

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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8 December 2012

Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Hamas

A few days ago, on 29 November 2012, Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority asked the United Nations General Assembly to grant Palestine “observer” status in the UN. He was successful, for the vote was 138-9, with 41 abstentions. I suppose this was intentionally done on the exact day of the 65th anniversary of the UN General Assembly’s Resolution 181, which partitioned the British-Mandated Palestine into Jewish and Palestinian states. The Jewish people accepted the resolution, while the Arabs unanimously rejected it and then attempted to destroy the infant state of Israel. Had the Palestinians and the Arab world accepted that resolution, they would have been celebrating the 65th anniversary of their own state with larger borders than they are now claiming! Instead of acknowledging that stupendous error in 1948, Abbas instead referred to that 1948 date as Al Nakba [“the catastrophe”], accusing Israel of “ethnic cleansing,” of “an apartheid of colonial occupation,” of practicing “the plague of racism,” and of the “unprecedented historical injustice inflicted upon the Palestinian people since . . . 1948.” In effect, then, this UN vote undid the Oslo Accords of 1993 which provided the legal basis for the Palestinian Authority and which required negotiations with Israel to create a Palestinian state. The bottom line is you simply cannot create a fantasy state; by treaty the Palestinians are required to negotiate with Israel but they refuse to recognize Israel as the Jewish homeland and refuse to even acknowledge the actual existence of the state of Israel. Furthermore, the Palestinian Authority no longer singularly represents the Palestinian people; Hamas represents over 1.3 million of them in Gaza—and Hamas abhors the existence of Israel and even refuses to talk with Israel.

This leads to what happened in Gaza only a few days before Abbas went to the UN: The recent conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza is a portent of a much more serious crisis looming on the horizon for Israel. It is a crisis that has political, military and profound security implications for Israel. In this edition of *Issues in Perspective*, I seek to place this entire conflict in a proper context.

- First, why was there this conflict now? Seven years ago, Israel pulled out of Gaza and in the words of columnist Charles Krauthammer, “It dismantled every settlement, withdrew every soldier, evacuated every Jew, leaving nothing and no one behind. Except for the greenhouses in which settlers had grown fruit and flowers for export. These were left intact to help Gaza’s economy—only to be trashed when the Palestinians took over.” Nonetheless, Israel renounced all claims to Gaza and declared its border an international one. The Ottoman Turks and the Egyptians, who both ruled Gaza over a period stretching back hundreds of years, never gave the Palestinians territory they could rule. But Israel did; it gave up land for peace. What did it get? In subsequent elections, the Palestinian people of Gaza elected Hamas, turning Gaza into a military fortress community, clandestinely arming its people with weapons and rockets, most of

them from Iran. Hamas has used its newly won territory to make war on Israel. It began first with a campaign of suicide bombings, and, when Israel built its security fence, with rockets fired indiscriminately at the civilian centers of southern Israel. In fact, since 2005, Hamas has fired 8,000 rockets at Israel. Its military strategy is to paralyze southern Israel with short- and middle-range rockets while, just recently, launching Iranian Fajr-5 rockets at Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Further, Hamas has gained significant diplomatic strength because its parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, now controls Egypt. In addition, the emir of Qatar recently visited Gaza promising \$400 million in aid. As the *New York Times* surprisingly said in a recent editorial, “Iran-backed Hamas . . . is so consumed with hatred for Israel that it has repeatedly resorted to violence, no matter what the cost to its own people . . . That approach will never get the Palestinians the independent state most yearn for, but it is all Hamas has to offer.”

- Second, what are the results of this recent conflict? There are several discernible results, none of which bode particularly well for Israel.
 1. The Hamas leadership has been strengthened. It is an amazing dynamic of the Middle East: If you are not totally destroyed and decimated by your enemy, you declare victory. Israel killed one of the key Hamas leaders, struck 1,500 sites, including 19 key senior command centers of the Hamas military. Israel also destroyed 200 smuggling tunnels and 26 weapons storage and manufacturing facilities. Hamas was actually devastated militarily. But, the Hamas leadership publically thanked Iran for supplying them with weapons. In addition, Turkey, once a close Israeli ally, has now labeled Israel a “terrorist state.” Therefore, in the eyes of the Palestinian people of Gaza and of the West Bank, Hamas has won!!!
 2. It would seem that for now, any meaningful discussion of peace between Israel and the Palestinians is an illusion. It makes no sense for Israel to negotiate with the Palestinian leadership led by Mahmoud Abbas, when Hamas has greater clout and support. And Hamas has absolutely no intention of recognizing Israel’s right to exist, let alone negotiate anything meaningful with Israel. Israel gave them land for peace—and it got rocket attacks on its civilian population. At a minimum, Israel would like Hamas to renounce all violence against Israel and recognize it as a Jewish state. That will never happen, so what hope is there in Israel for negotiations? The ceasefire with Hamas, negotiated by Egypt, has virtually no chance of leading to any kind of peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, let alone Hamas. The Arab leaders should recognize the obvious culpability of Hamas for the recent conflict and insist that Hamas focus on the needs of the Palestinian people, not condemn Israel for its “aggression.” There would have been no conflict had it not been for Hamas rockets!
 3. Today, nothing makes Israel more strategically insecure than the Hamas rocket attacks. Israel’s amazing Iron Dome “Pillar of Defense” apparently destroyed 80% of Hamas rockets fired. But 20% did get through. As Iran provides more sophisticated and longer-range rockets, more of Israel’s population will be vulnerable. Also, this perceived vulnerability makes it nearly impossible for Israel to give back any more land in the expectation it will receive peace and greater security in return. For all practical purposes, the Oslo Accords are dead. For all practical purposes, Israel will return no more land unless and until it has bedrock guarantees about its security. Here is where the United States will play a key role.

It is the only one that can provide that kind of guarantee, for only the US stands meaningfully with Israel. President Obama has his work cut out for him, for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the future of the Egyptian democracy and the US-Israel-Arab struggle with Iran and Syria are now all inextricably linked. Only the US can truly defuse these three linked issues. We should be praying for him and for the leaders of the Middle East. We are at one of those proverbial turning points! The next year or so will be quite crucial. Can Iran and Syria, along with Hamas and Hezbollah, be isolated? Can the US and Israel truly prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons? It is quite difficult to imagine all of this being defused without a major war, but it is possible. May God grant our leaders wisdom, discernment and dependence on Him.

See the following in the *New York Times*: editorial (20 November 2012); Tom Friedman (25 November 2012); the following in the *Washington Post*: Michael Oren (29 November 2012) and Charles Krauthammer (26 November 2012); the *Wall Street Journal* editorial (1-2 December 2012); and *The Economist* (24 November 2012), p. 55.