



Written by on January 19, 2009

## The Aftermath of the Gaza Cease-fire

On December 27, Israeli F-16 fighters launched a series of airstrikes against targets in Gaza in retaliation for rocket attacks against Israel by Hamas. Hamas launched over 3,000 in 2008. Israeli tanks and troops entered Gaza on January 3, escalating the Jewish state's offensive against Hamas. Three weeks of strikes by aircraft and artillery have reduced much of Gaza to rubble. Since the Hamas militants made a practice of setting up mobile rocket launchers in the midst of civilian neighborhoods, firing and then fleeing, Israeli retaliatory strikes against their positions produced large number of civilian casualties, angering many Palestinians and others in the Arab world and inviting criticism from journalists worldwide. As of January 19, the unofficial number of people killed during the three-week conflict, supplied by Palestinian sources, was more than 1,300, with at least 670 being reported as civilians.



The damage to Gaza's infrastructure has been extensive. The *New York Times* for January 19 reported that Gaza's parliament building was reduced to rubble, that the engineering building of the Islamic University was destroyed, and that many police stations, mosques, and homes have also been destroyed.

The *Times* writer asked hypothetically if the Israeli assault had weakened Hamas, or if the only result had been human suffering. Reports from the Israeli military indicate that Hamas avoided confronting the Israelis directly during the conflict, engaging in a type of guerilla resistance operating from the shadows. As a result, much of their force remains intact.

The BBC reported that a spokesman for Hamas military wing, Abu Ubaida, said the group's rocket capabilities had not been affected by the conflict. "We hereby stress that our rockets are being developed and are piling up, and that the enemy will receive more rockets and God willing, our rockets will hit more targets," Ubaida said in a news conference broadcast live on the Hamas-controlled al-Aqsa TV.

Reuters news service quoted a spokesman for Hamas armed wing, who appeared at a news conference with his face masked by a checkered Arab scarf, and who predicted that any attempt by Israel or an international authority to halt the flow of weapons to Gaza would be futile: "Do whatever you want, bringing in and manufacturing the holy weapons is our mission, and we know how to acquire weapons." However, Israeli Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter told Israel Radio that his government would react militarily if the flow of arms into Gaza resumes, noting: "That means, if smuggling is renewed,



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Israel will view it as if it were fired upon."

Israel has reopened three border crossings to enable more basic goods to be transferred to the Palestinian territory, which lies along the Mediterranean. Mark Regev, a spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, said he expected border crossings to open for aid today. "We are going to see a massive volume of aid entering the Gaza Strip," he told the BBC. "Medicines, foodstuffs, energy, all will be reaching the Gaza Strip in the volume that is required and in an expeditious manner."

As the rebuilding of Gaza is contemplated, the Arab League, which has been meeting for a summit in Kuwait, is expected to discuss a proposal for a \$2 billion fund for reconstruction in Gaza. Saudi King Abdullah said his country would donate \$1 billion.

While speaking at the summit, Abdullah delivered an open message to Israeli officials: "Israel has to understand that the choice between war and peace will not always stay open and that the Arab peace initiative that is on the table today will not stay on the table."

Abdullah referred to a plan that was first proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002 and reiterated in 2007 that offered Israel collective Arab recognition in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from territory it occupied in the 1967 war, the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and what it terms "a just solution" for the plight of Palestinian refugees. Israel rejected the initiative in 2002, but has recently indicated it would reevaluate the plan.

The AP quoted Israeli spokesman Mark Regev concerning the plan: "The position of the Israeli government is that the Arab peace initiative remains a basis for dialogue between Israel and the Arab world, and we continue to be willing to negotiate with all of our neighbors on the basis of that initiative."

Almost alone among Arab leaders, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak accused Hamas of inviting the Israeli offensive by not extending a six-month cease-fire, which had been brokered by Egypt, when it expired last month.

Surrounded by an array of European political leaders from Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and the Czech Republic who had traveled to Israel to lend their support to the cease-fire, Prime Minister Olmert said that Israel was not interested in remaining in Gaza: "We didn't set out to control Gaza, we don't want to remain in Gaza and we intend on leaving Gaza as quickly as possible."

Before going to Israel, the world leaders had gathered at a meeting hosted by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to discuss plans to help maintain the cease-fire. Among the issues discussed was how to stop the flow of weapons supplied to Hamas through tunnels constructed under the territory's eight-mile border with Egypt. Israel would like an international force to monitor the border, a proposal Egypt finds unacceptable. "It would look like another occupying force," Abdel Monem Said Aly, director of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, based in Cairo, was quoted by *USA Today*. "It's a very sensitive issue in Egypt."

A January 19 article in *USA Today* reported that Israeli officials had announced plans to pull all of its troops out of Gaza by the time President-elect Barack Obama is inaugurated, contingent upon Hamas holding to the cease-fire. The officials explained that Israel hopes to get its soldiers out before the inauguration to "pave the way for a smooth beginning with the Obama administration and spare the incoming president" from having to deal with a crisis in Gaza from day one of his presidency.

The statement draws a curious parallel with the decision by Iran to release the American hostages it



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had held for 444 days on January 20, 1981, minutes after Ronald Reagan was sworn in as president, as if calculated to spare Reagan from dealing with the crisis. While the coincidence may not have any particular significance, it does underscore the impact of U.S. politics on international diplomacy. If such influence can be exerted even passively, it makes one wonder what benefit a presidential administration stongly committed to adhering to the U.S. Constitution could bestow upon the world.

*Photo: AP Images*



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