



ISRAEL NEWS

*A collection of the week's news from Israel
From the Bet El Twinning / Israel Action Committee
of Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto Congregation*

Commentary...

Sound and Fury Signifying Incompetence By Caroline Glick

The Olmert-Livni-Barak government's latest exercise in saber-rattling has ended with customary haste.

Sunday Palestinian terror forces maintained their rocket and missile offensive against Israel, shooting 40 rockets, including upgraded Katyusha missiles at Sderot, Ashkelon, Netivot and surrounding areas. Whereas in 2005, 25,000 Israelis lived within Palestinian rocket and missile range from Gaza, the past week has shown that the number has expanded at least tenfold since then.

Monday morning, the limited IDF ground component that was deployed in Gaza on Saturday abruptly suspended operations and pulled out. The pullout came just hours after senior IDF officials announced that the forces in Gaza were about to be augmented by additional forces and Defense Minister Ehud Barak told senior military commanders, "The time has come for action. Hamas is responsible and will pay a price."

IT IS obvious that in suspending Operation "Hot Winter" in Gaza, the Olmert-Livni-Barak government essentially crumpled in the face of pressure from US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and President George W. Bush. Sunday night the White House issued a press release demanding that Israel end its operations in Gaza and return to the negotiating table with Palestinian Authority Chairman and Fatah chief Mahmoud Abbas.

For their part, Abbas and his Fatah underlings have been outspoken in their support for Hamas's missile and rocket offensive against Israel. Sunday they organized joint Fatah-Hamas rallies in Hebron and Ramallah where rioters called for Israel's destruction, burned Israeli and American flags and then attacked IDF patrols and the security fence.

Truth be told, the US may have done Israel a favor preventing the escalation of operations. This is not because an offensive against Hamas's Iranian built war machine in Gaza is not vital. This is so because Operation "Hot Winter" was bereft of operational logic. Its strategic ends were unclear and, to the extent they were enunciated at all by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Barak, they bore no connection to the operations on the ground which were so limited in scope that they were incapable of achieving any long-term objective.

In one form or another, Olmert, Livni and Barak all said that the goal of Operation Hot Winter was to end the Palestinians' missile and rocket campaign against the Western Negev generally and against Ashkelon in particular. They intimated as well that the strategic objective of the campaign was to overthrow the Hamas regime in Gaza, and reinstall a Fatah government. Beyond that they said that they sought to kill or capture Hamas's leadership.

But the Olmert-Livni-Barak government gave the IDF insufficient tools to achieve these grandiose plans. They only allowed the IDF to deploy one infantry brigade and two partial tank battalions. They refused to expand the operation to a divisional sized force, which would still have been too small to achieve any significant or long-lasting results. The limited geographical scope of the IDF operation - in a 2-3 kilometer zone in northern Gaza - had no impact of Hamas's ability to continue to shoot off rockets and missiles whose ranges run from 5-25 kilometers. In short, the Olmert-Livni-Barak government enunciated operational and strategic objectives that it clearly had no intention of achieving.

Today the Gaza Strip is a terror state run by an Iranian proxy. Since Israel withdrew from Gaza in September 2005, Hamas and its terror partners in Fatah and Islamic Jihad have built terror armies along the model of Hizbullah.

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Hamas forces have received training in Iran, Syria and Lebanon. They have built up formidable arsenals of Katyusha and Kassam rockets as well as anti-tank missiles. And, according to Fatah and other sources, they have been augmented not only by Iranian, Syrian and Hizbullah operatives. Al-Qaida has also built up a presence in the area.

This combined force successfully overwhelmed Egyptian forces along

Gaza's border with Egypt in January. Its current capacity has rendered extensive portions of southern Israel exposed to missile and mortar attacks. And unless it is routed militarily, its capabilities will only grow.

Israel has limited options to contend with the present and growing threat. For the Olmert-Livni-Barak government, the easiest solution would be to have someone else fight Hamas and its allies for Israel. But no such proxy force exists. Both the Americans and the Olmert-Livni-Barak government operate under the assumption that Fatah is a reasonable proxy. But experience has shown that this is not the case. From September 2005 when Israel withdrew its forces until June 2007 when Hamas ousted Fatah from power, Abbas and his US-trained forces did nothing to curb Hamas's growing power or limit Iran's growing control over Hamas. Confronted by Hamas forces last June, Fatah forces cut and ran rather than fight and those who remained were largely integrated into Hamas's burgeoning army. Since June, Fatah has shown no willingness to confront Hamas. And over the past week of Hamas's escalated missile offensive, Fatah stood foursquare with Hamas against Israel.

THEN TOO, the notion that an international force could be deployed in Gaza to protect Israel from the growing terror army at its doorstep similarly lacks credibility. At no time has any international force - whatever its composition - ever been interested or capable of defending Israel against Arab terror or military offensives - whether from Gaza, from Lebanon or indeed from Egypt or Syria. And there is no reason to believe that this historic state of affairs will change significantly in the future.

In the absence of proxies, Israel has two options going forward. First, it can incapacitate Hamas and second it can try to deter Hamas. To incapacitate Hamas, Israel must launch an operation aimed at cutting off Hamas's logistical supply lines through the border with Egypt. It must fight Hamas forces on the ground with the aim of defeating them, and it must kill or capture Hamas's senior and mid-level leadership. Given that like Hizbullah, Hamas and its state-sponsors will seek to regenerate any diminished capacities by rearming and promoting new leaders, these operations must be continuous. Consequently, to incapacitate Hamas, and so secure southern Israel, Israel requires a continuous military presence in the Gaza Strip.

The Olmert-Livni-Barak government has repeatedly rejected the redeployment of IDF forces to Gaza for any significant length of time. But they have never been called on to explain why the current state of affairs, in which an Iranian-proxy army with al-Qaida components is permitted to grow in close proximity to its civilian centers is preferable to such a long-term military presence in Gaza.

As to deterrence, it is unclear that it is possible to embrace deterrence as a strategy without first establishing a continuous military presence in Gaza. To succeed, deterrence must be based upon a credible threat to exact a cost for aggression that Hamas is unwilling to pay. In sending its leadership to ground while encouraging Gazans to confront IDF forces and "martyr" themselves, Hamas made clear that it views the sacrifice of its leadership as an unacceptable cost for its aggression. And yet, without forces on the ground in Gaza, the IDF lacks the intelligence necessary to conduct a wide-scale and successful assault on Hamas's leaders. So today, Israel lacks the capacity to base its operations in Gaza on a deterrence model.

There is an additional option which the government seems interested in

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adopting which is to conduct a new offensive every so often, when attacks foment a public outcry for action. It is far from clear though that this option is less costly either militarily or politically than maintaining a continuous presence in Gaza. Given Hamas's continuously expanding capabilities, each such operation will exact a large cost in the lives of IDF soldiers who will be required to repeatedly fight their way into Gaza. Moreover, each time Israel returns to Gaza it faces renewed international condemnation for taking action. A continuous presence in Gaza would not incur such costs.

Both Rice and the Olmert-Livni-Barak government argue that a renewed military presence in Gaza is a poor option because it would render negotiations towards the establishment of a Palestinian state in Gaza, Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem non-viable. But then, if those negotiations were successful, they would lead to the imposition of a Fatah-Hamas terror state which would not only not protect southern Israel from missile and rocket attack, it would expose central Israel to similar aggression.

It is unclear then, why the strategic aim they seek to achieve would leave Israel better off than an operation aimed at incapacitating Palestinian-Iranian terror forces and safeguarding Israeli territory from attack.

Other voices argue that a continuous Israeli presence along the Gaza-Egypt border would make it impossible for Israel to completely disengage from Gaza by enabling the Palestinians to link up with Egypt instead of Israel for electricity and other supplies. Israel, they claim, would still be perceived as responsible for Gaza and for the welfare of its Hamas-supporting population. These voices fail to ask a simply question: In whose eyes would Israel be considered responsible for Gaza's population?

The issue of Israel's responsibility under international law for the welfare of Gazans is an open one. Israel is not obligated to advance the aims of the Palestinians by accepting such responsibility. Beyond that, whether foreign governments perceive Israel as responsible for Gaza is not something that Israel can determine. The most it can do is seek to divest others of such a perception by explaining why it is not responsible for the welfare of Gaza's population.

By sending insufficient forces willy-nilly into Gaza over the weekend while conducting aerial bombings of empty buildings, Olmert, Livni and Barak showed that they have learned none of the lessons of the Second Lebanon War. Indeed, Barak showed that he has learned nothing from his experience as prime minister at the start of the Palestinian terror war in September 2000, when he responded to the lynching of Israeli reservists in Ramallah by bombing empty buildings and making empty threats to Yasser Arafat while begging him to take the Temple Mount.

How long will this unacceptable state of affairs be allowed to continue? (Jerusalem Post Mar 3)

The Sderot Calculus By Bret Stephens

The Israeli town of Sderot lies less than a mile from the Gaza Strip. Since the beginning of the intifada seven years ago, it has borne the brunt of some 2,500 Kassam rockets fired from Gaza by Palestinian terrorists. Only about a dozen of these Kassams have proved lethal, though earlier this month brothers Osher and Rami Twito were seriously injured by one as they walked down a Sderot street on a Saturday evening. Eight-year-old Osher lost a leg.

It is no stretch to say that life in Sderot has become unendurable. Palestinians and their chorus of supporters -- including the 118 countries of the so-called Non-Aligned Movement, much of Europe, and the panoply of international aid organizations from the World Bank to the United Nations -- typically reply that life in the Gaza Strip is also unendurable, and that Palestinian casualties greatly exceed Israeli ones. But this argument is fatuous: Conditions in Gaza, in so far as they are shaped by Israel, are a function of conditions in Sderot. No Palestinian Kassams (or other forms of terrorism), no Israeli "siege."

The more vexing question, both morally and strategically, is what Israel ought to do about Gaza. The standard answer is that Israel's response to the Kassams ought to be "proportionate." What does that mean? Does the "proportion" apply to the intention of those firing the Kassams -- to wit, indiscriminate terror against civilian populations? In that case, a "proportionate" Israeli response would involve, perhaps, firing 2,500 artillery shells at random against civilian targets in Gaza. Or should proportion apply to the effects of the Kassams -- an exquisitely calibrated, eye-for-eye operation involving the killing of a dozen Palestinians and the deliberate maiming or traumatizing of several hundred more?

Surely this isn't what advocates of proportion have in mind. What they really mean is that Israel ought to respond with moderation. But the criteria for moderation are subjective. Should Israel pick off Hamas leaders who are ordering the rocket attacks? The European Parliament last week passed a resolution denouncing the practice of targeted assassinations. Should Israel adopt purely economic measures to punish Hamas for the Kassams? The same

resolution denounced what it called Israel's "collective punishment" of Palestinians. Should Israel seek to dismantle the Kassams through limited military incursions? This, too, has the unpardonable effect of resulting in too many Palestinian casualties, which are said to be "disproportionate" to the number of Israelis injured by the Kassams.

By these lights, Israel's presumptive right to self-defense has no practical application as far as Gaza is concerned. Instead, Israel is counseled to allow goods to flow freely into the Strip, and to negotiate a cease-fire with Hamas.

But here another set of considerations intrudes. Hamas was elected democratically and by overwhelming margins in Gaza. It has never once honored a cease-fire with Israel. Following Israel's withdrawal of its soldiers and settlements from the Strip in 2005 there was a six-fold increase in the number of Kassam strikes on Israel.

Hamas has also made no effort to rewrite its 1988 charter, which calls for Israel's destruction. The charter is explicitly anti-Semitic: "The time will not come until Muslims will fight the Jews (and kill them); until the Jews hide behind rocks and trees, which will cry: O Muslim! there is a Jew hiding behind me, come on and kill him!" (Article Seven) "In order to face the usurpation of Palestine by the Jews, we have no escape from raising the banner of Jihad." (Article 15) And so on.

It would seem perverse for Israeli taxpayers, including residents of Sderot, to feed the mouth that bites them. It would seem equally perverse for Israel merely to bide its time for an especially unlucky day -- a Kassam hitting a busload of schoolchildren, for instance -- before striking hard at Gaza. But unless Israel is willing to accept the military, political and diplomatic burdens of occupying all or parts of Gaza indefinitely, the effects of a major military incursion could be relatively short-lived. Israel suffered many more casualties before it withdrew from the Strip than it has since.

Perhaps the answer is to wait for a technological fix and, in the meantime, hope for the best. Israel is at work on a missile-defense program called "Iron Dome" that may be effective against Kassams, though the system won't be in place for at least two years. It could also purchase land-based models of the Phalanx Close-In Weapons System, used by the U.S. to defend the Green Zone in Baghdad.

But technology addresses neither the Islamic fanaticism that animates Hamas nor the moral torpor of Western policy makers and commentators who, on balance, find more to blame in Israel's behavior than in Hamas's. Nor, too, would an Iron Dome or the Phalanx absolve the Israeli government from the necessity of punishing those who seek its destruction. Prudence is an important consideration of statesmanship, but self-respect is vital. And no self-respecting nation can allow the situation in Sderot to continue much longer, a point it is in every civilized country's interest to understand.

On March 9, 1916, Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa attacked the border town of Columbus, N.M., killing 18 Americans. President Woodrow Wilson ordered Gen. John J. Pershing and 10,000 soldiers into Mexico for nearly a year to hunt Villa down, in what was explicitly called a "punitive expedition." Pershing never found Villa, making the effort something of a failure. Then again, Villa's raid would be the last significant foreign attack on continental U.S. soil for 85 years, six months and two days. (Wall Street Journal Feb 26)

Too Much to Expect By Moshe Arens

It was just too much to expect. That Ehud Olmert, the prime minister who brought us the disaster of the Second Lebanon War, had finally learned the lesson of that war. That he now understood that the only way to protect civilians from short-range rocket attacks is to have soldiers on the ground at the rocket-launching sites. That there is no substitute for this.

That the "leverage" theory - which holds that the destruction of enemy infrastructure and attacks on the enemy's civilian population will produce pressure on decision makers to cease their attacks against Israeli civilians - simply does not work in the Middle East. It did not work in Lebanon, and it certainly does not work in Gaza.

That raising the "price tag" that the Palestinian population will have to pay after every rocket attack against Israeli towns and villages has not convinced the terrorists to abstain from further violence, and will not do so. Quite the contrary, it only increases the support that the terrorists receive from the civilian population. Cutting off fuel, cutting off electricity, preventing food from reaching them is both counterproductive and immoral.

These lessons were not learned by Olmert, and it was just wishful thinking to expect that once ground forces began moving into the Gaza Strip last week, they would be ordered to take over the rocket-launching sites and stay there as long as necessary to finally bring peace to the citizens of Sderot, Ashkelon and other communities in the vicinity of Gaza.

The victory parades in Gaza as soon as the Israel Defense Forces withdrew were only to be expected. Like Hezbollah in the Second Lebanon

War, whoever gets in the last barrage of rockets is the victor in the eyes of Middle East spectators. And not only in their eyes.

It was another blow to Israel's deterrence. All the talk about the damage that has been inflicted on Hamas does not begin to equal its perception that it has won its contest with the IDF and the encouragement it will draw from this to engage in further attacks against Israeli civilians.

Hamas will have plenty of recruits to take the place of those who were killed, and lots more rockets, weapons and ammunition will be brought into the Gaza Strip to more than make up for what it lost in the past few days of fighting.

So what about the defense minister, who was expected bring some good strategic sense to the Olmert government? The wishful thinkers among us tend to forget that he was the man who unilaterally evacuated the Israeli security zone in southern Lebanon, which began the cycle that led to the Second Lebanon War. He seems to have learned no lesson from that mistake.

Now, he is checking to see whether directing artillery against the civilian population in the Gaza Strip is permissible under international law. He does not seem to understand that even if it is permissible, it is going to be counterproductive, and that it is impermissible by our moral standards.

And the other member of the governing trio - the foreign minister, Tzipi Livni? She seems to have only one thing on her mind, a Palestinian state. Like Olmert, she believes that Israel is finished unless a Palestinian state is established.

The former defense minister and chief of staff, Shaul Mofaz, who might have been expected to provide the cabinet with some common-sense advice based on his experience, only talks about the need for a new strategy, based on a definition of goals; as if the goal in this case were not crystal-clear - to provide protection for the civilian population living in the vicinity of Gaza. But after all, what should we expect from the man who ordered the IDF to evacuate all Israeli citizens from Gush Katif and the northern end of the Gaza Strip?

Unfortunately, we are stuck with this disaster-prone leadership. Who knows where they are going to take us before they are finally thrown out of office? They are clinging to the seats of power with the support of Shas and the Pensioners, Likud renegades and those who were given a free once-in-a-lifetime ride into the Knesset by Ariel Sharon and Olmert.

People of Israel, grin and bear it! (Haaretz Mar 5)

The Emperor is Naked By Yehudit Tayar

In 2005 I wrote an article prior to the expulsion and destruction of Gush Katif that was published in the Jerusalem Post warning about the missiles that would hit the south of Israel if this plan was implemented - it is not consoling that I was right. It is however infuriating to witness the silence of all those who supported, pushed and enacted the needless and dangerous expulsion of our families from flourishing Jewish communities.

Where are all those wise men today who shouted out the importance of the so-called "disengagement"? Not one word about the result of this horrific political tactic by a Prime Minister and his fellow politicians carried out for their own greed and ambition, this horrific political tactic that turned the south of Israel into a target for missiles and rockets, and thousands of patriots into refugees.

Where is the investigative reporting now which should be speaking about the needless entrance of our soldiers into the sands of Gaza just to give a show as if the government is attempting to resolve the situation that they themselves created? The pitiful facade of committees following the disastrous Lebanese war that did not demand that each and every one of the politicians and military who were involved leave office is typical of the situation that we are living through today.

Each and every human life is so precious and irreplaceable, and yet the government of Israel is willing to allow seven years of missile attacks on civilian populations without resolving the situation and relying on miracles to prevent deaths. I do not see any difference between the fire on our communities in Gush Katif or the missile fire on Sderot, Netivot and Ashkelon.

Instead of the media targeting the government for causing the situation and instead of the media targeting the government for the continuous charade of talks with one of the sworn enemies of Israel, Abu Mazen, the media is giving a platform to our enemies while our civilian population is under attack and our missing are still unaccounted for. But we do hear the enemy report on our radio an account of the casualties caused by Israeli attacks, without any mention of the fact that the terrorists use civilians including women and children as shields. What other normal country would allow the enemy to spread propaganda on national radio (including the I.D.F. station) and allow for demonstrations against Israel while we are under attack and innocent

people are being injured and killed?

In a normal situation Israel would divide Gaza into areas that would be marked, and following any fire of missiles from a given area would give the locals 48 hours to clear out the area before coming in and leveling it out. After a few of these areas were clean the attacks would stop because the terrorists would finally realize that Israel will not tolerate fire on her civilian population, and is unwilling to sacrifice her soldiers in order to make headlines instead of actually resolving the intolerable situation.

Where is that one voice of honesty, as in the fable of the Emperor and his New Clothes, when a small child finally called out, "but the emperor is naked!" I for one demand that each and every one responsible for this miserable situation leave office and never return and I know that I am not alone in this. For the emperor is naked and must be forced to take responsibility for his mistakes.

It's the Middle East, Stupid By Michael B. Oren

It begins with a single Qassam rocket, one of the thousands of homemade projectiles fired in recent years by the Islamic radicals of Hamas from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel. The rockets have made life nightmarish for many Israelis but have largely missed their targets. But this one gets "lucky": It smashes into an elementary school, wounding 40 children and killing 15.

The Israeli government, which had heretofore responded to the Qassams with airstrikes and small ground raids, cannot resist the nationwide demand for action. Within hours, tens of thousands of Israeli troops and hundreds of tanks are rushing into Gaza, battling house-to-house in teeming refugee camps. Just as swiftly, Palestinian officials accuse Israel of perpetrating a massacre and invite the foreign press to photograph the corpse-strewn rubble. The images flash around the Middle East on al-Jazeera TV and trigger violent demonstrations in Arab capitals.

Hezbollah, the radical Lebanese Shiite militia, then gets into the act, raining Katyusha rockets on northern Israel. But when Israeli warplanes bomb the Katyusha batteries, Syria leaps in, sending its commandos to retaliate by capturing key Israeli bunkers atop the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Israel's counterattack succeeds only in precipitating a hailstorm of Syrian Scud-D missiles, some armed with chemical warheads, into Israeli cities. Then, just as Israeli planes are incinerating the main electrical plant in Damascus, the first of hundreds of Shehab-3 rockets, pre-targeted at Tel Aviv, lift off from Tehran.

Sound fantastical or too horrific to ponder? Not to Israeli intelligence analysts it doesn't. The Israeli military recently conducted a round of large-scale war games based precisely on this scenario. In some rounds, Israel managed to humble Hamas and Hezbollah while shooting down most of the Iranian and Syrian rockets with its own Arrow and Patriot antimissile systems. But other forecasts went far less well: Israel survives but barely, with its cities devastated and countless civilians killed.

This is the mess that will soon land in the lap of President Clinton, President Obama or President McCain. Despite the shadows of 9/11 and Iraq, the U.S. primary season thus far has been dominated by the economy. But it's a mistake to assume that the next presidency will be. Instead of a honeymoon, the new president could inherit a brush fire raging out of control in a volatile region where U.S. involvement has never been deeper. Would he or she merely convene the U.N. Security Council, or rush to Israel's defense? And how, in the event of a general Middle East war, would the president safeguard the woefully exposed U.S. forces in Iraq?

The Middle East will continue to be the source of the gravest threats to U.S. security, whether in the long-term form of a nuclear-armed Iran or the short-term one of an unforeseen multistate war. So the candidates must be pressed about how they would handle a chain reaction in which events in Gaza suddenly engulf the entire region. To borrow an old slogan: It's the Middle East, stupid.

The possibility that a border scrap between Israelis and Palestinians could ignite a regional conflagration should not be too surprising. A very similar concatenation of events led to the most volcanic eruption in the region's modern history, irreparably convulsing the Middle East and carving many of the furrows that still destabilize it.

That conflict, too, began with Palestinian attacks into Israel, a series of Israeli reprisals and a mass clamoring for revenge. The countdown began just over 43 years ago, on New Year's Eve, 1964, when Palestinian guerrillas belonging to the Fatah faction crossed the Lebanese border to attack Israel. Though the infiltrators were intercepted, Fatah's leader, Yasser Arafat, declared the raid a heroic victory and dared Arab rulers to match his audacity.

Few could. The Arab world at the time was split between two warring camps: the socialist, pro-Soviet dictators in Egypt, Syria and Iraq and the conservative, pro-Western monarchs in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and elsewhere. Egypt's fiery leader, Gamal Abdul Nasser, gleefully branded King Hussein

of Jordan a Zionist "whore," ratcheting up the tension by hinting that the kings were American lackeys. Despite the rhetoric, Arab rulers did not really want war with Israel. But Arafat's challenge left them little choice.

Nasser responded by ordering the Palestine Liberation Organization, originally established as an Egyptian propaganda tool, to launch its own cross-border attacks. The Israelis lashed back, blowing up Fatah's West Bank headquarters. Jordan accused Nasser of "hiding behind the skirts" of the U.N. peacekeepers deployed in the Sinai to separate Egypt and Israel. Mortified, Nasser ousted the U.N. forces on May 15, 1967, and closed a strategic Red Sea shipping route to Israeli vessels. Suddenly, Nasser was the champion of the Arab "street," hailed by huge demonstrations that demanded Israel's destruction. The Arab world closed ranks behind him. Shorn of international allies, Israelis were convinced that they faced annihilation.

But then Israel struck first. On the morning of June 5, Israeli warplanes obliterated almost the entire Egyptian air force, and Israeli tanks rumbled through Gaza and Sinai. At the end of six days of fighting, Israel had nearly quadrupled the territories under its control, among them the West Bank, the Golan Heights and Gaza. A new era -- and new sources of Middle East bloodshed -- had emerged.

Much has since changed in the Middle East. The Cold War is largely forgotten, as is the 1960s enmity among most Arab regimes. Israel remains a powerhouse, with more high-tech companies than Western Europe, an ironclad alliance with the United States and (it's widely assumed) a nuclear arsenal. Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, now rules the West Bank as the head of a Palestinian Authority publicly committed to coexistence with the Jewish state. But for all these transformations, the Middle East remains the same explosive context of conflict it was in the 1960s. The region is still bitterly divided -- not between Arab nationalism and conservatism but between religious moderation and the surge of Islamist extremism spurred, in part, by the Six-Day War. Backed by Syria and Iran, a phalanx of terrorist groups threatens Israeli and Arab societies alike. Israel has peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and is engaged again in peace talks with the Palestinians, but it is still an object of abomination for the overwhelming majority of Middle Easterners. And violence in Gaza -- now run by a democratically elected Hamas government -- can still spark turbulent demonstrations throughout the region's streets. If anything, the Middle East is even more flammable today than in the 1960s because of the countless thousands of short- and long-range missiles in its armies' arsenals. These weapons vastly amplify the potential destruction of any military confrontation while slashing the amount of decision-making time that might be needed to avert all-out war. And modern weapons, including unconventional ones, make everything scarier. A conflict between Israel and Iran might not last six days but six hours, unleashing shock waves even more seismic than those of 1967.

Contemporary Middle Eastern leaders cannot afford to ignore these lessons. Neither can decision-makers -- and would-be ones -- in the United States. Though the waning Bush administration is focused on trying to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty, shore up Iraq and flex its muscles at Iran, it should not downplay the danger that a seemingly limited border skirmish could rapidly escalate into a regional catastrophe.

Nor should Bush's heir. The next commander in chief may have to proceed directly from the inauguration to the Situation Room to try to defuse a Middle Eastern crisis of monumental dimensions. That moment could be a single Qassam away. (Washington Post Mar 2)

The writer is the author of "Six Days of War" and "Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present."

The Canard of 'Disproportionate Force' By Evelyn Gordon

International denunciations of Israel came thick and fast this week. The EU's rotating president, Slovenia, condemned the "disproportionate use of force by the Israeli Defense Forces against the Palestinian population in Gaza." UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon slammed Israel's "excessive and disproportionate" response to Palestinian rocket attacks. Even the US State Department urged Israel to "exercise caution to avoid the loss of innocent life," which is merely a milder version of the same premise: that Israel is to blame for all Palestinian civilian casualties, either because it uses "disproportionate force" or because it exercises insufficient "caution." Yet media reports on the fighting in Gaza reveal that in fact, the blame frequently lies with Palestinian behavior.

Take, for example, an Israeli air strike that killed two Palestinian teenagers last Wednesday. According to The New York Times, "witnesses in Gaza told the Palestinian news media that the civilians were hit while standing at a launching site watching Hamas militants firing rockets." There can be no more justified military activity than targeting terrorists in the very act of firing rockets at civilians. If that is "disproportionate," all military activity is. Moreover, since Hamas eschews uniforms, the IDF has no way to distinguish

rocket crews from civilians who are cheering them on. Thus any civilian who dabbles at a rocket launch is clearly and deliberately putting himself in danger - which in itself should absolve Israel of responsibility.

But more importantly, for that very reason, most armed forces do not allow civilians in firing zones. The IDF, for instance, generally declares active combat areas "closed military zones" from which Israeli civilians are legally barred, and it enforces such orders. Other Western armies do the same.

But Hamas needs civilian casualties to fuel Palestinian and international anger at Israel. So rather than barring civilians from its launch zones, it welcomes them. And if they do not volunteer for the victim's role, it co-opts them - as happened last weekend: "Palestinian gunmen took up positions in homes while the civilians were still inside," Haaretz reported.

Firing back at people who are shooting at you is also clearly legitimate military activity; no law of war obligates soldiers to let themselves be mown down without a fight just because there are civilians nearby. Moreover, soldiers have no way of knowing whether the civilians have fled or are still inside a house; all they can be certain of is the presence of gunmen.

Under such circumstances, civilian casualties are inevitable. But those casualties are not caused by "disproportionate force" or insufficient "caution"; they are the direct result of Hamas's decision to use civilian homes, with the people still inside, as bases for targeting Israeli soldiers.

Moreover, civilians are not always innocent. Those whose homes were invaded by Hamas were presumably unwilling hostages. But some Palestinians voluntarily serve as "human shields" for terrorists - and by actively aiding and abetting terror, they turn themselves into combatants.

In one widely publicized case in November 2006, for instance, the IDF, seeking to avoid civilian casualties, announced two planned air strikes 30 minutes in advance to enable civilians to leave. Instead, Hamas used the loudspeakers of local mosques to urge civilians to flood the area and serve as human shields. Hundreds did so, and the IDF - precisely because Israel tries to avoid civilian casualties - consequently aborted the strikes. Yet these civilians were hardly "innocent": They deliberately intervened in an armed conflict on the terrorists' behalf.

What is most noteworthy about such incidents, however, is what they say about the Palestinian claim - mindlessly parroted by the international community - that the IDF fires indiscriminately, without regard for civilians. In fact, Hamas summoned civilian reinforcements precisely because it knew a civilian presence would prevent the air strikes. And the civilians came for the same reason - not because they sought death, but because they knew the IDF would not shoot them.

In another incident that same month, hundreds of Palestinian women purposely entered a combat zone to shield gunmen besieged by IDF soldiers. Again, they were deliberately abetting combatants. And again, they knew they could do so safely, because the IDF would not shoot them. And indeed, the soldiers held their fire as the wanted men escaped by mingling with the crowd.

In July 2006, The New York Times described another Gaza battle as follows: "[Israeli] soldiers fired at groups of armed Palestinians who fought in the streets, sometimes surrounded by curious and excited children." Why any parent would let his children outside during a gunfight is a mystery. But unless these parents were deliberately sacrificing their children for propaganda purposes, such behavior demonstrates a truly extraordinary faith in the IDF's efforts to avoid harming civilians.

Contrast this with Palestinians' behavior when the combatants are not Israelis. During last May's Hamas-Fatah infighting, for instance, the Times reported: "The streets of Gaza City were empty except for the gunmen, with shops shuttered and residents remaining indoors, usually in interior rooms farthest from the windows." No "curious and excited" children surrounding the gunmen in these battles: Gazan parents who trusted the IDF with their children's lives evidently placed no similar reliance on Palestinian forces.

The media reports above, and numerous others like them, make three things clear: (1) Palestinians know full well that Israel strives to avoid civilian casualties; indeed, as their behavior demonstrates, they count on this. (2) Palestinian civilians frequently deliberately put themselves in the line of fire - either to help the combatants, or, like those "excited children," merely to cheer them on. (3) Palestinian terror groups deliberately foster casualties among their own civilians: Not only do they not discourage civilians from entering combat zones; they force them to do so - for instance, by invading civilian homes - when there are no volunteers.

In short, Palestinian civilian casualties usually result not from "disproportionate force" or "insufficient caution" by the IDF, but from Palestinian behavior, on the part of both civilians and terrorists.

But of course, realizing this would require actually reading reports of the fighting. It is much easier just to skim the headlines and issue stock condemnations of Israel. (Jerusalem Post Mar 5)