with Hamas' takeover of Gaza eighteen months ago. The Palestinian national movement has long hosted tensions between accommodationists and radicals. When the Palestinian national movement was under a single leadership, Yasser Arafat helped bridge the widening gap. In the last years of his life, Arafat was always able to shrewdly combine political skill, theatrics, and a heavy dose of guile. He became Mr. Palestine (nicknamed "Father of the Struggle") and he ensured there was little space to be pro-Palestine if one was anti-Arafat. He kept Hamas at arm's length, but was careful never to push them into open revolt.

Since Arafat's death in 2004, Abbas has been less deft, and Hamas' rise to the unchallenged domination of Gaza has widened the split. Arab governments—with the exception of Syria—support Abbas, with his straightforward nationalism, his pursuit of international agreements, and his acceptance of the international norms. To them, and to a whole generation of secular nationalists in the Middle East, Hamas is a threat, the specter of a religiously inspired opposition movement rising to power, upending the status quo and expelling Arab rulers from their own territory. Each and every Arab government feels it faces such a threat in its own country, and it has no interest in giving such movements any inspiration. Iran's material and

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## A Gloomy New Year's

Rather than being an excuse for coming together, this year's New Year's Eve celebrations in the Arab world highlighted many of the fault lines running through Arab societies. Many governments tamped down parties in solidarity with the news out of Gaza, yet in some countries in the Gulf, the partying never got off the ground even before Gaza. Many regional conservatives see such celebrations as another malign Western influence creeping into their societies.

In early December, Kuwait's Ministry of Information decided preemptively to reject any application for licenses for New Year's Eve celebrations. In Saudi Arabia, where authorities keep a vigilant eye out for stray roses around Valentine's Day, it wasn't even an issue.

But in international hubs with large expatriate communities, New Year's Eve is becoming an increasingly raucous excuse for a celebration. In recent years, Dubai and Beirut have capitalized on the Western holiday with over-the-top concerts, parties and even fireworks. Even smaller Amman has had notable New Year's celebrations in the past few years.

This year, many Arabs toned down their celebrations. In Jordan, Bahrain, and Syria, major concerts and celebrations were canceled, as were official events in Egypt. Dubai's ruler, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, banned "all forms of celebrations" in Dubai. The Lebanese-Colombian singer Shakira did manage to squeeze in a concert (with no fireworks) in Abu Dhabi, which was rapturously received although not quite sold out. Smaller celebrations went on it Beirut. As Paul Ariss of the Beirut Restaurant Owner's Association lamented, "although our hearts are with the victims in Gaza, life must go on after all."

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## Gulf Roundtable Series

The CSIS Middle East Program will continue its Gulf Roundtable Series through 2009. CSIS launched the lunchtime discussion series in April 2007 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in the Gulf region, and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. Last year's series brought in such guests as IMF economist Mohsin Khan, Gulf diplomacy expert Gregory Gause and Saudi expert Stéphane Lacroix for discussions with an audience of leading academics, diplomats, journalists, government officials and non-governmental experts. Click [HERE](#) for summaries of events in 2008. ■

retorical support for Hamas heightens the sense of threat and isolation that governments feel, seeing Iran as an aspiring regional hegemon that seeks to expand its influence at the expense of Arab governments' interests.

For restive Arab publics, however, Hamas represents a powerful rejection of the unacceptable state of affairs. They see Hamas' violence in the face of overwhelming odds as bravery, and they see cowardice in governments' desire to find accommodation with Israel.

It is this rift—which shows no sign of abating—that explains the fury of the Arab streets. Behind closed doors, some Arabs lament the suffering of Palestinian civilians but see the Israeli action as a predictable and perhaps deserved response to Hamas rocket attacks. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit stated it clearly last week when he criticized Hamas for serving “Israel the opportunity on a golden platter to hit Gaza,” and Egypt has declined to open the Gaza-Rafah border unless Abbas' Fatah-led government controls the Palestinian side of the crossing. Embittered by Hamas' rejection of several leaders' mediation efforts to unify the Palestinian leadership, most Arab governments are seeking an outcome which will weaken Hamas and potentially increase the power and presence of Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority in Gaza.

Many others, however, view startling television images and see Palestinians under attack, and they see their governments being typically ineffectual. They embrace the Palestinians' suffering as a metaphor for their own daily suffering; the Palestinians' weakness in the face of the Israeli onslaught becomes a metaphor of the Arab world's weakness for more than a century of Western depredations.

For Abbas to reassert his control over the Palestinian cause, he cannot merely mediate Palestinians' way out of this conflict. He needs to show a level of toughness and resolve that has often been lacking in his tenure. In addition, he needs to demonstrate to the people he purports to lead that he can obtain meaningful results. So far, the results he has won have been meager.

To advance his interests, Abbas needs to wring concessions out of both Hamas and Israel. He needs to deny Hamas the nationalist card and defend the nascent Palestinian nation. He needs to bring Hamas under his influence through a political deal regardless of Israeli and American objectives. His first priority should be to open up Gaza to the world in such a way that Palestinians generally, and not Hamas' leadership in particular, derive the benefits. To give himself the wherewithal to do all of this, he needs to put tough choices to Israel, while at the same time demonstrating to Israelis and Palestinians that he can deliver on his promises. In other words, the times insist that he demonstrate his mettle as a leader.

Instead, Abbas has seemingly gone AWOL. Meeting with foreign leaders such as Nicolas Sarkozy is neither a policy nor a substitute for one. Arab governments seem willing to help him and weaken Hamas, but he needs to organize and direct their efforts. He needs to do so now. Waiting until the dust settles to make his move is not a viable option. If he acts merely as a bystander, he will find himself a spent force, covered in dust, and utterly irrelevant. ■ 1/07/09

## Links of Interest

Jon Alterman, appeared on PBS' Nightly Business Report, “A Kuwait Cancellation Derails a Big Dow Deal.”

Haim Malka, deputy director of the CSIS Middle East Program was interviewed by Federal News Radio regarding what it will take for Hamas and Israel to reach a ceasefire.

Jon Alterman, director of the CSIS Middle East Program, was quoted by the Associated Press, “White House Demands End to Violence in Mid-east.”

Commentary from the Middle East Program is now available on iTunes.

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