



Egypt in the Crossfire

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When innocent casualties begin to mount and the stark pictures are there for the entire world to see, it becomes impossible to rationalize violence, regardless of the motives. Pictures taken a couple of days apart tell the story. Some show the Israeli Foreign Minister *Tzipi Livni* visiting Cairo, presumably to inform the Egyptians of the impending attack. Others show the tragic civilian casualties in Gaza that closely followed her visit. The combination sent shockwaves through the Arab streets and stoked anger towards many Arab rulers, the Egyptian leadership in particular.

Arabs always react with denial and confusion when they see signs of any relationship, dialogue or rapprochement between an Arab leader and Israel. For the Arabs, any public display of friendship toward Jewish leaders is taboo. That reaction is reinforced by the dictates of Islamic religious figures, articles in the Arab media and even pronouncements by the Arab governments who have diplomatic relations with Israel.

The Arab reaction stems from two competing influences on the Arab mind: Arabism and Islamism. Until the ascendance of Religious Fundamentalism throughout the Middle East, the Palestinian issue was framed in geo-political terms. For the Arabs then, like the early founders of Israel, the territorial and nationalistic base of the conflict had little, if anything, to do with religion. In fact, many of the Palestinian politicians and many of the most well known writers sponsoring the Palestinian cause were Christians. *Hanan 'Ashrawi*, the Palestinian legislator who was the main Palestinian spokeswoman for years is Christian, as was *George Habash*, one of the founders of the PLO, and *Edward Sa'id*, who was the main English speaking voice for the Palestinian diaspora. It was Arabism, symbolized by the loss of Palestine, rather than Islamism that was at the heart of the problem between Arabs and Israelis. Socialism and the emergence of the Baath party in Syria and Iraq and the socialist party of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt cemented that non-religious, Pan-Arab foundation of the Palestinian struggle.

Arabism continued to define the Palestinian problem until the ascendance of Islamic fundamentalism in the region, which transformed the political and the cultural aspects of daily life in the Arab world. Islamic fundamentalists cared less about national or territorial integrity and more about religious unity without regard to geographic boundaries. The Islamization of the Palestinian conflict was fully realized when *Hamas* was elected to power. It was difficult to assess which, on balance, was more philosophically disastrous for the West – allowing a democratic election process to put *Hamas* in power, or totally disregarding the results of that election. Either way, however, the Egyptian government of Hosni Mubarak, which has resisted pressure to adopt a more democratic regime, would breathe easier. The entire Arab world knew that once the West rejected the legitimacy of the elected *Hamas* government democracy was dead in the Middle East. As the wise men stated, democracy requires conditions such as basic constitutional guarantees, a functioning and impartial judiciary and an educated constituency, none

of which exists in the Arab world. To justify rejecting a democratically elected government, the West used *Hamas' status* as a “Terrorist Organization”, even though the majority of the Palestinians who elected them obviously did not agree that most *Hamas* members were terrorists.

Once elected, however, *Hamas' Islamist* ideology did not recognize political boundaries; they didn't distinguish between Gaza, the West Bank of the Jordan River or the banks of the Nile. Driven by religious ideology they reached out for the backing of Syria and Iran as well as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Their unexpected election was seen as a transformation of the Palestinian conflict into a battle between Islam and non-believers [see [PI 546 - The Religious Transformation of the Palestinian Fight](#)]. Most observers believe that the election of *Hamas* was the result of a backlash against the rampant corruption of the *Fatah* regime. Nevertheless, as a result, religious zealots representing the extremist factions of the *Hamas* movement took over the government through the militant *Al-Qassam* Brigades. *Hamas* tried to accomplish in Gaza what *Hizbullah* had accomplished in Lebanon. However, *Hamas* lacked the resources (in part due to the blockade), the planning and organizational skills, and most of all the culture of discipline of their *Shi'a* counterparts.

Looking at current events in Gaza, the Arab Street has reached the same conclusion of most experienced analysts¹ – Saudi Arabia and Egypt have decided to let Israel deal with *Hamas*, without interference. Both Saudi Arabia and Egypt also had scores to settle with *Hamas*. The Saudis were irked by *Hamas' failure* to abide by the Mecca accord of 2007, which the Saudis negotiated in an effort to reconcile *Hamas* with the rival *Fatah* movement. Mubarak was unwilling to make further efforts to broker deals between *Hamas* and *Fatah*, and *Hamas* and Israel, after *Hamas* cozied up to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and sabotaged the efforts of Egypt's well respected head of Intelligence, *Omar Soleiman*.

Pouring gas on the fire, Arab papers have reacted with horror to John Bolton's article in today's Washington Post² suggesting that the two-state solution to the Palestinian problem is dead and that all parties should abandon the idea of creating a Palestinian nation. Bolton advocates for the “Three State Plan” which would annex Gaza to Egypt and the West Bank to Jordan, effectively ending the hope of a Palestinian State, which was the status before the 1967 war. Writing in *Al-Arabiya*³, *Farag Ismail* reported on the analysis of *'Abdallah Al-Ash'al*, a former Egyptian diplomat who is now part of the opposition in Egypt. *Al-Ash'al* stated that Bolton's suggestion of a Three-State solution is a longstanding Israeli plan that is being revived with U.S. backing to eliminate once and for all any hope of granting the Palestinians their own state. That solution makes Gaza Egypt's problem and that's a problem Egypt does not want. The Egyptian government now finds itself assailed by many in the Arab media, confronted by an angry population rioting throughout Egypt, and with few options to extricate itself from that quagmire. It remains to be seen if the Sarkozy/Mubarak proposal for a truce between the parties that was announced tonight shall help ease the pressure on Egypt or like so many other proposals before it, will be sabotaged by Israel or *Hamas*.

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¹ *PI Online* has reported on more than 2500 commentaries posted on several Arabic sites during the first forty-eight hours following the Israeli incursion into Gaza. [see [PI-804 – Web Street Reactions - GAZA](#)]

² Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/04/AR2009010401434.html?sub=AR>

³ <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/05/63574.html>