

AUGUST 2005: ISRAEL WITHDRAWS FROM GAZA

In December of 2003, Ariel Sharon shocked Israelis by announcing that he would be unilaterally withdrawing from Gaza and forcibly removing the 8,000 Israeli settlers living there (in the settlements known as Gush Katif). Of course, Ariel Sharon also planned for Israel to “strengthen its control over areas of Greater Israel” (the West Bank) at the same time. In fact, before his stroke in January of 2006, Sharon had planned to conduct a second unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank – only this one would include the annexation of about one-third of that territory to incorporate a large number of Israeli settlements.¹

George W. Bush went along with Ariel Sharon’s plan to withdraw from Gaza, even though Colin Powell and Condi Rice felt they were “touching the third rail” by validating the West Bank occupation. But Bush proclaimed that “in light of new realities on the ground, including already existing population centers [Israeli settlements in the West Bank], it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949 [the pre-1967 borders].” There was one anecdote in particular that displayed the way Bush had now come to understand things: In a meeting, Ariel Sharon insisted to President Bush that it would not be feasible for Israel to allow the “right of return” for Palestinian refugees and their descendants into Israel’s national territory. To which Bush replied, “No shit. Here come three million people.”

Now, although Bush gave Israel cover on the *existing* West Bank settlements, he did demand a freeze on any and all *new* settlements. He also declared the Israeli border wall should be “a security rather than a political barrier” and “should be temporary.” He further stated that the border wall must take into account “its impact on Palestinians not engaged in terrorist activity.” Of course, rhetoric does not necessarily mean action and since the Americans were more than a little busy with Iraq at the time, little was done to pressure Sharon into complying with the White House’s positions. Still, Ariel Sharon’s advisor Dov Weissglass stated that “Sharon reached the conclusion that it doesn’t matter who is sitting in the White House – they will always view the settlements as a significant problem.” Therefore, Sharon realized something bold needed to be done to change the status quo.

And what Dov Weissglass says on this matter is important, as his comments are still brought up (and interpreted differently) in the ongoing debates today. Coleman Hughes

¹ According to news reports, only some 70,000 of the 250,000 West Bank settlers would have been removed, and the Jordan Valley and Judean Desert would remain in Israel’s hands. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert inherited this plan (which was widely popular in Israel), but it was shelved when fighting broke out in the summer of 2006 between Israel and Hamas (in the south) and Hezbollah (in the north).

(taking a pro-Israel position) recently had Yousef Munayyer [on his program](#) (taking a pro-Palestinian position) and in a follow-up to that conversation, Coleman Hughes offered a "[correction](#)" on how Munayyer portrayed Dov Weissglass' comments in a [2004 Haaretz article](#) on the decision to withdraw from Gaza. This article is behind a paywall now, so I can't read it for myself and can only cite the quotes that came from other sources.

Yousef Munayyer *paraphrased* Dov Weissglass as saying, "We want to be able to point to Gaza as a place we are going to ensure is a failure, as a reason not to withdraw from the West Bank." And this is a view that is commonly held among many pro-Palestinian commentators regarding the Gaza withdrawal plan: That is was all just done as cover to take over the West Bank, and that they had some kind of "plan" in place to ensure Gaza would eventually collapse (even though the events that took place over the next two years were very far from predictable).

Coleman Hughes pointed out that "Weissglass doesn't say anything about ensuring Gaza is a failure," and then he directly quoted Dov Weissglass from the article: "We reached that conclusion [to withdraw] after years of thinking otherwise – after years of attempt at dialogue. But when Arafat undermined Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] at the end of the summer of 2003, we reached the sad conclusion that there is no one to talk to, no one to negotiate with. Hence the disengagement plan. Because when you're playing Solitaire, when there's no one sitting across from you at the table, you have no choice but to deal the cards yourself."

That would tend to make it a clear win for Coleman Hughes (assuming you take Dov Weissglass at his word), but there was another quote provided in the [Unpacking Israeli History episode on Gush Katif](#) where Dov Weissglass was quoted saying, "The disengagement is actually formaldehyde. It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians... The significance is the freezing of the political process. And when you freeze that process, *you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state*, and you prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders, and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda."

Now that quote I think gives some credence to why Palestinians took issue with the withdrawal plan. It does seem that Ariel Sharon and Dov Weissglass thought they could prevent a Palestinian state and avoid making any further concessions by offering up a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza as a way to push aside the more important issues. At the same time, it does not make sense to me that they wanted to "ensure it was a failure" because that would only lead to instability and violence which would increase the pressure on them to get back to the negotiating table and work out these issues

they were so keen to avoid.

In my opinion, much of this seems to be about the fact that Israel ended up squeezing Gaza so horribly in the years after Hamas took it over (which, again, was not something anyone could have predicted at the time of Ariel Sharon's withdrawal from Gaza). After that happened, leftist and pro-Palestinian commentators started to ex-post-facto place the context for all that happened later on the years that preceded it. As if to say: "It was all a premeditated plan by Israel from the very start" (not unlike how many Israelis tried to claim that Arafat had "pre-planned" the Second Intifada even before Ariel Sharon walked on the Temple Mount). Basically, both sides assume everything that happens in this conflict is not a response to ever-changing events on the ground, but rather a cleverly crafted plot developed in smoke-filled rooms by the other side (and, to be fair, *sometimes* that is true). Even Sari Nusseibeh believed that in this case, and he was not prone to the conspiracy culture that often pervades Palestine.

SARI NUSSEIBEH: By clearing out settlers from Gaza – a classic red herring – [Ariel Sharon] could divert international attention while he cut the [West Bank] to pieces... The predictable clashes between Hamas and Fatah, not to mention the occasional Qassam rocket fired over the wall, would prove to the world what sort of unruly neighbors the democratic Israelis had to live around. Meanwhile, more Palestinian land in the [West Bank] would be massively populated with Israelis. The key to this plan, of course, was that there be no dialogue, no trust, and no negotiations between the two sides.

Another source on this matter was Ronen Bergman's *Rise and Kill First*, which provided yet another quote from Dov Weissglass:

RONEN BERGMAN: For Sharon, the settlements – which he had wholeheartedly promoted in his previous positions – were not a religious, ideological issue; rather, they were a security consideration. [Dov Weissglass:] "The moment he understood that they're a burden and not an advantage, he had no problem evacuating them and turning his back on the settlers." Sharon, the sworn hawk, who had built his career on his aggressive policy toward the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular, "underwent a dramatic change," Weissglass said. "He wanted to exit the stage as a battle-worn general who became a great peacemaker."

Obviously, it has been (and will continue to be) hotly debated whether Ariel Sharon truly "changed" at the end of his political career. Nonetheless, his policies did come with considerable political cost. In the wake of the intense opposition to Ariel Sharon's plans within his own Likud Party (which included the highly-publicized resignation of Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu), and other right-wing parties in his coalition, Sharon had to form a coalition government with the left-wing Labor Party (led by Shimon Peres) in

January of 2005. However, in November of 2005, the Labor Party voted out Peres as the head of their party and withdrew from the coalition government. When it was announced that there would be new elections in March of 2006, Ariel Sharon announced that he would be leaving the Likud Party to form his own party, Kadima. Shimon Peres (from Labor) and Ehud Olmert (from Likud) both joined this new party, as did some other members of Likud.²

The Kadima Party's platform also illustrated another major factor in the reasoning behind Ariel Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan: demography. By making permanent Jerusalem and *parts* of the West Bank, Sharon was consolidating the segments that were now majority Jewish – while disengaging from the parts that were overwhelmingly Palestinian in population. "We cannot hold onto Gaza forever," Sharon said, "More than a million Palestinians live there and double their number with each generation."

MARK TESSLER: Kadima's platform proclaimed that Israel has a national and historic right to the whole Land of Israel, but then acknowledging that *demographic realities made territorial compromise necessary*, went on to say that "a Jewish majority in Israel would be preserved by territorial concessions to the Palestinians." More precisely, the platform specified that although Jerusalem and large settlement blocks in the West Bank would be kept under Israeli control, "in order to maintain a Jewish majority, part of the Land of Israel must be given up to maintain a Jewish and democratic state."

During the 2001 Israeli election campaign, Ehud Olmert had told voters that "the Ariel Sharon of today is not the Ariel Sharon of 30 years ago," and by the time of the Gaza pullout and the formation of Kadima, many in Israel were asking, and debating, whether this might indeed be the case.

When the IDF finally started to forcibly remove the settlers of Gush Khatif in August of 2005, there were heated protests by Israelis who condemned Sharon's withdrawal from Gaza. Even Noam Weissman, the host of *Unpacking Israeli History*, admitted to joining those protests at the time. (And I do recommend listening to [that episode](#) in particular to hear a perspective that is actually more sympathetic to the settlers.) Some IDF soldiers were crying and commiserating with the settlers as they carried out their orders. There were widespread predictions that there would be violence between settlers and IDF soldiers, but in the end those worries did not come to fruition. But many settlers did wear yellow Stars of David on their clothes to invoke the memory of the Holocaust as they were being dragged from their homes (a move which a lot of Jews felt was a tad

² Kadima would end up winning those elections in March of 2006, even though Ariel Sharon had been forced into retirement by a stroke that crippled him in January. The election of Kadima was considered a validation of the Gaza withdrawal, and a mandate for the new prime minister, Ehud Olmert, to complete Ariel Sharon's plan to pull out of (two-thirds of) the West Bank. (But again, that plan was abandoned after the hostilities that erupted in the summer of 2006.)

distasteful).

[Khalil Shikaki wrote](#) about the proposed Gaza withdrawal at the end of 2004 (just before Yassir Arafat had died), and once again he offered a few prescient thoughts about the consequences of such a move. Views which also provide clarity on why so many Palestinians could feel justified in believing that the Israelis wanted to “ensure Gaza was a failure.” Ironically, Shikaki describes the withdrawal as “a plan the United States is counting on to revive the peace process,” which was very different from how Dov Weissglass claimed he and Ariel Sharon saw it (although that was what Sharon’s government stated *publicly*).³

KHALIL SHIKAKI: If Israel implements Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip in the last quarter of 2005, Palestinian society will fragment even more, lose the benefit of unified representation, and very possibly lapse into bloody infighting... Palestinian power struggles will intensify and the PA will crumble, with warlords and Islamists coexisting within vaguely specified domains. Gaza will become a breeding ground for radicalism of the worst kind – leading Israel to directly reoccupy the strip with no future exit plan... The Israelis will not get the security they want and will be forced to confront a Hamas empowered by the PA's collapse.

In March 2004, soon after the plan's announcement, a survey found that [75%] of Palestinians welcomed Sharon's disengagement plan, while [66%] viewed it as a victory for the intifada. But by June, the public had grown concerned about the plan's implications: 59% worried about Palestinian infighting after Israel's withdrawal and only 30% believed the PA had a high capacity to control internal matters following the pullout.

More people feared that the withdrawal from Gaza would not be complete and that the small strip of land would become a suffocating ghetto, without access to the rest of the world... Not surprisingly, Hamas views the disengagement plan as its own victory, earned by the blood of its fighters, but it may be willing to discuss an agreement: its declared motto, “partners in blood, partners in decision-making,” indicates an eagerness to share power with the nationalists, and a pact with the young guard holds more potential for Hamas than a partnership with Arafat, who is unlikely ever to share genuine power.

Islamist leaders also know that their decision not to recognize the first Palestinian

³ Khalil Shikaki also noted that *at that time*, the Americans and Israelis were hesitant to hold Palestinian elections for fear that Yassir Arafat would win – but they were not showing any signs of concern about a Hamas victory. After Arafat died, they immediately held presidential elections and planned legislative elections for later that year.

elections in 1996 was a tremendous blunder: they lost all ability to influence the national agenda for the following four years – until the intifada began. Indeed, since its establishment in 1987 and with the sole exception of 1996, Hamas has participated in all types of [local] elections in Palestinian civil society.

True, [if they win elections] Islamist hard-liners will be able to undermine the peace process by working within the political system – just as Israeli ultraconservatives do in their government – but they will still have to obey the PA's laws... Only holding national elections now, *before the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza*, can help Palestinians and Israelis prevent this impending disaster... Elections, if conducted honestly and efficiently, promise the best chance to end the anarchy and paralysis that afflict the Palestinian political system.

Despite Ariel Sharon's insistence that the withdrawal should not be seen as a concession to Hamas, most residents of Gaza agreed with the leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, who claimed, "Sharon cannot evade the truth. The Qassam [rocket] is what forced the enemy out." A survey of Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza found that 84% of respondents saw the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza as a victory for "armed resistance."

This ties back into the Micah Goodman quote I mentioned earlier: "The Second Intifada did not break out *because* of the occupation, it broke out after Israel offered to *end* the occupation." Now, I personally do not agree with the way Israelis frame this, but it is still very important to understand that this is how *they* see it. Because the withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza only helped to validate this sentiment, as both moves only led to *more* wars with Hezbollah and Hamas, not less.⁴

In a [recent episode of Israel Story](#), they interviewed one of the Gush Katif settlers, Datya Itzhaki, who was forced to leave Gaza back in 2005. They discussed the recent October 7th attacks by Hamas and how they specifically targeted the southern *kibbutzim* that had been so populated with the peacenik types that wanted settlers like

⁴ Benjamin Netanyahu [reiterated this point](#) on the *Lex Fridman Podcast* (recorded shortly before the October 7th attacks). He noted that when the Israelis withdrew from Lebanon, it just got taken over by Hezbollah; and when they left Gaza, it just got taken over by Hamas – so what should they expect to happen if they left the West Bank? "Every time we just walked out, what we got was not peace," Netanyahu said, "We didn't give territory for peace, we got territory for terror... Therefore, I think most Israelis today if you asked them, they'd say it's not gonna work – so what do you do with the Palestinians? They're still there... The Palestinians should have all the powers to govern themselves, and none of the powers to threaten Israel. Which basically means that the overall responsibility for security remains with Israel... And right now, if you ask Israelis across the political spectrum, except the very hard-left, most Israelis agree with that. They don't really debate it... And from a practical point of view we've seen that every time that Israel leaves a territory, and takes its security forces out of an area, it immediately is overtaken by Hamas or Hezbollah or jihadists who basically are committed to the destruction of Israel – and also bring misery to the Palestinian or Arab subjects."

her out of Gaza. And just to be clear, I believe that her comments are exactly the *wrong* lesson that Israelis should be taking from the October 7th attacks – but I admit that I cannot blame her for seeing things this way. Because it is my great fear that the atrocities by Hamas have simply “validated” the narratives that the settlers have been pushing for many, many years.

DATYA ITZHAKI: Listen, it was tense [between us and] the kibbutzim. For more than a year, they were standing every Friday in the junction with signs saying “Come Back Home,” “Leave Gaza.” We have a video with me arguing with one of them – and this guy is now in Gaza kidnapped. So we tried to explain to them: We’re now your bumper. We’re there in order to make sure that you will be safe. Once we’re out, you have a big problem. And, y’know, they said, “You’re an obstacle to peace. We want peace with the Gaza region. We know them, you don’t.” – I know them. I lived there 21 years. Believe me. I know them. I know the good, I know the bad. And they paid the price... We said it will happen.

THE PROLOGUE TO THE EPILOGUE

In March of 2004, before the Gaza withdrawal had been completed, the Israelis finally managed to assassinate [Sheikh Ahmed Yassin](#), and then they killed Hamas co-founder [Abdel Azis al-Rantisi](#) the following month. Part of the rationale for these assassinations was that it would help prevent Hamas from securing a foothold in Gaza after the Israelis withdrew (this calculation was obviously incorrect). But it also had other geopolitical consequences that Israel could not have foreseen.

RONEN BERGMAN: It is hard to believe that Hamas would ever have succeeded in establishing a state of its own in the Gaza Strip if Sheikh Yassin were still alive. Yassin strongly opposed any cooperation or ties with Iran, and he imposed his view on the organization. Undoubtedly, the killing of Sheikh Yassin was the harshest blow suffered by Hamas in its entire history, and the single biggest factor in its desire to reach a ceasefire with Israel [ending the Second Intifada]. But it also led to another unlikely twist in the course of Middle East history: Thanks to Yassin’s removal from the scene, Iran, Israel’s most dangerous enemy, forged the last link in its plan to become a regional power.

On January 9, 2005, Mahmoud Abbas was elected to succeed Yassir Arafat as the president of the Palestinian Authority. The elections were considered to be fair despite a few issues, but Hamas and Islamic Jihad boycotted the elections and encouraged their followers to do the same. Abbas was seen as someone the Israelis and Americans could work with, and he remains in charge of the Palestinian Authority to this day (having never again allowed another election to challenge his position). These days he

has come to be seen as utterly corrupt by nearly all Palestinians and utterly ineffectual by nearly everyone else.

In February of 2005, Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas attended the [Sharm El Sheikh Summit](#), which marked the “official” end to the Second Intifada. Violence continued of course, but at least the suicide bombings had decreased back down to “normal” levels.

In August of 2005, the Iranian hardliner **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** became the president of Iran, and his subsequent comments claiming [the Holocaust was “a myth”](#) (a claim that was openly endorsed by Hamas Chairman Khaled Meshal), and that there should be a “world without zionism,” greatly heightened tensions between Iran and Israel. Especially as Iran started openly flaunting UN resolutions and pushing forward with their nuclear program.

Daniel Byman noted that by 2006, “normal life began to resume for Israelis, but not for Palestinians... Israelis could once again walk down the streets of Netanya and Tel Aviv without fear. Support for suicide bombings [among Palestinians] fell to less than 30% for the first time during the Second Intifada.” But at the same time, he also noted the costs of Israel’s victory:

DANIEL BYMAN: “We are on our way to catastrophe,” declared Yediot Ahronot, Israel’s largest circulation newspaper, in 2003. The sources of this doom and gloom: four former heads of Israel’s domestic security service, commonly known as the Shin Bet, broke the service’s traditional silence in the face of politics to deride Israel’s current policies. They contended that Israel’s government was focused only on preventing the next attack rather than on “how we get out of the mess we find ourselves in today.”

Many of Israel’s most effective counterterrorism tools were also intrusive and controversial, and Israel’s successes in reducing Palestinian violence came at the price of its international legitimacy and the welfare of ordinary Palestinians. Israeli counterterrorism ultimately resulted in a tactical victory, but on the political level the result was at best a draw and may even prove a defeat for Israel.

In January of 2006, Ariel Sharon had a severe stroke and **Ehud Olmert** took over as prime minister. Sharon lived for several more years but he remained out of commission from this point forward.

The first Palestinian legislative elections were scheduled to be held later that month. Ariel Sharon had not wanted Hamas to be allowed to participate unless they renounced terror and recognized Israel’s right to exist, but the Bush administration insisted they must participate so as not to discredit the democratic process. The Bush administration

had also received assurances from Mahmoud Abbas that he would start cracking down on Hamas terrorists after the elections were over.

To the surprise of everyone involved, Hamas wound up winning a shocking victory and received a 56% majority of the seats in the legislature (although it only received 44% of the popular vote). This would set in motion a series of events that we are still living with – and hotly debating – today...

*“Basically the process has been paralyzed since the 2007 split between Hamas and Fatah. There wasn’t really going to be a meaningful peace process thereafter, in part because Hamas could easily play the role of a spoiler – as it did in 2008, once war broke out... That caused the Annapolis negotiations that I was involved in [to collapse]. And we’ve seen that happen time and again, where Gaza erupts in violence and that basically scuttles whatever diplomatic process was happening... So I think if there is a moment that the peace process actually died ... it’s been dying a slow death – but the decline I think really dramatically increased in 2005. Once the Gaza disengagement failed and then you have this kind of domino effect of blow after blow to the Palestinian leadership – Hamas’s election, and then the split, Hamas’s takeover of Gaza, and then these periodic wars – we haven’t had a meaningful process since then. And now finally people have come to the conclusion that maybe this Gaza situation is kind of destabilizing. [People are saying], “We should probably do something about it.” But after what? After all this damage had been done.” — Khalid Elgindy, author of *Blind Spot* ([speaking in 2019](#))⁵*

JAN 2006: HAMAS WINS THE PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS

In the year leading up to these elections, there were signs of increasing support for Hamas. At the start of 2005, Palestine held presidential elections where Fatah’s Mahmoud Abbas emerged victorious as the democratically elected successor to Yassir Arafat. Those elections were once again boycotted by Hamas, but Hamas would continue to participate in *local* Palestinian elections and made significant gains over Fatah throughout the course of the year.

⁵ This quote rings true to me (and even seems prescient nowadays), and yet one sentence in the middle of Khalid Elgindy’s answer included a sentiment that I found a little bizarre. Elgindy said: “And so that is a legacy of the Bush administration and its policy, and its *intent*, on maintaining that division between Israelis and Palestinians.” Now, to be clear, the Bush-43 administration policy was pretty incoherent, and could even be rather incompetent; but I have a hard time believing it was their *policy* to keep Israelis and Palestinians divided. So I wanted to highlight this part of Elgindy’s response, just to illustrate how little it matters if Israelis and Palestinians (and Americans) agree on the “what,” if they still in no way can agree on the “why.”

This trend was leading to increased fears from Mahmoud Abbas (and the Israeli government) about the chance of a Hamas victory in the January 2006 legislative elections. In fact, Abbas had already postponed the elections once in the summer of 2005, but the Bush-43 administration was insistent that the elections not be postponed again and that Hamas be allowed to participate (lest the elections seem illegitimate). The result was a shock to everyone involved: Hamas won a majority in the legislature with 74 of the 132 seats, while Fatah only won 45 seats.⁶

One of the interesting things I have run across in regards to this election was the amount of blame heaped on Khalil Shikaki's Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, which is still today the most respected organization for polling public opinion in the Palestinian territories. The narrative I kept hearing was that the western powers had put all their faith in Shikaki's predictions that Fatah would most assuredly win and that is why they pushed forward with the elections. Zaki Chehab, in his book *Inside Hamas*, noted that even the Israeli intelligence services tried to deflect blame onto Khalil Shikaki after the Israeli press criticized them for not foreseeing the Hamas victory.⁷

When I went back and looked at what Khalil Shikaki [was actually writing](#) in the lead-up to the elections, I didn't feel the accusations against him were all that justified. It's true that Shikaki did not predict a Hamas victory but he did note that "Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006 are likely to introduce Hamas as a major parliamentary bloc." He also argued that even "if [Palestinians] do manage to produce a democracy under such adverse conditions, it will be one dominated by the rise of Hamas and a declining prospect for peace with Israel." So I have a hard time understanding why western and Israeli officials would have been 100% confident they would get the outcome they wanted based on his work alone. It seems more to me like

⁶ [A 2008 article](#) quoted Fatah Security Chief (and favorite of the Bush-43 administration) Mohammed Dahlan as saying: "Everyone was against the elections," Dahlan says. Everyone except Bush. 'Bush decided, 'I need an election. I want elections in the Palestinian Authority.' Everyone is following him in the American administration, and everyone is nagging Abbas, telling him, 'The president wants elections.' Fine. For what purpose?"

The same article also summarized the reactions of Bush-43 administration officials to the results: "'I've asked why nobody saw it coming,' Condoleezza Rice told reporters. 'I don't know anyone who wasn't caught off guard by Hamas's strong showing.' ... 'Everyone blamed everyone else,' says an official with the Department of Defense. 'We sat there in the Pentagon and said, 'Who the fuck recommended this?'"

⁷ Zaki Chehab quoted an editorial in the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*: "If [the intelligence agencies] don't know what's happening in the Palestinian territories, how are we going to rely on them for what's happening in Iran?" ... Looking for a scapegoat, the intelligence outfits targeted Professor Khalil Al Shikaki ... claiming that he grossly misled them... The views expressed by Shikaki's centre were taken seriously by decision-makers and institutes worldwide, due to his reputation as a respected Palestinian political analyst."

they just needed a scapegoat after things went off course.⁸

Furthermore, Hamas did not have the “overwhelming” victory in 2006 that they (and others) have often portrayed it as being. Hamas only won 44% of the popular vote despite winning 56% of the legislative seats. And while it is true that Fatah itself only received 41% of the popular vote, the sum total of votes for *all* the opposition (primarily nationalist) parties running against Hamas came out to 56% of the popular vote. The problem was that the nationalists had become very fractured by that point (many were disenchanted with the corruption of the Fatah “old guard” still tightly controlling the PA) and they broke up into several different parties, or ran independently, while the Islamists chose to remain unified under Hamas. Due to the complicated nature of the way these parliamentary elections were set up, Hamas came away with a plurality of seats despite not having a majority of the popular vote.⁹ (And anyone closely familiar with American

⁸ For more context on Khalil Shikaki’s writings just before the January 2006 elections, here are a few more excerpts: While at the national level voters’ considerations were similar to those of Fatah (focusing on revival of the peace process, improvement of the economy, and restoration of law and order), at the local level voters’ considerations tended to favor the Islamists (with a focus on clean government and efficient delivery of services).

In local elections in December 2004 and in January and May 2005 ... voters rewarded Hamas candidates, perceived as uncorrupt, and punished those of Fatah, perceived as part of PA corruption... Similar majorities of voters in each of the rounds of local elections ... have indicated that *the incorruptibility of candidates* has been the most important consideration, with *candidates’ political affiliation coming fifth*, after education, religiosity, and position on the peace process.

Despite a narrow tolerance of dissent during the past decade, Palestinian public opinion played a significant role in empowering and constraining leaders. It gave or deprived them of legitimacy to act in ways that significantly affected the prospects for peacemaking and state building. But public opinion has also been subject to manipulation and framing and has fallen victim at times to misperception and ignorance... Heightened threat perception [due to Israeli policies of increased settlements, raids inside Palestinian territory, increased scrutiny at checkpoints, etc.] increased public support for violence, while progress in the peace process and state building generated optimism, leading to greater moderation.

Palestinian misperception of Israeli public attitudes is evident even when it comes to one of the core elements of the peace process: the two-state solution. Lack of normal personal interaction, because the only Israelis most Palestinians encounter are soldiers or armed settlers, encourages misperception and the desire to portray the other side negatively... Greater exchange between Palestinians and Israelis is likely to reduce misperceptions and increase each side’s willingness to compromise and take risks.

⁹ If you’re a politics nerd and want the long, boring rundown of how the electoral system in Palestine gave Hamas a majority of seats, despite them not winning a majority of the popular vote, historian Mark Tessler gave this detailed explanation: The [Palestinian] Legislative Council elected in 1996 had 88 members, chosen in separate races in 16 multimember districts – 11 in the West Bank and 5 in Gaza. The number of representatives elected from each district varied as a function of population; voters in each district were able to cast ballots for as many candidates as there were Council seats to be filled; party lists were open, giving voters the option of casting ballots for candidates from different parties; and candidates were ranked according to the votes they received and then declared to have been elected until all available seats were filled. This arrangement, sometimes described as a majoritarian plural electoral system, was amended in March 2005, however. At a meeting in Cairo, two important changes were adopted. First, the size of the Council was increased from 88 to 132. Second, only half the seats, 66, continued to be chosen

politics can easily understand how this can happen.)

When I was looking at the specifics of Khalil Shikaki's [numbers at the very end of 2004](#), they actually predicted the vote share for Fatah and the "independent nationalists" pretty spot on. Shikaki predicted 40% of the vote share would go to Fatah (which was only 1 point off), but his only major blunder was in believing that "moderate Islamists" would take a significant share of the votes away from Hamas. Instead, it appears that even the moderate Islamists stuck with Hamas. Shikaki had said he expected Hamas to get, "at most, a third of the votes" instead of the 44% they did receive – but even Ariel Sharon (who wanted to ban Hamas from participating in the elections) also underestimated Hamas by predicting they would get about 40% of the vote.

Hamas later stated that they had specifically instructed their followers to avoid the pollsters, and even told them that if they were questioned they should give misleading answers. Hamas did not want it to appear as if they might win because they (reasonably) feared that the Israelis and Americans would cancel the elections. Hamas also managed to receive a surprising amount of votes from people within the PA government itself (meaning the lower-level PA security personnel and civil servants who were *expected* to be loyal to Fatah), likely because they had assured them that they would still have a place in a Hamas-led PA government.

Zaki Chehab stated that Hamas actually developed a rather skillful and intricate campaign strategy for the 2006 elections. They specifically targeted "waverers" (swing voters) and ran against the ruling Fatah party's corruption and mismanagement, rather than promoting their own militarism and plans for an Islamic state. Hamas' slogan before the election was "For Change and Reform" – after the election, their banners read "Islam is the Solution." (I have heard another famous slogan they used was: "America says no to Hamas. Israel says no to Hamas. What do you say?") And as often happens in elections, many voters voted *against* Fatah more than they voted *for* Hamas (even though Hamas has always found this claim insulting). Chehab quoted one voter at the time who said, "We want to teach [Fatah] a lesson so they will not ignore us in the future. We don't believe in Hamas' political views, and if [Fatah] wants to make a comeback they have to consider our views and respect us as voters."

in multimember district-level balloting. The other half, as in Israeli elections, were to be chosen through a party-list proportional representation system in which the whole country is treated as a single constituency. The change seemed to favor Fatah, in that it fared almost as well as Hamas in the new single-constituency party-list balloting. In the contest for these 66 seats, elected on the basis of proportional representation by all West Bank and Gaza voters, Hamas captured 29 seats and Fatah captured 28, between them obtaining 86.5 percent of the total votes. By contrast, Hamas routed Fatah decisively in the district-level voting, winning 45 of the available 66 seats, while Fatah won only 17 seats. This suggests that Fatah would have done better if the prior electoral system had been abandoned entirely in favor of a single-constituency party-list system, and that Hamas would have done better had the previous system remained in place.

As I alluded to a second ago, the leaders of Hamas have always (even today) vehemently denied the notion that their election was due more to Palestinian disenchantment with Fatah rather than a sign of outright support for Hamas itself, but I personally feel it's pretty clear that the anti-Fatah vote was probably the most significant factor in the Hamas victory.¹⁰ [In a 2009 talk](#) by historian Mark Tessler, he noted that pollsters found over half of the Palestinians who voted for Hamas in 2006 continued to support the peace process (to include negotiating with the Israelis), which was absolutely *not* the position of Hamas itself.

The Hamas victory left America, Europe, Israel, and even Fatah scrambling on how to respond. These were arguably the freest and fairest elections ever held in the Middle East, and they had given a mandate to an internationally recognized terrorist organization that rejected the entire peace process that had created the very Palestinian Authority government they were now leading. How could the US, Israel, or Europe continue to give aid (which was absolutely essential to keeping the Palestinian territories functioning) to a government run by Hamas? After all, that would have made them the primary source of funding for an internationally recognized terrorist organization. Such a thing would be difficult to justify to themselves, let alone justifying it to their citizens and legislatures.

But at the same time, how can you claim to promote democracy in the Middle East if you refuse to accept the results of free and fair elections? After all, the 2006 elections made Hamas the most legitimate government in the Arab world – as all other Arab governments were monarchies / dictatorships that generally had no elections at all, or elections that were clearly rigged.¹¹ Palestine's elections were by all accounts extremely

¹⁰ Zaki Chehab talked about how many of the PLO "old guard" had come back to Palestine in the '90s after many years in exile (once the Israelis permitted them to return as a provision of the Oslo Accords) to live as 'carpetbaggers' among the Palestinian population: "It didn't seem to matter whether they were high- or low-ranking members, their lifestyles exceeded those of many of their fellow Palestinians back in Gaza and the West Bank. They added another tier to the class system and were described by local Gazans as *Al Aedoun*, which literally means 'the returnee' but has connotations of 'nouveau riche'. The Al A'adeen had grown accustomed to the trappings of wealth [while in exile] and a way of life which bore no comparison to life in the territories. But back in the territories there were no homes and apartments of the standard they were accustomed to, so they began to build grandiose villas or six-storey apartment blocks. The camp refugees, so unaccustomed to the sight of such luxury, referred to these apartments as 'the Towers', whose owners drove around in Mercedes cars or the latest 4x4 jeeps which put them totally at odds with the rest of the Palestinian population. This cultural divide was seized on by Hamas and its followers and used to criticize the PLO." (Ironically, this same trend is happening among the political leaders of Hamas now in exile in Qatar. They too, have [grown accustomed to a lavish lifestyle](#) in their host countries that no ordinary citizen of Gaza could ever imagine.)

¹¹ It is worth noting that in the year leading up to the Hamas victory in Palestine, the Muslim Brotherhood made huge gains in Egypt's 2005 parliamentary elections, and Shia Islamists (many with connections to Iran) were the big winners in the 2005 Iraqi legislative elections. So, Bush's dreams of a democratic

free and fair, and had even garnered an impressive 77% voter turnout.

Interestingly, a quarter of the Hamas candidates were women, and you can listen to [this piece](#) done just a few days before the election to hear some views from Palestinians on the ground talking about this. There was also [this brief interview](#) conducted with one female Hamas candidate, Miriam Farhat, who won a seat in the legislature. Popularly known as “The Mother of Martyrs,” Farhat had three sons die in suicide bombing operations (which she fully supported and encouraged). In an interview with Zaki Chehab, Farhat stated that when one of her sons was upset at seeing her crying, she told him, “Don’t misinterpret my tears. They are the tears of a mother who is about to give her son in marriage to the beautiful [houris](#) in Paradise.” In that NPR interview, Farhat also explained her views toward Islam in Palestinian society:

MIRIAM FARHAT: We are already a Muslim and Islamic society, but what we need is to have more commitment to the Islamic rules and to Islam... If someone drinks alcohol in his house, he will not damage anyone, hurt anyone. But if he drinks it in the street, he will hurt the others and provoke the others. The same for the women; if she doesn't put the hijab on outside the house, there are bad people outside; young generations who will be provoked and not respect her.

In the immediate aftermath of the elections, Fatah refused to set up a government with Hamas. (But stay tuned, because things in the PA government will keep shifting back and forth for the next year and a half.) Fatah had now been in power for over a decade and had little to show for it other than providing continued patronage for their allies who wanted high-paying (and low-working) jobs in the PA. The PA government under Fatah had not provided law and order, no increase in services, no end to Israeli occupation, and Palestinians were no closer to getting a state than they had been when Oslo was first signed in 1993. And all this while Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah were continuing to give more and more concessions to the Israelis. In essence, Fatah had become the worst of both worlds: On the one hand, bad governance in Palestine; and on the other, complicity with the Israelis.

It’s true that Hamas was untested in government, but they had stood tall in giving zero concessions to the Israeli government from day one – a stance that many Palestinians felt was validated by the fact that the Israelis never gave (and never intended to give) them a state of their own. For Hamas, there was a strong desire to keep the “armed

Middle East seemed to be benefiting Islamists far more than the liberal, secular, democratic Arabs he had hoped to empower (a trend that unfortunately recurred in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring revolts). Dennis Ross stated that part of the problem was that the Bush administration had a mistaken belief that democratic elections would be “self-correcting.”

struggle” going on and on until Israel was vanquished from the world; but for most Palestinian civilians, their position was more about the fact that the Israelis were now seen (rightly or wrongly) as having blatantly misled and strung them along throughout the entire peace process. And to that effect, I feel it is once again important to point out that every prime minister during that process (Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Benjamin Netanyahu) explicitly opposed the establishment of a Palestinian state – even though Ehud Barak *may* have finally changed his position on this (too late as it turned out).

During the peace process, the Palestinians opposed the violence and the PA locked up their own people who committed acts of terrorism. Meanwhile, the Israelis continued to create more and more settlements, which were carved out of territory that was *supposed* to be granted to the Palestinians for their own state. And so, Hamas appeared to have been right all along. The Palestinians had granted recognition of the Israeli state, while Israel had continued to oppose any prospect for a Palestinian one. Tareq Baconi noted that “Hamas’s leaders looked to Israel and stressed that many political parties in the Knesset, including the mainstream Likud party, refused to recognize that Palestinians even existed as a people.” So what had been gained by the PLO’s recognition of Israel and renouncing of “armed struggle,” other than to make it easier for the Israelis to consolidate their hold on Jerusalem and the occupied territories?

Furthermore, there was a general feeling among many Palestinians that Hamas has actually provided far more social services to the people over the years than the Fatah-led PA government ever had. And unlike many of the “old guard” leaders of Fatah, Hamas did not siphon off the funds they received in order to line their own pockets (although [many of them do now](#)). So why not give Hamas a try and see what they can do as a government? After all, there weren’t really any other options as far as organized parties went: It was either Hamas or Fatah (or bust).

Of course, it must be stated plainly that Hamas did in fact want an Islamic state with Islamic law, but they were willing to *ease* the people into that and not strictly enforce it right away. After all, the Palestinian people were generally known to be much more on the secular side, and they did not elect Hamas because they wanted Sharia law. They elected Hamas because they wanted a better life and a better government. If Hamas could provide that which Fatah had failed to deliver, then perhaps Hamas could get the Palestinian people to go along with the rest of their Islamist agenda.

ROBERT O. FREEDMAN: The new Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert quickly decided Israel would have nothing to do with Hamas unless it changed its policies toward Israel, a position embraced by most of the Israeli political spectrum. The newly elected

Israeli government refused to have anything to do with Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas either (who was considered ineffectual).

Secretary of State Condi Rice quickly convened the Quartet (the United States, the EU, the UN, and Russia), which agreed not to have any dealings with the Hamas-led Palestinian government until Hamas **[1] renounced terrorism, [2] agreed to recognize Israel, and [3] acceded to the agreements signed between Israel and the PLO, including the Oslo Accords and the Road Map for Peace.**

These three points would be the crux of the friction between the Bush-43 administration and the newly-elected Hamas government. The White House would not accept Hamas as part of the PA government until it agreed to all three of these demands. And since Hamas continually refused to do so, the Bush administration continually put pressure on Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah not to form a government with Hamas until they did.

This "intransigence" on the part of the Bush-43 administration is the backbone of the arguments made by some that the civil war between Hamas and Fatah was the "fault" of the US government. Although I would argue that these demands were pretty standard (and should have been totally expected by Hamas) and not unreasonable (although they did need to be reciprocated better by Israel). After all, these demands were all part of the Oslo Accords, which was the agreement that set up the very PA government that Hamas had just campaigned to be a part of. It seems a little odd that Hamas could think they were allowed to nullify all of these agreements but still take control of the PA (since the PA only existed due to those agreements).

That being said, these demands should have been agreed upon *before* Hamas participated in the elections, not given to them as an ultimatum *after* they won a victory. The thing I cannot fathom is why the hell did the Bush-43 administration wait for Hamas to win before they ensured they were willing to abide by the basic guidelines of the PA government?

Tareq Baconi noted that Mahmoud Abbas seemed to understand this better than the Bush-43 administration did: "Having pushed for Hamas's involvement, Abbas insisted that elections were taking place within the framework of the Oslo Accords. This conflicted sharply with Hamas's premise that al-Aqsa Intifada [the Second Intifada] had rendered Oslo 'dead and gone' and that elections constituted a new political environment rooted in the [Cairo Declaration](#) [of 2005]. Without directly addressing these diverging views, elections got under way."

In contrast to the Oslo Accords, the core principles for the Cairo Declaration were "[1]

the right of the Palestinian people to resistance in order to end the occupation, [2] establish a Palestinian state with full sovereignty with Jerusalem as its capital, and [3] the guaranteeing of the right of return of refugees to their homes and property.” And it also called for “the continuation of the atmosphere of calm [referring to the ceasefire agreement signed between Hamas and Israel that formally ended the Second Intifada] in return for Israel’s adherence to stopping all forms of aggression against our land and our Palestinian people, no matter where they are, as well as the release of all prisoners and detainees.”

On the surface, the Cairo demands were no more unreasonable than those of the Bush-43 administration, but I do think it’s more of a mixed bag here. Point #2 seems to be the bare minimum that the Israelis should agree to – although exactly how Jerusalem is managed will always be a problem.¹² However, Point #1 feels to me like it is another demand that suffers from the problem of reciprocity: in that, if you grant the Palestinian people the right to commit violence in the form of whatever they consider “resistance,” then you have also tacitly granted the Israelis the right to commit violence in the form of whatever they consider “self-defense” (especially since both sides like to play fast-and-loose with those definitions). And as far as Point #3, I fully understand why the Palestinians continue to ask for the “right of return,” but I really feel it is a completely unreasonable and unrealistic demand at this point in the conflict.¹³ Even though I fully

¹² I noted that the translation of the Cairo Declaration (and all other similar declarations) only said “Jerusalem” not “East Jerusalem,” but Tareq Baconi did state at one point in his book that Hamas was willing to accept East Jerusalem as their capital – so I’m not sure what to believe on that one.

¹³ When elaborating on a controversial topic like this, I always like to quote people whose views carry more weight than my own (and so you can yell at them instead of me). Here, I will cite [Ezra Klein’s take](#) on this: “I think ‘right of return’ is a lie that has been told to people. I mean, that is a part of it that kind of breaks my heart. I have talked to people who work in refugee camps in Jordan, Egypt, et cetera. And they’ve met people who have the keys to their grandparents’ house on a necklace around their neck, because it shows you’re going to go back there someday. And you’re not. That is not how these conflicts have ever worked. I think the idea that international law tells you it will work that way is a lie international law is telling you. There’s no right of return for the Jews who were expelled from Iran. There’s no right of return for the people expelled during partition in India and Pakistan. No right of return for the Germans expelled after World War II out of Eastern Europe. About 900,000 Jews, is the number I’ve heard, were expelled, or left, or fled different parts of the Middle East during this period. There’s no right of return for them. It’s not going to happen... There are people who think you need ‘right of return,’ which is a kind of single state solution. And I don’t see any world where you’re getting that. And so I think it actually then ensures the continuation of this world [in Israel and Palestine]. And this world is very, very, very bad.”

In addition, Ezra Klein also alluded to something that Israelis frequently point out: that the UN has a unique definition of “refugee” as applied to Palestinians (and only to Palestinians), where it includes not just those who were made refugees during the 1948 war but any Palestinian who can trace their ancestry back to that *nakba*. In other words, all of the descendants of refugees are also considered refugees – even those who have since resettled in other countries. All of those “refugees” can still claim the rights to Israeli lands. Tareq Baconi stated that the number of Palestinians who meet this definition comes out to around 14 million (even though it was only 750,000 who were originally expelled in 1948). Those 14

acknowledge that this is an opinion that would absolutely infuriate most Palestinians.

ROBERT O. FREEDMAN: Russia soon broke with the Quartet consensus by recognizing Hamas and inviting a Hamas delegation for an official visit to Moscow. In April 2006, the United States and the EU, seeing no change in Hamas policy, decided to cut all aid to the PA [which, at this time, still included both Fatah and Hamas together] except “humanitarian” assistance, but Russia again broke ranks with its Quartet colleagues by offering the PA economic assistance.

Most of the Arab countries did not take a hostile position on Hamas, but they refused to provide them the increased level of financial and material support that Hamas had been lobbying them for – which caused them to instead turn to Iran. For Russia’s part, they did not (and never have) labeled Hamas a terrorist organization and [maintained good relations](#) with them despite being a member of “The Quartet” that was promoting the US-backed Road Map For Peace. At the same time, Russia managed to also maintain good relations with Israel, and a [surprisingly warm relationship](#) with Benjamin Netanyahu (although this relationship [has since been strained](#) in the wake of the 10/7 attacks).

Israel (which had typically given a portion of its tax dollars to the occupied territories) cut off all of its funds to Palestine after the 2006 elections. The loss of this aid was incredibly destructive for the Palestinian territories, as they have little economy of their own – which I should point out is due to harsh Israeli policies that keep the occupied territories economically dependent on Israel. (Israel has always feared allowing the Palestinians too much economic independence because they fear what they might do with the funds.) Without economic assistance from the Israelis or the international community, the Palestinians had essentially no way of providing for themselves.

Nearly all of the employment in the occupied territories was state-run jobs, which means that if the government has no money – no one gets paid. No money for infrastructure, no pay for teachers, doctors, ambulance drivers, security forces, civil servants, construction workers, sanitation workers, etc. And with that being most people’s incomes, those people also have no money to spend on groceries, taxis, shopping, etc. Thus it all became part of an endless cycle that affected every aspect of their economy.

As often happens with such sanctions policies, despite it being designed to put pressure on the ruling government (the Hamas side of it anyway), it instead causes far more harm to the ordinary people living under that government. And as is also frequently the

million would have the right to return to an Israel with only 7 million Jews living in it, and this demographic takeover is seen as the equivalent to the “end of the Jewish state” for supporters of Israel.

case, it allows the government under sanctions with an opportunity to blame all of its failures on the US and the West so it can deflect the blame from themselves. (This is basically the same narrative that played out with the sanctions policy against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the 1990s.)

THE CIVIL WAR

The narratives over the civil war of 2006-2007 between Hamas and Fatah have been revised a lot recently between those who put the bulk of the blame on Hamas (usually more conservative or pro-Israeli voices), and those who tend to put the bulk of the blame on the US government and Israel (typically leftist and pro-Palestinian voices).

One of the major sources that has been cited recently is Tareq Baconi, whose 2018 book *Hamas Contained* has gotten a lot of praise in certain corners. It's worth reading for an understanding of Hamas from their own perspective, but I won't try to pretend that Baconi is coming from an objective perspective. He doesn't always go easy on Hamas, but he certainly follows the leftist trends of most academics in the pro-Palestinian camp. [In a 2020 interview](#), Baconi plainly stated that the "core argument" of his book is that "Hamas is only a fig leaf that allows Israel to justify all these policies" it imposes on the occupied territories. That quote certainly hasn't aged well in the wake of the 10/7 attacks, but it was a pretty ridiculous statement to make even at the time he said it.

Personally, I think Zaki Chehab's 2007 book *Inside Hamas* was a more objective look that still allowed for Hamas to speak in their own words (the author had access to all the major players from the founding years of Hamas). Furthermore, the Hamas officials seemed far more candid in Chehab's book than in Baconi's – perhaps because it had been written so many years earlier when the rhetoric of Hamas was less 'careful' than it is now. For instance, Baconi stated that members of Hamas told him that Sheikh Yassin was actually quite moderate and made peace overtures to Israel, which seemed to be contradicted by the interviews that Sheikh Yassin gave to Chehab while he was still alive (where he admitted such overtures were just calculated strategic moves). Unfortunately, Chehab's book was published in 2007 as these events were still unfolding, so it does not have the complete details on what I'm discussing here.

Jonathan Schanzer is another a well-known source on this topic, who wrote a 2008 book called *Hamas vs. Fatah* which gives a more conservative perspective on the civil war. Again, it is worth factoring in his views, but I admit that I thought his take was a bit too biased in the other direction. For example, Schanzer argued that direct ties "undeniably exist between Hamas and al-Qaeda," which I'm still not convinced of (and

which parts of Bin Laden's captured files seem to refute). He also criticized the Khalil Shikaki polling on the 2006 election, to the point where he was dismissive of the idea that *any* polling could work in a society like Palestine's. He also dismisses the notion that Palestinians casted a "protest vote" against Fatah in 2006 – arguing instead that any Palestinian who voted for Hamas knew full well they were voting for violence and Sharia law. "Thus," Schanzer argued, "the Palestinians were fully responsible for the electoral choices they made."

All that being said, Jonathan Schanzer's account juxtaposes well with Tareq Baconi's work (which I also put up against countless other lectures, articles, interviews, and contemporary news sources on the subject). While Baconi attempts to list out every Israeli provocation and act as illustrative of how they are responsible for the bulk of the violence; Schanzer gives a lot of details on the incidents involving Hamas (particularly those toward Palestinians who attempted to protest against them). Plus, both authors do show some balance: Schanzer did seem to think Fatah's unwillingness to let go of power played the primary role in starting the civil war; while Baconi acknowledged in several places that for all their "moderating" rhetoric, Hamas never really changed their ideology or objectives.

APR-MAY 2007: THE FIRST CLASHES

"The first serious clashes," Jonathan Schanzer wrote, "which foretold the real possibility of a civil war, were reported in mid-April." Fatah activists took to the streets denouncing Hamas. In Gaza, they threw stones and shattered windows in a parliament building; while in the West Bank, armed Fatah men stormed a courthouse in Nablus and shut it down. On April 22, "Hamas and Fatah factions at Gaza's al-Azhar University and the Islamic University threw stones and homemade grenades at one another. Fifteen people were wounded." Two weeks later, more Palestinians were wounded in escalating gun battles, including some school children caught in the crossfire. Then a Hamas member was assassinated, and Hamas retaliated by "launching a shoulder-fired missile at a Fatah security services truck, killing two passengers inside."

Tareq Baconi noted that while all of this was going on, "Hamas's political overtures went unheeded and unchallenged. American positions hardened when Hamas refused to condemn a suicide bombing by Islamic Jihad in Tel Aviv, on April 17, 2006, killing eleven. While Abbas and the international community condemned this as a deplorable act of terrorism, Hamas's leaders concurred with Islamic Jihad that it was legitimate self-defense against Israel's aggressive occupation policies."

JONATHAN SCHANZER: The violence grew worse after the creation of the “Executive Force” (EF), a new military unit deployed on April 20 by Hamas Interior Minister Said Sayyam... For weeks, Sayyam had complained that forces loyal to Fatah and the PA were not following Hamas directives. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, as it turned out, had actually ordered Gaza’s police officers to stay home in exchange for receiving their salaries as a means to deny Hamas the power that it had earned at the ballot box.

TAREQ BACONI: Hamas’s leaders realized this move [establishing the “Executive Force”] would escalate tension, particularly with other armed factions. But they regarded this initiative as being both “a desperate and a bold” move to assert Hamas’s authority as a government able to offer security to the people. Hamas’s cabinet ... asserted that [Sayyam] was constitutionally authorized to create such a group, given that the ministry of interior was responsible for civil order and that he needed to reassert calm.

JONATHAN SCHANZER: It soon became apparent, however, that the EF was not a legitimate police force. Rather than filling the void left by the PA forces and restoring law to the streets of Gaza, the EF became an authoritarian tool that Hamas used to intimidate and exterminate its political foes. The EF adopted many of the extremist views associated with Hamas’s military wing, the al-Qassam brigades. As one new recruit noted, “I’m not Qassam, but I’m in the police force. It’s considered jihad.”

TAREQ BACONI: Expectedly, the Executive Force’s creation marked an escalation in the arms race within the territories as acrimonious exchanges between the two rival factions ensued, each backed by its own external funders: the United States for Fatah, and Iran for Hamas. Fatah viewed the Executive Force’s establishment as an unconstitutional move to create a Hamas-affiliated force. Hamas dismissed such claims and retorted by noting precedents such as “Death Squads” and the “People’s Army” militias that had previously been formed by [Fatah Security Chief Mohammed] Dahlan, ostensibly without presidential decree.

In the first two weeks of May, armed men stormed Hamas’s ministries, instigating clashes. While these were portrayed in the media as Hamas-Fatah skirmishes instigated by the Executive Force, many on the ground believed that the clashes were provoked by members of Fatah’s security forces to raise the heat on Hamas.

There had always been tensions (and violence) between the “nationalists” and “Islamists” in Palestine going all the way back to the 1970s and ‘80s (although those differences seem to have been set aside somewhat during the Second Intifada). So although there have been recent attempts on the left to promote the narrative that the

schism between Fatah and Hamas in 2006-2007 was “orchestrated” by the US government and Israel, the truth is that the civil war should not have been a huge surprise to anyone.

Both sides in the Palestinian civil war now had their own separate police / security forces, which they both considered “legitimate.” No one was sure if the violence was being instigated by rogue actors from both sides, or if these attacks were being coordinated by the leaderships of Hamas and Fatah. Regardless, the effect was the same: Palestinian-on-Palestinian violence was now the new narrative.

As assassination attempts were made by both sides against the other, Hamas used it as an excuse to openly bring out its Qassam Brigades for “security” purposes. Fatah declared this illegal and considered it an “escalation” and an attempt by Hamas to consolidate their power. While this was all going on, Hamas continued its practice of launching rockets on Israel from Gaza (which has continued to be a frequent occurrence), which led to Israeli airstrikes on Gaza in retaliation (also a frequent occurrence).

In his book, Tareq Baconi pointed to an incident on June 9, 2006, where “Israel carried out an air strike that killed a family of seven in Beit Lahiya, Gaza, who were picnicking on the beach. Officially breaking the ceasefire that had lasted since the Cairo Declaration the previous summer, al-Qassam promised ‘earthquakes.’” Having not heard of this incident, I decided to look it up and found that (like most things in this conflict) what actually happened that day [is highly contested](#).

Interestingly, none of the accounts I read (besides Baconi’s) described what happened that day as an Israeli “air strike,” but rather as some sort of explosion on the beach whose source is unknown. It could have been from Israeli artillery (although that is denied by the IDF), but possibly from some kind of unexploded ordinance that was already on the beach (which could have originated from either Israel or Hamas). Initially, it was blamed on an Israeli shell, but the IDF investigation stated that the victims “died 15 minutes after Israeli forces ceased firing, when a stockpile of Hamas Qassam rockets exploded.”

Of course, the original story likely came from a Hamas ministry, which is not exactly trustworthy; but it is also hard to say that an IDF investigation into its own actions is completely unbiased (and the IDF never cooperates with anyone else investigating their actions). Still, it is disturbing to see such a highly contested incident being framed by Baconi *conclusively* as an Israeli air strike that “officially broke the ceasefire,” and which is then given as the reason for Hamas’s Qassam Brigades to justify its return to war

over the summer of 2006.

MAY 2006: THE PRISONERS DOCUMENT

The first major intervention to quell the violence between Hamas and Fatah was the [Prisoners Document](#) of May 2006. According to Tareq Baconi, it was “an unexpected intervention produced by prisoners from Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other factions” who negotiated it from inside their Israeli prison cells (although its primary authors were reportedly Marwan Barghouti from Fatah and Abdul Khaleq al-Natshe of Hamas).

TAREQ BACONI: Seizing on the document, [Mahmoud Abbas] issued a surprising ultimatum and called for a public referendum to be carried out within ten days on the content of the prisoners’ document. Hamas had [already] formally conceded to the items outlined in the prisoners’ note through the Cairo Declaration in 2005 and its own governmental agenda. *The document went one step further*, however, as the imprisoned signatories committed to unity *on the basis of international legitimacy*. This carried severe implications for Hamas’s leadership, given its conviction that past agreements [such as the Oslo Accords] were illegitimate.

The fact that prisoners are a revered constituency within the Palestinian public meant that there was little room to dismiss their proposal. Hamas’s leadership reacted sharply, opposing the referendum... [Hamas] leaders worried that Palestinians might support this document in their desire to end the sanctions. A poll produced by Birzeit University in the West Bank at the time confirmed Hamas’s fears, showing that 77% of Palestinians favored recognition of Israel, less than five months after voting Hamas into the legislature.

So, while [Hamas] Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and the Hamas cabinet in the PA government sought a rapprochement with President Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah (while still trying to avoid a referendum on the Prisoners’ Document), more militant members of Hamas and Fatah continued to derail such negotiations through violence. Militant members of the Qassam Brigades of Hamas also continued to provoke hostilities with Israel through rocket attacks; while Israel openly sent arms to Fatah, which only increased the suspicions that Fatah were acting as “puppets” of the Israelis and Americans.

The negotiations between Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud Abbas led to an “amended” version of the Prisoners’ Document on June 27. This new version “circumvented the need to explicitly recognize past resolutions” and allowed for “the right of the Palestinian

people to maintain resistance ... in all forms.” However, it also stated that such “resistance will be focused on land occupied in 1967.” In other words, attacks were only to occur within the occupied Palestinian territories and not inside Israel-proper (note that this would mean the Hamas rocket attacks would have been a violation of this provision). This new document also stated that resistance would occur alongside “political efforts, negotiations and diplomatic initiatives.”

TAREQ BACONI: But the breakthrough was almost immediately sidelined by escalation on the military front. On June 25, al-Qassam [Brigades], accompanied by the Popular Resistance Committees and the Army of Islam, two armed factions in Gaza, went into Israel through an underground tunnel. Emerging on the other side, the fighters ambushed an Israeli army post and captured a young Israeli soldier, Corporal Gilad Shalit, dragging him back into the Gaza Strip through the tunnel. Hamas’s publications declared Shalit a prisoner of war, taken to negotiate the future release of Palestinian prisoners.



JUNE-JULY 2006: THE SUMMER KIDNAPPINGS

In June of 2006, Hamas utilized its already-intricate tunnel system to sneak into Israel from Gaza, attack an IDF post, and kidnap a 20-year-old soldier named **Gilad Shalit** (two other IDF soldiers were killed in the operation). Shalit wound up being held prisoner for the next five years and became a tremendous national symbol to all Israeli citizens (and even to Palestinians – albeit for different reasons).

Gilad Shalit's kidnapping led Israel to immediately launch a four-month long ground invasion inside Gaza known as Operation Summer Rains. This was notable since Israeli retaliation against Gaza was typically limited to airstrikes. The ground forces were expected to find and rescue Shalit in the course of their operation, but they returned home empty-handed.

As the Israeli government is frequently known to do, they blamed Fatah and Mahmoud Abbas for the kidnapping as much as they blamed Hamas. Hamas's political wing appeared to not have known about the kidnapping (as it was carried out by the military wing), but the Hamas politicians immediately jumped on board with supporting the kidnapping once they learned of it. They did not condemn the act and quickly began pushing for a prisoner exchange as a condition of Gilad Shalit's return.

A month later, in July, Hezbollah conducted a similar operation over the northern border of Israel from Lebanon, kidnapping two more IDF soldiers, **Ehud Goldwasser** and **Eldad Regev** (three other soldiers were also killed during the raid). Hezbollah had been planning this kidnapping for months, but they could never find the right time to carry it out as the Israelis had been on high alert. The second the Israelis went back to normal strength patrols, Hezbollah launched the raid.

UNPACKING ISRAELI HISTORY: The entire nation felt it. The country seemed to mobilize within minutes. Gilad's parents, Noam and Aviva Shalit, went from anonymous private citizens to the country's biggest celebrities. Ehud's wife Karnit shocked the world with her poise and determination, even traveling to the UN so she could accuse Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinijad of war crimes... Ahmedinijad was silent. And after a bit of a kerfuffle in which the Iranian president ignored all questions that seemed even remotely pro-Israel, Karnit was escorted out by UN security.

These kidnappings (and the extremely high price that would later be paid for their release) also heightened debates of the IDF's controversial "[Hannibal Directive](#)," which had first been made aware to the Israeli public in 2003. This unofficial (and still not completely well understood) policy reportedly allows for the IDF to go so far as targeting their fellow soldiers if they are in danger of being taken captive. As *Haaretz* put it, "from the point of view of the army, a dead soldier is better than a captive soldier."

Again, no one knows for certain just how institutionalized this directive actually is, or exactly what entails, but events such as these kidnappings in the 2006 had a long-term impact on this debate (especially in the aftermath of the 10/7 attacks). During the 2008-2009 Operation Cast Lead, one Israeli commander was recorded telling his men,

“No soldier in the 51st Battalion will be kidnapped, at any price or under any condition. Even if it means that he has to detonate his own grenade along with those who try to capture him. Even if it means that his unit will now have to fire at the getaway car.”

RUTH MARGALIT: Since the directive’s inception, the IDF is known to have used it only a handful of times, including in the case of Gilad Shalit. The order came too late for Shalit and did not prevent his abduction... That year, as part of the military’s inquiry into the circumstances leading to Shalit’s capture, the IDF’s Chief of Staff, Benny Gantz, modified the directive. It now allows field commanders to act without awaiting confirmation from their superiors; at the same time, the directive’s language was tempered to make clear that it does not call for the willful killing of captured soldiers. In changing the wording of the protocol, Gantz introduced an ethical principle known as the “double-effect doctrine,” which states that a bad result (the killing of a captive soldier) is morally permissible only as a side effect of promoting a good action (stopping his captors).

Daniel Nisman, who runs a geopolitical-security consultancy, [told the Times](#) that the Hannibal Directive “sounds terrible, but you have to consider it within the framework of the Shalit deal. That was five years of torment for this country, where every newscast would end with how many days Shalit had been in captivity. It’s like a wound that just never heals.”

JULY 2006: THE ISRAEL-HEZBOLLAH WAR

After the two kidnappings by Hezbollah in July (and as Operation Summer Rains continued down south in Gaza), Israel launched airstrikes on Lebanon which led to a short but notable war between Israel and Hezbollah. Israel re-entered southern Lebanon for the first time since Ehud Barak withdrew all Israeli forces in 2000, where they met resistance from entrenched Hezbollah guerillas. It all ended with a ceasefire after 34 days, but the anti-climactic ending was still seen as a success for Hezbollah – as Hezbollah had stood up to Israel and remained standing.

Lebanon had essentially been the *one* success the Bush-43 administration had accomplished in its efforts to democratize the Middle East, and they had hoped an Israeli victory against Hezbollah would shore up support there. In 2005, the uproar over the [assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri](#) had pushed a Syrian-backed government out of power and made Syria finally withdraw its troops out of Lebanon. The new Lebanese government established afterwards was seen as legitimate, but its main rival was Hezbollah and the “success” of Hezbollah against Israel made them more popular.

Iran also actively supported and supplied Hezbollah throughout the war, which heightened tensions even further between Iran and Israel. After all, this was coming on the heels of the 2005 election of the hardline Iranian President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** and Iran's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons.



Israel's military approach in Lebanon produced what came to be known as the "[Dahiya Doctrine](#)," a strategy that entailed the use of disproportionate force and heavy bombardment against civilian areas (albeit ones being used by the enemy) to maintain military "deterrence."

JERUSALEM POST: Dahiya is a neighborhood in Beirut which can only be accessed by card-carrying Hezbollah members. During the 2006 war, the IDF bombed large apartment buildings in the neighborhood since they were also used as Hezbollah command-and-control centers, and were built over Hezbollah bunkers... Those against this doctrine believe that due to the makeup of Hezbollah and Hamas, it is almost impossible to deal it a fatal blow like when fighting against a conventional military. Those in favor believe that a blow to a terror group's nerve center can indeed have such an effect.

In his report to the United Nations [known famously as "[The Goldstone Report](#)"], [Richard] Goldstone brings a quote from OC Northern Command Major-General Gadi

Eizenkot to back up his finding that Israel consistently destroys buildings and houses during operations in the Palestinian Territories.

“What happened in the Dahiya quarter of Beirut in 2006 will happen in every village from which Israel is fired on,” Eizenkot said in an interview in October 2008. “We will apply disproportionate force on it and cause great damage and destruction there. From our standpoint, these are not civilian villages, they are military bases.”

This remark, in addition to others made by Israeli officials, led Goldstone to the following conclusion: “Disproportionate destruction and violence against civilians were part of a deliberate policy.” It would be natural to think that such a notification would deter Eizenkot from making similar remarks in the future. On Sunday though, he proved the opposite, when at a conference in Tel Aviv he said the IDF would continue to apply this doctrine in the future. “Hezbollah is the one that is turning these areas into a battleground,” Eizenkot said of future plans to bomb homes in Lebanese villages where Hezbollah is storing rockets and maintains command posts. “I hope this will restrain them ... but if not, we need to explain to ourselves and to others that this is something that Hezbollah has brought upon itself since it is building its combat zones inside these villages.”

In an attempt to be balanced, I should note that [Goldstone later stated](#), “If I had known then what I know now, the Goldstone Report would have been a different document.” He said that while his UN report validated “cases involving individual soldiers” who had targeted civilians, “civilians were not intentionally targeted as a matter of policy” by the IDF. “Indeed,” Goldstone wrote, “our main recommendation was for each party to investigate, transparently and in good faith, the incidents referred to in our report. McGowan Davis has found that Israel has done this to a significant degree; Hamas has done nothing.”

However, [an article by Brookings](#) also noted that “Goldstone’s retraction doesn’t apply to the finding that Israel engaged in other violations of the laws of war, such as indiscriminate warfare and massive destruction of civilian infrastructure. Other observers noted that even though Israel has opened military investigations of 400 cases of misconduct, these inquiries have neither been independent nor thorough and [have resulted](#) in only three convictions to date.”

Tareq Baconi’s book indicated that Hamas even put a positive spin on the disproportionate use of force by Israel: “Hamas’s publications perceived Israel’s massive ‘overreaction’ as an indication of the significant psychological damage the movement had inflicted on the state.”

The Israeli tactics did spawn one of the more horrific moments in the war when the IDF [bombed a school in Qana](#) on July 30, killing 28 civilians, 16 of whom were children. (Again, this incident echoed the [previously mentioned bombing in Qana](#) that took place in 1996.) The incident led to the usual back-and-forth about Israel's culpability and/or intentionality, but it was a huge problem for Israel either way. It caused an international outcry and even put pressure on President Bush as Israel's closest ally. Vice President Dick Cheney wanted to continue to let the Israelis finish the job against Hezbollah, but Condoleezza Rice said that if they did that then the US would lose their credibility in the Middle East. Bush sided with Rice and pressured Israel for a ceasefire in the war with Hezbollah.

Meanwhile in Gaza, the rockets started to reach levels of 20 per day (and remember that this was before Israel had its [Iron Dome](#) defense system), and Israel's retaliations started to hit a disproportionate number of civilians. The reports from inside Gaza noted one particular instance where Israel had warned the residents of an apartment building before they attacked it, but the residents had ignored the warnings. The journalists on the scene said the Palestinians told them they never know what to believe, so they just took their chances.

In August, two *Fox News* reporters [were kidnapped](#) inside Gaza by militants from a random faction (as there are a lot of smaller groups and gangs inside Gaza that are not actually part of Hamas and Islamic Jihad). Hamas ordered them to let the reporters go after 13 days in captivity. Hamas understood that kidnapping westerners (especially reporters) would just be bad P.R. for them and the Palestinian cause, but many of the smaller gangs of militants in Gaza were not so strategic in their thinking.

AUG 2006: EHUD OLMERT ON THE ROPES

After an ignominious end to the Hezbollah war, the political situation did not bode well for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government in Israel. He was seen as handling both the operation in Gaza and the war with Hezbollah very poorly, and it did not help that Olmert was a career politician with none of the military bona fides of previous prime ministers. Ariel Sharon, Ehud Barak, and Yitzhak Rabin were all famous generals with storied military careers, and even Benjamin Netanyahu was a former Israeli commando.

In light of these complications, Ehud Olmert canceled his planned withdrawal from the West Bank. Olmert had campaigned (and won) election based largely on a plan to unilaterally withdraw from the West Bank as Ariel Sharon had done in Gaza (although this plan would have seen some portion of the West Bank annexed into Israeli territory).

Now that the violence was ramping back up again, Olmert felt there was no longer any willingness among the Israeli public and the Knesset to back such an action. The following articles give some idea of just how much of the West Bank Israel was planning to take in exchange for withdrawing from the rest:

TIMES OF ISRAEL: Rafi Eitan, a former high-ranking Mossad official and government minister under Ehud Olmert [said that] former prime minister Ariel Sharon, who was advised by Eitan for years, was engaged in drafting exactly such a plan [unilateral disengagement from the West Bank], *which would include the annexation of roughly one-third of the West Bank to Israel*, when he suffered a debilitating stroke in January 2006.

Sharon dubbed his plan “the mosaic separation,” because it left most Israeli settlements intact, allowing isolated Palestinian villages access to large urban centers through an intricate system of underpasses and tunnels. “Arik [Sharon] said: Let’s divide Judea and Samaria and take roughly one-third for ourselves, leaving two-thirds for the Arabs,” Eitan said. “Under this plan, the Jordan Valley and the Judean Desert would remain ours.”

WASHINGTON POST: The Israeli government’s plan to dismantle some Jewish settlements in the West Bank and redraw the country's borders [which was “warmly endorsed by President Bush”] is being shelved at least temporarily, a casualty of the war in Lebanon, government officials said... “It’s not operative or realistically possible today,” said Dan Schueftan, deputy director of national security studies at the University of Haifa and a proponent of the plan. But he predicted that “inevitably, we will have to come back to it.”

Olmert’s plan could have required the removal of about 70,000 of the estimated 250,000 West Bank settlers. The exact lines of the proposal were never made public, however, and some in his government talked of evacuating fewer settlers... [Olmert] promised that if there was no agreement from the Palestinians, Israel would unilaterally set its own borders around the remaining settlements.

Critics [of any withdrawal from the West Bank at all] said the attacks from southern Lebanon and Gaza showed it was folly to have abandoned those areas without a deal to ensure some authority remained there to curb attacks... Dror Etkes, director of the Peace Now Settlement Watch [a critic of the settlements], said the government’s plan for some withdrawals was better than no withdrawal. But “the reason they wanted to do it unilaterally is that they wanted to pay less” in terms of land.

OCT 2006: ISLAMISM INCREASES IN GAZA

By October, some Islamists in Gaza were starting to push harder on enforcing their brand of Sharia law (these groups were typically independent Islamist groups, not Hamas itself). There had been some honor killings in Gaza before, but now they were accompanied by assassinations of suspected prostitutes and threats against those suspected of selling American movies or pornography. There were also threats and attacks on Palestinians for things like playing cards in cafes or selling/drinking alcohol.

One of the groups claiming credit for these acts of religious punishment called themselves the “[Righteous Swords of Islam](#)” (although I’m not 100% sure that translation is totally accurate). Some commentators did declare that Hamas was directly behind this organization and that groups like them were just a front for Hamas (since Hamas knew they could not openly promote such behavior without hurting their international reputation), but Hamas denied this.

DEC 2006 TO FEB 2007: THE CONSPIRACY

TAREQ BACONI: In December, [Hamas Prime Minister Ismail] Haniyeh’s delegation was on its way back into Gaza through the Rafah crossing with Egypt. As the prime minister waved at crowds that had gathered to welcome him home, shots were fired in his direction, killing his bodyguard. Hamas’s leaders were incensed at this assassination attempt and pointed to [Fatah Security Chief Mohammed] Dahlan as the figure responsible. Dahlan provocatively retorted that “assassinating Haniyeh is an honor I cannot claim,” as violence escalated.

Backed by the United States, [Fatah President Mahmoud Abbas] took the decisive step in early 2007 to call for new presidential and legislative elections, expressing his frustration with Hamas’s political games and dismissing its fearmongering that there was a conspiracy aimed at collapsing its government. In a provocative speech, Abbas talked about the foolishness of rocket fire and of Shalit’s abduction. Rather than the occupation, he blamed Hamas for the deaths of hundreds of Palestinians in Israel’s attacks and for the persistent blockade. He bemoaned the movement’s naiveté and its willingness to undermine the political establishment in pursuit of fantasies of resistance.

JONATHAN SCHANZER: Seeking to regain control, Abbas called for an early election to bring down the Hamas government. Fatah activists in Gaza and the West Bank celebrated this political maneuver, taking to the streets and firing celebratory machine-gun bursts into the air. In response, Hamas accused Abbas of launching a coup against its democratically elected government.

Even before Abbas made this call for early elections, Hamas complained that the Fatah-backed PA had refused to engage with it on issues of governance... Indeed, each faction retained and developed its own militias. In retrospect, Abbas's call for a new government was probably justifiable. The political tensions that characterized the Hamas-Fatah power struggle had paralyzed the Palestinian legislature.

TAREQ BACONI: For Hamas's leaders, the events at the end of 2006 signaled irrefutably that a conspiracy had been planned by "rogue elements" within Fatah. They stressed that opposition from Fatah was not party-wide but limited to a coterie of individuals who had been handpicked by the Bush administration to carry out this conspiracy. Headed by [Mohammed] Dahlan and including members of the security establishment, these men were referred to by Hamas as the "revolutionary current."

[Hamas Chairman Khaled Meshal stated], "Some members of our flesh and blood are conspiring against us... Opposition is natural; let them oppose and contradict us, as we did them in the past. But there is a difference between opposition and conspiracy. What is happening today is conspiracy."

JONATHAN SCHANZER: In January and February of 2007 ... Hamas carried out a string of abductions of Fatah and PA figures. Those who were kidnapped were often beaten; in some cases, "their limbs were fired at to cause permanent physical disabilities." According to PCHR [Palestinian Center for Human Rights], the Hamas EF [Executive Force] stormed private homes and executed their Fatah enemies by shooting them, point blank, in the head. Reportedly Hamas also hijacked a convoy of PA trucks, marking a turning point in the conflict. The EF was not simply trying to kill Fatah members; it was attempting to cut off their supply lines as well.

TAREQ BACONI: In early 2007, President Abbas's forces reported that they had detected explosives that had been planted for him... The situation compelled Abbas and Meshal to meet face-to-face in Damascus, the first such meeting since Hamas's rise to power... Before the ink had even dried on the Damascus Agreement, as it came to be known, clashes erupted once more in Gaza... Hamas's leaders remarked that "there is no longer a shadow of a doubt that a decision had been taken in the darkened corridors" of Fatah's "revolutionary current" to spark a civil war.

FEB 2007: THE MECCA AGREEMENT

King Abdullah intervened in February in an attempt to make Saudi Arabia the peacemaker in this intra-Palestinian conflict by inviting Fatah (namely **Mahmoud Abbas** and **Mohammed Dahlan**) and Hamas (namely **Ismail Haniyeh** and **Khaled Meshal**) to

a three-day conference which produced the [Mecca Agreement](#) (which was rooted in the provisions of the earlier Prisoners' Document). This agreement finally brought Fatah and Hamas together to form a unity government.

TAREQ BACONI: Without making ideological concessions, Hamas acquiesced to relinquishing domestic power in order to lift the blockade and end lawlessness. The movement gave up six of its nineteen ministries to Fatah and another four to independents, including the key positions of interior, finance, and foreign ministries.

The extent of Hamas's relinquishment of power betrayed a desire to offload its governance responsibilities, given its failure to circumvent the blockade, while maintaining its ideological platform.

The United Nations and members of the Quartet welcomed this deal as a first step toward moderating Hamas. The Bush administration, however, stated that it could not deal with a Palestinian Authority that included Hamas... Despite this opposition, Hamas and Fatah moved toward implementation.

On March 17, they put forward the political agenda of the new cabinet, which called for "respecting" past agreements made by the PLO; the right of return based on UN Resolution 194; and the right of resistance *as defined by international law, meaning that civilians would not be targeted in armed operations.*

Tareq Baconi did note that Hamas's concessions resulting from the Mecca Agreement "met with a great deal of criticism internally," as well as from Islamic Jihad, whose leader said the deal negated the "resistance government" that Hamas had promised. Baconi also noted that "despite calling for the right to resist, the unity government adopted a decision to implement a ceasefire, *which factions such as Islamic Jihad refused to do.*"

Baconi also highlighted the issue of the "right of return" and ended up illustrating why I think it continues to be a roadblock to any agreement between Israel and Palestine (regardless of how justified it may be on its face). Baconi noted that Israel denounced the call for the "right of return" in particular when condemning the new unity government, and his characterization of the Israeli position was that it "underscored Israel's unwillingness to deal with certain political aspects that form the core of Palestinian nationalism, not of Hamas's political agenda." Again, I disagree with this characterization, but I think it is essential to understand that this is how most

Palestinians truly feel and not merely a “talking point” they use to denigrate Israel. But it really does illustrate just how little the two sides accept each other’s positions.¹⁴

JONATHAN SCHANZER: Predictably, the brokered calm did not last long... The same month that the agreement was signed, there were 46 reported kidnappings of civilians in the Gaza Strip as well as more than 25 killings... The violence in Gaza was also directly correlated to a rise in crime. While Hamas and Fatah were killing one another, no one was policing the streets. Indeed, the Palestinian media, not known for its candor about negative developments within Palestinian society, reported that crimes, including car theft and abductions, had skyrocketed.

Foreign aid workers and armed military advisors [from nations such as Egypt] began to flee for their lives... The United Nations even considered declaring the Gaza Strip a “dangerous zone,” a move that would prompt the evacuation of nearly all foreigners, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency [UNRWA] and other international aid organizations.¹⁵

Gaza’s decrepit infrastructure also paid the price. While the fighting raged, a sewage-treatment pool collapsed in Umm al-Nasser, a North Gaza village. The disaster was ultimately blamed on local residents who were stealing sand from an embankment and selling it to local building contractors. It was later learned that the sewage basins from which they stole were already stretched well beyond their maximum capacity. The ensuing “sewage tsunami” killed 3 women and 2 toddlers and injured 25. The raw sewage submerged at least 25 homes, flooded the streets, and caused untold damage to the 3,000-person village... A number of sewage projects, including the one in Umm al-Nasser, had been halted after the Hamas electoral victory in January 2006... According to one UN official, it was “a tragedy that was predicted and documented.”

Essentially, Palestine (particularly the Gaza Strip) was turning into a replica of Iraq at the time. The “Righteous Swords of Truth” bombed a Christian bookstore and two internet cafes in Gaza. Gunfights were even erupting at hospitals. One of the more infamous execution methods by Hamas (which got widely reported at the time) consisted of tying up a prisoner and throwing them off of a rooftop. Although I’m not entirely sure if this tactic was really a frequent occurrence, but it did happen.

¹⁴ Tareq Baconi also stated at another point in his book: “Like the PLO before it, Hamas’s political vision, and with it the internationally sanctioned right of self-determination, right of return, and right to resist – *demands that form the core of Palestinian nationalism* – had effectively been neutralized by foreign intervention.” Again, I see no reason anyone should argue with a right to self-determination, but the “right of return” and *especially* a “right to resist” are points that I think are counterproductive.

¹⁵ Yes, this would be the same UNRWA that you are hearing about [over](#) and [over](#) and [over](#) and [over](#) in the news today.

Journalists were facing more and more repression from both Hamas and Fatah. In April, a group of journalists were protesting the kidnapping of a BBC reporter by a Hamas-linked clan in Gaza when three of the journalists were injured by Hamas security guards who forcibly broke up the protest. The loss of protection for journalists meant that very little on-the-ground coverage was happening toward the end of this conflict. The situation there was already insanely chaotic, and now with no one really able to confirm anything concretely, the record became spotty enough that everyone today is now easily able to cherry-pick who they feel is at fault for what took place.

As things continued to spiral, the Bush-43 administration was scrambling desperately to put the pieces back together just as it had been trying to do in Iraq since its 2003 invasion fell apart. Fatah's "presidential guards" were condemned by Hamas as "dogs" for "carrying out extrajudicial assassinations of its members, for torturing Hamas supporters, and for attacking its institutions." At the same time, the US military's pointman in Palestine, General Keith Dayton, was praising the "presidential guards" for their heroism and referring to them as the "legitimate security forces." General Dayton said that Hamas's "Executive Force" was very unpopular with the Palestinian people according to the polling he saw (although that doesn't necessarily mean that they have any greater fondness for the US or Fatah), and Dayton [assured Congress](#) that things were on the right track.

GENERAL KEITH DAYTON: We live there. And I firmly believe you make changes in this world the way the Romans did: by being on the ground, by getting your feet dirty in the mud, and working with the people on the scene... We're late in the ballgame here, and we're behind... but I think we may be on the right track for sure.

Tareq Baconi noted that Hamas now accused Israel itself of having "graduated from its subversive plots with Fatah's security forces into explicit collusion with 'revolutionaries and renegade Fatah gangs.'" But the record clearly shows that even with Yassir Arafat gone, Israel continued to have as little trust in Fatah as they did in Hamas.¹⁶ It's true that

¹⁶ I should note that many Israelis constantly point out that Mahmoud Abbas [has made statements](#) that they consider just as vile and antisemitic as the ones you hear from Hamas. In 2018, Abbas gave a speech where he stated, "They say hatred against Jews was not because of their religion, it was because of their social profession. So the Jewish issue that had spread against the Jews across Europe was not because of their religion, it was because of usury and banks." And then again in September 2023, Abbas said that Nazi Germany killed Jews during World War II "because of their role in society, which had to do with usury, money, and so on and so forth ... [Hitler] said he fought the Jews because they were dealing with usury and money. In his view, they were engaged in sabotage, and this is why he hated them. We just want to make this point clear. This was not about Semitism and antisemitism." And that latter comment even received a rare condemnation from *Palestinian* scholars and thinkers in the form of [an open letter](#), which included notable signatories such as Rashid Khalidi, Tareq Baconi, and Noura Erakat.

The linked-to article also noted that: "In a [1982 study](#) based on [Mahmoud Abbas'] dissertation [entitled "The Other Side: The Secret Relationship Between Nazism and Zionism"] Abbas cited Holocaust denier

the US government was arming and training Fatah's security forces, but the Israelis were always uncomfortable with this and warned the US that providing such arms to Fatah could lead to them ending up in the wrong hands (which many of them did). In fact, in [that same Congressional hearing](#) with General Keith Dayton, conservative Republicans also expressed their fear that arming Fatah could mean that those weapons would later be turned against Israel. Republican Congressman Mike Pence said that he was currently worrying about such a development "more than any other issue."

Mahmoud Abbas now wanted a UN peacekeeping force installed in the Palestinian territories. At the very least, he had at least hoped that Israel would allow Fatah to receive increased imports of weapons with which to fight back against Hamas (Israel refused). No one in Palestine ever thought it would get this bad, and any Palestinians with the means to flee got the hell out of dodge. Particularly in Gaza, where many went over the border into Egypt. One witness told a reporter that this intra-Palestinian violence was worse than any clashes he had ever seen before with the Israelis. This exodus also has the usual "brain-drain" effect on the Palestinian territories, as the most skilled and educated Palestinians typically were the ones who had the means to flee.

The civil war reached its climax (and its finale) in June of 2007, when Hamas launched a "coup" inside Gaza – taking total control of the strip in less than a week – in response to what it saw as preparations for a "coup" by Fatah and the United States. This has since led to dueling narratives about who was actually at fault for what ensued. And this debate has actually been given new life – and even greater relevance – in the wake of the 10/7 attacks.

TAREQ BACONI: Hamas achieved its goals in spectacular speed as it carried out brutal acts of violence against its political opponents... Hamas reported on troves of American weapons it had found stored in preparation for the coup Hamas had anticipated. This vindicated voices within the Bush administration who had opposed the American "train and equip" program for fear that weapons would fall into Hamas's hands. [General Keith] Dayton's assertions about the efficacy of Fatah's armed forces and [Mohammed] Dahlan's boastful confidence suddenly rang hollow.

Drawing on Israeli and international media, Hamas had hypothesized about the alleged US-led planned coup... Publications surmised that Secretary [Condoleezza] Rice had

Robert Faurisson for the proposition that the gas chambers were not 'for murdering people,' but that 'they were only for incinerating bodies, out of concern for the spread of disease and infection' ... In 2014, Abbas claimed to have changed his position, calling the Holocaust 'the most heinous crime to have occurred against humanity in the modern era.' But, as his 2018 and most recent statements made clear, he remains what he has always been: a Holocaust denier who embraces antisemitic tropes."

secretly agreed with [Mahmoud] Abbas to scuttle the latest unity agreement to prevent any legitimacy being conferred on [Hamas].... These suspicions were not unfounded. The United States was indeed actively implementing its “train and equip” program, providing arms and training for Fatah’s security forces to prepare them for a clash with Hamas. As Secretary Rice later explained, the administration believed that Hamas was getting arms and training from Iran, and therefore the administration was doing what it could to prepare “the good guys” to emerge victorious.

JONATHAN SCHANZER: [After the Hamas takeover of Gaza], Abbas had no choice but to dismiss the Hamas-led unity government that the Saudis had helped create in March. He soon appointed outgoing Finance Minister Salam Fayyad to lead an emergency government in the West Bank. In so doing, Abbas had all but conceded that he had lost the Gaza Strip.

Fatah’s forces, trained and armed by the United States and other western nations, had failed miserably in war. According to numerous reports, PA fighters either left the field of battle or even joined the Hamas fighters... In what Fatah leaders viewed as an utterly audacious statement, [Hamas spokesman Sami Abu] Zuhri claimed that Hamas had entered into battle to defend itself from a Fatah cadre that was collaborating with the United States and Israel.

Among the more interesting sources behind these dueling narratives was a couple of cables released by Wikileaks that gave some candid assessments from high-level Israeli officials to the June takeover. These cables were frequently cited in the later accounts which blamed the Bush-43 administration (which I’ll discuss in a minute), but I felt they were also very interesting in their own right, so I wanted to excerpt parts of them here. These cables were both transmitted on the last day of the battle.

CABLE 1 (2007 JUNE 13): [Director of Shin Bet] Yuval Diskin said that he opposes [General Keith] Dayton’s proposal to equip security forces loyal to Palestinian Authority President Abbas and Fatah, as he is concerned that the provisions will end up in the hands of Hamas. He claimed that the security forces loyal to Abbas and Fatah have been penetrated by Hamas, and pointed to a recent incident in which Hamas reportedly seized heavy machine guns from Abbas’ Presidential Guard... The difference, he explained, is between the “quality” of Hamas, and the “quantity” of Fatah’s security apparatus that is loyal to Palestinian Authority (PA) President Abbas... “I support the idea of militarily strengthening Fatah,” [Diskin said], “but I am afraid that they are not organized to ensure that the equipment that is transferred to them will reach the intended recipients.”

Diskin said that Abbas views Fatah as weak and “on its last legs,” and incapable of being rehabilitated within six months. *Stressing that it was his own opinion (and not necessarily shared by the GOI [Government of Israel])*, Diskin said that Abbas is starting to become a problem for Israel: “He's a paradox. He cannot function and do anything. Why is Fatah failing? Because Abbas has become the ‘good guy’ whom everyone is trying to do everything for in order to keep him alive. Everyone is afraid of the alternative, and yet Abbas is already talking about how he plans to retire from the political scene after his term ends in 2008. He knows he is weak and that he has failed... He did not start to take any action when he had the chance in 2004. Instead of choosing to be the leader for Fatah, he chose to be a national leader for all Palestinians.”

Diskin lamented that the current situation suggests that nobody can now assume leadership of Fatah. [Mohammed] Dahlan, he said, can only lead in the Gaza Strip – if that – and Marwan Barghouti can lead in the West Bank, but not the Gaza Strip. “It is something in their blood,” he said, “the leaders of the West Bank cannot rule the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and vice versa.” Diskin warned that Palestinian society is disintegrating, and that this bodes ill for Israel.

Diskin especially criticized PA National Security Advisor [Mohammed] Dahlan as ... “trying to manage Fatah's security forces by remote control. We are not even sure where he is.” ... He observed that there is a young generation of leaders among Fatah who are being “pushed” by Dahlan and who have a sense of the urgency of the situation and what needs to be done. At the same time, however, they are not behaving in a way that is to be expected by people in their urgent situation. Diskin observed, “They are approaching a zero-sum situation, and yet *they ask us to attack Hamas*. This is a new development. We have never seen this before. They are desperate.”

That last comment is a reference to the oft-reported fact that Fatah got so desperate during the June attack that they actually reached out to the Israelis for help. Fatah wanted the IDF to attack Hamas inside Gaza to rescue their forces from annihilation (which Israel declined to do).

It was also interesting that Abbas indicated a desire to retire at this point in time, as we now know that he has stubbornly remained in power for almost two decades (having never allowed another presidential election in the West Bank).

This next cable gets into some views that definitely resonate today, as they show how the Israelis grew to be complacent towards the threat of Hamas – and how some even welcomed the idea of having them isolated inside Gaza.

[CABLE 2 \(2007 JUNE 13\)](#): [Head of the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate (IDI)] General Amos Yadlin said that Gaza [and by extension Hamas] was “number four” on his list of threats, preceded by Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah in that order. Yadlin said the IDI has been predicting armed confrontation in Gaza between Hamas and Fatah since Hamas won the January 2006 legislative council elections. Yadlin felt that the Hamas military wing had initiated the current escalation with the tacit consent of external Hamas leader Khalid Meshal, adding that *he did not believe there had been a premeditated political-level decision* by Hamas to wipe out Fatah in Gaza.

While not necessarily reflecting a consensus GOI [Government of Israel] view, Yadlin commented that such a development [Hamas taking over Gaza] would please Israel since it would enable the IDF to treat Gaza as a hostile country rather than having to deal with Hamas as a non-state actor. He added that Israel could work with a Fatah regime in the West Bank. [US Ambassador Richard H. Jones] asked Yadlin if he worried about a Hamas-controlled Gaza giving Iran a new opening. Yadlin replied that Iran was already present in Gaza, but Israel could handle the situation “as long as Gaza does not have a port (sea or air).”

Yadlin commented that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh had become personally close despite their ideological differences, but neither leader had control over those forces under them... But there were also many armed groups in Gaza that were not under the control of either party.

Yadlin's relatively relaxed attitude toward the deteriorating security situation in Gaza represents a shift in IDF thinking from last fall, when the Southern Command supported a major ground operation into Gaza to remove the growing threat from Hamas [Operation Summer Rains]. While many media commentators continue to make that argument, Yadlin's view appears to be more in synch with that of Chief of General Staff [Gabi] Ashkenazi, who also believes that the more serious threat to Israel currently comes from the north [Hezbollah and Syria]... He said the Russians [were] telling the Syrians [last summer] that Israel planned to attack them, possibly in concert with a U.S. attack on Iran... The fact that both sides were on high alert meant that a war could happen easily, even though neither side is seeking one. In response to a question, Yadlin said he did not think the Assad regime would survive a war, but he added that preserving that “evil” regime should not be a matter of concern.

Both cables noted that Fatah was “not cohesive” as an organization, which was backed up by an internal Fatah report that Tareq Baconi mentioned in a footnote of his book (although keep in mind that I could not read this report myself and am relying on Baconi's paraphrasing of it here):

TAREQ BACONI: [According to the internal Fatah report:] The order for confrontation with Hamas came not from Fatah's Central Committee but rather from Dahlan, whose appointment and stockpiling of arms the report criticized. Furthermore, the report noted that many officials within the [PA] security forces were not motivated to fight "Dahlan's war" against Hamas. The report criticized the vacuum at the top of the security forces and suggested there was never a transition from revolution to authority within Fatah.

THE COUP

Despite the fact that Tareq Baconi is quite a bit more balanced in his book, when he gives interviews he tends to give a far more critical (and I would argue too biased) narrative of the United States that has become the mainstay of voices from the left who are in the pro-Palestinian camp. Although I think it is important to reiterate that much of this narrative is about long-standing grievances with the US government and its foreign policy than it is about supporting Hamas; even though this narrative does often end up painting a white-washed and overly-sympathetic portrait of Hamas (in my opinion).

[This rundown](#) Baconi gave on *The Dig* podcast (which is part of the socialist *Jacobin* network) after the 10/7 attacks sums up what you will generally hear from most people in this camp regarding the June 2007 Gaza takeover by Hamas:

TAREQ BACONI: The response of the international community [to the election of Hamas] is to initiate efforts to result in a regime change. *So, to begin preparations for a coup.* To undermine the elected party and to reinstate Fatah – which is the party that is committed to negotiations under Israeli apartheid – and these preparations take the form of financial support, military support, and diplomatic support against Hamas, in support of Fatah. And so we have about a year where Hamas tries to overcome that attempted coup and to try to create a Palestinian Authority that is united, that even brings Fatah into the governing body, to try to create a Palestinian Authority that accepts international demands, recognizes a Palestinian state on '67 [borders], accepts partition in some ways, and puts forward major concessions. And instead of any of those being dealt with, the international community – through what it calls the Quartet conditions – puts forward the same conditions it had put on the PLO before it: You must renounce armed resistance, recognize the state of Israel, and accept the Oslo Accords. [Even though] these conditions are not conditions that are employed or accepted by Israel, which is still using armed force against civilians, which has undermined Oslo and continues to expand its

settlements.¹⁷

So it's really an effort to try and marginalize Hamas. And it works. *It facilitates a civil war between Hamas and Fatah*, and results in a situation where Hamas then takes over the Gaza strip, and Fatah becomes the governing authority in the West Bank. And this is where we see the institutional and political division within the Palestinian territories begin to take hold.¹⁸

So, that is the standard leftist take. What follows next is excerpted from the initial reporting that developed into this version of events. The specific sources from these accounts can be found in the footnote provided here.¹⁹ As we go along, I will try to add context and give my best rendition of the counter-arguments to what is referred to as the "alternative narrative."

JOHN B. JUDIS: If the political effects of Hamas' ousting of Fatah are clear enough, Washington's prevailing narrative about it has mostly been self-serving. In a new book, *Tested by Zion*, Elliott Abrams, who supervised American policy in the Middle East for

¹⁷ I would like to give my own response to these points of criticism of Israel by Tareq Baconi: I actually think he is completely correct on the last two points. If Israel demands the Palestinians recognize their state, then why should Israel not be required to do the same and recognize a Palestinian state? (Especially since that was always *supposed* to be the end-goal of Oslo.) By that same token, Baconi is right to say Israel "has undermined Oslo" by not doing so – and also by their continuation of settlements before, during, and after the peace process. However, I do disagree on his first point: I do not think there is an equivalency between military operations by Israelis in the occupied territories and Palestinian "armed resistance" operations. Israelis would argue that their operations are "defensive" (and always done in *response* to an attack by Palestinians) while Palestinian operations are "offensive" – but I admit that it's a much more complicated debate and so I won't go deep into it here. I will just note that my saying there is not an "equivalency" between the two is not the same as saying one is always justified and the other is always not. Just that they cannot really be viewed on the same terms. But I do believe that you can't ask Israel to "renounce military operations" if Palestinians refuse to "renounce violence" – or if the PA government proves incapable of combating violence and of arresting / prosecuting terrorists.

¹⁸ In a footnote in his book, Tareq Baconi even took specific aim at the narrative Jonathan Schanzer tells in his book: "These clashes [at the start of the civil war] were used as proof of a historic animosity between factions. See [Jonathan] Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah*. This view, however, is reductionist and overlooks the impact of active foreign intervention."

¹⁹ Sources include: *Vanity Fair*: "[The Gaza Bombshell](#)" by David Rose (Mar 3, 2008). *Vanity Fair*: "[The Proof Is In The Paper Trail](#)" by David Rose (Mar 5, 2008). *Vanity Fair*: "[More Leaked 'Talking Points'](#)" by David Rose (Mar 7, 2008). *The New Republic*: "[Clueless in Gaza](#)" by John B. Judis (Feb 19, 2013). *Al-Jazeera*: "[The Curse of Mohammed Dahlan](#)" by Ramzy Baroud (Jul 30, 2017). *Jacobin*: "[Washington Engineered the Disastrous Split in the Palestinian National Movement](#)" by Daniel Finn (Oct 12, 2023). *Wikileaks*: "[ISA Chief Diskin on Situation in the Gaza Strip and West Bank](#)" (Jun 13, 2007). *Wikileaks*: "[Military Intelligence Director Yadlin Comments on Gaza, Syria and Lebanon](#)" (Jun 13, 2007). The Bush-43 Administration "[Action Plan](#)" (Mar 1, 2007): This internal document gave a "framework" for how the Bush-43 Administration wanted Mahmoud Abbas and the PA to approach the situation with Hamas just two months before the Hamas takeover happened. Note that this is the final draft, and not the earlier draft cited in the *Vanity Fair* article (which is no longer available online – although parts of it are outlined on [this old blog](#)).

George W. Bush's National Security Council, offers the standard line, charging that Hamas staged a "coup" in Gaza because it feared that "time might bring greater strength for what Hamas saw as Fatah and we saw as the legitimate PA national security forces." Abrams acknowledges that Hamas leaders might have believed there was "a conspiracy to crush it," but dismisses the possibility that there actually was one, and that the United States might have played any role in it.

This account is in marked contrast with the testimony put forth independently by two journalists, Paul McGeough and David Rose, by a former British intelligence official, Alistair Crooke, who had served as a special advisor on the Middle East to the European Union, and by UN Under-Secretary General Alvaro de Soto... According to the alternative narrative ... the Bush administration helped arm Fatah's security forces against Hamas, which stoked the civil war and led to Hamas taking over Gaza. According to this narrative, Hamas was basically right about American intentions.

I am not absolutely certain which version of events is right. Too much of what happened is still shrouded in secrecy. Abrams' reputation is tarred by his admission that he withheld documents from Congress during the Iran-Contra investigation. On the other side, Rose published credulous accounts in 2001 linking Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda. But I believe that the alternative narrative fits the outward events much better than what Abrams recounts in his book.

One problem I have already with the way this alternative narrative is framed is the idea that America's intentions were really so shrouded in mystery. The Bush administration was pretty open about what the demands on Hamas were, and that it would not support a PA government that included a terrorist organization that refused to renounce violence or even accept the basic foundations of the government they were a part of. Also, it seems wrong to classify American support for Fatah's security forces as "nefarious" when Hamas was getting the same backing from Iran, and when *both* Fatah and Hamas had attacked one another repeatedly and given each other plenty of cause to feel there was a "conspiracy" against them (rightly or wrongly). You could certainly argue that the US *exacerbated* the state of affairs that culminated in the events of June 2007, but I think it's a bridge too far to say they *created* them.

JOHN B. JUDIS: In the wake of the election [of Hamas] ... Israel and the United States believed that by depriving the PA of the funds it needed to pay workers and dispense welfare, it could bring down the government. Abbas would call new elections and this time Fatah would win. But Israel and America's strategy backfired. By denying the PA funds, it initially crippled Abbas and Fatah's patronage base and security force. Hamas, meanwhile, whose sources of funding in the United States were drying up because of

federal prosecution, turned to Iran for support, and Iran's funding allowed Hamas to pay its fighters and to maintain its own system of clinics and schools. Hamas retained its political support, while Fatah continued to lose ground.

I should note that Mahmoud Abbas never attempted to call for new elections until a year later. I get the impression that what Judis is referring to is the strategy laid out in the Bush administration "Action Plan" (which did ask Abbas to dissolve the government and call for new elections), but that strategy was not designed until early 2007 – a full year after the initial Hamas victory. The article gives the impression that this was the strategy from day one – and who knows, maybe it was – but from what I can tell, this notion that it was planned from the beginning is based on assumption more than hard evidence.

In November 2006, with civil war already breaking out in Gaza between Hamas and Fatah, Lieutenant **General Keith Dayton**, whom Bush had appointed the U.S. security coordinator for the Palestinians, met with **Mohammed Dahlan**, a Gazan who was Fatah's security chieftain... Dayton urged Dahlan to "build up your forces in order to take on Hamas," and promised \$86.4 million in aid.

In David Rose's article, he stated, "There is no one more hated among Hamas members than Mohammed Dahlan, long Fatah's resident strongman in Gaza." Tareq Baconi also noted that Dahlan "was much despised by Hamas for his role in cracking down on the resistance factions under the rubric of security coordination throughout the 1990s. Reflecting wider sentiment, Dahlan told a rally that it would be 'shameful' for Fatah to even consider entering a coalition government with Hamas." David Rose also characterized George W. Bush as publicly praising Dahlan for being "a good, solid leader" and privately describing him as "our guy."

Rose also cited video evidence of Fatah men under Dahlan's command in Gaza torturing a student at the Islamic University of Gaza and his father, whom they had kidnapped. At the end of the video, the captors made the blindfolded men chant, "By blood, by soul, we sacrifice ourselves for Mohammed Dahlan! Long live Mohammed Dahlan!" The Fatah men then told the captives they would be executed, but instead shot them multiple times in the kneecaps and feet. Dahlan later insisted that these two men were "tortured without his knowledge." And to be fair, that latter claim *might* actually be true. The Wikileaks cables I excerpted previously had noted that Israeli officials criticized "Dahlan as attempting to lead his loyalists in the Gaza Strip by 'remote control' from abroad."

Mohammed Dahlan is [still showing up in the news](#) today, although these days he lives in Abu Dhabi (the capital of the United Arab Emirates). He is described as actually

having a lot of support among Palestinians in the refugee camps, both in the West Bank and in Gaza, while being completely on the outs with PA President Mahmoud Abbas. A reporter for *The Economist* said Dahlan and Abbas absolutely hate each other – and then added, “I can’t emphasize that enough.”

The Israelis hinted at the idea of Mohammed Dahlan taking over Gaza after the 10/7 war ends, but Dahlan has repeatedly refused to take the job. He no longer believes Hamas is going away; and despite his years of warring with them, he now calls for unity among all of the Palestinian factions. According to a [Wall Street Journal report](#), Dahlan had been part of recent talks with Hamas political leaders in exile to form some kind of unity government under the PLO banner to help end the war (these talks reportedly angered the Hamas leader inside Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, who does not support any kind of negotiated settlement). “I am no friend of Hamas,” Dahlan is quoted as saying, “but do you think anybody is going to be able to run to make peace without Hamas?”

JOHN B. JUDIS: Congress balked at the \$86.4 million grant – in part because some members didn’t want to send any military aid to the Palestinian Authority and in part because some thought the aid would end up in Hamas’s hands. Congress finally agreed to \$59 million in non-lethal aid, but the Bush administration tried to get around Congress by seeking lethal aid from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

I would say the characterization that “the Bush administration tried to *get around* Congress” is overstating things. David Rose even likened it to the Iran-Contra Affair, which was a covert operation by the Reagan administration that was done without the knowledge of Congress (or anyone else) and in direct violation of Congressional legislation. Here, the Bush administration did everything pretty much in the open (as far as I can tell) and did not violate any Congressional acts. They just asked the Arab governments to contribute, and those governments then chose whether or not they wished to comply with said request.²⁰

JOHN B. JUDIS: In February, the Saudis surprised the Quartet members by bringing Hamas and Fatah leaders to Mecca for unity talks that resulted in an agreement between the two sides establishing a new government. The government included prominent Fatah and Hamas officials as well as several academics and policy experts, including **Salam Fayyad**, who were not at that point aligned with either faction. The two sides agreed that

²⁰ David Rose’s article elaborated on why many Arab governments failed to comply with the Bush administration’s requests: “During a trip to the Middle East in January 2007, [Condoleezza] Rice found it difficult to get her partners to honor their pledges. ‘The Arabs felt the U.S. was not serious,’ one official says. ‘They knew that if the Americans were serious they would put their own money where their mouth was. They didn’t have faith in America’s ability to raise a real force. There was no follow-through. Paying was different than pledging, and there was no plan.’”

Hamas would handle domestic matters and Fatah and the independent experts [would handle] international affairs, including negotiations with Israel.

I should call back to a previous excerpt from Tareq Baconi where he gave a completely opposite characterization of the role Hamas had in the Mecca Agreement government. He said that “Hamas acquiesced to *relinquishing domestic power* in order to lift the blockade and end lawlessness,” and that “the extent of Hamas’s relinquishment of power *betrayed a desire to offload its governance responsibilities*, given its failure to circumvent the blockade, while *maintaining its ideological platform*.” And it should be understood that this “ideological platform” was the very thing that the Americans and Israelis were objecting to when it came to accepting a government that would include Hamas. Therefore, the Mecca Agreement addressed Fatah’s needs vis-a-vis Hamas, but it never attempted to address the concerns of Israel and the US.

In addition, I want to [highlight an interview](#) that Salam Fayyad gave to Thomas Friedman in 2009 where Fayyad stated that many people believed that the Mecca Agreement government collapsed after a mere three months “because of the [financial] siege” and that this was “not so.”

SALAM FAYYAD: The financial siege on the PA was beginning to be broken. I was Minister of Finance in that government. And although, technically, the government was boycotted by Europe, by the United States... Nevertheless, we were beginning to make inroads in breaking the siege. And the government in my view was beginning to act, and was beginning to be seen, as a working government. One that actually really did not very much look like Hamas or act like a Hamas government. And maybe that’s what brought it down – to be honest with you.

Yes, it would have been easier had the world embraced that government with open arms and said “yes, we recognize you” ... but the government did not fall under the weight of the siege. That’s not true... That government really did not look like a factional government. It started to act like a pragmatic organ of the Palestinian Authority. It was beginning to make inroads. Things were beginning to happen, but then it really fell down because it just simply didn’t look like the government that Hamas had wanted.

And now, back to our regularly scheduled program:

JOHN B. JUDIS: Hamas leader Khalid Meshal, who led the [Mecca Agreement] negotiations, reasserted Hamas’s opposition to the state of Israel, but agreed to abide by past treaties between the PLO and Israel, including the Oslo accords, and to support negotiations for a two-state solution. “Hamas is adopting a new political language,” he

said afterwards. “The Mecca agreement is a new political language ... and honoring the agreements is a new language, because there is a national need and we must speak a language appropriate to the time.”

While there are often a lot of quotes from Hamas at this time that do show their willingness to moderate their position, there are still many other quotes that make one feel it was all just cynical political calculation – and the Israelis and Americans certainly believed it was.²¹ (Salam Fayyad’s comments also seem to indicate that Hamas was never truly content with the role it played in the Mecca Agreement government.) To give some examples, Khaled Meshal had once stated in a press conference from Cairo, “The world will see how Hamas can encompass resistance and politics, resistance and government. *Government is not our goal, it is a tool... Democracy is not a substitute for resistance.* Democracy is our internal choice to reform our house, whereas resistance is our choice in facing the enemy. There is no conflict between the two.” And in another instance he said, “As a Palestinian, I speak of an Arab and a Palestinian demand [though not a Hamas demand], to have a state on the ‘67 borders. True, by inference, this will mean there is an entity or a state called Israel on the rest of the Palestinian lands. That is a reality, and *I will not deal with this reality by recognizing it or validating it.* It is just a reality based on historic circumstance.”

JOHN B. JUDIS: The U.S. and Israel, however, refused to deal with the new government, and according to Rose and McGeough, pressed ahead with its plans to force Hamas out of the government. [David Rose quoted an unnamed State Department official as saying that Condoleeza Rice “was apoplectic” over the Mecca Agreement.] Abbas was convinced to name Dahlan, whom Hamas saw as its enemy, as the new security chief in the cabinet. And the United States sought to develop a new “action plan” with Abbas and Fatah that would lead by the year’s end to Hamas’s removal. In the months after the Mecca agreement, fighting had abated in Gaza [based on what I read in Schanzer and Baconi, this statement seems to be incorrect], but on April 30, the Jordanian newspaper *Al-Mayd* published a leaked 16-page draft of the action plan, which did not emphasize military means, but did include the need for a military buildup. The Jordanian government confiscated the issues before they got on the streets, but [the text remained on Al-Mayd's website](#), and was widely disseminated.²²

²¹ This reminded me of a rule that Thomas Friedman outlined in a recent interview: “What people [in Israel & Palestine] tell you in English is irrelevant. All that matters is what they say in their own language to their own people.” This rule tends to make me worried about how much I still do not know about what these figures really think. After all, I can only look at English sources – and those sources will only give me select English translations of what these people have said in Hebrew/Arabic. Not to mention that there have already been numerous instances in the media where translated comments by Israelis/Palestinians have caused huge headlines – only to later be found to have been somewhat inaccurate. Because even a minor mistranslation can lead to a major misrepresentation of what was actually said.

²² David Rose’s article contained a link to this draft document, but it no longer works. So I’ll just reprint what Rose had to say about this draft of the Action Plan in his article: “The State Department quickly drew

I should note that Tareq Baconi's account of this story does not even mention the Action Plan, nor does it bring up this Jordanian news story. I thought this odd, because the initial reporting by David Rose made it appear as if this Jordanian news story is what started the whole conflict that culminated in the June takeover by Hamas.

DAVID ROSE: The formation of the unity government [after the Mecca Agreement] had brought a measure of calm to the Palestinian territories, but violence erupted anew after *Al-Majd* published its story on the Action Plan... The Hamas leadership in Gaza is adamant that the coup would not have happened if Fatah had not provoked it. Fawzi Barhoum, Hamas's chief spokesman, says the leak in *Al-Majd* convinced the party that "there was a plan, approved by America, to destroy the political choice." The arrival of the first Egyptian-trained fighters [in May], he adds, was the "reason for the timing." About 250 Hamas members had been killed in the first six months of 2007, Barhoum tells me. "Finally we decided to put an end to it. If we had let them stay loose in Gaza, there would have been more violence."

Obviously, you have to take everything Hamas says here with a grain of salt. Still, I think it is credible that Hamas could have legitimately interpreted things in this manner – as they have always tended to see conspiracies lurking behind every corner – the question is whether or not Hamas was *justified* to have interpreted things in this manner.

JOHN B. JUDIS: Hamas interpreted the plan accurately as a conspiracy to block the Mecca agreement and to remove it from power. Then two weeks after the plan surfaced, new Egyptian trained and armed Fatah forces arrived in Gaza with Israel's approval. The fighting in Gaza resumed. Then on June 7, [Ha'aretz reported](#) that Fatah officials in Gaza had "asked Israel to allow them to receive large shipments of arms and ammunition from Arab countries, including Egypt."

up an alternative to the new unity government. Known as 'Plan B,' its objective, according to a State Department memo that has been authenticated by an official who knew of it at the time, was to 'enable [Abbas] and his supporters to reach a defined endgame by the end of 2007. The endgame should produce a [Palestinian Authority] government through democratic means that accepts Quartet principles.' ... Plan B called for Abbas to 'collapse the government' if Hamas refused to alter its attitude toward Israel. From there, Abbas could call early elections or impose an emergency government... Security considerations were paramount, and Plan B had explicit prescriptions for dealing with them. For as long as the unity government remained in office, it was essential for Abbas to maintain 'independent control of key security forces.' He must 'avoid Hamas integration with these services, while eliminating the Executive Force or mitigating the challenges posed by its continued existence.' ... In a clear reference to the covert [his words not mine] aid expected from the Arabs, the memo made this recommendation for the next six to nine months: 'Dahlan oversees effort in coordination with General Dayton and Arab [nations] to train and equip 15,000-man force under President Abbas's control to establish internal law and order, stop terrorism and deter extralegal forces.'"

Ha'aretz also reported that [Mohammed] Dahlan was organizing another paramilitary force in Gaza to fight Hamas. At this point, Hamas, who had already lost 250 fighters that year, took the final step and drove the Fatah forces out of Gaza and took control of its government. **David Wurmser** [a Middle East advisor to Dick Cheney] told Rose, "It looks to me that what happened wasn't so much a coup by Hamas but an attempted coup by Fatah that was pre-empted before it could happen." Wurmser, who left the Bush administration a month later, told me he still stands by this judgment.

David Wurmser provided many key quotes that do validate the "alternative narrative" from the perspective of someone who was inside the Bush administration at the time. As I have already provided plenty of countering views to the alternative narrative, I felt it was important to highlight the views from inside the US government which actually validated it. So here are some other quotes from David Rose's article:

DAVID ROSE: One of [Elliott Abrams'] associates says Abrams, who declined to comment for this article, felt conflicted over the policy – torn between the disdain he felt for Dahlan and his overriding loyalty to the [Bush] administration. He wasn't the only one: "There were severe fissures among neoconservatives over this," says Cheney's former adviser David Wurmser. "We were ripping each other to pieces."

How could the U.S. have played Gaza so wrong? Neocon critics of the administration – who until last year were inside it – blame an old State Department vice: the rush to anoint a strongman instead of solving problems directly... To rely on proxies such as Mohammed Dahlan, says former U.N. ambassador **John Bolton**, is "an institutional failure, a failure of strategy." Its author, he says, was [Condoleezza] Rice, "who, like others in the dying days of this administration, is looking for legacy. Having failed to heed the warning not to hold the elections, they tried to avoid the result through [General Keith] Dayton."

"You know," says [Khalid Jaber, a commander with Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades], "since the takeover, we've been trying to enter the brains of Bush and Rice, to figure out their mentality. We can only conclude that having Hamas in control serves their overall strategy, because their policy was so crazy otherwise."

The fighting was over in less than five days... Fatah attempted to shell [Hamas] Prime Minister [Ismael] Haniyeh's house, but by dusk on June 13 its forces were being routed... By June 16, Hamas had captured every Fatah building, as well as Abbas's official Gaza residence. Much of Dahlan's house, which doubled as his office, was reduced to rubble.

Many armed units that were nominally loyal to Fatah did not fight at all. Some stayed neutral because they feared that, with Dahlan absent, his forces were bound to lose. “I wanted to stop the cycle of killing,” says Ibrahim abu al-Nazar, a veteran [Fatah] party chief. “What did Dahlan expect? Did he think the U.S. Navy was going to come to Fatah’s rescue? They promised him everything, but what did they do? But he also deceived them. He told them he was the strongman of the region. Even the Americans may now feel sad and frustrated. Their friend lost the battle.”

With few good options left, the administration now appears to be rethinking its blanket refusal to engage with Hamas. Staffers at the National Security Council and the Pentagon recently put out discreet feelers to academic experts, asking them for papers describing Hamas and its principal protagonists. “They say they won’t talk to Hamas,” says one such expert, “but in the end they’re going to have to. It’s inevitable.”

Just as the US government eventually did with the Taliban in Afghanistan, they may realize that there is no way to resolve the conflict between Israel and Palestine without negotiations that include Hamas. Of course, the flip-side to that is that for all of the willingness by the US to sign a deal with the Taliban and withdraw from Afghanistan – just about every promise the Taliban made to the United States (and the Afghan people) turned out to be bullshit. So, even if Hamas is a reality on the ground that the US has to accept, they should not be overly naive when dealing with them.

John B. Judis noted in his article that the Wikileaks cables “confirm parts of the alternative narrative,” but I have to say that I am not sure that statement is entirely accurate. It does show that the Israelis (unlike the Americans) had very little faith in Fatah (and especially Dahlan), but I’ll again note that this pours cold water on the statements by Hamas that this “coup” was a conspiracy hatched by both the US *and* Israel working together (the notorious “Zionist-Crusader alliance” as Al-Qaeda put it). It even shows that Fatah was desperate enough to ask the Israelis directly for help as the battle raged on, which the Israelis declined to do.

I would say the most notable part of the cables (especially when viewed in the aftermath of the 10/7 attacks) is the statement by Military-Intelligence Chief Amos Yadlin that “he was actually ‘happy’ with the prospect that Hamas would gain control of Gaza.”

JOHN B. JUDIS: [Yadlin] thought that Israel could then treat Gaza as a “hostile territory.” And several weeks after Hamas’s takeover in Gaza and Abbas’s ouster of Hamas officials from the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, Israel’s cabinet did declare Gaza a “hostile territory.” And in [a 2010 article](#), *Ha’aretz* revealed that during Operation Cast Lead in December 2008, Israel’s Defense Minister asked Fatah’s leadership whether

it wanted to take back control of Gaza after Israel had ousted Hamas. That operation ended badly, of course, for Israel and its government.

Of course, nothing in the cables makes it seem as if this was ‘the plan all along,’ but it does appear that after the Hamas takeover of June occurred, Israel started down an ill-guided path that ultimately led them to 10/7. (Not unlike the path they took back in the ‘70s and ‘80s, when they promoted the rise of Hamas as a counter to the PLO.) The Israeli government used Hamas’s constant attempts to restart hostilities every time they started to feel irrelevant as a means to enact a policy of “containment” over the Gaza Strip (leading to the blockade that has crippled the lives of those living in Gaza). That policy then developed into the strategy of periodically “[mowing the lawn](#)” in Gaza whenever Hamas started up another war with Israel (and this policy is frequently brought up by leftist voices critical of Israel).²³ That strategy then led into [the Netanyahu policy](#) of explicitly allowing funds to go to Hamas as a means to prop up their regime, keep the West Bank and Gaza divided, and prevent any hope for a two-state solution (which Netanyahu has always opposed).²⁴

The last item in this story that warrants mentioning is the “[Action Plan](#)” that the Bush administration pushed upon Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah government after the Mecca Agreement was signed. Again, I don’t find this Action Plan quite as nefarious as Hamas and leftist commentators tend to view it; but it did put Abbas and Fatah into an intractable position (and I do think one *could* argue that it made war between Hamas and Fatah inevitable).

This Action Plan caused Fatah to be hemmed in from both sides and essentially forced them to decide if they wanted to alienate the United States or Hamas. If they alienated Hamas, they risked provoking a war and also branding themselves as “puppets” or “collaborators.” If they alienated the US, they risked losing their only significant source

²³ The Executive Summary of [that 2014 paper](#) explains the “mowing the lawn” strategy: “The Israeli military offensive in Gaza [of 2014] reflects the assumption that Israel is in a protracted, intractable conflict. It is unlikely that Israel can purge Hamas from Palestinian society, nor is a political solution likely to be achieved. Instead, Israel is acting in accordance with a ‘mowing the grass’ strategy. After a period of military restraint, Israel is acting to severely punish Hamas for its aggressive behavior, and degrading its military capabilities – aiming at achieving a period of quiet.” In other words, Israel no longer expects to “defeat” Hamas but rather to degrade and deter it for a significant period of time, and then wait to do so all over again the next Hamas decides to attack. And yes, that would mean the violence by Hamas would continue indefinitely; but it was expected (prior to 10/7 anyway) that the level of violence would be low enough that Israelis could manage it.

²⁴ In the aftermath of the 10/7 attacks, the most frequently cited quote from [that report](#) on Netanyahu’s policy toward Hamas was this one: “In March 2019, he said during a meeting of Likud MKs, at which the subject of transfer of funds to Hamas was under discussion, that, ‘Whoever opposes a Palestinian state must support delivery of funds to Gaza because maintaining separation between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza will prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state.’”

of funding and support, which would put them at the mercy of Hamas. And I can imagine Fatah and Abbas were not at all confident that Hamas would not attack them regardless, once Hamas came to the conclusion that Fatah was weak, vulnerable, and alone.

The key provisions I wish to highlight from the Bush administration's "Action Plan" are its desire to "maintain the presidency [Mahmoud Abbas] and Fatah as the center of gravity in the Palestinian political scene to the international community... Provide sufficient support (financial and political) for Abbas and Fatah... Undermine the political strength of Hamas by providing for the Palestinian people's immediate economic needs through the Presidency and Fatah as well as improving and strengthening the governance structures, and rule of law institutions within the PA... Provide the necessary tools for the Presidency to control the security institutions and impose necessary order on the Palestinian street. This would also deter attempts for escalation by Hamas or other groups as long as the superiority of the PA forces and Fatah is well established... Underscore the basis of the peace process and the requirements on all parties to abide by established international parameters. This means avoiding wasting valuable time on accommodating Hamas' ideological conditions and turning the clock [back] to the pre-Madrid context. Spending valuable time and political capital on getting Hamas on board would undermine the entire basis for a peace framework."

On the other side of the equation, the expectations the Action Plan put on Israel tended to be vague and really just more of the same. Essentially, Israel would think about promising to plan for eventually talking about maybe doing something at some point down the line (if they felt like it). Although Phase II of the Action Plan did ask Israel (once again) for a complete freeze on settlements and the adoption of a timeline for their withdrawal from the West Bank. However, they were only asking Israel to withdraw to the lines of September 28, 2000. Meaning that all the settlements they had built in the West Bank and East Jerusalem before then (including all those built during the Oslo process) would still be incorporated into Israeli territory – which would have been a huge slap in the face to Palestinians.

Meanwhile, the expectations on the PA were for them to make themselves the "center of gravity in the Palestinian political scene" and "actively prevent acts of violence" (which would basically require them to go to war with Hamas and Islamic Jihad).

This Action Plan does make it seem as if the Bush administration was genuinely as worried about a conspiracy by Hamas to take over the PA, as Hamas was worried about a conspiracy by the US, Israel, and Fatah. So, I guess the same rationale I put on Hamas would apply here: It is not a question of whether the US truly believed in the

danger posed by Hamas (because they certainly did), it is about whether or not it was *justified* to believe this.

If there is one part of the article by John B. Judis that I do generally agree with, it was his conclusion that “the Bush administration was utterly incompetent at foreign policy... Nothing they did – from urging elections on the Palestinian Authority to attempting to oust Hamas from the PA – achieved what they hoped. They were constantly being upended by events that they had not foreseen – from Hamas’s victory in January 2006 to the Saudi’s Mecca agreement in February 2007 to the Hamas takeover in June 2007.”

THE AFTERMATH

DANIEL BYMAN: [Fatah’s President Mahmoud] Abbas and [Fatah’s Prime Minister Salam] Fayyad, in contrast to Arafat, hoped that through competent governing, Israel would eventually loosen its grip on the West Bank and turn security over to them.²⁵ Abbas shut down some radio and television programs that incited hatred of Israel, and he discouraged depictions of suicide bombings as heroic.

Fayyad restored law and order in the West Bank. After Hamas ousted Fatah in Gaza in June 2007, the Fatah-led PA returned the favor in the West Bank by firing and jailing Hamas officials and purging them from the government and security services. The PA even went after Hamas preachers, arguing that “they are more dangerous than gunmen.”

Even skeptical Israelis now admit [as of when this was written in 2012] the PA is aggressively going after Hamas and other terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank. However, because the PA brutally cracks down on dissent and criticism of all kinds and has not held new elections, its democratic legitimacy is shaky at best. In the years since Fayyad became prime minister, Reporters Without Borders has twice ranked the PA lower than any other Arab government in terms of press freedom.

One Israeli security official, speaking about the victory of Hamas in Gaza, said, “Fatah was so weak, so corrupt, that the takeover was like wind blowing over a moth-infested structure.” If Fatah had something to show for all the concessions they made to Israel over the years, then maybe they could have maintained popular support. Instead, they were now just another corrupt Arab regime like all the others.

²⁵ [A recent conversation](#) with Salam Fayyad on *The Ezra Klein Show* gave an interesting look back at Fayyad’s years in the PA (from 2007 to 2013) where he pushed a technocratic approach to “competent governing” as the way forward for the West Bank. It was an approach that was championed by elites in the West, but Fayyad felt it was not supported enough by the Israeli government. In that interview, he explains what the approach was, how it was carried out, and why he believes it ultimately failed.

Israel imposed a blockade on Gaza as soon as Hamas took control of it. The blockade was supposed to allow exceptions for humanitarian aid to get through, just nothing that could be used to build up the military capabilities of Hamas. Unfortunately, almost any building material that could be used for infrastructure, could also be used for rockets and tunnels – so the blockade cut off much of what was necessary to prevent Gaza from becoming a dilapidated ghetto.

Israel also had complete control of Gaza's flow of water and electricity but had promised that they would never cut these resources off. I am uncertain if they ever did so during the various conflicts that occurred from 2007 to 2023, but I do know for a fact that they cut off electricity and water following the 10/7 attacks. Regardless, the fact that the Israelis maintained control over basic utilities illustrates just how much control they exerted over every aspect of Gazans' lives (even after ending the occupation).

ROBERT O. FREEDMAN: The Hamas seizure of Gaza gave the Bush administration the opportunity to make the West Bank a showcase. Thus the United States began a major program of economic aid to the West Bank and stepped up its efforts to train Fatah's West Bank security forces, a policy continued by Bush's successor, Barack Obama. The thought was that the West Bank would prosper while Gaza – under a tightening Israeli blockade because of Hamas rocket fire and the continued imprisonment of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit – would stagnate.

SEP 6, 2007: SYRIAN NUCLEAR REACTOR STRIKE

In January of 2007, Mossad agents used a classic "honey trap" (a beautiful woman) to distract Ibrahim Othman, the director of the Syrian Atomic Energy Commission, at a hotel bar while Mossad agents searched his room for intel. What they discovered shocked them: The Syrians were already far along on construction of a facility meant to house a nuclear reactor in the Deir ez-Zor region, which had been purchased from North Korea with Iranian funding. The Israelis were equally shocked that the United States intelligence agencies had failed to catch any of this.

The Israelis took what they found to the United States. At that point, there was a debate within the Bush administration on how to respond. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert wanted the US to strike the reactor and destroy it unilaterally, before it could get up and running. However, there were some in the US government who believed the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, was so weak and miscalculating that he would escalate things into a war if the US struck the facility. But others felt that there was no way Bashar al-Assad would risk open war with Israel or the US, especially since it would

mean verifying to the world that he had been illegally building a nuclear site in violation of a Non-Proliferation Treaty his country had signed.

There were also concerns about launching a preemptive strike at a time when the US was embroiled in two wars in the region that had not been going very well. The failures in Iraq, and the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, had made the American public very suspicious of anything that looked like more “foreign adventurism.” On top of that, any action the US took would be done solely based on intel coming from the Israelis; and not everyone in Washington was sure how much to trust Israel’s intentions behind pushing us to take this action on their behalf.

Vice President Dick Cheney was about the only one who wanted the US to go ahead and launch a strike (Cheney had also been about the only one in the US government who was convinced beforehand that the Syrians were pursuing nuclear weapons). Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said that Cheney also believed “that a military strike would send a powerful warning to the Iranians to abandon their nuclear ambitions.” However, at this point in the Bush presidency, Dick Cheney no longer held the level of sway with the cabinet (or the president) that he had when George W. Bush first took office.

In the end, President Bush backed off taking action himself but essentially cleared the Israelis to strike the reactor themselves. In his book *Duty*, Robert Gates gave his view of the decision that was ultimately reached – which he openly admits he strongly disagreed with, even though he also admitted the military strike did work out in the end with no serious repercussions.

ROBERT GATES: Our debates during the ensuing months as to whether to take military action, and about how closely to work with the Israelis, were important regarding Syria, but they also prefigured in many respects the arguments regarding the Iranian nuclear program in 2008 and later... [Not catching the construction of this Syrian nuclear site] was a significant failure on the part of the U.S. intelligence agencies, and I asked the president, “How can we have any confidence at all in the estimates of the scope of the North Korean, Iranian, or other possible programs” given this failure? Surprisingly, neither the president nor Congress made much of it. Given the stakes, they should have.

[In a cabinet meeting], I repeated what I had said about [Ehud] Olmert boxing us in [to a military strike]. Notwithstanding, it was clear that the vice president, Elliott Abrams of the NSC staff, my own colleague Eric Edelman, Condi’s counselor Eliot Cohen, and others were all for letting Israel do whatever it wanted. I’m inclined to think that the president himself was sympathetic to that view, perhaps mainly because he was

sympathetic to Olmert's view of the reactor as an existential threat to Israel, though I never heard him say so. By not confronting Olmert, Bush effectively came down on Cheney's side. By not giving the Israelis a red light, he gave them a green one.

On September 6, the Israelis attacked the reactor and destroyed it. They insisted on keeping the existence of the reactor secret, believing – correctly, as it turned out – that the lack of public exposure of the reactor and embarrassment over its destruction might persuade Assad not to retaliate militarily. But Condi [Rice] and I were frustrated that Syria and North Korea had undertaken a bold and risky venture in violation of multiple [UN] Security Council resolutions and international treaties to create a covert nuclear capability in Syria, probably including other sites and labs, and had paid no political price for it. Nor could we use their gambit to our advantage in detaching Syria from Iran or in seeking harsher sanctions on Iran.

MAY 2008: PRISONER EXCHANGE WITH HEZBOLLAH

In May of 2008, the negotiations over the two kidnapped soldiers by Hezbollah were concluded when a prisoner exchange agreement was finally reached. The Israelis had long suspected (based on investigations of the ambush scene) that the soldiers were already dead from wounds they had received, but Hezbollah would not confirm or deny anything unless they got something in return first. When negotiations concluded, the Israelis found out that their suspicions had been correct all along; but the exchange proceeded anyway so that Israel could take possession of the soldiers' remains.

The Israelis would only agree to swap Lebanese prisoners with Hezbollah (no Palestinians), but there was one prisoner released that really angered some of the Israeli public: Samir Kuntar. In 1979, at the age of sixteen, Kuntar had led a PLF raid into Israel which was considered an act of retaliation for the signing of the peace deal between Israel and Egypt. During the raid, Samir Kuntar and his group took a father and his four-year-old daughter hostage; both of whom were killed as the PLF militants were trying to escape back to Lebanon in their boat. [According to Haaretz](#), "As Kuntar was kidnapping the father and daughter, the mother, Smadar, grabbed their 2-year old baby, Yael, and hid from the men who breached her home. As Samadar tried to keep her baby quiet to keep them from being found, her daughter suffocated in her arms."

The Israelis claimed Kuntar – after killing the father in front of his daughter – had bashed the little girl's head in with the butt of his rifle. Kuntar denied this. He claimed that he only wanted to take the hostages back to Lebanon but discovered that his boat had been disabled when he got back to the beach. At that point, he claimed the IDF cornered his outfit on the beach and both the father and girl had been killed in the

crossfire. I cannot claim to know whose story has better evidence to support it without taking the time to dig deeper myself (although I will confess that I am more suspicious of Kuntar's account), but this has been yet another ongoing debate between the two sides. Samir Kuntar was later killed [in an Israeli airstrike](#) in 2015.

SEP 16, 2008: THE EHUD OLMERT PROPOSAL

On September 16, 2008 – in what was essentially the final meeting to come out of the Annapolis Conference talks put together by the Bush administration in November of 2007 – there was [a proposal](#) put on the table by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to PA President Mahmoud Abbas. According to many Israeli commentators (and even US figures like Condoleezza Rice and Elliott Abrams), the offer Olmert made was even sweeter than the deal Ehud Barak made to Yassir Arafat in 2000 and would have given the Palestinians a state, but Abbas rejected it.

Abbas initially denied having rejected the deal, but then later [admitted to having rejected it](#), only to have Olmert later say [he didn't technically reject it after all](#). Regardless of the differing accounts, this “rejection” of Olmert's offer has been once again used to blame the Palestinians for blocking any hope of a two-state solution coming to fruition (even though Olmert himself does not seem to blame Abbas for what happened).

Ehud Olmert described his offer as a withdrawal from the West Bank, with Israel keeping 6.3% of the territory to incorporate certain Israeli settlements; but also compensating the Palestinians for that acquisition by giving up Israeli land equivalent to 5.8% of the West Bank (so the Palestinians would only lose 0.5% of their land mass). Furthermore, Olmert agreed that there would be no military presence (aka: no occupation) by Israel within this new West Bank territory. It would be completely sovereign. Israel would also withdraw from the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem and divide the city between the two sides, then place the Old City (including the holy sites) under international control. Olmert described his offering to have Israel give up its control of the holy sites as “the hardest day of my life.”

Olmert later said, “I told [Abbas], ‘Remember my words, it will be fifty years before there will be another Israeli prime minister that will offer you what I am offering you now. Don't miss this opportunity.’”

For his part, Abbas complained that Olmert wanted him to agree to the deal that very day (Olmert appears to have confirmed this), but Abbas was not comfortable because he could not get a map of the offer to take back and review with his team. Abbas famously quipped, “I'm not an expert on maps.” Abbas said he had only been shown a

hand-drawn map by Olmert, which he refused to relinquish so that it would not be leaked or used against any negotiators in future meetings.

Abbas also felt disappointed that Olmert was only willing to offer the “right of return” to a “token” number of Palestinian refugees (only 5,000 over five years). And it also didn’t help that Olmert was a lame-duck prime minister at that point, as he had already announced that he would be stepping down in the wake of corruption charges (of which he was later convicted and sent to prison for). Benjamin Netanyahu would be elected just five months later in the wake of The First Gaza War.

DEC 2008–JAN 2009: THE FIRST GAZA WAR

In December of 2008, in response to the endless volley of rockets by Hamas, the Israelis launched a campaign of “massive retaliation” that led to a three-week battle in which “the United States gave Israel its full backing.” The conflict killed about 1,200 Palestinians, and only 13 Israelis, before leading to yet another ceasefire. Although this all tends to feel like “more of the same” in the context of everything that has happened after it, I have heard many Palestinians say this war in particular was a turning point in the choking off of Gaza from the outside world.²⁶

RAND REPORT: In June 2008, Hamas and Israel agreed to a cease-fire in which Hamas would end the rocket and mortar fire against Israeli towns in exchange for Israel ending its strikes against Gaza and easing the economic blockade. The cease-fire was tenuous. Israel only allowed between 70 and 90 trucks to cross into Gaza daily, significantly less than the 500 to 600 trucks Hamas expected. Hamas reduced the number of rocket attacks into Israel but did not end attacks completely. Hamas also refused to release Gilad Shalit.

On December 24, Hamas launched 88 rockets into Israel and another 44 on December 25 in the opening salvos of what would come to be called the First Gaza War. In response, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead. The goal of Cast Lead was to “create conditions for a better security situation in southern Israel.” ... Israel launched a massive coordinated air campaign against preselected targets, which caught Hamas by surprise. On January 3, 2009, Israel sent ground troops, tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery divisions into Gaza to destroy rocket launch sites... Overall Israel faced little resistance, and Hamas’s leaders remained in hiding during the conflict. On January 17, Israel announced a unilateral withdrawal, which was completed by January 21.

²⁶ In my appendix, I recommended [this interview with Wasim Almasri](#) on the *Groundwork* podcast. It gives a personal story of someone who lived in Gaza for many years (and saw it change) up until around this time when it fell into chaos and disrepair. It’s worth listening to if you want a perspective from a Palestinian who saw these things unfold first-hand.

Was Israel successful in achieving its goals? The answer is somewhat in dispute... Israel did strike a substantial blow to Hamas and destroyed much of its support infrastructure... The IDF, however, killed only a fraction of Hamas's fighters and failed to kill many of its leaders, thereby leaving Hamas as a functioning organization. Moreover, many analysts suggest Israel's goals may have broadened during the course of the campaign to include ousting Hamas from power. If this truly was an unspoken objective, Israel fell short.

During this conflict, Hamas did deliver money and supplies to the civilians that had been wounded. This caused Israel's actions (which were meant to subdue and deter the population) to make Gazans see Hamas as supportive and sympathetic, while Israel appeared cold-blooded and ruthless. But views toward Hamas were still divided among Gazans, and it is impossible to say for certain just how much support Hamas really had with the public at this time.

On the ground interviews from during the conflict had people saying (paraphrased), "Hamas brought security and order to the area, but daily life just keeps getting worse and worse." Yet, at the same time, not all Gazans blamed Hamas for that latter fact. Some blamed Israel and the international community for not giving Hamas a chance to actually govern – even though there was also evidence that Hamas never had any intention of truly governing anyway.

EPILOGUE: "CAPTIVES"

Lawrence Wright's *New Yorker* piece "[Captives](#)" was written shortly after this 2008-2009 war concluded. It described how the situation in Gaza had really reached a low point and gave a human element to the story that I thought worth closing this chapter on. Just note that the parts in *italics* were taken from the transcript of when Lawrence Wright was interviewed about this article on [Fresh Air](#), but the standard text is all taken from the *New Yorker* article itself. I simply intercut excerpts from both of those sources in order to give a fuller picture of the story.

LAWRENCE WRIGHT: We were sitting in Restobar, a noisy café in downtown Jerusalem. Ari Shavit, a prominent columnist for the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, pointed to a spot a few feet away. "In March, 2002, there was a beautiful twenty-five-year-old girl dead on the floor, right there," he said. A suicide bomber had targeted the café, which was then called Moment [which Wright described as "a hangout for liberal intellectuals and artists"]. Shavit was living nearby at the time, and on the night of March 9th he heard the bomb explode. Running to the café, he saw mutilated bodies scattered on the sidewalk. People had been blown across the street. The dead girl was lying near the doorway. Inside, at the bar, three young men were sitting upright on the stools, but they

were all dead. “It was as if they were still drinking their beers,” Shavit recalled.

Gaza makes a mess of the idealized two-state solution because it is separated from the West Bank, not just physically but also culturally and politically. *Many of the Gazans haven't ever been to the West Bank. So they don't really know anything about the rest of the occupied territories. It's a very isolated population. But it's not uneducated. They have a very high rate of literacy. And in the mid- '90s, their poverty rate was almost equivalent to that in the United States.* But by 1996, the Israelis had virtually shut out Palestinian labor. And the Second Intifada, four years later, ended tourism in Gaza; before then, more than ten thousand people a month had visited the territory, many of them Israelis who enjoyed the beaches and the seafood.

*So it used to be a fairly well-educated, rather prosperous place. Much of it depended on work in Israel, and in the mid- '80s, 100,000 Gazans were going to work in Israel every day [but not anymore].*²⁷

According to Haaretz, the IDF has calculated that 106 truckloads of humanitarian relief are needed every day to sustain life for a million and a half people. But the number of trucks coming into Gaza has fallen as low as 37. Israeli government officials have told international aid officials that the aim is “no prosperity, no development ... no humanitarian crisis.”

“Half a year after the conflict, we don’t have a single bag of cement and not a pane of glass,” John Ging, the director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees, told me in July. (Later that month, Israeli authorities announced that they would allow the UNRWA a limited amount of steel and cement. Ging says that that has yet to happen.) Humanitarian supplies that suddenly have been struck from Israel’s list of approved items pile up in large storage warehouses, and international aid worth billions of dollars awaits delivery.

Gaza’s main exports were strawberries, cherry tomatoes, and carnations, destined mainly for Israel and Europe. But then the borders clamped shut and the fruit rotted. The carnations were fed to livestock. Now the greenhouses are nothing more than bare frames, their tattered plastic roofing fluttering in the sea breeze.

Gaza is a sea of children. The average woman there has 5.1 children, one of the highest birth rates in the world. More than half the population is eighteen or younger. “We love to reproduce,” Khalil al-Hayya, a senior Hamas official, told me on a searingly hot July day,

²⁷ After the 10/7 attacks, I heard reports about how Israel had actually started to let significant numbers of Gazans return to working inside Israel in the months beforehand. Obviously, this rapprochement ended after what happened on 10/7.

as hundreds of young boys in green caps shouted slogans at a Hamas summer camp. Hayya, a former professor of Islamic law, has six children; a seventh was killed by an Israeli bomb.

There is very little for children to do in Gaza. The Israeli blockade includes a ban on toys, so the only playthings available have been smuggled, at a premium, through tunnels from Egypt. Islamists have shut down all the movie theatres. Music is rare, except at weddings. Many of Gaza's sports facilities have been destroyed by Israeli bombings, including the headquarters for the Palestinian Olympic team. Only one television station broadcasts from Gaza, Al Aqsa – a Hamas-backed channel that gained notice last year for a children's show featuring a Mickey Mouse-like figure who was stabbed to death by an Israeli interrogator.

I watched Hamas television. And the children's shows that they had – they have a show called "Pioneers for Tomorrow," in which there's a young host named Saraa, who's, I think, 12 years old. And she has a co-host. And the original co-host was a mouse name Farfur, who is beaten to death by an Israeli interrogator on the television show. And then he's succeeded by a bumblebee, who dies because he can't get across the Egyptian border for medical treatment. And then he's succeeded by a rabbit, and the rabbit is bombed by an Israeli. It's just – your jaw drops when you watch what kids are being shown on this television.

The main diversion for children is the beach, and on Fridays, after noon prayers, the shore is massed with families. Unlike the topaz waters off Tel Aviv, here the sea is murky, a consequence of twenty million gallons of raw and partially-treated sewage that is dumped offshore every day. The main water-treatment plant is broken, and because of the blockade the spare parts that would fix it are unavailable. [Remember that these are the same beaches the Israelis used to vacation at back in the '80s and early '90s.]

Although the new Prime Minister of Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh, emphasized that Hamas had no intention of making Gaza an Islamic state, it took over the judiciary, appointing Islamist judges who impose Sharia law on the court system. I was repeatedly assured by Hamas officials, such as Khalil al-Hayya, that they stood for "moderate Islam, the Islam of tolerance and justice and equality," but Gazans who are not in the Party worry. "The whole place is becoming a mosque," a young female reporter, Asma al-Ghoul, complained. She had recently been hassled on the beach by self-appointed morality police, even though she was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt.

I began to see Gaza as, I suspect, many Gazans do: a floating island, a dystopian Atlantis, drifting farther away from contact with any other society. Although the West Bank is only

twenty-five miles from the Gaza Strip, it feels in many respects even more distant than other nations in the world. The Israelis began requiring special permits for travel between the two halves of Palestine in 1988 [which actually makes it easier for Gazans to visit foreign countries than to visit the West Bank]. Since the Hamas takeover, there have also been many warnings that Al Qaeda has infiltrated Gaza.²⁸

In the summer of 2007, Mahmoud Abbas accused Hamas of “shielding” jihadists. [At this point, Lawrence Wright discussed how he went to see for himself by meeting a Jihadi figure in Gaza:] Abu Mohammed claimed to represent four armed groups that have joined a jihadi coalition. (There is such an alliance, called the Popular Resistance Committees.) “When I speak, I speak for all of them,” he told me.

“We consider Osama bin Laden our spiritual father.” His group follows the same ideology as Al Qaeda, but there is no direct connection. “The siege around Gaza has disconnected us from the outside world,” he said. “None of us can travel.” In Gaza, he estimated, there were about four hundred armed fighters in cells like his, down from as many as fifteen hundred before the Hamas takeover. When Fatah ran the Strip, it was easier for subversives to operate, he said, but now “Hamas is in full control, and their power is very tight.” Hamas, he explained, wanted to dictate when violence occurred in Gaza, and tried to keep the Al Qaeda sympathizers penned in.

Abu Mohammed said that he was a former political-science student who had been jailed first by the Israelis, and later by Hamas officials. During his second internment, “Hamas brought in a moderate sheikh with a suit and a tie and the smell of roses to discuss the way we look,” he said, in a wry tone. “If I want to dress like my comrades in Afghanistan and Iraq” – wearing the *shalwar kameez*, the uniform favored by jihadi veterans – “that’s prohibited.” Finally, his jailers released him with a warning: “Don’t do anything against our ceasefire!” He complained, “We feel we’re under a microscope. If an Internet café or a beauty salon is burned, immediately they come round up the people they know. If Hamas suspects I am behind all this troublemaking, they will hang me by both hands and both feet for thirty days – that’s the minimum.”

“We thought Hamas was going to apply Islamic law here, but they are not,” he said. He spoke of the “fancy restaurants on the beach” and said that Hamas tolerated uncovered women there. “They have a much more moderate way of life, and we cannot deal with

²⁸ I should note that in a discussion with Peter Bergen in 2021, he said that Osama bin Laden’s private documents showed that he detested the Muslim Brotherhood (which is the organization that Hamas evolved from) because it participated in regular politics and elections, rather than solely focusing on jihad. Therefore, one could assume that Hamas would not meet with Bin Laden’s approval for that same reason. Although that would only apply to the political wing, the military wing (al-Qassam Brigades) could still meet Bin Laden’s expectations – but I’m not sure that anyone knows for certain.

that.”

When I mentioned Gilad Shalit, Abu Mohammed smiled and said, “I cannot talk about this, but a member of our group participated.” Hamas now has exclusive control of Shalit. Mohammed said of the arrangement, “We respect this, because of the higher interest of the exchange of prisoners.”

Six weeks after this conversation, a group of radical Islamists, calling themselves the Soldiers of the Followers of God, stood on the steps of a mosque near the Egyptian border and declared Gaza to be an Islamic emirate. That afternoon, members of the Hamas military wing and the Gaza police surrounded the mosque, demanding that the radicals give themselves up. A shoot-out erupted, continuing into the night. According to the BBC, at least twenty-four people were killed, including the group’s leader.

Ari Shavit told me recently, “We dismantled the settlements [and withdrew from Gaza], and then we sat back and said, ‘Let’s have a new beginning.’ What we got was rockets and Gilad Shalit. People became very angry, and Shalit became an icon of that frustration... Israel is obsessed with Gilad Shalit in a way that no other nation in history has been obsessed with a prisoner of war.”

Though it may seem perverse, a powerful sense of identification has arisen between this shy soldier and the people whose government holds him hostage. Gazans see themselves as like Shalit: confined, mistreated, and despairing. At the same time, the sense of specialness that surrounds Shalit rankles many Gazans. “Everybody talks about Shalit as if he’s a holy man,” Ahmed Yousuf, the deputy minister, complained. “The whole world is showing such concern about a soldier who is still young and unmarried.” Meanwhile, Israel is holding more than seven thousand Palestinians, nearly nine hundred of them from Gaza, who, like Shalit, are cut off from their families and are sometimes held without charge. “People say, ‘What’s the difference between their Shalit and our Shalits?’” Yousuf remarked. “We are all Shalits.”

Osama Mozini, a professor of education at the Islamic University, spent five years in an Israeli prison and was arrested three times by the Palestinian Authority because of Hamas activities. “This one who has been abducted is an Israeli soldier who was on the border throwing shells that were killing Palestinians,” he said. “We did not take him from the market or from his family. We took him from a military tank on the Gaza border.”

The IDF won’t say whether Shalit had been involved in military actions against Gaza, but the tanks that line the border do lob shells into the territory, causing many random casualties. While I was there, a teenage girl was killed, and her young brother injured, in

such an incident.

In this next section, Lawrence Wright described the tunnel system that Hamas has built:

The tunnels are in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, right next to the Egyptian border, which is nine miles long. You know, we're talking about sand, essentially. So they bore down 30, 40, 50 feet, straight down, and then they turn the corner and head to Egypt. And they come out on the other side, usually in some predesignated house. They'll come up inside the kitchen or something like that. So you wouldn't be able to see the actual exit hole for the tunnel. And goods are brought into the house; they're put into the hole in the ground. They're sent down, using a winch, down to where the tunnel floor greets the lateral part of the tunnel. And then the smugglers haul it across – sometimes using electrical winches to drag it through the hole – and it's brought up on the other side.

When on the Gaza side, it's quite open. There were hundreds of tunnel operators. In fact, this was the only construction activity I saw when I was in Gaza [and it accounts for some 35,000 jobs in Gaza]. It became the major source of Hamas' tax revenue because they taxed the goods that came through the tunnels.

[The interviewer then asked if Hamas was using the materials to rebuild homes:] No, they were rebuilding the rockets. It was clear that nobody was rebuilding their homes. But they were able to get materials and perhaps actual rockets – pre-manufactured rockets – in through the tunnels. There's no question that they were doing that.

[The interviewer then asked, “How do you get a rocket through a fairly small tunnel?”]

You're misconceiving the tunnels. They are not small. They bring automobiles through there. They bring cows. The cars, of course, are disassembled and reassembled on the other side, but they are substantial, some of these tunnels. You can walk through them. You don't have to crawl through them.²⁹

In this final section, Lawrence Wright gave some accounts of the 2008-2009 war and its aftermath:

The Israeli military adopted painstaking efforts to spare civilian lives in Gaza. Two and a

²⁹ During this latest war following 10/7, Israelis [got a better glimpse](#) at just how complex and sizable the Hamas tunnels have become in the years since this was written (much more so than even the IDF had imagined). One video even showed Yahya Sinwar's brother, Mohammed, *driving* through a large tunnel in his personal vehicle. A couple days later the Israeli government released evidence of [even more complicated networks](#) where the heads of Hamas had residences underground that they could live in for extended periods of time.

half million leaflets were dropped into areas that were about to come under attack, urging noncombatants to “move to city centers.” But Gaza is essentially a cage, and the city centers also came under attack. Intelligence officers called residents whose houses were going to be targeted, urging them to flee. The Air Force dropped “roof knockers” – small, noise making shells – on top of some houses to warn the residents to escape before the next, real bomb fell on them.

A ground invasion began on January 3rd. According to Amnesty International, some Israeli troops were encouraged to fire at “anything that moved.” A number of soldiers spoke to a human-rights group called Breaking the Silence [made up of IDF veterans who want to hold their own military accountable] about the behavior of Israeli forces during Operation Cast Lead. One said that his orders were “You see a house, a window? Shoot at the window. You don’t see a terrorist there? Fire at the window... In urban warfare, anyone is your enemy. No innocents.” Another soldier said, “The goal was to carry out an operation with the least possible casualties for the [Israeli] Army, without even asking itself what the price would be for the other side.” A military rabbi told soldiers, “No pity, God protects you, everything you do is sanctified,” and, “This is a holy war.”

One voice in Gaza that became familiar to Israeli television viewers was that of Ezzeldeen Abu al-Aish, a Palestinian gynecologist and peace activist who had trained and practiced in Israel. He often spoke to Israel’s Channel 10, giving reports, in Hebrew, about the medical crisis in the Gaza hospitals. On January 16th, the day before the war ended, a tank shell went through a bedroom window of his fourth-floor apartment in Jabalia, killing two of his teenage daughters and a niece, and seriously injuring another daughter and several relatives. His oldest daughter ran into the room to see what had happened, only to be struck dead by a second tank shell.

Moments later, he rang the Channel 10 newsman Shlomi Eldar on his cell phone, in the middle of a broadcast. Eldar answered on air, and the anguished wails of Abu al-Aish on the other end of the line jolted many Israelis. “No one can get to us,” the doctor cried, begging for help to get his injured family to a hospital. “My God... Shlomi, can’t anyone help us?” Eldar persuaded the Israeli Army to let ambulances through to rescue the survivors.

The IDF initially claimed that Palestinian rockets had struck the building, and then, after that was disproved, that the tank was responding to “suspicious” figures on the third floor. Later still, the IDF concluded that an Israeli tank had fired the two shells that killed the girls.

Five months after Operation Cast Lead, Hamas sponsored a workshop in Gaza City on

“How to Talk to Israel.” Two dozen people attended, most of them academics or journalists. “What Israel knows about Hamas is that Hamas wants to eliminate them,” one of the panelists observed. Governing imposes new responsibilities, he said, but since coming to power “Hamas has not changed its speech.” A member of the audience said that Hamas had not even decided what to call Israel, pointing out that some speakers had used the term “Israeli entity” and others had called it the “Zionist entity.” “You can’t say to our own public you are going to throw Israel into the sea and then talk another way to the outside world – you have to have one speech,” the audience member said. “We address moderates in Israel with words, and then we also send rockets to them... We should be responsible but also clear in what we want. The world is not going to wait for us forever.”

Many Gazans I spoke to were introspective about Israel’s crushing retaliation. Eman Mohammed, a young photographer, told me that she was shocked by the indifference of the Arab world. “Look at the U.S. and Britain, sending convoys of aid,” she said. “Maybe we needed this war to look at things in a different way.” The sight of buildings being destroyed in Gaza made her more sympathetic to the reaction of America to 9/11.

“I thought Osama bin Laden was a hero, but he’s not. He’s just a corrupted man taking us all to hell.”

The teacher in Gaza told me that many children have been reluctant to return to class, because that’s where they were when the bombs began to fall. Some of the children have become extremely aggressive, forming gangs. “They don’t listen, they don’t care what you’re saying,” the teacher told me. Others are mute, but “as soon as they hear a loud sound they start screaming.”

“At every level, you find people suffering from a siege mentality. They don’t know which direction to take. There’s no guidance from the world community or from our local leaders. We have lost the wise men among the Palestinians.”