

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE
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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

ISRAEL AND HAMAS: UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT

As I am writing this, Israel has begun a significant military operation into the Gaza strip, seeking to neutralize the rocket threat that Hamas poses to southern Israel. It is part of a much larger picture of what is occurring in the Middle East. In this *Perspective*, I hope to place it in its proper context.

- First, what is the threat to Israel that Hamas poses? How does this threat fit into the larger context of its enemies and the internal realities of modern Israel? Benny Morris of Ben-Gurion University helps us understand the brutal facts facing Israel in 2009. The Arab and much wider Islamic worlds have never accepted the legitimacy of Israel's existence and most still oppose that existence. In fact, the policy of many Middle Eastern Arab and Islamic governments is the destruction of Israel. This is still true despite peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. Furthermore, public opinion in the West is shifting away from Israel and toward a growing sympathy for the Palestinian cause. The Holocaust is a distant memory for many and the cause of the Palestinians ignores the threat of most Middle Eastern governments to destroy Israel, if they had the opportunity. Finally, there is the simple geography of the Middle East. That geography is threatening Israel's very existence. Let me explain: (1) To the east is Iran—advancing its nuclear threat. Iran's president, Ahmedinejad, has made it clear that destroying Israel is his personal preference and goal. (2) To the north is Lebanon, now controlled increasingly by Hezbollah, which has vowed to destroy Israel and has strengthened itself considerably since the 2006 war. According to Israeli intelligence, Hezbollah now has an arsenal of 30,000 to 40,000 Russian-made rockets, twice what it possessed before the 2006 war. Some of those rockets could reach Tel Aviv. (3) To the south is Hamas, whose charter promises to destroy Israel "and bring every inch of Palestine under Islamic rule and law." Its arsenal of rockets are home-made Qassams and Russian-made, Iranian-financed Katyushas and Grads smuggled across (and under) the border with Egypt. Last June, Israel and Hamas agreed to a six-month truce, which Hamas refused to renew. It then began a systematic series of rocket attacks upon the towns and villages of southern Israel. (4) The final challenge for Israel is an internal one. Morris writes that "Over the past two decades, Israel's 1.3 million Arab citizens have been radicalized, with many openly avowing a Palestinian identity and embracing Palestinian aims." The birth rates of these Israeli Arabs are among the highest in the world, with 4 or 5 children per family (as opposed to the 2 or 3 children per family among Israeli Jews). With this trend, by 2040 or 2050, Arabs will be the majority of Israel's citizens. For that reason there is growing friction politically between Israeli Arabs and Jews. Morris summarizes Israel's dilemma: "What is common to these specific threats is their unconventionality. Between 1948 and 1982 Israel

coped relatively well with the threat from conventional Arab armies. Indeed, it repeatedly trounced them. But Iran's nuclear threat, the rise of organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah that operate from across international borders and from the midst of dense civilian populations, and Israeli Arabs' growing disaffection with the state and their identification with its enemies, offer a completely different set of challenges." Israel has never been in such a unique situation—and this forms the context for its current actions against Hamas. See Morris's editorial in the *New York Times* (30 December 2008).

- Second, it is for these reasons that Israel sees this action against Hamas as a strategic one. Since the 2006 war with Hezbollah, Israel has increasingly been concerned, in the words of Ethan Bronner, that “. . . its enemies are less afraid of it than they once were, or should be. Israeli leaders are calculating that a display of power in Gaza could fix that.” In 2006, Hezbollah began firing rockets into Israel with apparent impunity. Israel invaded southern Lebanon and for 34 days carried out land, sea and air assaults against Hezbollah before a truce was negotiated. Bronner writes that “Hezbollah, by successfully shooting thousands of rockets into Israel while under attack and sounding defiant to the end, won a great deal of credit among Arabs across the region and used its prestige to grab a decisive role in the Lebanese government.” This is the threat that Israel faces in dealing with Hamas. It cannot afford to permit Hamas to end up with the same level of prestige as Hezbollah achieved after the 2006 war. In short, the present offensive against Hamas is fraught with grave dangers for Israel. But in light of the realities detailed in part one of this *Perspective*, Israel had no choice. See Bronner's helpful article in the *New York Times* (29 December 2008).
- Third, why did Hamas end the six-month cease-fire with Israel on 19 December? As a result, why then did it unleash an increasing number of rocket attacks against Israel? Did it not know that Israel would respond? In one sense, I do not know. But, there is no question that Hamas used these six months to arm itself even more completely with rockets and other armaments via the secret tunnel system under the border with Egypt. Further, Hamas sees itself as the champion of “resistance against the Zionist enemy, Israel.” Over the last two years, Hamas has been losing support among Palestinians. Hamas hopes that Palestinians will now blame Israel for all the suffering and chaos this conflict is bringing to Gaza. The risk of course is that they will blame Hamas and then turn to the support of Fatah, now situated in Ramallah on the West Bank. It is also important to remember that in about one year there will be presidential and parliamentary elections among the Palestinians. Hamas hopes to do well in these elections and perhaps unseat Fatah and Mahmoud Abbas as the Fatah leader and current president of the Palestinians. In short, provoking Israel as Hamas has done is quite risky for them. They could emerge as heroic champions of the Palestinian cause; or they could emerge as defeated leaders who brought so much suffering and havoc upon the 1.5 million residents of Gaza. At this point, no one knows. See Stephen Farrell in the *New York Times* (30 December 2008).
- Fourth is the question of the morality of Israel's actions against Hamas in Gaza. Correctly, Charles Krauthammer argues that this conflict possesses “moral clarity not only rare but excruciating. Israel is so scrupulous about civilian life that, risking the element of surprise, it contacts enemy noncombatants in advance to warn them of approaching danger. Hamas, which started this conflict with unrelenting rocket and mortar attacks on unarmed Israelis—

6,464 launched from Gaza in the past three years—deliberately places its weapons in and near homes of its own people.” Hamas has the strategy of provoking Israeli attacks so that collateral damage will cause Israel to be viewed by the world as the culprit in the conflict. Krauthammer observes that “For Hamas, the only thing more prized than dead Jews are dead Palestinians.” This is even more astounding when one realizes what Israel actually has done in Gaza. When Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, it gave something to the Palestinians it has never done before: It gave them sovereign territory to govern and administer—and then sought peace and normal relations; something never done by the Turkish, the British, the Egyptians or the Jordanians when they ruled Gaza!! What did Hamas do once they won control over the government? “Did the Palestinians [under Hamas] begin building the state that is supposedly their great national aim? No. No roads, no industry, no civil society at all. The flourishing greenhouses that Israel left behind for the Palestinians were destroyed and abandoned. Instead, Gaza’s Iranian-sponsored rulers have devoted all their resources to turning it into a terror base—importing weapons, training terrorists, building tunnels with which to kidnap Israelis on the other side. And of course firing rockets unceasingly.” The moral clarity of this conflict could not be more clear—the defeat of Hamas or the extinction of Israel. Michael Gerson so perceptively writes that “no nation can tolerate a portion of its people living in the conditions of the London Blitz—listening to sirens, sleeping in bomb shelters and separated from death only by the randomness of a Qassam missile’s flight. And no group aspiring to nationhood, such as Hamas, can be exempt from the rules of sovereignty, morality and civilization, which, at the very least, forbid routine murder attempts against your neighbors.” So, is Israel’s response proportionate? Article 51 of the United Nations Charter reserves to every nation the right to engage in self-defense against armed attacks. The only limitation is one of proportionality. Hamas, by sending its rockets into Israeli towns and villages and thereby targeting civilians, is committing war crimes. The residents of Sderot in Israel have exactly 15 seconds from the launch of a Hamas rocket until impact. Alan Dershowitz reports on a distinct contrast: “. . . Israeli intelligence learned that a family’s house in Gaza was being used to manufacture rockets. The Israel military gave the residents 30 minutes to leave. Instead, the owner called Hamas, which sent mothers carrying babies to the house.” Those rockets, protected by mothers and babies, were used against Israel civilians in Sderot! The moral clarity of this situation is clear. Hamas is committing three war crimes: It is targeting indiscriminately Israeli civilians; it is using its citizens as human shields; and it is seeking the destruction of a member state of the United Nations. Israel is acting proportionally and with a strong moral case. The world community needs to see this for what it is: Terrorism versus the survival of a nation! See Gerson’s editorial in the *Washington Post* (2 January 2009); Krauthammer’s piece in the *Washington Post* (2 January 2009); and Dershowitz’s essay in the *New York Times* (2 January 2009).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

THE LEGACY OF SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON

During the Christmas holidays, a scholar who has had a profound influence upon my own personal thinking, died. Samuel P. Huntington, a Harvard political scientist, died at age 81. He wrote many books, but two of his most recent had an enormous influence on my thinking—*The*

Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order and Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity.

In the former, he analyzed a world in which the nation state and ideology are replaced with what he called “civilizations.” He argued for a world in which cultural identities—ethnic, national, religious, civilization—are central, and cultural affinities and differences shape the alliances, antagonisms and policies of states. The implications of this new reality involve the emerging politics of culture, the rising power of non-Western civilizations and the increasing cultural assertiveness of these societies. For that reason, America needed to abandon its Cold War thinking about the world. “The war of ideologies would yield to a ‘civilizational’ struggle of soil and blood. It would be the West versus the eight civilizations dividing the rest—Latin America, African, Islamic, Sinic [i.e., Chinese], Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist and Japanese.” The enemies of the US (and the West) do not know borders and are not associated with modern nation states. Terrorism fits that description perfectly. Finally, the relevance and universality of western culture is now questioned. Islam certainly does not accept that proposition and it is one of the defining civilizations that Huntington cites. The US is only now beginning to understand that the seemingly ubiquitous western culture is not as appealing to Asia and to the Middle East. Indeed, the terrorists of 9/11 wanted to destroy that ubiquitous western culture. The current War on Terror is a classic “clash of civilizations.” He wrote this about Islam: “The relations between Islam and Christianity, both orthodox and Western, have often been stormy. Each has been the other’s Other. The 20th-century conflict between liberal democracy and Marxism-Leninism is only a fleeting and superficial historical phenomenon compared to the continuing and deeply conflictual relations between Islam and Christianity.”

His second and more recent book is even more compelling. In *Who Are We?*, Huntington wrote of the “American Creed” and its erosion within America. Fouad Ajami summarizes his thesis: “[the key elements of the American creed] are the English language, Christianity, religious commitment, English concepts of the rule of law, the responsibility of rulers, and the rights of individuals—[these elements] he said are derived from the ‘distinct Anglo-Protestant culture of founding settlers of America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.’” The success of America has depended on the willingness of each generation of Americans to honor the creed of the founding settlers. Today, there is neither deep attachment nor deep-seated commitment to America’s national identity. He therefore envisioned three possibilities for America: “cosmopolitan, imperial and national. In the first, the world remakes America, and globalization and multiculturalism trump national identity. In the second, America remakes the world: Unchallenged by a rival superpower, America would attempt to reshape the world according to its values, taking to other shores its democratic norms and aspirations. In the third, America remains America: It resists the blandishments—and falseness—of cosmopolitanism, and reins in the imperial impulse.” Huntington preferred an America that was “devoted to the preservation and enhancement of those qualities that have defined America since its founding.”

His writing and thinking were provocative and thought-provoking. He will be missed.

See his book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, especially, pp. 84-101 and pp. 301-21; and Ajami’s essay in the *Wall Street Journal* (30 December 2008).