

ISRAEL'S STRATEGIC INCOMPETENCE IN GAZA

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By Daniel Pipes
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Commentary on the Israel-Hamas war has tended toward partisan pleading, making the moral case for or against Israel. That's a crucial debate but not the only one; there's also a need for a cool strategic assessment: Who is winning, who is losing?

Hillel Frisch argues that Hamas (which he calls "a small isolated movement that controls a small strip") has "grossly miscalculated" by antagonizing the Egyptian government and making war on Israel. He concludes that Hamas has embarked on "strategic suicide."

Perhaps, but scenarios exist in which Hamas gains.

Khaled Abu Toameh notes the powerful and growing support for Hamas around the Middle East. Caroline Glick notes two ways Hamas wins: a return to the status quo ante, with Hamas still in charge of Gaza, or a cease-fire agreement whereby foreign powers form an international monitoring regime to oversee Gaza's borders with Israel and Egypt.

As this suggests, an assessment of Hamas's war record depends primarily on decisions made in Jerusalem. Those decisions being the real issue, how well has Israel's leadership performed?

Disastrously. Jerusalem's profound strategic incompetence continues and heightens the failed policies since 1993 that have eroded its reputation, strategic advantage and security. Four main reasons lead me to this negative conclusion.

FIRST, THE team in charge in Jerusalem created the Gaza problem. Its leader, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, immortally explained in 2005 the forthcoming unilateral withdrawal from Gaza: "We are tired of fighting, we are tired of being courageous, we are tired of winning, we are tired of defeating our enemies." Olmert had a vital role in (1) initiating the Gaza withdrawal, which ended the IDF's close control of the territory, and (2) giving up control over the Gaza-Egypt border. This latter, little noted decision, enabled Hamas to build tunnels from Egypt, smuggle in matériel and launch missiles.

Secondly, Olmert and his colleagues failed to respond to the barrage of rockets and mortar shells. From the withdrawal in 2005 until now, Hamas has launched more than 6,500 missiles. Incredibly, Israelis endured nearly eight attacks a day for three years; why? A responsible government would have responded to the first rocket as a *casus belli* and immediately responded.

Thirdly, a committee of the French parliament published an important technical report in mid-December, establishing that "there is no longer doubt" about the military purposes of the Iranian nuclear program, and that it will be up and running in two to three years.

The waning days of the Bush administration, with the current president nearly out the door and the president-elect still in the wings, offers a unique moment to take care of business. Why did Olmert squander this opportunity to confront the relatively trivial danger Hamas presents rather than the existential threat of Iran's nuclear program? This negligence has potentially dire repercussions.

FINALLY, FROM what one can discern of the Olmert government's goal in its war on Hamas, it seems to be to weaken Hamas and strengthen Fatah so that Mahmoud Abbas can retake control of Gaza and restart diplomacy with Israel. Michael B. Oren and Yossi Klein Halevi captured this idea in a recent article titled: "Palestinians need Israel to win: If Hamas gets away with terror once again, the peace process will be over."

Bitter experience, however, invalidates this thesis. For one, Fatah has proven itself a determined enemy intent on eliminating the Jewish state. For another, Palestinians themselves repudiated Fatah in 2006 elections. It strains credulity that anyone could still think of Fatah as a "partner for peace." Rather, Jerusalem should think creatively of other scenarios, perhaps my "no-state solution" bringing in the Jordanian and Egyptian governments.

More dismaying even than Olmert's ineptitude is that the Israeli election a month from now pits three leaders of his same ilk. Two of them (Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defense Minister Ehud Barak) currently serve as his main lieutenants, while two (Barak and Binyamin Netanyahu) failed badly in their prior prime ministerial stints.

Looking beyond Olmert and his potential successors comes the worst news of all, namely that no one at the upper echelons of Israel's political life articulates the imperative for victory. For this reason, I see Israel as a lost polity, one full of talent, energy and resolve, but lacking direction.

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