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WORKING TO PREVENT CONFLICT WORLDWIDE

Ending the War in Gaza

I. OVERVIEW

A war neither Israel nor Hamas truly wanted turned into a war both are willing to wage. The six-month ceasefire that expired on 19 December was far from ideal. Israel suffered through periodic rocket fire and the knowledge that its foe was amassing lethal firepower. Hamas endured a punishing economic blockade, undermining its hopes of ruling Gaza. A sensible compromise, entailing an end to rocket launches and an opening of the crossings should have been available. But without bilateral engagement, effective third party mediation or mutual trust, it inexorably came to this: a brutal military operation in which both feel they have something to gain.

As each day goes by, Israel hopes to further degrade Hamas's military capacity and reduce the rocket risk; Hamas banks on boosting its domestic and regional prestige. Only urgent international action by parties viewed as credible and trustworthy by both sides can end this before the human and political toll escalates or before Israel's land incursion – which was launched as this briefing went to press – turns into a venture of uncertain scope, undetermined consequence and all-too-familiar human cost.

From Hamas's perspective, prolonging the ceasefire was appealing but only if that arrangement was modified. Relative calm had enabled it to consolidate power and cripple potential foes. But the siege never was lifted. Increasingly, Hamas leaders were in the uncomfortable position of appearing to want the truce for personal safety at the price of collective hardship. As the expiration date approached, rocket fire intensified, an unsubtle message that Hamas would use violence to force Israel to open the crossings. In the first days, Israel's retaliatory air campaign shook Hamas's Qassam fighters by its timing, intensity and scale. But it did not catch them unprepared.

Instead, the Islamist movement hopes to reap political benefit from material losses. It knows it is no military match for Israel, but it can claim victory by withstanding the unprecedented onslaught; for a movement that thrives on martyrdom and the image of steadfastness, that would be enough. Its domestic and regional standings, somewhat bruised by its harsh tactics in taking over Gaza and seeming indifference to national unity, would grow far beyond its actual military capability, while those of its domestic foes – President Mahmoud Abbas, the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority (PA) and Fatah – are in peril. A ground invasion was expected and, in some Hamas quarters, hoped for. House-to-house guerrilla warfare, they surmise, is more favourable terrain. Should their rule be toppled, some claim to look forward to a return to pure armed struggle, untainted by the stain of governance.

From Israel's perspective, six months of overall quiet had been welcome, if not without perpetual qualms. Hamas used it to amass a more powerful and longer-range arsenal; Corporal Gilad Shalit, captured in 2006, remained imprisoned; and sporadic rocket fire continued. All this it could withstand, but not the intensification of attacks immediately preceding and following the end of the truce. Then, even those most reluctant to escalate felt compelled to act massively.

Goals remain hazy. Military success could not be achieved through airpower alone; an end to the operation then, despite massive destruction, would have handed Hamas a political victory. So, while the land incursion might not have been inevitable, once the operation was launched it was virtually preordained. Unlike in Lebanon in 2006, Israel can carry it far: in contrast to Hizbollah, Hamas has neither strategic depth nor resupply ability. It has few allies. Israel can take Gaza and kill or capture most of the military and political leaders. Yet, with such expansive possibilities come risks of equal magnitude for there is no logical exit or end point. Israel might start by occupying areas in Gaza's north to deal with the short-range rockets, but that would leave longer-range ones. Intensive ground operations can remove many rockets and launchers, but without profound, durable incursion into densely populated areas cannot prevent Hamas from firing.

A massive intervention that in effect topples Hamas is looking increasingly possible. But who will take over on the back of Israel's occupation? How could a then discredited PA assume power? Even crushing military

victory ultimately might not be that much, or that lasting, of a political win.

Fighting that began as a tug-of-war over terms of a new ceasefire has become a battle over terms of deterrence and the balance of power – with no easy way out. Israel in principle wants a ceasefire, but only after it brings Hamas to its knees, strips it of long-range capabilities and dispels any illusion of a fight among equals in which rocket fire has the same deterrent effect as airforce raids, all of which could take a long time. Hamas, too, has an interest in a ceasefire, but only in return for opening the crossings. In the meantime, it sees every day of conflict as testimony to its resistance credentials. Both inexorably will see more benefit in persevering with violent confrontation than in appearing to give in.

That leaves the international community. The impetus to conclude such an asymmetrical war can come one of two ways: for the parties to bloody each other sufficiently, or for the international community to assertively step in. In this, some world actors appear to have learned a useful lesson from the Lebanon war. There is more activism now, from the EU, individual European countries like France, which is seeking to renew its central Middle Eastern role and important regional actors, like Turkey – a nation whose involvement has become all the more critical given the breakdown of trust between Hamas and the traditional mediator, Egypt. Even Cairo, on 5 January, had invited Hamas for talks.

Still, as was the case two years ago, a swift, unconditional end to fighting is bumping up against the argument that this would leave in place ingredients that prompted the conflagration. True enough. The blanks in the defunct ceasefire must be filled. But, Washington's unhelpful and perilous efforts to slow things down notwithstanding, the most urgent task must be stopping the fighting; already, the absence of effective mediation has contributed to the climb from unreliable ceasefire to long-range rocket fire and massive aerial bombardment to ground offensive**.** To protect civilians, limit political damage (regional polarisation and radicalisation, further discrediting of any "moderates" or "peace process") and avoid a further catastrophe (massive loss of life in urban warfare in Gaza, a Hamas rocket hit on a vital Israeli installation), third parties should pressure both sides to immediately halt military action. In short, what is required is a Lebanon-type diplomatic outcome but without the Lebanon-type prolonged timetable.

To be sustainable, cessation of hostilities must be directly followed by steps addressing both sides' core concerns:

- an indefinite ceasefire pursuant to which:

  Hamas would halt all rocket launches, keep armed militants at 500 metres from Israel's border and make other armed organisations comply; and

  Israel would halt all military attacks on and withdraw all troops from Gaza;

- real efforts to end arms smuggling into Gaza, led by Egypt in coordination with regional and international actors;

- dispatch of a multinational monitoring presence to verify adherence to the ceasefire, serve as liaison between the two sides and defuse potential crises; countries like France, Turkey and Qatar, as well as organisations such as the UN, could play an important part in this; and

- opening of Gaza's crossings with Israel and Egypt, together with:

  return of an EU presence at the Rafah crossing and its extension to Gaza's crossings with Israel; and

  coordination between Hamas authorities and the (Ramallah-based) PA at the crossings.

That last point – Hamas's role – is, of course, the rub, the unresolved dilemma that largely explains why the tragedy unfolded as it did. Gaza's two-year story has been one of collective failure: by Hamas, which missed the opportunity to act as a responsible political actor; of Israel, which stuck to a shortsighted policy of isolating Gaza and seeking to undermine Hamas that neither helped it nor hurt them; of the PA leadership, which refused to accept the consequences of the Islamists' electoral victory, sought to undo it and ended up looking like the leader of one segment of the Palestinian community against the other; and of the international community, many regional actors included, which demanded Hamas turn from militant to political organisation without giving it sufficient incentives to do so and only recognised the utility of Palestinian unity after spending years obstructing it.

This should change. Sustainable calm can be achieved neither by ignoring Hamas and its constituents nor by harbouring the illusion that, pummelled into submission, it will accept what it heretofore has rejected. Palestinian reconciliation is a priority, more urgent but also harder than ever before; so, too, is the Islamists' acceptance of basic international obligations. In the meantime, Hamas – if Israel does not take the perilous step of toppling it – will have to play a political and security role in Gaza and at the crossings. This might

mean a "victory" for Hamas, but that is the inevitable cost for a wrongheaded embargo, and by helping end rocket fire and producing a more stable border regime, it would just as importantly be a victory for Israel – and, crucially, both peoples – as well.

II. DESCENT INTO WAR

A. THE CEASEFIRE BREAKS DOWN

The six-month ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, in place since 19 June 2008,[1] formally ended on 19 December.[2] From the outset, the agreement was fragile. Hamas complained that Israel never fulfilled its commitment to open the crossings[3] and that military operations continued, resulting in 28 deaths.[4] Israel was equally dissatisfied. While Hamas clamped down on activities by other groups and, by Israel's admission, kept transgressions relatively low, rocket and mortar fire from Gaza never ended.[5] The Islamic movement also continued to arm itself, smuggling weapons through tunnels under its border with Egypt and by sea. Although Egyptian sources deny this formed part of the deal,[6] Israel claims it constituted a ceasefire breach.[7]

As became apparent almost immediately after the agreement was reached, the two sides had conflicting views about how it would be carried out. Israeli officials told Crisis Group that they did not intend to open the crossings fully and anticipated this would be a serious bone of contention; likewise, Israel's expectations regarding a prisoner exchange – and its view that the opening of crossings depended on release of the captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit – never matched Hamas's.[8]

In the run-up to 19 December, both parties expressed interest in prolonging the ceasefire, albeit each on its preferred terms. For Israel, this implied a definitive and unconditional cessation of rocket fire and a means to halt weapons smuggling; for Hamas, it meant opening the crossings with Israel and Egypt. As the date approached, senior Hamas leaders increasingly made clear that, faced with the alternative between "starvation and fighting", they would choose the latter, an unsubtle indication that they would intensify rocket fire in an attempt to force Israel to relax the siege.[9]

[1] The Egyptian-brokered ceasefire was not made official in any formal, written document. According to Egyptian sources involved in the process, it provided for an immediate cessation of hostile activities; a limited increase in the amount of goods entering Gaza after three days; and, after ten days, the opening of the crossings for all products except materials used in the manufacture of projectiles and explosives. After three weeks, the two sides were to commence negotiations for a prisoner exchange and the opening of the Rafah crossing. Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian officials, Cairo, June 2008. Hamas provided its written version of the understanding to Robert Pastor, a professor at American University (Washington DC) and senior adviser to the Carter Center:

1. Mutual agreement to cease all military activities by the start of "zero hour" on Thursday, 19 June, at 6:00AM.
2. Duration of ceasefire is six months according to agreement concluded among the national parties under Egyptian auspices.
3. Ceasefire will be implemented under national consensus and under the Egyptian auspices.
4. After 72 hours from the start of the ceasefire, the crossing points will be opened to allow 30 per cent more goods to enter the Gaza strip.
5. Ten days after that (i.e., thirteen days after ceasefire begins), all crossings would be open between Gaza and Israel, and Israel will allow the transfer of all goods that were banned or restricted to go into Gaza.
6. Egypt will work to expand the ceasefire into the West Bank later.

[2] During negotiations, Hamas insisted that the ceasefire be extended to the West Bank after six months. After Israel rejected this, Hamas took the position that the ceasefire would last only six months, at which point it would reassess the situation.

[3] Although the flow of goods and fuel improved, it never reached levels enjoyed prior to Hamas's June 2007 Gaza takeover and remained far below Hamas's expectation. The supply of cement in particular was restricted as Israel took the position that it could be diverted for construction of underground bunkers. Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, Tel Aviv, August 2008. According to Hamas, Gaza received only 15 per cent of its basic needs during this period. Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 30 December 2008. Hamas also claimed that the sick were prevented from leaving the coastal strip, leading to 280 deaths. Crisis Group interview, Hamas spokesman, West Bank, 29 December 2008.

[4] Hamas cited 53 land incursions and nineteen maritime aggressions. Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 30 December 2008.

[5] During the ceasefire, Palestinian groups fired 329 rockets and mortar shells into Israel, the vast majority after 4 November. This was considerably less than the 2,278 that were launched during the six months preceding the ceasefire. "The Six Months of the Lull Arrangement", Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre at the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Centre, December 2008.

[6] Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian officials, Cairo, June 2008.

[7] "Newsletter", Israeli foreign ministry, 31 December 2008.

[8] Crisis Group interviews, Israeli, Egyptian and Hamas officials, Jerusalem, Cairo and Damascus, June 2008.

[9] Crisis Group interviews, senior Hamas leaders, Damascus, 16 December 2008; Gaza City, December 2008.

Politically, they appear to have surmised that they had more to gain by military escalation than by facing the anger of ordinary, impoverished Gazans, and a substantial constituency believed the Islamist movement had gained nothing in return for stepping back from its raison d'être, resistance. Hamas was not the only party to make this calculation; a consensus among factions – including Islamic Jihad, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades – opposed extending the ceasefire.[10]

In hindsight, the agreement collapsed approximately six weeks before its expiration, on 4 November. On that day, Israel launched an attack, reportedly to prevent a planned abduction of Israelis through a tunnel dug under its border with Gaza, evidence, say Israelis, of Hamas's offensive intentions. Hamas responded with intense rocket fire.[11] Thereafter, Hamas's military preparations close to the Israeli perimeter and Israel's deadly retaliation accelerated the ceasefire's collapse.

On 17 December, Crisis Group wrote:

> Despite a sense among some Hamas militants that the ceasefire has been a net loss, most observers believe both sides have an interest in extending it: Hamas because it wants to consolidate its power; Israel because it has no good response to continued violence. In the meantime each will flex its muscles, seeking to demonstrate its ability to inflict hardship and intent not to appear overly eager for a truce. Hamas also would like to ensure that an extension includes a real opening of Gaza's crossings with Israel.

But, it concluded, "what one senior [Israeli] official dubbed the tit-for-tat 'ping pong game' across the Gaza border easily could spill out of control".[12]

And so it has. After a brief respite – a 24-hour Hamas-decreed ceasefire on 23 December[13] – any semblance of calm quickly unraveled. The following day, in response to the killing of three Hamas operatives said to be planting a bomb near the Israeli border, Palestinians launched 88 rockets, followed by another 44 the next day. On 27 December, at approximately 11:30 am, Israel launched massive, coordinated airstrikes against 50 targets in less than four minutes.[14] First media reports cited approximately 200 killed,[15] although when those buried under rubble were accounted for, the total was closer to 300.[16]

B. WAR ON GAZA

In the first days of the war, Israel targeted a large number of Gaza's military and civil locations and, with the onset of the ground campaign, a wider array still. Initially, the air force focused on strategic targets: command and control centres, security installations (destroying all civil police stations and the bases of the 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas's military wing), fifteen Hamas training camps and Hamas's limited naval and Gaza's port facilities, as well as rocket manufacturing facilities and storage warehouses.[17] In succeeding days, it continued to hunt for rocket storage and development locations while widening its scope to hit tunnels under the Egyptian border and homes of Hamas fighters and parliament members, together with the full spectrum of Hamas and government institutions.[18] On the eve of the ground operation, reports put casualties at more than 430 killed and 2,200 injured.[19]

According to Israeli officials and many independent observers, including Crisis Group's, Hamas was taken aback by the military operation.[20] On 26 December, Israel allowed significant humanitarian supplies into Gaza in an apparent effort to mislead Hamas about the impending assault. Other elements of deception included a 24 December Israeli cabinet meeting that officially began a debate about Gaza which was to be continued on the 28th, as well as Defence Minister Ehud Barak's appearance on a satirical television show – a step assumed to be inappropriate on the eve of war – on the night of the 26th.[21] Some Hamas lead-

[10] Crisis Group interviews, factional leaders, Gaza City, Damascus, 2008.
[11] See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°25, *Palestine Divided*, 17 December 2008.
[12] Ibid, pp. 18-19.
[13] The cessation was not absolute; four rockets were launched by a Palestinian group, albeit not Hamas.
[14] *Jerusalem Post*, 1 January 2009.
[15] *Haaretz*, 27 December 2008.
[16] Crisis Group interviews, hospital sources, Gaza City, 29 December 2008.
[17] "Announcements", Israel Defence Forces (IDF), 27-31 December 2008.
[18] Israel justifies targeting the Islamic movement's institutions, because "there are many aspects of Hamas, and we are trying to hit the whole spectrum, because everything is connected and everything supports terrorism against Israel". Quoted in *The Washington Post*, 30 December 2008. Similarly, it justifies hitting government sites, since they "serve as a critical component of the terrorist group's infrastructure in Gaza". Quoted in *The New York Times*, 2 January 2009.
[19] Gaza health ministry, 3 January 2009.
[20] *Haaretz*, 28 December 2008.
[21] Crisis Group interview, former senior Israeli official, 29 December 2008.

ers also angrily accuse Egypt of intentional deception, claiming its officials gave them assurance Israel had committed to a 48-hour period of calm to allow negotiations to go forward.[22]

Still, an attack was far from unexpected, and Hamas – which had continued to launch rockets notwithstanding repeated Israeli and international warnings – was far from unprepared. In the immediately preceding days, two third-country diplomats had conveyed direct messages from Israel to the Islamist group, advising that if the rockets did not stop, heavy reprisals would ensue.[23] By 25 December, Hamas's senior leaders were in hiding; sensitive materials, including computers, were being removed from the Islamic University and ministries; some Qassam fighters had left their bases; and, during nighttime – when an attack was deemed most likely – at least some civil police operated outside of their stations for the sake of self-protection.[24]

The element of surprise lay elsewhere. Hamas militants acknowledge being startled by the precise timing – at the height of the workday – and the simultaneous, coordinated attacks against so many diverse locations. Nor did they anticipate the choice of targets would include prominently the civil police. Israel's decision to go after that group could be seen as an attempt to undermine internal order, Hamas's most significant domestic achievement. More likely it reflected Israeli conviction that there exists broad personnel overlap between the Qassam Brigades and the police force,[25] a feature Crisis Group has observed at levels both senior (some top police commanders also serve as Qassam commanders) and lower ranks (some Qassam *murabitun* – sentinels – work as police by day and spotters by night).[26]

Yet, such a link between civilian and military forces was not widely evident. In theory Hamas had sought to separate the two forces, the police being viewed as an arm of government and the Qassam as an instrument of the Islamic movement itself. Indeed, these efforts accelerated over the past two months, as the prospect of a show-down with Israel loomed.[27] Most Gazans view the police – and especially the 50 new traffic officers killed during a graduation ceremony at the Gaza City police station – as civilians. Even many who oppose Hamas saw little purpose in this attack. As a Fatah supporter put it, "they are the lucky ones who managed to get jobs. They had only just finished their training. What did they ever do to anyone?"[28]

Gaining a reliable assessment of the operation's military and political impact is no easy task, especially in its early stages. On the third day of its campaign, Israel asserted it had reduced Hamas's rocket stocks by somewhere between one third and one half[29] and its launch capacity by an even greater amount.[30] By most accounts, Israel's intelligence proved remarkably efficient, targeting individual fighters' homes,[31] as well as

[22] Press conference with Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum, 28 December 2008; Crisis Group interview, analyst with close ties to Hamas, 29 December 2008. Other Hamas leaders used somewhat softer language, merely accusing Egypt of having been tricked by an "Israeli deception". Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 30 December 2008.

[23] Crisis Group interviews, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, December 2008; international official, Jerusalem, 29 December 2008.

[24] Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 25-27 December.2008.

[25] Crisis Group interview, former Israeli military intelligence officer, 2 January 2009.

[26] Crisis Group interviews, Qassam members and police officers, Gaza City, November-December 2008.

[27] A Hamas leader explained that the movement sought to avoid the mistakes of Fatah, which, because of its de facto integration into the Palestinian Authority, was damaged as a political movement when the PA itself was in effect destroyed during the second intifada. Crisis Group interviews, Qassam commanders and cadres, Gaza City, November-December 2008.

[28] Crisis Group interview, Fatah supporter, Gaza City, 28 December 2008. Usama Hamdan, Hamas's representative in Lebanon, asserted: "We were expecting this aggression, like everybody else, because of all the Israeli threats. Hamas fighters are ready for this battle, which is why the losses among militants are minimal. As for the civilian police, just the day before, we had contacts with the Egyptian side, and they assured us that no military aggression would take place immediately. This is why we decided to proceed with the graduation ceremony". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 30 December 2008. Some Palestinians opposed to Hamas offered a far more cynical interpretation: that the Islamist movement expected the attacks but accepted the loss of life so as to turn Gazans into victims. Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Ramallah, 28 December 2008.

[29] As an illustration of such difficulty, the *Jerusalem Post* reported on 29 December 2008 a reduction of one half, while Channel Ten news the following day put it at one third, with 2,000 rockets still in Hamas's arsenal. Nor are early predictions necessarily indicative of subsequent developments: less than a week into its July 2006 war with Hizbollah, the Israel military claimed that it had destroyed 40-50 per cent of Hizbollah's missile capacity, yet rocket launches continued well afterward. *Jerusalem Post*, 18 July 2006.

[30] Crisis Group interview, former Israeli minister, 30 December 2008.

[31] According to an Israeli Defence Forces spokesman, the homes of Hamas's top 25 field commanders were destroyed in the early days of the campaign. In interviews with Crisis Group, Qassam members stated that the homes of many lower ranking fighters were hit as well. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, 31 December 2008. Israel sometimes

mosques, houses and other locations where arms were stored and militants hid. For many militants, the breadth of the targeting is the most difficult to bear: hitting mosques deprives them of a habitually safe refuge, while destroying family homes takes an emotional toll.[32]

Paradoxically, intelligence gathering was facilitated by Hamas's June 2007 takeover, which first revealed the identities of many Qassam fighters[33] and so allowed their movements to be tracked through sophisticated technology.[34] Observers on the ground offer more anecdotal but no less convincing evidence: it was only after hearing a terrifying explosion in the middle of the night that a longtime Gaza City resident learned the Popular Resistance Committees had rented an office barely 100 metres from her home.[35]

Whether Israel's powerful air campaign translated into military and political success is another matter. Most Hamas leaders in Gaza are unavailable for comment, having gone into hiding. Still, some initial conclusions can be drawn. An international security official remarked:

> The first 48 hours they hit 240 targets; in the last few, only 30-40 a day, many of which were targets of opportunity, such as rocket launchers spotted in the field. They are hitting some targets repeatedly, on some occasions because they might have missed something, on others because people might be returning to salvage material from the rubble but often just because they need to look like they are continuing to take down Hamas.[36]

Heavy bombing notwithstanding, Hamas continued to launch rockets, and virtually all military observers concurred that the weapons could not be neutralised through airpower alone. Moreover, Hamas appeared to more or less have maintained its ground operations. As of this writing, communications were functioning: Hamas's Gaza-based Al-Aqsa TV continued to broadcast from cars and stairwells;[37] the radio frequency used by Hamas field spotters – who track and report the movement of Israeli planes, attacks and events on the ground – basically was as active as on the first day of fighting, despite heavy losses;[38] and Hamas allegedly hacked into the Israel Defence Forces communication network, broadcasting messages warning soldiers not to fight in Gaza.[39] In early January, Hamas militants took pride in the fact that few of their senior leaders had been killed. Those who were included two Qassam area commanders and Nizar Rayan.[40]

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gives ten minutes warning by phone, "and precisely ten minutes later, the missiles hit". Crisis Group interview, Palestinian security official, Gaza City, 2 January 2009.

[32] Crisis Group interviews, Qassam members, Gaza City, 29-31 December 2008. In some instances, the Israeli army issues warnings via radio and telephone to evacuate, as in the case of a chemistry professor at the Islamic University, who was warned to evacuate his home. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 31 December 2008. At a 31 December press conference, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni claimed that 90,000 phone calls had been made warning residents to evacuate. That said, several patients at Shifa Hospital and Qassam members to whom Crisis Group spoke asserted they received no warning before their houses were hit. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, 27-30 December 2008. Crisis Group also spoke with a journalist whose family's house in Khan Yunis was destroyed without warning. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 30 December 2008. A Hamas member offered the explanation that while the Hamas member's family might be warned, surrounding families sometimes are not, leading to damage and casualties. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 31 December 2008.

[33] In interviews at the time, Gaza residents often expressed surprise at their neighbours' factional affiliation, especially when it was to Hamas. "There are no secrets anymore; everyone had to take a side". Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City resident, June 2007.

[34] Crisis Group interview, international security official, Jerusalem, 2 January 2009. A former Palestinian security official in Gaza said, "Israel used the ceasefire very astutely". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 2 January 2009.

[35] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 30 December 2008. The Popular Resistance Committees were formed in Rafah at the outset of the second intifada by Jamal Abu-Samhadana, a former member of Fatah and PA security forces. Most initial recruits were disgruntled ex-Fatah members who wished to pursue armed struggle. They later were joined by defectors from other organisations, including Hamas. The composite militias began fragmenting as the intifada dragged on. Abu Samhadana was appointed senior security official by the Hamas government in early 2006; he was killed by Israel several days later. Together with Hamas and Army of Islam**,** the group organised the capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

[36] Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem**,** 2 January 2009.

[37] Crisis Group interview, television workers, Gaza City, December 2008.

[38] The spotters' work is extremely dangerous, as it involves broadcasting over radio equipment – which can be quickly traced to within three feet – from high ground. Crisis Group interview, international security official, Jerusalem, January 2009. Most Qassam losses have been from the ranks of the spotters but thus far Hamas apparently has been able to replace them. Crisis Group interview, Qassam members, Gaza City, 2 January 2009.

[39] Crisis Group interview, international security official, Jerusalem, January 2009.

[40] The most senior Hamas figure killed to date has been Nizar Rayan, who – along with his four wives and five of his children – was struck by a missile in his Jabalya home on 1 January 2009. He was known for his close relationship with Hamas's military wing and extremist views. He remained

Overall, discussions with militants suggest Qassam morale has been shaken but not broken; in interviews with Crisis Group, fighters admitted that the daytime strike "shocked" them and that it is "draining" to be constantly under threat, even as they expressed cold determination not to yield. More importantly, in a conflict such as this, Hamas could claim success merely by virtue of withstanding the onslaught. In that sense, every day that goes by is a victory of sorts, boosting its domestic and regional standing far beyond its actual military capacity. When Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, in a speech broadcast on 31 December 2008, exhorted the people of Gaza to remain "steadfast", he tapped into a deep-rooted Palestinian political tradition.

In other ways, too, the outcome after a week of air attacks was not necessarily to Hamas's disadvantage. Israel appeared to be counting on anger toward the Islamists, whose decision not to renew the ceasefire has been criticised in surprisingly direct terms by Egypt and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.[41] The war also took its toll, with heavy civilian suffering. According to the UN on-the-ground office, some 80 per cent of the population cannot "support themselves and are dependant on humanitarian assistance", Gaza is "facing a food crisis", the health system is "overwhelmed", and "utilities are barely functioning".[42]

Gazans assert they never have suffered such distress[43] and report shortages of virtually all basic commodities, including staples such as lentils, flour, diapers, baby food, milk, meat and canned goods. Automatic teller machines are out of cash and locked, while banks are closed, meaning that even those who manage to find supplies cannot buy them. Without fuel supplies, the last gas stations still in operation soon will shut down and streets are virtually empty of cars.[44] Some smugglers initially risked the journey underground even after Israel began bombing tunnels, drawn by the prospect of potentially enormous profits, but since then virtually all the tunnels have been destroyed, bringing smuggling to a halt.[45]

Yet, if some Gazans blame the Islamic movement for their plight, a majority directs its fury at others**.** Most perceive Israel's massive attacks as targeting the strip as a whole, not merely Hamas. Israeli motivations aside, attacks against government institutions are viewed with particular indignation. Not only have all civil police stations been hit, but so too have the interior, foreign affairs, finance, public works, justice, education, labour and culture ministries, as well as the presidential compound, prime minister's office and parliament. A politically independent observer said, "these are the institutions of the people, not of Hamas. There's nothing left of the PA; it no longer has an address here. Even if Abu Mazen comes back, what will he be coming to? Everything Oslo built is now gone".[46]

The scope of the attacks swayed even some longtime Fatah members – and diehard Hamas opponents. A former interior ministry employee, who abided by Ramallah's call for PA security to boycott the Hamas government, told Crisis Group that for the first five days of the bombing campaign, he was glad that Hamas was getting its comeuppance: "Israel did it to Fatah. Then Hamas did it to Fatah. Now Israel is doing it to

tied to the political leadership, but his vehement opposition to participation in the 2006 legislative elections led to his estrangement and eventual marginalisation from it. Despite the evident threat and repeated entreaties from some colleagues, he refused to vacate his house. In explaining his refusal, he said "that was the mistake Palestinians made in 1948". Crisis Group interview, Jabalya, January 2008. In that and other interviews with Crisis Group, he repeatedly expressed his wish "to die a martyr". The most senior government official known to have been killed is Gaza police chief Tawfiq Jaber, who was from Fatah, not Hamas.

[41] On 28 December 2008, Abbas laid the onus on Hamas: "We spoke to them and told them: 'Please, we ask you not to end the ceasefire. Let it continue'"; on 1 January 2009, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmad Aboul Gheit said there were "signals Israel was determined to strike Hamas in Gaza for the past three months. They practically wrote it in the sky". *Jerusalem Post*, 1 January 2009.

[42] "Situation Report", United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2 January 2009. While Israeli officials correctly point out that humanitarian shipments have substantially increased since the operations began, OCHA's 4 January report explains that aid distribution is impossible in many areas due to lack of stocks and violence; that thousands of homes have been damaged and in many cases are no longer habitable; that only ten bakeries in Gaza are fully operational, due to lack of flour, cooking gas and electricity; that water and sewerage facilities have been hit; and that much of the coastal strip has been plunged into darkness for lack of electricity.

[43] "We've suffered a lot, but we've never had four-hour bread lines before". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City resident, Gaza City, 31 December 2008. "It's the most ferocious attack we've faced in living memory". Crisis Group interview, Beit Hanoun resident, 3 January 2009.

[44] Crisis Group interview, gas station owner, Gaza City, 30 December 2008.

[45] Crisis Group interviews, shopkeepers and smugglers, Gaza City, 30 December 2008 and 2-4 January 2009. Smugglers explain that even should a few tunnels remain navigable, it is too risky to spend twenty minutes underground to pass into Egypt, and also that they cannot discern from above ground which tunnels might still be intact.

[46] Crisis Group interview, independent political observer, Gaza City, 2 January 2009.

Hamas". But on the sixth day, with his children inconsolable after their house was heavily damaged in the attack on the justice ministry, he changed his tone: "Israel never did anything this bad to Fatah and neither did Hamas. It's clear who the real enemy is. This is aggression against the institutions that serve the people, against what we [the PA] built; it's all been destroyed".[47] Another self-described former "Hamas hater" too had a change of heart, extolling the "Islamic model" over the "corruption" of the PA and its Arab allies. When asked the reason for this conversion, he replied, "They are destroying mosques. They don't want children to know about the Koran or their religion".[48]

Israel is not the only party blamed. While anger toward Israel was predictable, outrage at Egypt and the PA does not lag far behind. A Hamas supporter said, "Abbas and [Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak are using civilians in Gaza to teach Hamas a lesson".[49] At Gaza City's Shifa hospital, victims' families curse Abbas and Mubarak with no less vehemence than they do Israel;[50] a woman crying over her two children – one dead, one brain-damaged – accused them of "killing innocent people in Gaza to teach Hamas a lesson".[51] None of this should be viewed as necessarily translating into support for Hamas; many still resent the movement for its failures in government, its bloody takeover and repressive means. Another grieving woman, who also had lost children, cried that she hoped that "God will exterminate Hamas".[52] But, in many quarters, the intensity of Israel's attacks, the feeling of betrayal at the hands of Egypt as well as the PA and Hamas's steadfastness for now are playing into the Islamic movement's hands.

Despite the Israeli campaign, Hamas appears in control of Gaza. After the massive destruction of their headquarters, internal security forces regrouped. The Qassam Brigades and some civil police members (still referred to locally as the "Executive Forces"[53]) patrolled streets in civilian clothes; some wore badges to establish their official status. They continued to arrest lawbreakers, detaining them in ordinary apartments since prisons have been destroyed; this helps explain why thus far there has been no report of looting or increase in crime. Likewise, security personnel maintained order in breadlines that sometimes stretched to hundreds of people and prevented unrest at the overburdened hospitals, where tempers easily flare.[54] In this, they were aided by "Children of the Mosque" – more commonly known as "drones" – who aspire to a future with the Hamas military wing and today are proving themselves by helping with public order.

The Qassam Brigades divided their functions. Some went underground, preparing for the prospective Israeli land assault and firing rockets; others monitored Israeli drones and airplanes, issued warnings via radio, reported on what had been hit and dispatched aid when possible. Still others patrolled streets on foot, in groups of two or three, and by motorbike.[55] The director of a charitable association said, "they've destroyed our buildings, but we can work from home or underground".[56]

Its self-confidence notwithstanding, Hamas seemingly fears that Fatah sympathisers or others will take advantage of the situation to fuel disturbances. So far, these have been few. Clans and families, many of whom have been victims of Hamas aggression and crave revenge,[57] have refrained from action, aware that the balance of power remains in Hamas's favour.[58]

If rules are broken, Hamas retribution comes quickly. In Gaza City, a Fatah supporter was shot in the leg after giving out chocolates when Israel began bombing.[59] When Israel bombed the Rafah jail during the campaign's first day, four people were killed. At a funeral the next day, a Qassam member shot and killed a mourner who raised a Fatah flag; three others were shot in the leg. A smuggler who observed the incident said, "it was a very clear message. Nobody is crossing Hamas now".[60] Certain Fatah members, whom Hamas deemed security threats, were placed under house ar-

[47] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 2 January 2009.
[48] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 4 January 2009. Another echoed the thought, saying "This is war against Islam". Crisis Group interview, 5 January 2009.
[49] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 30 December 2008.
[50] Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 27 December 2008-4 January 2009.
[51] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 31 December 2008.
[52] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 4 January 2009.
[53] The Gaza interior ministry created the Executive Forces after Hamas seized control of Gaza in June 2007. They were later absorbed into the civil police.
[54] Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 27 December 2008-4 January 2009.
[55] Crisis Group observations and interviews, Qassam members, Gaza City, 27-31 December 2008.
[56] Crisis Group interview, Jabalya, Gaza City, 31 December 2008.
[57] See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°71, *Inside Gaza: The Challenge of Clans and Families*, 20 December 2007 and N°73, *Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas*, 13 March 2008 and Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°24, *Round Two in Gaza*, 11 September 2008.
[58] Crisis Group interviews, political observers, Gaza City, 1-2 January 2009.
[59] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City resident, 2 January 2009.
[60] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 28 December 2008.

rest.[61] Some suspected of collaborating with Israel or Fatah reportedly have been killed by Hamas, though neither Crisis Group nor human rights workers as of yet have been able to verify the allegations.[62]

Demonstrations in principle are allowed but, in practice and due to Hamas concerns, none have taken place since the bombing began. Fearing Israeli airstrikes, Hamas and Islamic Jihad have refrained from gathering; the longstanding prohibition on Fatah gathering has not been lifted.[63] For the same set of reasons, the bodies of those killed in the Israeli assault are released individually to the families and no mass funerals, a standard practice for those Palestinians considered to be martyrs, have been held.[64]

The war still is in its early stages, and it is too early to predict how well Hamas's most important achievement in Gaza, internal security, will hold up now that Israel has launched its ground incursion. That operation caused panic on its first day, 3 January; while Israeli leaflets asked people to evacuate certain neighbourhoods, residents of Gaza City, operating in pitch darkness, had few safe places to which to retreat.[65] Hospitals visited by Crisis Group were completely overwhelmed, with doctors saying they never had seen such quantities of shrapnel in bodies. Among the casualties were many civilians.[66] As of 4 January, Qassam and civil police still could be seen patrolling the streets.

The situation could change. Israel might choose to target all security personnel in which case, and at some point, Hamas could lose effective control. Indeed, it was only after Israel re-occupied Palestinian cities in the West Bank in 2002 that central order broke down.[67] Israel in principle would prefer to avoid a complete breakdown; as one official said, "the only thing worse than Gaza in Gaza is Somalia in Gaza".[68] But, intentionally or not, that could be the outcome of its actions.

It is also too early to predict the ultimate political fallout, with opinions in Gaza divided. There have been few outward displays of anti-Hamas feeling, even though privately many Gazans are critical of Hamas for launching a campaign which far from ending the closure saw it tighten to the point where basic services from telephones to water supplies collapsed. Indeed, since Israel launched its ground invasion, Crisis Group for the first time heard public condemnations, even cursing, of Hamas.[69] Some complain that Hamas is provoking attacks on civilians by fighting

[61] Crisis Group interview, Fatah supporter, Gaza City, 3 January 2009.

[62] Crisis Group staff has been able to confirm only six killings of alleged collaborators, one of which it witnessed at Shifa Hospital on 29 December 2008. That killing was carried out by the collaborator's family to restore its honour, though nearby Qassam members did not intervene. 115 collaborators and 60 political prisoners were incarcerated in the Saraya, Hamas's central jail in Gaza City, when Israel bombed the facility on Sunday, 28 December. Some prisoners were killed in the bombing, while others escaped the destroyed building. Some were followed and killed; others were tracked down at Shifa Hospital, where they had sought medical treatment. 800 criminals also had been imprisoned in the jail but, after the initial Israeli assault on 27 December, their families pressed for their release, and the authorities complied. Gaza interior ministry officials insisted they informed the Red Cross "several times" that there were prisoners in the Saraya who, in the case of collaborators, allegedly were being held for their own protection as much as for their crime. Crisis Group interviews, ministry officials and human rights workers, Gaza City, December 2008. Red Cross officials deny having received notification. Crisis Group interviews, Red Cross official, 31 December 2008. As the Fatah prisoners who survived the Israeli attack escaped, a cameraman from Palestine TV filmed them cursing the Hamas government. The footage was shown repeatedly, much to Hamas's embarrassment. Obviously stung by the incident, Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniya mentioned the Fatah political prisoners in his 31 December speech, saying some were being held and protected at other locations and urging reconciliation after the end of the Israeli campaign. It appears that at least some were removed from the Saraya before it was bombed. Crisis Group interview, Fatah supporter, Gaza City, 3 January 2009.

[63] On the treatment of Fatah under Hamas rule, see Crisis Group Report, *Ruling Palestine I*, op. cit. and Crisis Group Briefing, *Round Two in Gaza*, op. cit.

[64] Crisis Group interviews, hospital workers, Gaza City, 29 December 2008.

[65] Crisis Group observation, Gaza City, 3 January 2009.

[66] Crisis Group observation, Shifa hospital, Gaza City, 4 January 2009. The death toll resulting from the land invasion is very hard to determine as many appear to be burying their dead without bringing them to a hospital. Ibid.

[67] See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°32 *Who Governs the West Bank? Palestinian Administration Under Israeli Occupation*, 28 September 2004. Some Hamas members express concern about what Fatah sympathisers might do should circumstances worsen. One claims to know from interrogations "that Ramallah has issued instructions for Fatah operatives to act at a time of their choosing. Will they plant bombs, assassinate, take revenge?" Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 28 December 2008. A Fatah leader in Gaza discounted such a possibility, at least in the near future. "The ones who know how to play dirty are all out of Gaza now. It shows the stupidity of our leadership: if we had the right people on the ground in Gaza today, we would be much better off". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 29 December 2008.

[68] Crisis Group interview, Israeli security official, Jerusalem, December 2008.

[69] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 4 January 2009.

from populated areas; a few brave individuals have urged the militants to leave particular neighbourhoods, but their demands have not met with success.[70]

But the campaign is pushing many others in the opposite direction, toward revenge and greater resistance. A rise in popular support for rocket fire and other attacks would appear to be the opposite of Israel's hope. While Crisis Group fieldwork indicated that a robust majority opposed the rockets during the ceasefire,[71] and even today some fear they will provoke greater Israeli retribution, casualties are prompting calls for revenge.[72] Some go so far as to suggest that more lethal means should be employed; after her sister's death, a woman said: "The rockets don't cause the same fear and suffering in Israel that we feel here. Only suicide bombings will, and only then will I feel that I can breathe again".[73] Whether or not Hamas has the capacity to conduct such attacks today remains uncertain; Israel's and the PA's security campaigns in the West Bank appear to have seriously degraded militant groups' ability to conduct suicide operations.[74] But the rise in support is a significant, worrying indicator.

Despite these differences, Gazans of all political stripes believe that Israel is targeting civilians to turn them against the Islamic movement. They also think that any success in this regard likely will be short-lived, since when the dust clears, Hamas will still hold valuable cards: its religious appeal, its history of steadfastness against the occupation and most importantly, the lack of a viable alternative to their rule in Gaza and, more broadly, of any prospect for a viable peace with Israel.[75]

III. HAMAS'S PERSPECTIVE

As early as July 2006, Crisis Group warned against a strategy of isolating Gaza. The message sent by Hamas, it reported, was straightforward: "let us govern, or watch us fight. Governing … is what the Islamists have not been permitted to do".[76] The ensuing Gaza takeover and consolidation of Hamas's rule slightly altered the calculus; at a minimum, it meant that its leaders had a greater stake in the status quo and more to lose by provoking an upheaval.[77] But the fundamental equation remained: a situation whereby Hamas could not provide basic goods and address Gazans' fundamental needs was deemed politically unsustainable in the longer run. Notwithstanding reports of disagreement between Hamas's various branches, this position was conveyed to Crisis Group by movement leaders in Gaza and Damascus in almost identical words in the days leading up to the war.[78]

Hamas might not have wished for a full-scale confrontation. There are indications it believed its brinkmanship would force Egypt to mediate a new ceasefire agreement entailing opening of the crossings and persuade Israel to accept it.[79] Three days after the ceasefire's expiration, a Hamas leader in Gaza said, "there is a previous agreement on the truce with conditions that have not been met by Israel. We said that to Egypt several times. We never asked them to mediate in the first place; they made that decision. But they know what to do".[80] The Islamist movement arguably wagered that a steady stream of rockets could force that outcome at minimal cost to itself.

But if all-out war was not intended, it was deemed an alternative preferable to the status quo. Hamas leaders made clear that perpetuation of the existing situation was tantamount to renewal of a one-sided ceasefire, since Palestinians were not getting what for them was a crucial part of the bargain. Said one, "Israel is trying to force us to agree to a new ceasefire unilaterally".[81] In the words of another, "our strategy is to end the

[70] Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, 5 January 2009.
[71] Crisis Group interviews, Gaza, June-December 2008.
[72] Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, Jabalya, Bayt Lahiya, 27-31 December 2008.
[73] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 29 December 2008.
[74] Before going into hiding, a senior Hamas leader in Gaza said he was unsure if the Islamic movement could organise a suicide bombing, "but if we do, I will give out chocolates". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, December 2008. A Palestinian security commander in the West Bank said that he, too, was unsure; he claimed that Hamas's capacities in the West Bank had been greatly reduced in this regard:."Hamas came very close to causing us headaches in West Bank, but instead we've turned the tables and given them brain cancer". Still, he claimed that suicide bombings were easy to execute, "and in times of emotional upheaval, even easier". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 30 December 2008.
[75] Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, 27 December 2008-5 January 2009.

[76] Crisis Group Middle East Report N°57, *Israel/Palestine/Lebanon: Climbing out of the Abyss*, 25 July 2006, p. i.
[77] See Crisis Group Briefing, *Palestine Divided*, op. cit.
[78] Crisis Group interviews, Gaza, Damascus, December 2008.
[79] Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, December 2008. Several Hamas leaders also suggested that the ceasefire was not viable if not extended to the West Bank, though it was unclear whether this was a hard and fast condition for a renewed truce. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, Gaza, December 2008.
[80] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 22 December 2008.
[81] Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, West Bank, 29 December 2008.

siege using all means".[82] Once the movement opted to pressure Israel (and Egypt) through rockets and mortars, it was on a slope that would lead either to a modified ceasefire, powerful Israeli retaliation, or both; there was no third destination. For the Islamist movement to halt the fire without registering gains would have appeared a humiliating retreat. Speaking days after the war began, Usama Hamdan, Hamas's representative in Beirut, argued:

> Before the beginning of the Israeli aggression, all circumstances indicated that the truce had fallen apart. Israel didn't want it; Egypt didn't want to play a role in renewing it. As for us and other Palestinian factions, the status quo wasn't acceptable.[83]

Besides, as Hamas leaders plainly saw it, a confrontation carried potential benefits. Speaking in the wake of Israel's attack, a Hamas spokesperson in Lebanon said:

> We didn't really have a choice. It was either die slowly because of the blockade or more quickly due to confrontation. Israel was telling us, "accept the blockade that is killing you". Despite all the suffering, this aggression put an end to a more painful situation. Now, the whole world is seeing that Palestinians are being killed. Before, people would die and no one would take note.[84]

Taking a page from Hizbollah's 2006 performance, Hamas also anticipated that withstanding attack by a clearly superior foe would boost its status. A spokesman put it this way: "A good performance on our part doesn't necessarily require military victory. It means showing we have the ability to confront and resist Israel even at a high price".[85] The Islamist movement took solace from the groundswell of support, especially throughout the Arab world, where Hamas's image – somewhat tainted by the Gaza takeover and feeling it was resisting attempts at reconciliation with Fatah – appeared to soar from that of Palestinian to pan-Arab actor.

Conversely, the PA's image suffered as casualties mounted in Gaza and the authorities in Ramallah could do nothing but issue bland reprimands. A Hamas leader said, "listen to PA leaders and you'd think you were hearing the UN, calling for restraint by all sides".[86] In the process, Abbas – whose legitimacy in any event will be called into question after the 9 January 2009 expiration of his mandate – is being further weakened. Hamdan's characterisation of the Palestinian president crossed new boundaries:

> This aggression showed that Abu Mazen was involved in the conspiracy against Gaza. He wants to get rid of Hamas and restore his control of Gaza. Even some members of Fatah are embarrassed by his position, blaming Hamas for the aggression. In the West Bank, his troops arrested Hamas supporters and demonstrators. Abbas has lost all credibility.[87]

Even as some Arab leaders redoubled calls for Palestinian unity,[88] Hamas leaders seized the opportunity to shift the terms of debate and impose new conditions. For reconciliation to succeed, said Hamdan, Abbas needs to "clearly and openly condemn Israel's aggression, take real action to stop it, halt all negotiations with Israel and accept a meeting without any precondition".[89] In any event, Hamas presumes that prospects of renewed negotiations between Israel and the PLO will be seriously damaged, at least in the immediate wake of a brutal war. Regionally, the impact already is being felt. Syria halted its indirect negotiations with Israel, even as reports of a putative fifth round were circulating. Turkey, the mediator of those talks, issued some of the harshest criticism of Israel's actions.[90]

With the prospect of a widespread ground invasion looming, some militants took a defiant stance, seeming to invite it, claiming that Israel would be blood-

[82] Ibid.
[83] Crisis Group interview, southern suburb of Beirut, 30 December 2008.
[84] Crisis Group interview, Hamas spokesman, Beirut, 30 December 2008.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Crisis Group interview, December 2008.

[87] Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 30 December 2008. Heightened tensions notwithstanding, an Abbas adviser commented on 4 January that Hamas appeared to be moderating its tone. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 4 January 2009.
[88] At a 31 December 2008 Arab League meeting, Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal argued that Arab nations could not "extend their hand" to the Palestinians as long as they remained divided: "It's time for Palestinian factions to hold a decisive meeting that will lead to (forming) a government of national unity". Agence France-Presse, 31 December 2008. Others echoed that view.
[89] Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 30 December 2008.
[90] Prime Minister Erdogan said, "despite the calls to stop attacks, Israeli officials' statements that operations will last a long time and are in fact open-ended constitute a serious crime against humanity". *Hurriyet*, 28 December 2008. Some Hamas leaders contemplated longer-term consequences. One speculated that the war "will inflame the region, and Iran will take advantage of this. [U.S. President-elect] Obama talked about diplomatic engagement to deal with Iran, but he won't be able to do so given what's happening in Gaza". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 29 December 2008.

ied, unable to achieve its goals, and the movement would emerge strengthened. Prior to the land attack, a Hamas member with close ties to its military wing asserted:

> Qassam cannot confront the airstrikes. They are not stupid, and they are not going to come out now only to be killed. But if there is a ground invasion, Hamas will be able confront them and get a few more Shalits.[91]

Much of this can be viewed as pure bravado. Indeed, such reactions aside, militants and political leaders alike know the dangers posed by a massive land assault. Unlike Hizbollah's leaders in Lebanon, they will be exposed and highly vulnerable, with no territorial depth or sanctuary. Still, only hours before the 3 January ground attack began, a prominent politician in close contact with Hamas leaders said, "Hamas's position has only hardened since the assault began. It is perfectly willing to take on Israel on the ground if that's what it takes".[92] In the words of a Hamas political leader in Gaza only a day prior, "between fighting and opening the crossings, we will choose the latter. But between surrender and fighting, we will fight".[93]

Likewise, Hamas views the most ambitious Israeli objective – to remove Hamas from power in Gaza[94] – as either unrealistic given the absence of an alternative authority or, if somehow accomplished, far from a fatal blow. A movement leader in the West Bank scoffed at the notion, saying Israel would not wish to occupy Gaza in the face of resistance, and no party would wish to assume power as a result of an Israeli attack. "Look at Afghanistan and Iraq. Look at the Village Leagues.[95] Anyone who comes to Gaza on the back of an Israeli tank will be expelled by the people".[96] A Palestinian observer agreed:

> This is wholly unrealistic. Israel left Gaza for a reason and has no interest in coming back in for a sustained period. Who will assume power in its wake? Egypt? An Arab force? An international presence? Not one of them will be willing to assume this task in a hostile environment, which is what it will be. Israel simply would have no exit strategy.[97]

Should Hamas nonetheless be in a position where it no longer can effectively rule Gaza – a situation Israel might create intentionally or unwittingly – a movement leader claims it will simply go underground and "revert to its original state as a resistance movement".[98] During the Egyptian reconciliation drive and again in the wake of the ceasefire, senior Hamas leaders repeatedly emphasised that preserving the movement was more important than preserving the Gaza government.[99] A militant with close ties to the Qassam leadership even saw some advantage should the movement go back to its roots, hinting at the discomfort some have felt at the recent experience in government:

> It would be difficult but in some ways it would be the right way forward. There are some within Hamas who dreamed of assuming power and taking control of ministries. But if all that is gone, then we once again will have the opportunity to attack Israel. True, we achieved some things during the truce, but resistance suffered a setback. Palestine was cut off from the Arab and Islamic worlds. Only renewed resistance can restore those ties.[100]

All of which helps explains why, at this moment at least, Hamas appears in little hurry to end the fighting and why, suffering and degradation of its military arsenal notwithstanding, it views time as on its side. Rightly or wrongly, it believes that the longer the conflict goes on, the more it can register gains, and that Israel scored its most impressive hits in the first 24 hours of the fight. The ground incursion – or so leaders stated before it began – would allow the movement to strike back on more propitious terrain. Meanwhile, by continuing to launch rockets deep into Israel**,** it hopes to elevate its status at home and abroad.

As a result, Hamas has shown no flexibility in its goals, repeatedly insisting on the need to open the crossings as a condition for quiet. The leadership, in-

[91] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 1 January 2009. Other Qassam fighters echoed this sentiment. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, 29-31 December 2008.
[92] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 3 January 2009.
[93] Crisis Group interview, Hamas member, Gaza City, 1 January 2009.
[94] See below for a discussion of possible Israeli objectives. Former Israeli deputy defence minister and Strong Israel party head Ephraim Sneh**,** expressed support for a strategy aimed at toppling Hamas in *The Washington Post*, 1 January 2009.
[95] The Village Leagues, an Israeli-sponsored governing arrangement in the West Bank, were formed in 1982. Israel appointed its leaders to undermine those backed by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation.
[96] Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Ramallah, 29 December 2008.
[97] Crisis Group interview, December 2008.
[98] Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Ramallah, 29 December 2008.
[99] Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, November-December 2008.
[100] Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 28 December 2008.

side and outside Gaza, has displayed no sign of disagreement on this core objective despite repeated reports of internal tensions. Ismail Haniya stressed, in a 31 December speech on Al-Aqsa TV, as did Khalid Mishal in his own speech broadcast on Al-Jazeera three days later, that there would be no change in Hamas's position: only once Israel ends its campaign, lifts the siege and opens all crossings will Hamas stop its rocket fire and rejoin unity talks with Fatah. In Hamdan's words, "the siege itself is a form of aggression. We will not end our response so long as it continues".[101]

This would appear to herald a prolonged, drawn-out conflict. Shifting Hamas's calculus likely will require pressure from its allies (Iran and Syria) or from those it deems both sympathetic and important (Qatar and Turkey); allowing it to boast of some achievement; or both. Ultimately, an end to Gaza's isolation likely will be politically necessary, besides being vital from a humanitarian standpoint. At a minimum, this probably will have to include an opening of the Rafah crossing with Egypt, Hamas's main interest since shortly after its Gaza takeover.[102] A Hamas militant went so far as to claim that the rocket fire in the run-up to the Israeli attack, "though targeting Israel, was aimed at Egypt more than at the Israelis".[103] As Hamdan put it, "if Israel doesn't accept to open the crossings with Gaza, at least Rafah should be opened completely, once and for all, without any conditions", subject only to Palestinian-Egyptian arrangement.[104]

Hamas seems prepared to accept an international presence at the crossing for observation and monitoring purposes – even perhaps a return of Europeans.[105] But regardless of who else will be there, it is sure to insist that it, and not the PA alone, be treated as a legitimate and full partner to the deal and party at the crossings.[106]

One more important note: political developments have vastly complicated the possibility of mediation with Hamas. While Egypt traditionally has taken the lead for political and geographic reasons, its relations with the Islamist movement rarely if ever have been worse. Fawzi Barhum, a Hamas spokesman, attacked Cairo at a 28 December press conference, and others speak in veiled terms of its conspiracy. Besides refusal to provide Hamas with unfettered access through Rafah – a step Cairo contends would violate Israel's agreement with the PA – they cite its alleged deception regarding the timing of an Israeli operation; its alleged marking of tunnels for the benefit of Israeli air attacks;[107] its purported efforts to delay an Arab summit; and its decision to blame Hamas for the escalation.[108]

In light of this situation, the Islamist movement would like to see another third party – possibly Turkey or Qatar – mediate a new ceasefire agreement.[109] As discussed further below, however, it is unlikely Egypt will acquiesce or that either Israel or the U.S. will accept

[101] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 30 December 2008.

[102] At a rally celebrating Hamas's 21st anniversary, Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniya spoke only about "the" crossing, meaning Rafah; and at a press conference on 28 December, Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum also spoke only about Rafah. According to Hamas, Egypt repeatedly rejected calls for it to open Rafah, even after Israel had agreed. Several days before Israel launched its opening salvo against Gaza, a senior Hamas leader alleged (although Crisis Group could not independently confirm) that Israel had given its green light to opening Rafah but Egypt had balked. "Israel doesn't mind opening Rafah but Egypt does. We need to put pressure on Egypt in that regard". Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader**,** Gaza, 24 December 2008. On 30 December, President Mubarak made clear that the crossing would only be opened under PA auspices, meaning that there first needed to be some form of Hamas-Fatah reconciliation. Indeed, in the wake of the ceasefire, a senior Egyptian official told Crisis Group that, Hamas expectations notwithstanding, Rafah would not be open until it agreed to allow the PA to staff the border crossing. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2008.

[103] Crisis Group interview, December 2008.

[104] Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 30 December 2008.

[105] Crisis Group interview, independent political leader, Ramallah, 3 January 2008. Some Hamas leaders appeared to categorically refuse the return of European monitors, as provided in the U.S.-brokered 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access between Israel and the PA. "The Europeans provided cover to the blockade and abandoned their humanitarian role. They are hypocrites". Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 30 December 2008. Other leaders evinced greater flexibility, although they insisted that any arrangement include participation by Hamas's government in Gaza. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, December 2008.

[106] Crisis Group interviews, senior Hamas leaders, Gaza, Damascus and Beirut, December 2008.

[107] A smuggler claimed that Egyptian troops plant red and green flags on the border, the former indicating a tunnel to be targeted, the latter an Egyptian area to be spared. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 30 December 2008.

[108] A West Bank Hamas spokesman sought to cool the atmosphere somewhat, saying "Egyptians and Palestinian are both part of the Arab nation. Our differences are internal. They are under enormous pressure, as are we. We call on them to fight the pressure, just as we are doing". Crisis Group interview, West Bank, 29 December 2008.

[109] Crisis Group interviews, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, 15 December 2008; Ussama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 30 December 2008.

Cairo's sidelining, especially at a time of a brewing regional cold war.[110]

IV. THE PERSPECTIVE FROM THE WEST BANK

The Palestinian Authority and Fatah are not involved in the current Israeli-Hamas confrontation and yet – or as a result – they (especially the former) currently are emerging as among its more notable losers. Abbas in particular is in a delicate spot, unable either to play a significant role or find the right words. He demanded an immediate end to the Israeli attack, return to ceasefire and resumption of the inter-Palestinian dialogue. But many Palestinians felt he was less than full-throated in his condemnation of Israel and objected to his denunciation of Hamas as bearing responsibility for not preventing the fighting.[111] Stung by these criticisms, he and his advisers raised their tone against Israel while softening it toward Hamas.[112]

Their quick adjustments to public opinion notwithstanding, to many in the West Bank it seemed that Abbas was trying to "fight Hamas with Israeli weapons".[113] A presidential adviser lamented this perception, "What can Abbas do? He urged an end to the Israeli aggression. So what? India has done the same, with pretty much the same effect".[114] As the Israeli campaign has unfolded, West Bank political currents seem to be shifting, albeit not yet decisively, their future course depending largely on Gaza's fate.[115]

As news of the Israel attack spread on Saturday, 27 December, spontaneous demonstrations broke out around the West Bank. Protests soon quieted, but then resumed the following Friday after noon prayers, albeit still in relatively small numbers. Ramallah witnessed the largest rallies, with about 2,000 the first week and 3,000 the second, attended by a wide variety of factions and civil society groups, Hamas included. All had agreed beforehand to raise the Palestinian flag only – as opposed to rallies during the second intifada, which were mainly factional affairs – though supporters of several factions violated the understanding. A presidential adviser took pride in the fact that security services pulled down Fatah flags first, though demonstrators claim that Hamas offenders were pursued more aggressively.[116]

Protests were far more tense in Hebron, a Hamas stronghold. Clashes erupted over the issue of flags but also over the lawfulness of the marches themselves. According to one Hamas leader, demonstrations during the first week were met with gunshots, which wounded several;[117] the following week, only men turned up, and, when PA security forces attempted to forcibly disperse 400 Hamas supporters, they were pelted with rocks.[118]

Some PA security officials are concerned that more violent action in the West Bank might take place, aimed at either Israel or the Authority. They are taking precautions. Efforts are made to keep demonstrations to a relatively modest size[119] and protesters at a

[110] A U.S. official made clear that Washington would resist efforts to sideline Egypt – whose positions during the conflict it highly appreciated – especially by Arab countries seeking to marginalise Cairo's role. Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, 31 December 2008.

[111] In a 28 December speech, Abbas said, "We talked to them [Hamas] and we told them, 'please, we ask you, do not end the truce. Let the truce continue and not stop', so that we could have avoided what happened". Some Fatah leaders also say Abbas should have immediately announced the suspension of security cooperation and negotiations with Israel. The PLO Executive Committee did so on 29 December, saying "political negotiations in the coming stage will depend on stopping the [Israeli] aggression". A leader who would have liked the PLO to go further said, "the negotiations in their current framework should be permanently scrapped pending unity in order to make it easier for Hamas to accept PLO membership". Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, 30 December 2008. Another complained of PLO fecklessness. "It's all talk, no action". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 3 January 2009.

[112] Abbas later said, "why would we continue with these negotiations? We will not hesitate to end them if they continue to be a cover for Israeli aggression". Quoted in *Globe and Mail*, 1 January 2009. His office simultaneously tempered the anti-Hamas campaign, which in the initial days had been quite sharp. Early on, a presidential adviser said, "The one responsible for the massacres is Hamas, and not the Zionist entity, which in its own view reacted to the firing of Palestinian missiles". Quoted in *The Washington Post*, 31 December 2008.

[113] Crisis Group interview, Hani Masri, political analyst, Ramallah, 29 December 2008.

[114] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 29 December 2008.

[115] Crisis Group interviews, political observers, Ramallah, 2-3 January 2009.

[116] Witnesses reported three attempts during the first week's Ramallah demonstrations to raise Hamas's flag; the second week, seven Hamas sympathisers were arrested, though after the intervention of protest organisers and a promise to refrain from repeating the behaviour, they were released. Crisis Group crowd interviews, Ramallah, 27 December 2008, 2-4 January 2009.

[117] Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, 3 January 2009.

[118] Associated Press, 2 January 2009.

[119] Crisis Group interview, Palestinian security chief, Ramallah, 27 December 2008.

safe distance from checkpoints where they might provoke Israeli soldiers.[120] Abbas purportedly made clear to the security forces and Palestinian factions that "we will not go back to the old days" of violence against Israel.[121] For now, PA security chiefs express overall confidence,[122] their primary worry emanating from shortcomings in coordination with Israel, despite recent improvements. As one put it, "my biggest fear today is Israeli overreaction. They have not yet concluded that we are really partners".[123]

While these protests have been among the largest in the West Bank since 2002, the relative dearth of big demonstrations in solidarity with Gaza has been striking – especially in comparison with some neighbouring states and particularly given Hamas's calls for a third intifada. As Crisis Group has reported, Hamas clearly has suffered substantial blows in the West Bank; its supporters thus far appear wary of defying the PA.[124] To an extent, restraint also might be a strategic choice, with Hamas banking on Israel's assault garnering it ample sympathy without taking the risk of PA retaliation.[125]

Other explanations lie in widespread exhaustion, demobilisation and cynicism about the utility of popular politics,[126] as well as strong residual resentment at Hamas for its bloody repression against Fatah activists in Gaza. In Jenin, some Fatah supporters allegedly went so far as to distribute chocolates after Israel began air raids.[127] Asked why demonstrations were so light given the magnitude of the death toll in Gaza, a PA security officer replied, "they [the casualties] weren't ours".[128] An independent civil society activist confessed her indecision: "We are in solidarity with Gaza, not Hamas. But when you demonstrate it's confusing; somehow it feels like you are supporting them".[129]

Yet, with every television set tuned to events in Gaza, many suspect the tide will continue to turn. An independent analyst explained: "Emotional identification is the most important thing in this equation. What people see is Israelis killing Palestinians, no matter their political affiliation. Hamas will be viewed as the victim, and people will identify with them".[130] Another analyst predicted that the greater and the longer Hamas's resistance in Gaza, the stronger would be its support, particularly should the Islamists recapture the twin mantles of victims and heroes.[131] Under such circumstances, PA forces could find it harder to crack down against Hamas; already, there are signs that its supporters feel less inhibited, having come out in larger numbers after prayers on 2 January.[132] Some predict broader shifts in West Bank public opinion, from apathy to mobilisation while activists seek to plan larger and better organised protests, although it is far too early to tell whether this will amount to a genuine change.[133]

Abbas and the PA have another problem, closer to home. Within Fatah, too, one senses increased discontent. Some voice criticism of what they see as the leadership's muted response.[134] One castigated the approach pursued by the president's advisers, lumping it together with those of Israel and the U.S.: "Their joint strategy has failed. Over the past eighteen months they have only strengthened Hamas".[135] During a special legislative session on the Israeli assault, a furious Fatah representative lashed out at his bloc's leadership, "You don't represent me".[136] A senior PA security official, not known for any sympathy toward Hamas, said of Israel's strikes against the civil police:

> This is a sad day for Palestinians. Israel used excessive violence. They didn't hit fighters, they hit

[120] Crisis Group observed security forces herding groups of young men away from the crossings. Crisis Group observations, Ramallah, 27-29 December 2008. However, some managed to get through, hurling stones and Molotov cocktails. *Jerusalem Post*, 30 December 2008.
[121] Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, 4 January 2009.
[122] "We are much stronger than a year ago, and I can promise you 100 per cent that there will not be a third intifada". Crisis Group interview, security chief, Ramallah, 30 December 2008.
[123] Ibid. On security reform under Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°79, *Ruling Palestine II: The West Bank Model?*, 17 July 2008.
[124] See Crisis Group Briefing, *Palestine Divided*, op. cit.
[125] Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, West Bank**,** 29 December 2008.
[126] Crisis Group asked a group of men in a Ramallah restaurant watching news coverage of the Gaza assault whether they had attended a political rally in solidarity with Gaza. None had. One said, "what's the point? It doesn't do any good. We've demonstrated for years in vain". Crisis Group interview, 3 January 2009.
[127] Crisis Group interview, Palestinian politician, Ramallah, 3 January 2009.
[128] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 27 December 2008.
[129] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 29 December 2008.
[130] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 29 December 2008.
[131] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 29 December 2008.
[132] Crisis Group interview, Palestinian politician and protest organiser, Ramallah, 3 January 2009.
[133] In this vein, the leader of a small party spoke of the rise of "collaborative organising and spontaneous popular action". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 3 January 2009.
[134] A political analyst commented that Abbas reacted "as if he was talking about a foreign country". Crisis Group interview, Mouin Rabbani, Amman, 3 January 2009.
[135] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 30 December 2008.
[136] Crisis Group interview, Palestinian politician in attendance, Ramallah, 3 January 2009.

> women, children, people just trying to get by, just trying to earn a living. This was a strike against Gaza, not Hamas.[137]

Echoing fears that the PA increasingly will be seen as Israel's collaborator in the West Bank – akin to what was once the reputation of the South Lebanon Army (SLA)[138] – a PA security chief said, "I am not [SLA chief] Lahud. I am here to protect my people, not Israelis. They are making that difficult, and if this continues, this all will explode. I won't stick around for that. I'll simply go home".[139]

Angry at both their leadership and Israel and worried that Hamas will reap the benefits of its Gaza stance, some Fatah supporters are chafing. Fatah marchers in Ramallah did not evince much affection for their security services, chanting, "CIA get out, from Baghdad to Ramallah" – a reflection of growing conviction among Palestinians that the U.S. pulls the strings.[140] As tensions mounted, some protests turned more violent; five young men were killed in clashes with Israeli soldiers. Tellingly, all were Fatah supporters.[141]

Many critics within Fatah advocate taking advantage of the current crisis to push for inter-Palestinian reconciliation. As a prominent member of this camp explained, the only way for the movement to stay afloat and revive Palestinian fortunes is to unequivocally call for a complete and unconditional cessation of Israeli attacks; release of all Hamas prisoners in the West Bank; and the scrapping – not merely suspension – of the current negotiations with Israel, instead giving immediate priority to Palestinian unity, out of which a new and more inclusive negotiating framework might emerge**.** He said, "this will make Abu Mazen part of the solution instead of part of the problem. The national movement needs to benefit from Hamas's strength, not destroy it".[142]

That said, a very different – indeed opposite – view exists within the movement. The unexpectedly intense Israeli campaign raised hopes among some Palestinians that Hamas might lose power in Gaza. A presidential adviser noted that Hamas was far weaker than Hizbollah, did not enjoy the same Iranian and Syrian support and was not as deft and pragmatic as the Lebanese movement.[143]

For the PA leadership and many within Fatah, the worst outcome would be an Israeli military operation that only marginally degraded Hamas's capability, leaving it in control of Gaza and in possession of a far vaster reservoir of domestic and regional backing. Victorious and stronger than before, it could be in a position to shift the domestic balance of power to its advantage and seriously damage Fatah's prospects, let alone those of credible Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Current and former PA security officials predicted from the outset a land incursion. One said, "if Israel only bombs from the air, Hamas will simply rebuild. No, Israel will come in, destroy tunnels and weapons facilities, target Hamas leaders and the like".[144]

The question, they say, is what Israel will do the day after. Ensuring that Hamas no longer has the ability to control Gaza – by systematically targeting instruments and symbols of authority – would, a Fatah leader said, "fundamentally change reality on the ground; there would be no going back. Conversely as long as Hamas rules, in however weakened a state, the people of Gaza will suffer".[145] Should Israel take that route, some Palestinian officials have gone so far as to suggest that Gaza be handed over to Arab or international forces before reverting to the Ramallah-based PA.[146] "Who knows", said a presidential adviser, "maybe this crisis can change the rules of the game".[147] Asked whether it would be politically palatable for Fatah to return to Gaza in the wake of an Israeli assault, a movement leader said:

> Putting it that way fundamentally misunderstands the problem. The embarrassment for Fatah would be *not* to follow international troops into Gaza, since that would return our people to the suffering of life under Hamas. There needs to be an end to Hamas control in Gaza and to do that, all means are open. A responsible party needs to take over;

[137] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 27 December 2008.
[138] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, November 2008.
[139] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 30 December 2008.
[140] Crisis Group interviews, demonstrators, 29-30 December 2008.
[141] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, 4 January 2009.
[142] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, 30 December 2008.
[143] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 4 January 2009.
[144] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 28 December 2008.
[145] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, 30 December 2008.
[146] Crisis Group interviews, PA officials and Fatah leaders, Ramallah, 29-30 December 2008. A Palestinian security chief doubted that Arab troops alone would suffice and explained that for political as well as technical coordination, the PA would have to participate at least through the presence of liaison officers. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 30 December 2008.
[147] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 4 January 2009.

> first Arab or international forces, then the PA. We cannot leave our people exposed like that.[148]

Echoing such sentiments, a presidential adviser spoke of the political possibilities such a scenario might open up, hinting that turning over Gaza to international and then PA rule could help resolve the internal crisis and accelerate Israeli-Palestinian negotiations:

> We've been engaged in fruitless negotiations with Israel over the last fifteen years; more recently, we've been paralysed by the situation in Gaza. We could fundamentally change both equations by introducing international forces to the West Bank and Gaza, in order to preserve the unity of territory and make clear this move is about ending occupation and not an international occupation of Gaza.[149]

Few are prepared to openly voice such views. Indeed, the notion that the movement could gain from a bloody Gaza campaign, with a heavy death toll and considerable destruction, even after an interlude marked by an Arab or international force presence, appears fanciful if not dangerous to many. As a Fatah leader asked rhetorically, "all that blood simply to create a government with no credibility?" Under such circumstances, he added, Palestinian elections could not be seen as remotely legitimate. He concluded: "This is impossible. Abbas would lose whatever authority he maintains within Fatah".[150]

The final impact of events in Gaza on the West Bank remains unclear. What is less uncertain is the toll it is taking on the PA leadership's fortunes. Mustafa Barghouti, a former presidential candidate and head of the Palestinian National Initiative, put it characteristically bluntly:

> The current crisis demonstrates to many that Abbas is incapable of representing or protecting his people. If he has good relations with the U.S., why can't he stop an assault on his own people? If he doesn't have good relations with the U.S., then what has he been doing the last four years? Good relations with the U.S. was his whole program. Likewise, if negotiations with Israel are not working, he should resign; if negotiations are working, why is Israel doing this to Gaza?[151]

[148] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, 30 December 2008.
[149] Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, 29 December 2008.
[150] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, 30 December 2008.
[151] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 3 January 2009.

V. ISRAEL'S PERSPECTIVE: A BATTLE TO ALTER THE RULES OF THE GAME

The ceasefire was unwritten and negotiated via a third party. Hamas's and Israel's understanding of its terms differed substantially. Hamas believed it had achieved a six-month period providing phased access to and for Gaza; Israel viewed it as open-ended,[152] with a modulated opening of the crossings depending on the degree of calm in the south and progress toward Gilad Shalit's release. The two sides accused one another of bad faith. Hamas protested Israel's continued limitations on supply-flows into Gaza. Israel denounced continued, albeit occasional, rocket fire, objected to Hamas's arms build-up and criticised lack of serious negotiations over a prisoner exchange.

Dissatisfaction aside, and despite loud disapproval from certain political circles which saw the truce as a thinly veiled cover for Hamas's strengthening, Israel's leadership – in particular defence officials – appeared desirous of prolonging the ceasefire. Ehud Barak, the defence minister and Labour Party leader, made clear that he saw little benefit in a wide-ranging military operation with unclear objectives, an uncertain outcome and evident risks for the life of the kidnapped soldier.[153] Even as rocket fire from Gaza intensified after 4 November, he held back, purportedly in the hope that the ceasefire would be renewed.

But there were limits. Israel adamantly rejected any alteration in its understanding of the ceasefire to Hamas's benefit, namely an opening of the crossings that would have handed the Islamist movement a victory and removed one of Israel's key instruments of leverage and pressure. A former senior IDF officer commented: "Hamas thought that with increased rocket fire they could secure Israel's agreement to a ceasefire at the price of a full opening of passages and a free hand on the border. They were wrong".[154] In

[152] Lecture by Amos Gilad, head of the defence ministry's diplomatic-security bureau, attended by Crisis Group, Jerusalem, 10 September 2008. Crisis Group interview, Itamar Yaar, former deputy head of the National Security Council, Jerusalem, 30 December 2008.
[153] Crisis Group interview, former senior Israeli official, December 2008. An Israeli analyst backed this view: "Ehud Barak tried hard to prevent this; he did not want this outcome, did not think an operation was necessary or wise". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, December 2008.
[154] Crisis Group phone interview, former IDF brigade commander in the Gaza Strip, 29 December 2008. An analyst expressed a different view: "It was a mistake to use the passages to choke Hamas and fight them into a corner. We

this sense, the issue might have been less to keep the crossings closed than not to give in to Hamas's insistence that they be opened.

For Israel, it was important to persuade not only Hamas but others in the region that the Islamist movement could not extract concessions through violence – that it "was not Israel's equal. That notion, which is inherent in the concept of mutual deterrence, is one Barak rejects".[155]

By the same token, the government could not sit passively under continued rocket fire. In this regard, the upcoming general elections scheduled for 10 February played a real but only secondary role, influencing the scope, intensity and precise timing of the offensive. Rivals endlessly chided Barak for abandoning Israelis to Gaza's rockets. One of his advisers, however, insisted to Crisis Group: "Going to war in an election period is not a wise move. One knows how to get into a war but not how to get out. The whole thing can turn upside down very easily. Barak simply felt he has to do it, and do it now, in order to achieve the main goal – stopping the fire on Sderot and the south".[156] Regardless of the electoral season, virtually any Israeli government would have felt compelled to react.

Once the war was launched, Israel sought to bear in mind the lessons of the 2006 conflict with Hizbollah. In many respects, it did. As a former official put it, "remember, Barak's real foe is not Hamas. It is the memory of 2006".[157] Unlike the rush to battle in Lebanon, the Gaza operation was months in the making; Israel's civil defences were much improved; and, in sharp contrast to the preceding battle, the government refrained from publicly articulating ambitious objectives which, if unmet, would spell defeat.[158] Over the past two years, moreover, Israel's troops underwent significant training to prepare precisely for this kind of eventuality.

Objectively, too, conditions differ markedly. Hamas is less armed and well-supplied than was Hizbollah. Hemmed in by Egypt, Israel and the sea, it lacks the strategic depth enjoyed by its Lebanese counterpart and cannot replenish a depleted rocket stock. Whereas Hamas rules Gaza, the pro-Western government of Fouad Siniora ruled Lebanon, complicating Israel's (and the West's) moves. Nor is Gaza the topographic equivalent to Lebanon, where a myriad of natural obstacles impeded the advance of foreign troops. What was not possible in Lebanon – substantial degradation of the militant group's arsenal and killing or capturing its key leadership through a ground invasion – is, theoretically at least, within reach. A former senior U.S. military commander explained:

> Gaza is much different militarily than Southern Lebanon. The battlefield can be fully isolated and it is relatively small in scale. By handling it piece by piece, Israel just might succeed over a period of weeks in identifying, combating and eliminating most of Hamas's armed resistance and its leadership.[159]

Barak aimed to mark his difference with his predecessor, Amir Peretz, in his military style, too. Reluctant to act, Barak went all-out once the decision was made. The initial bombardment from air and sea elicited widespread satisfaction in military circles. It targeted the locations of Hamas's rule over Gaza: police

forced Hamas to fight if it wanted to deliver to its population". Crisis Group interview, Herzliya, 29 December 2008.

[155] Crisis Group interview, former Israeli minister, 30 December 2008. A former brigade commander in the Gaza strip put it more colourfully: a negotiated arrangement was possible, he said, but Hamas had fallen victim of hubris, allowing as a Hebrew expression would have it, "the piss to rise to their heads". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 29 December 2008.

[156] Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 30 December 2008. It is true that, under his leadership, Labour's poll ratings had slumped to a stunningly low level; conversely, since the war Labour's projected share of the parliament (Knesset) that is to be elected has doubled from eight to sixteen seats. See *Haaretz*, 1 January 2009. Moreover, the war for now has silenced his critics. Still, the defence minister is cognisant of the vagaries of war and politics, and this remains a gamble until the conflict's outcome – and electoral results – are known.

[157] Crisis Group interview, former Israeli minister, 30 December 2008.

[158] In 2006, the government's conditions for a ceasefire – release of captured soldiers, an end to rocket attacks, deployment of the Lebanese army along the border and some form of Hizbollah disarmament – were so grandiose as to virtually preordain failure. The Winograd Commission, established after the war to draw lessons, strongly advised against setting too high a bar in government declarations and concluded: "The Prime Minister is responsible for the fact that … the declared goals were over-ambitious and not feasible. The Prime Minister did not adapt his plans once it became clear that the assumptions and expectations of Israel's actions were not realistic and were not materialising. All of these add up to a serious failure in exercising judgment, responsibility and prudence". Winograd Commission interim report, official website, at www.vaadatwino.org.il/pdf/press%20release%20april%2030-yd-final.pdf**.** By contrast "unlike the Lebanon bombast, Barak's opening moves had humble aims". Crisis Group interview, former military intelligence officer, 2 January 2009. An adviser to Barak pointed this out, noting in particular that Israel did not make Shalit's release a condition of victory. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 29 December 2008.

[159] Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, 4 January 2009.

stations on the first day, killing over 200 Palestinians, the highest recorded number in a single day in the occupied Palestinian territories since 1967; the tunnel supply lines on the second; and homes of Hamas leaders and government buildings on subsequent ones. The overwhelming force initially disrupted Hamas's radio communications and at least for a time damaged its command and control.[160]

By the close of the first week, all police stations, the homes of all Hamas field commanders, every military training centre and the pro-Hamas university had been hit, while coastal patrol and port facilities were destroyed. A former defence official said, "with an armada of fighter planes attacking Gaza, Israel decided to play the role of a mad dog for the sake of future deterrence".[161] One of the defence minister's advisers asserted:

> A key lesson Barak drew from the 2006 Lebanon War is the crucial importance of who is seen as victor and who as loser. He believes Israel's power of deterrence decreased in the Second Lebanon War. He will, therefore, not allow this campaign not to reach its objectives or to end with the appearance of an Israeli defeat.[162]

Israel's political factions have displayed remarkable unity, suspending their election campaign. Critics on the right, who had emphasised the limitations of a caretaker prime minister to make peace, fell silent when faced with his powers to wage war.

Yet, as the dust settles from the initial punch, observers inside and out have begun to point to some uncomfortable echoes of the Lebanon campaign. Far from submitting to overwhelming force, Hamas – as Hizbollah before – fired rockets of unprecedented depth, reaching 46 kilometres west to Beersheva and north into central Israel, bringing some 900,000 Israelis within range and forcing residents in the central city of Rishon le-Tzion to seek refuge in bomb shelters.[163] Targets reportedly included one of Israel's main air bases, Palmachim.[164] While to date there have been very few Israeli casualties (four), the psychological impact caused by frequent alerts is severe. A resident of Yavne, a town in central Israel, said, "the siren to seek shelter has sounded twenty times in the past four days. We haven't slept, except fitfully".[165] Schools, colleges and shopping malls have been closed, and many normal aspects of communal life have come to a halt.

As the conflict escalated, so too did Israeli defence officials' assessment of the desired end state; predictably, the inability to force Hamas into submission and its long range rocket fire led Israel to expand its goals. After a week of fighting, a former intelligence officer, who previously had listed only modest objectives, said, "given the range of Hamas's rockets, we now know it can target far beyond Israel's southern periphery. In this sense, Israel no longer is fighting Hamas alone; it is fighting a small Iran inside Israel".[166] With time, earlier reported differences between security officials seeking a prompt exit strategy and politicians aspiring to reshape the political map appear to have considerably narrowed. The emerging consensus centres on an air and land campaign aimed not only at ending rocket fire but also at destroying or at least seriously impairing Hamas's long-range rocket capabilities, security apparatus and longer-term threat potential, halting or seriously reducing weapons smuggling and barring any Hamas activity within a perimeter of several hundred metres from Israeli borders.

Such goals can be pursued in different ways. These range from intimidating and deterring Hamas, to punishing it to the point where it has no choice but to accept an international resolution congruent with Israeli demands, to physically removing and destroying both rockets and leadership. With air power, Israel could ensure Hamas pays a heavy price for continued rocket fire, degrade its capabilities and reduce the risk of a future large-scale attack "at a minimum for a couple of years".[167] But it could not eliminate the rocket threat and, as a Barak adviser conceded, "a ceasefire followed by a resumption of daily rocket fire is tantamount to failure".[168] Nor would it have dealt Hamas

[160] By the third day of fighting, however, a Crisis Group analyst in Gaza confirmed reports by foreign radio monitors that Hamas's radio communications once again were operational. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Jerusalem, 31 December 2008.
[161] Crisis Group interview, former defence ministry senior adviser, Jerusalem, 28 December 2008.
[162] Crisis Group interview, Barak adviser, Jerusalem, 30 December 2008.
[163] Israeli newspaper *Yisrael Ha-Yom*, 1 January 2009.
[164] Crisis Group interview, former Israeli military intelligence official, 2 January 2009. For background see www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/israel/palmachim.htm.
[165] Crisis Group interview, resident of Yavne, a town in central Israel, 2 January 2009.
[166] Crisis Group interview, 2 January 2009.
[167] Crisis Group interview, former military intelligence officer, 2 January 2009.
[168] Crisis Group interview, Barak adviser, Jerusalem, 30 December 2008. The prime minister made the same point forcefully: "Let's say we unilaterally stopped, and a few days

the psychological blow deemed necessary or compelled it to accept more stringent ceasefire conditions; to the contrary, having withstood the attacks without capitulation, the Islamist organisation almost certainly would claim victory.

After what were considered highly successful two days of aerial bombing, Israel began running out of prime targets without having achieved a major military knockout. Three days into the fighting, the defence ministry dispatched troops along Gaza's border and called up several thousand more; on 2 January, six brigades were said to be mobilised, along with ambulance and other assets required for an operation. That same day, Israel dropped leaflets warning Gaza residents and allowed hundreds of foreigners to leave Gaza, strong indicators of an imminent assault. As the operation's first week came to a close, a defence analyst with close ties to Barak told Crisis Group, "without a rapid new ceasefire, Israel will have to cross the line from an aerial to a territorial attack. Continuation of the present situation will lead Israel to enter Gaza. There's no middle way".[169]

On day eight of the operation, ground forces did enter Gaza, officially with the goal of "destroying the Hamas terror infrastructure in the area of operations", including by "taking some of the launch areas used by Hamas".[170] Within 24 hours, over 5,000 Israeli soldiers had taken much open ground, west of the border, in the north and south. This included the former settlements of northern Gaza, much of the farmland along the border, the destroyed airport in the south and the former Netzarim settlement in central Gaza. Gaza effectively was cut in three.[171] On 4 January, the army was calling up tens of thousands of reservists in anticipation of a much deeper operation.

Where might it end? Analysts advanced several possible scenarios. After occupying segments of Gaza – in the north to minimise the threat of rocket firing deep into Israel and in the south to limit weapons smuggling and cut Hamas off from its funding sources and access to the Arab hinterland[172] – Israel could accept a ceasefire agreement as long as it included the presence of an international force to which it would hand over responsibility. While in Gaza, troops are likely to seek to kill large numbers of Hamas fighters, while special forces could carry out more spectacular missions (eg, the assassination or seizure of top-level Hamas political or military leaders; Shalit's release; destruction of rocket stockpiles).

A more far-reaching option would involve – besides the occupation of areas in the north and south – a broader, deeper land incursion with entry into major cities, aimed at decapitating Hamas's leadership, killing or seizing Qassam and Executive Force members and dismantling its levers of power. In the words of a usually well-informed former intelligence officer, "we will aim for Hamas's military backbone, which includes the thousands in Hamas's Executive Force. We will fight a guerrilla force in a populated urban area, facing snipers and road-side bombs".[173]

Such an operation – potentially of relatively short duration – would seek to dramatically cripple Hamas and strengthen Israel's position as much as possible before a Security Council-backed ceasefire with meaningful enforcement mechanisms is in place. But the dynamics of warfare (Israel's desire to press its advantage, Hamas's continued resistance or its rejection of ceasefire terms) could push the undertaking much farther. At some point, the demolition of Hamas's security apparatus could lead – wittingly or not – to the end of Islamist rule in Gaza, should the movement no longer be in a position to ensure basic order. The demolition of virtually all instruments and symbols of authority, including government buildings and ministries, already points in that direction.[174]

from now a barrage fell on Ashkelon....Do you understand the consequences in Israel and the region for Israeli deterrence?" Quoted in *Haaretz*, 1 January 2009.

[169] Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 28 December 2008.

[170] Military spokeswoman, quoted in *Haaretz*, 3 January 2009.

[171] Crisis Group interviews, Israeli military analyst and UN monitors, Jerusalem, 4-5 January 2009.

[172] Such options have been contemplated by the defence minister for some time, especially the capture of a zone near the Egyptian border. Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, June-December 2008.

[173] Crisis Group interview, former military intelligence officer, 2 January 2009. A reservist formerly with Israel's southern command told Crisis Group that, in the event of a land invasion, rules of engagement would be far different from what applied during the Lebanon war. "In Lebanon, we were told to be humane and asked to identify carefully the targets and only fire when certain. In the dense urban Gaza context, this is impossible. We will be told to shoot when in doubt, take no risks for our lives". Crisis Group interview, 1 January 2009.

[174] As Ethan Bronner, the head of *The New York Times* Jerusalem office, astutely observed, "even if Israel intends to hold back from completely overthrowing Hamas, its choice of assault tactics could head that way anyway. And the Israelis may already be facing a kind of mission creep: after all, if enough of Hamas's infrastructure is destroyed, the prospect of governing Gaza, a densely populated, refugee-filled area whose weak economy has been devastated by the Israeli-led boycott, will be exceedingly difficult". *The New York Times*, 3 January 2009.

For some Israelis, this in any event should be the official goal, on grounds that anything less would allow Hamas to assert victory, regroup and emerge stronger. Ephraim Sneh, a former deputy defence minister and long a proponent of regime change in Gaza, wrote "the true objective is not to end the rocket fire. The true objective should be the end of Hamas rule in Gaza. Israel cannot resign itself to having a missile and terror base five miles from one of its principal cities, Ashkelon".[175] Under this scenario, Israel would seek to hand Gaza – or those parts under its control – over to international forces and subsequently to the PA, while allowing Egypt to reopen Rafah under greater supervision to guard against smuggling.

For now, Sneh appears to be in a minority, though the situation is fluid and shifting by the day. While toppling Hamas is, in the words of a former minister, many officials' "wet dream",[176] defence officials and Barak in particular are believed to be less than sanguine about the potential death toll, their capacity to succeed and even the likely consequences of success.[177] In the first days of the war, a former Israeli deputy foreign minister said, "the last thing the leadership wants is to be in a situation where it has to rule Gaza. If we don't, what will replace Hamas? Abbas will find it difficult to take control on the back of Israeli bayonets".[178] Echoing these concerns, an analyst remarked:

> What would the day after be? Would Israel reoccupy Gaza and rule a population made all the more hostile by the military assault that preceded it? Would it try to hand power over to a discredited PA, which quickly would be viewed as stooges? Which international forces would be willing to come in and take the reins over from us? And if the day after we leave 200,000 Gazans rally in support of Hamas, who do you think will come out the victor? Without an exit strategy, reoccupation and regime change present us with enormous risks.[179]

As with the U.S. in Iraq, in other words, Israel might well accomplish its goals but then be faced with the implications of – in President Bush's famous words – a "catastrophic success".

Other factors could well enter the equation. One is home front morale, for now exceptionally high but which could begin to erode should the campaign be prolonged or Israeli casualties mount. The other is strong international pressure to bring operations to a close. As discussed below, this is not yet the case; however, as time elapses and Arab anger rises, calculations might shift. Members of the international community also have learned lessons from the 2006 war, when an extended military campaign eroded the credibility of pro-Western Arab states, radicalised public opinion and boosted militants' fortunes without fundamentally altering the situation on the ground.

VI. WHERE HAVE THE MEDIATORS GONE?

Handicapped by their self-imposed ban on communications with Hamas, international power-brokers found themselves largely without a Gaza presence and consequent leverage during the descent towards violence. Most diplomatic missions have long since wound down operations there, and visits have grown increasingly rare, further constrained by Israel's access restrictions.

Other factors minimised the international role: transition in the U.S.; the EU's unwieldy collective decision-making process, which requires consensus among its 27 member states; and serious Arab divisions reflecting mounting polarisation between those who exclusively blamed Israel for the fighting and those who assigned at least some responsibility to Hamas. As a result of the latter, the Arab League was unable to meet for several days, as members wrangled over the timing, place and level of the gathering. Likewise, at a 28 December 2008 Gulf Cooperation Council summit, officials repeatedly denounced

[175] Ephraim Sneh, "Why Israel is Bombing Gaza", *The Washington Post*, 1 January 2009.
[176] Crisis Group interview, former minister, December 2008.
[177] "Our aim is not to … topple the Hamas regime. This is not the aim set forward by the cabinet to the IDF. The aim is to change the equation, to create deterrence, so that they will stop firing for as long as possible….If we can do it through pinpointed airstrikes, then so be it. If not, we're not deterred from further actions on the ground". Defence minister's chief of staff, Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, interviewed on "Newshour", Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), 31 December 2008, at www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/middle_east/july-dec08/gazatunnels_12-31.html.
[178] Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 30 December 2008.
[179] Crisis Group interview, Israeli analyst, December 2008. Matti Steinberg, a security analyst, made similar points: "In the event of invasion, there will be many casualties, mainly Palestinians, but also Israelis. Abbas will be judged a collaborator and doomed; Egypt could be threatened, as Palestinians flee in its direction". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 28 December 2008.

Hamas for its Iranian and Syrian loyalties.[180] Contributing mightily to the initial reluctance to intervene, some regional and international parties welcomed the push to cut Hamas down to size.[181]

The most notable absentee was Egypt, still smarting from Hamas's snub of its initiative at inter-Palestinian reconciliation. In the opening days of the fighting, Cairo did not undertake a major effort to renew the ceasefire and, despite explicit appeals from Hamas leaders to reopen the Rafah crossing – including after bombardments began – President Mubarak explicitly conditioned this on a resumption of PA control, pursuant to the 2005 Access and Movement Agreement. Clashes erupted between Egyptian security forces and Hamas militants, leading to the death of one Egyptian officer; as Israeli bombardments caused breaches in the wall, 150 Gazans crossed through on 28 December.[182]

Hamas, Egyptian officials suggested, needlessly provoked Israel by refusing to extend the ceasefire;[183] hostility also was related to Hamas's close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood[184] and Iran.[185] In the words of an Egyptian official, "Hamas was reluctant to pursue inter-Palestinian reconciliation and reluctant to pursue the *tahdia* [ceasefire]. Hamas felt it was invincible. It is important to convince it that it is not".[186] As seen, Egypt's anger at Hamas was reciprocated in kind.

Accordingly, the story of the descent into violence is, in part, the story of an absent third-party mediator in a context where adversaries refuse to talk. At the outset, Hamas and Israel were left to either fight or restrain themselves on their own. Gazans interpreted this as proof world leaders had abandoned them; Israel as evidence of a green light for a mission to at least humble the Islamists. An Israeli official said, "the international community and the PA cannot play a role in the Gaza Strip without Israel clearing a way for them. They want us to sacrifice our lives for them".[187]

After four days of televised bombardment, nervousness about both the rising humanitarian toll and the prospect that the Gaza campaign could replicate the 2006 Lebanon war induced regional and international leaders to some action.[188] Washington appeared to have learned at most half of that war's lesson. Unlike two years ago, the U.S. – directly and through the Quartet – called for a ceasefire and, at this writing, was preparing a Security Council resolution to that effect. U.S. officials privately said that, still stung by the experience of 2006, Secretary Rice was pressing for an early American initiative to end hostilities, though Israeli resistance was slowing this down.

> Rice has very bad memories of 2006, when she feels she never quite knew what Israel's objectives were and was stuck in the uncomfortable position of resisting calls for a ceasefire, thereby damaging U.S. interest. This time, she is far more willing to be proactive. But there are countervailing pressures; Israel is asking not to be prematurely constrained, and this must be taken into account.[189]

But the U.S. accompanied the call for a ceasefire with conditions (designed to make it durable) that negated

[180] Crisis Group interview, Arab journalist attending summit, 28 December 2008.

[181] A European official commented: "We face a short-term dilemma: should we call for a ceasefire and allow Hamas to emerge victorious as Hizbollah did from the Lebanon War?" Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 28 December 2008. Another European diplomat complained: "The international community is adopting a posture of ultimate cynicism. It is waiting to see how far Israel goes, while offering to mop up with a humanitarian effort". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 29 December 2008.

[182] Crisis Group interviews, December 2008.

[183] "Unfortunately, they (Hamas) served Israel the opportunity on a golden platter to hit Gaza". Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheith, quoted in *Jerusalem Post*, 1 January 2009.

[184] Shortly before the war, Hamas leaders in Gaza staged a massive rally in which four of the founding members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza pledged their loyalty to the organisation. Crisis Group observation, 14 December 2008. Other unconfirmed media reports pointed to growing tension; according to one, Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood held talks in a bid to organise protests against Gaza's closure outside Egyptian embassies in European and Arab countries (*Al-Hayat* and *Yediot Ahronot*, 8 December 2008), while another claimed that Egyptian security forces had arrested 23 Brotherhood members preparing a meeting to discuss the Gaza war. Deutsche Presse-Agentur, 30 December 2008.

[185] Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official, 30 December 2008. In his words, "the situation in Gaza has more to do with Hamas's relations with the region than confrontation with Israel".

[186] Ibid. He added: "Hamas should make it clear that it wants Egyptian mediation. What they did is utterly ignore all Egyptian advice. They have to choose: do they need us more than the Iranians?"

[187] Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, 30 December 2008.

[188] Crisis Group interviews, European official, Jerusalem and U.S. official, Washington DC, 31 December 2008.

[189] U.S. official, Washington DC, 31 December 2008. Another official asked, "what are Israel's goals? Sometimes, it appears as if they have not learned from the Lebanon war that, at the end of the day, they will not be in a position to achieve their most ambitious objectives. They need to define their objectives and understand there will have to be some give if the other side is going to accept a resolution". Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, December 2008.

any purported sense of urgency, insisting that Hamas take the first step in halting rocket fire and rejecting any cessation of hostilities that did not include an end to weapons smuggling – an echo of Rice's 2006 opposition to an immediate ceasefire and insistence that certain political conditions first be met.[190] As President Bush put it, "another one-way cease-fire that leads to rocket attacks on Israel is not acceptable. And promises from Hamas will not suffice – there must be monitoring mechanisms in place to help ensure that smuggling of weapons to terrorist groups in Gaza comes to an end".[191] As a result, the world was treated to the familiar spectacle of Washington seeking to slow down UN Security Council action.

Europeans – many of whom, French and British in particular, also have bruises from the 2006 confrontation – evinced greater alarm at the rapidly deteriorating situation. On 30 December, the EU issued a statement calling for an "immediate and permanent ceasefire", which it defined as "unconditional halt to rocket attacks by Hamas on Israel and an end to Israeli military action".[192] France, in its waning days as EU president, displayed welcome and by now habitual activism, proposing a 48-hour cessation of hostilities to allow for humanitarian access as well as negotiation of mechanisms for a lasting ceasefire.[193] French President Sarkozy and a separate EU delegation arrived in the region on 4 January to present ceasefire proposals.[194] Despite its divisions, the Arab League issued a resolution calling for an immediate stop to Israeli military operations and an end to Gaza's blockade.[195] The UN Secretary-General, too, called for an immediate end to hostilities.

At the same time, several regional states stepped forward with offers to mediate. Qatar, one of the few Arab countries to both retain a permanent foreign presence in Gaza and openly host senior Israeli officials, considered dispatching an envoy. Turkey, which has been brokering indirect Israeli-Syrian talks with considerable finesse and which both Israel and Hamas view as a critical player, also expressed interest in helping. Prime Minister Erdogan visited several Arab countries, including Egypt and Syria, and one of his top aides met with Hamas leaders in Damascus. His proposed initiative called for a halt to Israel's military operations and Hamas's rocket fire as well as an international mechanism, possibly including a small armed international contingent, to ensure the opening of Gaza's border crossings and monitoring of weapons smuggling.[196]

Involvement of such actors, which enjoy credibility with and leverage over Hamas (or its Syrian ally), could be critical. By the end of the first week of fighting, the rudiments of a coordinated approach by several nations aimed at a cessation of violence had begun to crystallise, faster than they did in the Lebanese case.

So far, however, such an approach has found few takers in Israel. Foreign ministry officials informed diplomats that Israel opposed any immediate truce, since

[190] See Crisis Group Report, *Climbing out of the Abyss*, op. cit., p. 22.

[191] Quoted in *Haaretz*, 2 January 2009. In the early stages of the war, officials conceded that differences existed between the State Department (which emphasised the urgency of the demand for a ceasefire) and the White House (which insisted that any ceasefire be "sustainable", implying the need for steps to curtail Hamas's military capacity and placing virtually the entire onus on the Islamist group). Acknowledging this nuance, a U.S. official explained use of the term "immediate and sustainable ceasefire" as a compromise between the two. Crisis Group interview, Washington, December 2008.

[192] See http://www.franceonu.org/spip.php?article3201. The statement went on: "The cessation of fighting should allow lasting and normal opening of all border crossings, as provided for in the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access. The European Union is ready to re-dispatch the EUBAM to Rafah to enable its re-opening, in cooperation with Egypt, the Palestinian Authority and Israel. It is also willing to examine the possibility of extending its assistance to other crossing points, provided that the issues relating to security have found a satisfactory response". The reference to opening border crossings could be seen as a nod to Hamas, though the EU pointedly did not include the Islamist movement as one of the parties to be involved.

[193] Crisis Group interview, EU diplomat, Jerusalem, 2 January 2009.

[194] Crisis Group interview, EU diplomat, Jerusalem, 3 January 2009. The EU "troika" delegation was led by Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg and included French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, European Commission External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana. The Czech Republic took over the EU presidency on 1 January from France. Sweden is to assume the next presidency, on 1 July 2009.

[195] The 31 December 2008 resolution went out of its way to "pay tribute" to Egypt's efforts to bring about Palestinian reconciliation and open Rafah for humanitarian aid – almost certainly a reaction to growing criticism of Cairo's role. It also "affirm[ed] support for the National Palestinian Authority and its legitimate institutions" without mentioning Hamas once, an apparent rebuke of the Islamist movement. Decision No. 6998, Extraordinary Session, 31 December 2008.

[196] Erdogan said, "there should be a ceasefire immediately. . . As promised in the [truce] agreement in June 2008, lifting the blockade should happen". Quoted in *Today's Zaman*, 3 January 2009. His proposal also includes efforts to reconcile Hamas and Fatah.

it would not impose clear and enforceable limitations on Hamas; such a lull, they feared, would give the Islamist movement time to regroup ahead of a future showdown.[197] They also object to any outcome that could in any way legitimise Hamas. An Israeli official described the meetings with Europeans as essentially photo opportunities.[198] Moreover, at this point neither Israel nor the U.S. appears willing to marginalise Egypt by giving another regional actor a central role, viewing the current conflict in the context of a broader regional battle for influence. In the words of a U.S. official, "we will insist that Egypt remain the mediator, and will not allow it to be sidetracked".[199] Notably, on 5 January Hamas agreed to an Egyptian request to send a delegation to Cairo for talks about a ceasefire, indicating both Egypt's desire to retain central stage and the Islamists' acknowledgment of their neighbour's key role. That said, there was little expectation of a rapid end of hostilities but rather of continued Israeli efforts to significantly diminish Hamas's infrastructure ahead of any possible ceasefire.[200]

As a result, the focus has turned to developing mechanisms for a sustainable ceasefire even as the war goes on. Proposals include dispatching an international presence to monitor the ceasefire and ensure Hamas militants stay at a respectable distance from the crossings; opening Gaza's crossings under international supervision (possibly through a renewed and reinforced EUBAM, the European mission designed to supervise Palestinian crossing at Rafah); and bolstering Egypt's anti-smuggling operations on its side of the border.[201] Ahead of a UN Security Council meeting on 5 January 2009, Robert Serry, the UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, pointedly noted that the UN maintained peacekeeping operations on Israel's borders with Syria and Lebanon.[202] Among the many issues yet to be worked out is what to do about Hamas – which few of these proposals even mentioned by name – and, in particular, whether and to what extent it could be allowed to play a role at the crossings, as it demands.[203]

VII. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A NEW CEASEFIRE?

In conducting the war, both Israel and Hamas have sought – with varying degrees of success – to internalise lessons of the Lebanon conflict, the former by moderating its stated goals, ensuring superior training of troops, more accurate targeting and swifter combination of air and land assaults; the latter by preparing for a prolonged conflict, utilising long-range missiles and banking on the political dividends of steadfastness. The international community ought to do the same. In 2006, it took weeks of bloody warfare before the U.S., Europeans and regional actors responded with sufficient urgency and concern. Prior to that, many operated under the illusion that, given enough time, Israel would deal Hizbollah a crushing blow, force its surrender and change the political map. As it turned out, they ultimately pushed for a ceasefire whose terms could have been obtained earlier, sparing Lebanon needless loss of life and destruction.

There are signs that important actors – European in particular – have learned from bitter experience that time is of the essence. The task of devising a ceasefire basically acceptable to both sides is not beyond reach. Israel is unlikely to agree to a deal that does not include steps that significantly constrain Hamas's ability to acquire, stockpile and launch rockets. Hamas is unlikely to agree to a cessation of hostilities without an opening of Gaza's border crossings. Mindful of these constraints, Crisis Group proposes a ceasefire that would include the following elements:

- an immediate cessation of hostilities on the understanding that it would rapidly be followed by an indefinite ceasefire pursuant to which:

  Hamas would halt all rocket launches, keep armed militants at a distance (several hundred metres) from the Israeli border and prevent other armed organisations from doing the same; and

  Israel would halt all military attacks on and withdraw all troops from Gaza;

[197] Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Tel Aviv, 2 January 2009.
[198] Crisis Group interview, foreign ministry official, Jerusalem, 4 January 2009.
[199] Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, 2 January 2009.
[200] Crisis Group interview, Egyptian diplomat, Cairo, 5 January 2009.
[201] British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, speaking at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Paris, said the EU could play a "significant role" on the Gaza/Israel border. Sky News, 30 December 2008. EUBAM suspended its operations on 15 June 2007, after Hamas's takeover, on the grounds that its agreement was with the PA, not Gaza's de facto authorities; Hamas is on its list of terrorist organisations; and no party was willing to implement its share of the agreement. It has retained a skeletal staff in the Israeli city of Ashkelon.
[202] Associated Press, 3 January 2009.
[203] A Western diplomat was adamant: "No one is going to do anything that bolsters the legitimacy of Hamas". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 2 January 2009.

- commitment by Hamas to stop arms smuggling into Gaza and new steps by Egypt, in coordination with regional and international actors, to halt the smuggling;
- dispatch of a multinational monitoring presence to verify compliance with the ceasefire, raise the political costs of violations and serve as liaison between the two sides; and
- opening of Gaza's crossings with Israel and Egypt to imports, exports and the passage of people, together with:

  return of the EU presence at the Rafah crossing, pursuant to the former understanding, and its extension to Gaza's crossings with Israel; and

  coordination between Hamas authorities and the (Ramallah-based) PA at the crossings.

The proposal raises at least three types of issues: about its sequence, its substance and the identity of third-party actors.

As to the proposed sequence, Israel already has rejected a French plea for a 48-hour so-called humanitarian truce, on the dubious ground that no humanitarian crisis exists.[204] More credible is its concern that a halt to operations would leave Hamas still in possession of a large rocket arsenal with the ability to strike deep into Israel. In the Lebanese case, too, Israel, with Washington's backing, argued that hostilities should not cease until steps were taken to significantly erode Hizbollah's military capacity.

The fundamental flaw in the argument – then as now – is that waiting while military action unfolds is far from risk-free. Events can escalate in unforeseen ways, for example if a Hamas rocket produces serious casualties, an Israeli attack kills scores of civilians or a deeper ground assault inexorably pulls Israel toward a perilous regime-change strategy without clear endgame or exit. Moreover, the proposal in this instance arguably should be more palatable to Israel since an immediate truce presents drawbacks for Hamas as well, which from the start has demanded that Gaza's crossings be opened and invoked their closure as justification for its attacks. Of course, should Israel be dissatisfied with conditions following the cessation of hostilities, or if the crossings were to remain shut, there is reason to believe fighting would resume.

As to the substance of the proposal, both sides are likely to raise complaints. Yet, the dual international presence proposed here (to monitor adherence to the ceasefire and oversee crossing operations) should meet their respective core concerns. An international presence in Gaza, while certainly not offering ironclad guarantees against a resumption of rocket attacks, would elevate the political costs to Hamas of any violation, particularly if member states included some with which it entertains good relations (such as Turkey). From Hamas's vantage point, such a presence could limit Israel's operational freedom. As importantly, it could serve as liaison between two parties that refuse to engage one another, intervening rapidly in the case of crisis, thereby helping to defuse potentially explosive situations prior to any escalation.[205]

Ultimately, dispatch of an international presence is controversial and, if done in a hostile environment, potentially dangerous. Based on past experience, it should be agreed to by all sides (Hamas included); authorised by the UN Security Council; and have a tightly defined mandate (to verify and monitor both sides' adherence to the ceasefire, act as liaison and investigate complaints as well as defuse crises in a timely manner).

Likewise, the return of an EU presence at the Rafah border crossing and its extension to crossings points with Israel would allow their opening for imports and exports by playing the role of interface between Israel and Hamas. In conversations with Crisis Group, some senior Hamas leaders ruled out any EU participation given what they described as Europe's negative role, while others indicated it could be acceptable as long as it was coordinated with the Islamist movement.[206] However, all concurred that some international presence was palatable. To the extent the return of the EU

[204] Approximately 70 truckloads have been entering Gaza daily since the onset of the war, far more than before. But this is insufficient to meet local needs. Beyond the fact that amounts are inadequate, utilities are barely functioning: without fuel, the only electric power plant has shut down. Some 250,000 people in central and northern Gaza do not have electricity at all due to the damage to fifteen transformers during the airstrikes. The water system provides running water once every five to seven days; the sanitation system cannot treat the sewage and is dumping 40 million litres of raw sewage into the sea daily. Fuel for heating, needed in the cold weather, as well as cooking gas no longer are available in the market. Without wheat imports since the crisis, most bakeries have also shut down. Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, Jerusalem, 2 January 2009.

[205] For example, had there been one, an international monitoring presence could have stepped in on 4 November 2008, when Israel attacked Hamas operatives it claimed were building a tunnel intended to be used to capture Israeli soldiers.

[206] Crisis Group interviews, senior Hamas leaders, Gaza, Damascus, December 2008.

mission would allow an opening of the crossing and, therefore, enable Hamas to claim achievement of its purported goal, there is reason to believe it ultimately would be acceptable.

Perhaps more delicate will be the issue of the PA's presence. In March 2008, Crisis Group suggested that PA security forces return to border crossings and their immediate perimeter, while Hamas forces reposition further from the crossings, with coordination between the two.[207] Relations between the two parties significantly deteriorated, even before the latest confrontation and barrage of mutual accusations. Still, Egypt has made clear it would not open Rafah without a PA role and, for that reason alone, Israel and the West are unlikely to take a different stand. A senior Hamas leader in Gaza told Crisis Group that the movement could acquiesce in a PA presence, but only if Hamas were clearly and fairly included in the mechanism and the presence coordinated with it.[208]

As for the identity of third-party mediators, the breakdown of the ceasefire is due, at least in part, to a crisis in mediation. As relations between Egypt and Hamas soured, so too did prospects of progress on the various files in which Egypt was involved: extension of the ceasefire, the prisoner exchange and Palestinian reconciliation. It is both unrealistic and unwise to exclude Egypt, given its political weight, geographic location and role. Yet an effective mediation will also require involvement by countries that are trusted by and can exercise leverage over not only Israel but also Hamas. Broadening the range of third-party actors will mean ensuring a role for countries such as Turkey and Qatar that can speak to and put pressure on the Islamist movement and one of its principal allies, Syria. France, which has shown renewed and reinvigorated activism in the Middle East, particularly in its relations with Damascus, also could play an important part.

None of this can happen if the international community refuses to shift its approach toward Hamas. This need not mean full-fledged, unconditional acceptance, but at a minimum, it means engaging the movement – first in order to reach a ceasefire; next to liaise between it and Israel in Gaza; and finally, building on such steps, to initiate a gradually more productive political exchange. Europe in particular, in light of its expected presence at the crossings, could take the lead in this endeavour.

Of course, much of this scenario rapidly could be overtaken by events. Over the coming days, Israel's ground operation likely will expand. Even if the defence establishment at first shies away from the goal of toppling Hamas, it might find itself irresistibly pushed in that direction, seeking to eliminate the Islamists' entire security apparatus and military capability. Unlike in Lebanon, this might well be an achievable goal. But how long would Israel have to stay? How would it govern Gaza? Who would agree to step in to fill the void? Those are questions with no easy and probably no satisfactory answers. They also are questions that suggest a heavy human and political toll ahead. All the more reason to press for a ceasefire now and silence the guns before it is too late.

Gaza City/Ramallah/Jerusalem/Brussels,
5 January 2009

[207] Crisis Group Report, *Ruling Palestine I*, op. cit.
[208] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 30 December 2008.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF GAZA STRIP

