



## The Rise of Hamas - where to now for the Israelis and the Palestinians?

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The US invasion of Iraq has had a dramatic and far reaching impact on the balance of power in the Arab East (Mashriq) or Fertile Crescent. It has created a power vacuum and left a leadership void in a region where, until very recently, the Ba'thi regimes of Syria and Iraq once vied for hegemony. Now, post-Saddam Iraq is in shambles and the Syria of Bashar Asad is no more than a caricature of the regional power lead by his father Hafiz for a generation since 1970.

As a result, Israel does not have to face the potential of an Eastern Front of Syria and Iraq ganging up for attack and possibly even pressuring Jordan to acquiesce in cooperation or even to join such an alignment.

Above and beyond the question of Israel's immediate and longer-term security concerns, Iraq's demise is both a reflection and exacerbation of the dire predicament of the Arabs. The Arab states, for the most part, have missed the boat of globalization as the gap between them and the advanced states of the first world, including Israel, continues to grow. The traditional centres of Arab power are all going through some form of political decline or crisis. Egypt is a poor third world state that no longer sets the regional agenda as it once did in the heyday of Abd al-Nasir. Egypt is struggling to bridge the ever growing gap between its self-image as a great regional power and the present-day reality, in which it has increasing difficulty to coerce local actors to do its bidding, as its clout and prestige continue to decline.

Syria is completely isolated, more than it has ever been since the country achieved independence in the mid-1940s. Surrounded by the United States and its regional allies, Syria has a declining military, a retrograde economy and an uninspiring leadership. Saudi Arabia since 9/11 is in a state of anxiety verging on panic as its relations with the United States are going through a difficult patch of mistrust and declining mutual confidence. The Saudis, even though oil prices are at an all time high, are not nearly as wealthy as they used to be. They persist in their dual policy of fighting terrorism with one hand, while abetting it with the other, as a form of protection pay off. This has not only consistently aggravated the United States, but has also failed to appease the militant Islamic opposition to the Saudi ruling family, which continues to harass the kingdom with attacks of increasing regularity. The Saudis are not quite sure just where to turn.

Iraq under American occupation is not an independent player and as long as that remains so it is a non-entity. Jordan, one of the best run of all the Arab states, is apparently on the way out of the worst of its economic woes. Geopolitically, however, the Jordanians have always been incapable of shaping the regional context in which they have to operate. Presently they are sandwiched between two arenas of total chaos, Iraq and the West Bank, a position one could describe as strategic anxiety.



### *Non-Arab Supremacy*

The decline of the Arabs has resulted in the emergence of a Middle East where the non-Arab players are far more critical in the setting of the regional agenda than are the Arabs. If the term “Arab world” was once synonymous with the “Middle East”, this is no longer true. External actors like the United States, or the European Union to a lesser degree, and the non-Arab states of the region, Iran, Turkey and Israel, are the key pace-setters. The United States, which just a year ago projected a posture of unassailable omnipotence, is presently undermining its capacity to create a new regional order as it sinks deeper and deeper into the Iraqi morass. Moreover, the regional deterrence of the United States is being eroded as it is exposed as a great power which also has severe political and military limitations.

Conversely, Iranian regional influence is on the rise. The Iranians are ever-more emboldened by American failure. Despite external appearances, they seem determined to continue their quest for a nuclear capability, irrespective of international opposition. Iran’s regional stature is also on the rise as the historical balance of power in the Arab East between Sunnis and Shi‘is is shifting in favour of the latter, for the first time in centuries.

The American invasion of Iraq not only removed Saddam Husayn and the Ba‘ath regime from power, most worthy objectives in and of themselves. It also dispossessed the Sunni Arab minority, which had been in power for centuries in Iraq, and crushed the Iraqi state, the main Arab bulwark against Iranian regional hegemony. Consequently Iran has made major and unprecedented inroads of influence in the chaos of Iraq, as its Shi‘ite coreligionists, the majority in Iraq, ready themselves to inherit the Sunnis.

For other reasons, unrelated to Iraq, and part and parcel of the demographic and concomitant political change in Lebanon of the last two generations, the Shia there too are on the march. They are by far the largest confessional group in Lebanon, spearheaded by their powerful militia, Hizballah. But Hizballah is not only the spearhead of the Shia in Lebanon. It is the long arm of Iran all the way into the West Bank and Gaza, where it has strong operational and financial connections with the whole array of Palestinian groups, from Fatah to Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Thus Iran is in pursuit of nuclear weapons with less to fear of the United States, while it also enjoys an unprecedented arc of influence deep into the heart of the Arab East, stretching all the way from Tehran to Baghdad, and then via an old ally in Damascus to Beirut, and beyond to the Palestinian territories. Israel now faces the Iranian challenge, in both its nuclear and terrorist dimensions far more acutely. Those who argue that Israel has only had a windfall of net benefit from the war in Iraq are wrong.

Israel’s options in respect to Iran are far from simple. Urging the international community to constrain Iran and pressure it to discontinue its nuclear program is the most attractive but not necessarily promising policy. The Iranians, in the long run, might not submit to pressure which has been so ineffective hitherto. Israel could choose the military option and attempt to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities as it did to Iraq in 1981. But that is no easy matter either. The Iranians have learnt the lessons of Iraq and do not have one major facility above ground, but numerous underground facilities. Their destruction from the air is anything but guaranteed. Failure in such an operation is not an option for Israel: leaving Iran with both its nuclear potential and an everlasting reason to take revenge.



What may be more realistic in the long run is perhaps some version of the Cold War formula of deterrence, where it would be made clear to Iran, by Israel itself or possibly by Israel and the United States combined, that any non-conventional attack on Israel would be met with a response in kind that Iran would not be able to sustain. For the meantime, however, there is no denying of the fact that Iran has shifted from the periphery to attain an unprecedented platform of regional influence deep into the very core of the Arab East.

The other non-Arab power rising to the fore against the background of the Arab void is Turkey. Perched above the Arab vacuum in the Fertile Crescent, Turkey is a regional superpower stretching all the way from Greece to Iran, controlling the water sources of Syria and Iraq, with the largest and most powerful military in the region, and a population of over 70 million. Along with Iran, Turkey has more influence over Syria and more of a say on the outcome of the war in Iraq than all the Arabs combined (and possibly more than the United States too).

For the last decade or so, Turkey and Israel have had an exceptionally close relationship - political, military and economic. And though much of that relationship is intact, there have recently been some difficulties between Ankara and Jerusalem.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, of the religio-conservative government that came to power in November 2002, has been exceptionally critical of Israel and the conduct of its military in the war with the Palestinians. So have the media and the public at large. As Turkey edges closer to membership in the European Union (EU) there is all the more reason for Israel to invest an extra effort to create a relationship of mutual trust and understanding with the new ruling elite.

Israel, along with Iran and Turkey, is the third of the non-Arab regional superpowers. In its immediate environment and with the Palestinians in particular, it is Israel alone that has the power to set the political and strategic agenda, for better or for worse.

As the Israelis have discovered since Camp David 2000, for Israel and the Palestinians to arrive at a final, end of conflict, settlement is a tall order, perhaps too tall for the moment. If the Palestinians are required to declare the “end of conflict” they are bound to examine the significance of such a declaration through the prism of their national historical narrative. That unavoidably leads them back to the origins of the conflict, to determine exactly what the conditions ought to be for declaring that it has ended. Such an enquiry is not just about politics, but primarily about history, historiography and national narratives.

Trying to negotiate the history of nations does not make the achievement of a settlement easy. For the Jewish-Israeli side, Zionism is a heroic enterprise of self-defence against the miserable historical fate of the Jews. The war of 1948 is the “War of Liberation,” and a magnificent victory of the “few against the many.” In 1948, in the space of just a few years from the horrors of the destruction of European Jewry, the Jewish people rose from the ashes of the crematoria of Auschwitz to the lofty heroic ground of national liberation, Jewish sovereignty and independent statehood. The gross historical injustice of the Diaspora was replaced by the incarnation of historical justice in the Land of Israel.



That, needless to say, is not the way the Palestinians see it. The Zionist enterprise, from the Palestinian point of view, is no more than a movement of settler colonialism, imposed upon them by force. Zionism, for the Palestinians, had no saving grace. It was in no way a movement of self-defence, but rather one of net aggression from start to finish. It sowed the seeds of destruction of Palestinian society in 1948. What was for the Jews their war of “liberation” was for the Palestinians their nakba, national calamity or catastrophe. What is for the Jews their rising from the ashes is for the Palestinians their crushing defeat, the disintegration of their society, their loss of homeland and the transformation of half their number into refugees. This catastrophe of 1948 is the formative experience and crucible of Palestinianness and the backbone of Palestinian identity, and is the foundation of a collective self-image as the victims of a gross historical injustice.

Anyone who seeks to obtain a Palestinian declaration on the “end of conflict” must bridge over this enormous divide between the narratives and provide a suitable political response to the profound Palestinian sense of grievance. For the most part, the evolution and entrenchment of territorial nationalism in the Middle East has been conducive to Arab-Israeli peace making, but not in the case of the Palestinians. Egyptianism and Jordanianism are territorially defined in ways that do not conflict with Israel’s pre-1967 integrity. The same can be said of the issues that had to be resolved between them so that peace treaties could be signed. But Palestinianism as a territorial identity applies to all of the territory of British Mandatory Palestine and has never been confined to the West Bank and Gaza and their residents. It relates to all Palestinians who originated from historical Palestine and their descendants, wherever they may be.

The dispute, in this case, is not restricted to the territories occupied in the 1967 war, but is deeply rooted in issues that stemmed from Israel’s creation in 1948, such as the refugee question or the question of the political status and national rights of the Palestinian minority that remained in Israel proper. These 1948 issues are not territorial matters that determine Israel’s size. They are linked to the very existence of Israel as the State of the Jewish people.

The “end of conflict” Camp David process of summer 2000 thus disintegrated into the worst Palestinian-Israeli bloodshed since 1948. Those who took part in the peace talks were unable to bridge the historical divide. Yasir Arafat by then had also lost any sense of urgency to reach a settlement with Israel. Arafat saw time on his side, and believed that prolonging the conflict served the historical objectives of the Palestinians, even if that meant sacrifice and hardship for his people in the short term. Within a decade or so, in the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River the Jews will lose their majority. In these circumstances, known to Arabs and Jews alike, the Palestinians were in no rush to implement a two state solution. If they could hang in long enough they may be able to have it all, in one state.

In the meantime, however, with the Arabs in disarray, Israel has effectively crushed the Palestinian war effort. Its combination of offensive and defensive measures has proved very effective. The targeted assassinations of Palestinian militants, from the operational cadres to the upper echelons of the leadership, have had a debilitating effect. The security fence has made the penetration of Israel’s defences by suicide bombers much more difficult. As a result, Israeli casualties have declined dramatically as those of the Palestinians continue to rise.



There can be little doubt in the minds of Palestinians and Israelis that the Palestinian endeavour to coerce Israel to accept the unacceptable has come to a dead end. Israeli society has proved to be far more resilient than the Palestinians (and perhaps many Israelis too) had expected. The Palestinian effort to break the Israeli spirit by force has failed. The Arabs have let the Palestinians down again. If the Palestinians believed momentarily that their war with Israel would draw the Arabs into the fray they were mistaken. Even financial aid was no more than a pittance.

The Palestinians desperately sought to internationalize the conflict. This did not materialize either. Arafat was discredited in the eyes of important segments of the international community. And though the vision of President Bush and the Quartet included the formation of an independent Palestinian state, the Palestinian objective was not to be included in the international community's vision, but for their own vision to be imposed on Israel. That is hardly likely. In sum, then, not any of the major Palestinian war aims were fully attained. That is the definition of failure. But Israel's victory in the battlefield has exacted a very heavy price.

Israel's image in the international arena has suffered severely. The seemingly endless footage of devastation in the West Bank and Gaza has eroded Israel's international legitimacy. Moreover, the re-occupation of the Palestinian territories will not decide the historical struggle between Israel and the Palestinians in Israel's favour. The occupation is more detrimental in the longer term to Israel than it is to the Palestinians. Prolonged occupation poses a threat to Israel's *raison d'être* as a liberal, democratic state of the Jewish people. The sine qua non for a state so defined is the maintenance of a stable, longstanding decisive Jewish majority. Prolonged occupation will add some 3.5 million Palestinians to the 1.25 million already in Israel proper (including East Jerusalem) and set Israel on the fast track to losing the Jewish majority in the areas under its effective control. Israel, therefore, must take the initiative, whether the Palestinians are ready for an agreement or not.

Israel's decision to withdraw unilaterally is neither "flight from terrorism" nor a victory for its Palestinian rivals, but a rational policy choice for Israel, in light of its demographic vulnerability, which is neither a function nor a consequence of the recent war. Disengagement and the construction of a secure barrier on the boundary would in all probability keep most of the potential suicide bombers out, lead to a de-escalation of the current hostilities and an overall improvement in the short term security situation. These tactics could be enhanced if accompanied by a dismantling of isolated settlements and outposts and a more concentrated and effective military deployment.

If Israel chooses to abstain from disengagement, unilateral or otherwise, it will soon find itself facing demands not for two states for the two peoples but for one state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. Such a state will have an ever-shrinking Jewish majority that will eventually become a minority in an Arab state. Paradoxically, therefore, the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel has become an Israeli self-interest even if this process has to be jump-started without agreement with the Palestinians, by a unilateral act of disengagement. Conversely, for the Palestinians, it is becoming ever more apparent that this is hardly their ideal solution, but the grudging acceptance of reality for lack of any better choice.



What is really at stake now is not the withdrawal from Gaza, but the struggle for Israel's soul. Israelis are now finally coming to grips with the truly existential questions that they have avoided since 1967. They must now decide between the Jewish biblical heritage and realpolitik, between an Israel which is an essentially secular, liberal, democratic state of the Jewish people or an altogether different Israel, which would be a messianic, fundamentalist state, where divine law becomes the source of authority overriding the democratic process, where the Rabbis reign supreme and the Jews, in the end, lose their state, as the holiness of the Land of Israel triumphs over the *raison d'état* of the State of Israel.

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