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# Another Round in Gaza

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Another round of violence between Israel and Gaza is coming to a close. Gazans count 25 dead so far, while Israel counts the number of rockets that the Iron Dome missile defense system shot down successfully. Both sides, Israel and the Islamic Jihad, have reached the conclusion that they've had all they can get out of this round, and they're asking the experienced Egyptian referee to pull them out of the hole they dug for themselves. Both sides are satisfied. The Islamic Jihad is organizing a victory march in the streets of Gaza, while its leaders in Damascus appear on giant screens promising to respond to all Israeli aggression. Indeed, the Islamic Jihad has shown the Iranians that their money was invested wisely, that their rockets are not rusting underground but finding their way to the target.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Defense Ministry are even more satisfied. While testing the Iron Dome system, they have proved to the boys at the Finance Ministry that there's no choice but to increase the defense budget. Moreover, the public is becoming accustomed to running for shelter, which will be very useful if Netanyahu ignores Obama and attacks Iran's nuclear facilities. Thus this round ends in a draw; each side has got what it wanted and is preparing for the next round, which will also end in a draw. From draw to draw, Netanyahu and the Islamic Jihad strengthen their positions at the expense of the few Israelis and Palestinians still willing to give negotiations a chance.

Netanyahu doesn't believe in diplomacy. He believes in action, especially unilateral action. He believes strongly in widening settlement in the occupied territories and attacking Iran immediately, regardless of attempts to reach a diplomatic solution with the aid of sanctions. The Netanyahu-Barak duo always put its faith in a military option, whether the issue is Gaza, Lebanon or the West Bank. For this Netanyahu needs a suitable "partner," like Ahmadinejad, for example, or the Islamic Jihad. Netanyahu must take advantage of the window of opportunity which has suddenly opened; if Ahmadinejad suddenly disappears from the Iranian political arena, there will be no convenient Holocaust denier for Netanyahu to compare to Hitler.

### **Chaos in Gaza**

The Palestinian side gives Netanyahu exactly what he wants. President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Hamas' Khaled Mashal continue their endless courtship, but they have no opportunity to manifest their love. However, Hamas leaders in Gaza, Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and Foreign Minister Mahmoud al-Zahar, have fallen in love with their roles. The reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas threatens their hold on Gaza, which is why they're zealously maintaining their loyalty to Tehran, even though Mashal fled Damascus for Istanbul and the hospitality of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Thus the Palestinians are sinking in their own internal mire, with each side fighting for its own narrow interests. The Gaza Strip is in semi-darkness, with the power stations working just 12 hours each day, because Egypt isn't supplying fuel for the turbines. This fuel is a good illustration of Hamas policy. Subsidized fuel, originally intended to make life a little more bearable for the Egyptian people, did not reach its destination in Cairo's poor neighborhoods. Instead it was sold to profiteers who channeled it to Gaza. Here it was sold at higher prices, but not only that: Hamas

added its own “excise tax” at the exits of the smuggling tunnels, financing its regime at the expense of Egyptians and Gazans alike—a cynical exploitation of the Israeli blockade. Now, however, the Egyptian regime wants to raise fuel prices, Hamas refuses to pay, and darkness descends over Gaza.

Chaos reigns, and the more chaotic it is, the more the ostensible “resistance” flourishes. This resistance is causing the collapse of the agreement with Fatah. It perpetuates the “customs authority” at the tunnels and increases the powerlessness of the local population. It also enables organizations with various strange agendas to exist. These rain rockets onto Israel and prepare for the next round, reminding everyone how essential they are to the struggle against the Zionist occupation. Israel, for its part, sees Hamas as the “sovereign” responsible for “quiet,” and indeed Hamas ensures a period of calm occasionally; meanwhile the schism between Gaza and the West Bank deepens.

### **Misery in the West Bank**

In the West Bank reigns Fatah, aided by generous support from America and its European partners, but the situation isn't much better. Though there is electricity and life follows its strange routine, Palestinians still suffer – if not from Hamas, then from the settlers and settlements stealing the land from under their feet. Moreover, because of the breakdown of talks with Israel and the rapprochement with Hamas, and in the light of the European economic crisis, financial support for the Palestinian Authority is dwindling. For this reason, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad has levied additional taxes on a population already struggling under the burden of poverty and unemployment, increased by the Israeli closure. Thus we see demonstrations, strikes and resentment which only increase as time goes on.

This is the Palestinian reality today, and responsibility for this reality is in the hands of the leaders who continue to take advantage of it to maintain their own benefits. However, the main responsibility is Israel's, whose government does all it can to increase the anarchy and weaken the Palestinians. The aim is to drive the Palestinian question out of international consciousness. The Arab Spring has helped, because Al-Jazeera's cameras are pointed at Damascus. But intimidation, threats and anti-Iran propaganda have done their bit to push the Palestinian issue aside, much to the satisfaction of Israel's right wing, which has managed – finally – to prove that the Palestinian issue is not the heart of the Middle East conflict.

### **Israelis are in denial**

Netanyahu's success was so brilliant that not only has the world forgotten the Palestinians – even Israelis are fleeing the “political” issue. Last summer's social protest movement was good for Netanyahu, and ever since it fizzled out his popularity has soared. The protest made Kadima and the Labor Party redundant: these parties once “obsessively” addressed the divisive “political” issue, inadvertently proving that the nation could be united only around “social” issues. Now Sheli Yachimovich and the protest movement's father-figure Yair Lapid, who try to unite the settlers with the leftwing, as well as secular Israelis with the religious, have gained a measure of popularity around the dream of a different Israel. Bibi, however, more in touch with reality, continues to remind the world that the social issue is not existential; the real issue is the Iranian bomb combined with extremist Islam, which is the next threat in line.

All Netanyahu needs to do is become even more extreme and quarrel with Obama at every opportunity, to make the Palestinians irrelevant, to compromise with the Migron settlers, to legislate racist and anti-democratic laws, to paint the Arab Spring in macabre colors, to remind us all of Auschwitz, and to do away with all those who oppose his madness, such as former Mossad chief Meir Dagan, national security hot-shot Uzi Arad and the rest of those pestering milksops who know nothing about policy.

The results are predictable. The pressure cooker of the occupied territories will sooner or later explode. Iran is far away and somebody is willing to deal with it, but the West Bank and Gaza are just a few seconds' rocket flight away,

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and nobody is going to deal with them except Israelis themselves. Those who appeal for peace with the Palestinians assure the future of Israeli society, while those who feel cozy in the Israeli "social" consensus are burying their heads in the sand and leaving the country's fate in the hands of its leaders. The closed-mindedness, corruption, conceit and contempt for human life which characterize these leaders assure us of continuing warfare, each round more terrible and blood-soaked than the last. .

*Post-scriptum :*

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Translated from the Hebrew by Yonatan Preminger