

Grim Gaza

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Any short-term hope for creation of the independent state to which Palestinians have so long aspired is, for now, dying in the bloody chaos of the Gaza Strip. For that, Palestinians have themselves to blame.

Israel's withdrawal of all its settlements and soldiers from Gaza in 2005 was to have been stage one of a larger Israeli pullback from Arab lands captured in the 1967 Six-Day War. Even Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a hard-liner and architect of the Israeli settler movement, had come to see that Israel would eventually have to withdraw from much of the occupied West Bank, too.

But first, Gaza would be the test case of Palestinian intentions. If a Gaza liberated from Israeli occupation and wholly under Palestinian administration could emerge as a peaceful, orderly neighbor, then Israelis might safely contemplate a far larger withdrawal from the more strategic ground of the occupied West Bank.

Tragically, however, Gaza is turning into a disaster for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The militant Hamas movement, winner of the 2006 Palestinian elections, is turning Gaza into a fortified base for attacks against Israel. Barrages of the small but potentially lethal Qassam rockets, 80 in just three days last week, are regularly fired from Gaza into southern Israel. Qassams have wounded a score of Israelis in recent days, and an Israeli woman was killed over the weekend when a rocket hit her car. There is also good reason to believe that Hamas is smuggling arms into Gaza through tunnels beneath the Sinai-Gaza border. Security forces of the Palestinian Authority, the nominal government in Gaza, have been unable or unwilling to stop these hostile acts against Israel. Meanwhile, the Saudi-brokered "unity government" of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority's rival Fatah organization has all but collapsed. Hamas and Fatah gunmen are shooting it out in the streets of Gaza City with deadly effect. Dozens of Palestinians have been killed, and chaos reigns. If Hamas wins, a rerun of the heavy fighting last year between Palestinians and the Israeli army inside Gaza is likely if not certain.

For now, the larger political environment is bleak for significant progress in the peace process. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stands discredited, and politically emasculated, by his own government's review of the badly bungled war last summer against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. For their part, the Palestinians won't be able to speak with one voice until some measure of unity is achieved between Hamas and Fatah, assuming that's ever possible.

In the meantime, the dangerous and growing mess in Gaza is no advertisement for an expanded Palestinian state that any Israeli government could accept. With a two-state solution still the only answer for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the news from Gaza is doubly grim.

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