

By Kamran Bokhari and Reva Bhalla

Israel continues Operation Cast Lead against the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas has been the de facto ruler ever since it seized control of the territory in a June 2007 coup. The Israeli campaign, whose declared primary military aim is to neutralize Hamas' ability to carry out rocket attacks against Israel, has led to the reported deaths of more than 560 Palestinians; the number of wounded is approaching the 3,000 mark (as of 8th January 2009).

The reaction from the Arab world has been mixed. On the one hand, a look at the so-called Arab street will reveal an angry scene of chanting protesters, burning flags and embassy attacks in protest of Israel's actions. The principal Arab regimes, however, have either kept quiet or publicly condemned Hamas for the crisis - while privately often expressing their support for Israel's bid to weaken the radical Palestinian group.

Despite the much-hyped Arab nationalist solidarity often cited in the name of Palestine, most Arab regimes actually have little love for the Palestinians. While these countries like keeping the Palestinian issue alive for domestic consumption and as a tool to pressure Israel and the West when the need arises, in actuality, they tend to view Palestinian refugees - and more Palestinian radical groups like Hamas - as a threat to the stability of their regimes.

One such Arab country is Saudi Arabia. Given its financial power and its shared religious underpinnings with Hamas, Riyadh traditionally has backed the radical Palestinian group. The kingdom backed a variety of Islamist political forces during the 1960s and 1970s in a bid to undercut secular Nasserite Arab nationalist forces, which threatened Saudi Arabia's regional status. But 9/11, which stemmed in part from Saudi support for the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan, opened Riyadh's eyes to the danger of supporting militant Islamism.

Thus, while Saudi Arabia continued to support many of the same Palestinian groups, it also started whistling a more moderate tune in its domestic and foreign policies. As part of this moderate drive, in 2002 King Abdullah offered Israel a comprehensive peace treaty whereby Arab states would normalize ties with the Jewish state in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal to its 1967 borders. Though Israel rejected the offer, the proposal itself clearly conflicted with Hamas' manifesto, which calls for Israel's destruction. The post-9/11 world also created new problems for one of Hamas' sources of regular funding - wealthy Gulf Arabs - who grew increasingly wary of turning up on the radars of Western security and intelligence agencies as fund transfers from the Gulf came under closer scrutiny.

Meanwhile, Egypt, which regularly mediates Hamas-Israel and Hamas-Fatah matters, thus far has been the most vocal in its opposition to Hamas during the latest Israeli military offensive. Cairo has even gone as far as blaming Hamas for provoking the conflict. Though Egypt's stance

has earned it a number of attacks on its embassies in the Arab world and condemnations in major Arab editorial pages, Cairo has a core strategic interest in ensuring that Hamas remains boxed in. The secular government of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is already preparing for a shaky leadership transition, which is bound to be exploited by the country's largest opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

The MB, from which Hamas emerged, maintains links with the Hamas leadership. Egypt's powerful security apparatus has kept the MB in check, but the Egyptian group has steadily built up support among Egypt's lower and middle classes, which have grown disillusioned with the soaring rate of unemployment and lack of economic prospects in Egypt. The sight of Muslim Brotherhood activists leading protests in Egypt in the name of Hamas is thus quite disconcerting for the Mubarak regime. The Egyptians also are fearful that Gaza could become a haven for Salafist jihadist groups that could collaborate with Egypt's own jihadist node the longer Gaza remains in disarray under Hamas rule.

Of the Arab states, Jordan has the most to lose from a group like Hamas. More than three quarters of the Hashemite monarchy's people claim Palestinian origins. The kingdom itself is a weak, poor state that historically has relied on the United Kingdom, Israel and the United States for its survival. Among all Arab governments, Amman has had the longest and closest relationship with Israel - even before it concluded a formal peace treaty with Israel in 1994. In 1970, Jordan waged war against Fatah when the group posed a threat to the kingdom's security; it also threw out Hamas in 1999 after fears that the group posed a similar threat to the stability of the kingdom. Like Egypt, Jordan also has a vibrant MB, which has closer ties to Hamas than its Egyptian counterpart. As far as Amman is concerned, therefore, the harder Israel hits Hamas, the better.

Finally, Syria is in a more complex position than these other four Arab states. The Alawite-Baathist regime in Syria has long been a pariah in the Arab world because of its support for Shiite Iran and for their mutual militant proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah. But ever since the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the Syrians have been charting a different course, looking for ways to break free from diplomatic isolation and to reach some sort of understanding with the Israelis.

For the Syrians, support for Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and several other radical Palestinian outfits provides tools of leverage to use in negotiating a settlement with Israel. Any deal between the Syrians and the Israelis would thus involve Damascus sacrificing militant proxies such as Hezbollah and Hamas in return for key concessions in Lebanon - where Syria's core geopolitical interests lie - and in the disputed Golan Heights. While the Israeli-Syrian peace talks remain in flux, Syria's lukewarm reaction to the Israeli offensive and restraint (thus far) from criticizing the more moderate Arab regimes' lack of response suggests Damascus may be looking to exploit the Gaza offensive to improve its relations in the Arab world and reinvigorate its talks with Israel. And the more damage Israel does to Hamas now, the easier it will be for Damascus to crack down on Hamas should the need arise.

With Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Syria taking into account their own interests when dealing with the Palestinians, ironically, the most reliable patron Sunni Hamas has had in recent years

is Iran, the Sunni Arab world's principal Shiite rival. Several key developments have made Hamas' gradual shift toward Iran possible:

Saudi Arabia's post-9/11 move into the moderate camp - previously dominated by Egypt and Jordan, two states that have diplomatic relations with Israel.

The collapse of Baathist Iraq and the resulting rise of Shiite power in the region.

The 2004 Iranian parliamentary elections that put Iran's ultraconservatives in power and the 2005 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose public anti-Israeli views resonated with Hamas at a time when other Arab states had grown more moderate.

The 2006 Palestinian elections, in which Hamas defeated its secular rival, Fatah, by a landslide. When endowed with the responsibility of running an unrecognized government, Hamas floundered between its goals of dominating the Palestinian political landscape and continuing to call for the destruction of Israel and the creation of an Islamist state. The Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt, had hoped that the electoral victory would lead Hamas to moderate its stance, but Iran encouraged Hamas to adhere to its radical agenda. As the West increasingly isolated the Hamas-led government, the group shifted more toward the Iranian position, which more closely meshed with its original mandate.

The 2006 summer military confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel, in which Iranian-backed Hezbollah symbolically defeated the Jewish state. Hezbollah's ability to withstand the Israeli military onslaught gave confidence to Hamas that it could emulate the Lebanese Shiite movement - which, like Hamas, was both a political party and an armed paramilitary organization. Similar to their reaction to the current Gaza offensive, the principal Arab states condemned Hezbollah for provoking Israel and grew terrified at the outpouring of support for the Shiite militant group from their own populations. Hezbollah-Hamas collaboration in training, arms-procurement and funding intensified, and almost certainly has played a decisive role in equipping Hamas with 122mm BM-21 Grad artillery rockets and larger Iranian-made 240mm Fajr-3 rockets - and potentially even a modest anti-armour capability.

The June 2007 Hamas coup against Fatah in the Gaza Strip, which caused a serious strain in relations between Egypt and Hamas. The resulting blockade on Gaza put Egypt in an extremely uncomfortable position, in which it had to crack down on the Gaza border, thus giving the MB an excuse to rally opposition against Cairo. Egypt was already uncomfortable with Hamas' electoral victory, but it could not tolerate the group's emergence as the unchallenged power in Gaza.

Syria's decision to go public with peace talks with Israel. As soon as it became clear that Syria was getting serious about such negotiations, alarm bells went off within groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, which now had to deal with the fear that Damascus could sell them out at any time as part of a deal with the Israelis.

Hamas' relations with the Arab states already were souring; its warming relationship with Iran has proved the coup de grace. Mubarak said it best when he recently remarked that the

situation in the Gaza Strip "has led to Egypt, in practice, having a border with Iran." In other words, Hamas has allowed Iranian influence to come far too close for the Arab states' comfort.

In many ways, the falling-out between Hamas and the Arab regimes is not surprising. The decline of Nasserism in the late 1960s essentially meant the death of Arab nationalism. Even before then, the Arab states put their respective national interests ahead of any devotion to pan-Arab nationalism that would have translated into support for the Palestinian cause. As Islamism gradually came to replace Arab nationalism as a political force throughout the region, the Arab regimes became even more concerned about stability at home, given the very real threat of a religious challenge to their rule. While these states worked to suppress radical Islamist elements that had taken root in their countries, the Arab governments caught wind of Tehran's attempts to adopt the region's radical Islamist trend to create a geopolitical space for Iran in the Arab Middle East. As a result, the Arab-Persian struggle became one of the key drivers that has turned the Arab states against Hamas.

For each of these Arab states, Hamas represents a force that could stir the social pot at home - either by creating a backlash against the regimes for their ties to Israel and their perceived failure to aid the Palestinians, or by emboldening democratic Islamist movements in the region that could threaten the stability of both republican regimes and monarchies. With somewhat limited options to contain Iranian expansion in the region, the Arab states ironically are looking to Israel to ensure that Hamas remains boxed in. So, while on the surface it may seem that the entire Arab world is convulsing with anger at Israel's offensive against Hamas, a closer look reveals that the view from the Arab palace is quite different from the view on the Arab street.

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