



Israel's Hamas policy threatens permanent war

By **Doug Bandow** – November 26th, 2012

Editor's note: Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties, and worked as a special assistant to President Reagan. The views expressed are his own.

The latest round of violence between Israel and Hamas has ebbed. But nothing has been settled.

Hamas has failed at the basic task of governing while ruling with an iron hand. Moreover, nothing justifies spraying Israeli cities with missiles.

However, Israel has contributed mightily to the violence. Israel occupied Gaza for four decades and continues to occupy the West Bank, with which Gaza long was intimately connected. Only in 2005 did Prime Minister Ariel Sharon finally remove 8,000 settlers, who enjoyed a privileged existence in the midst of more than one million Palestinians, many of them refugees or descended from refugees forcibly displaced by Israel's formation.

Once Hamas was elected, Israel blockaded the territory, even calculating the minimum calories needed for each resident, according to reports on defense ministry files from 2008. Although Israel has since eased the rules, the Israeli humanitarian group Gisha noted: "Gaza's connections with Israel and the West Bank, vital for its economy and the welfare of its residents, are still subject to sweeping restrictions."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that "No government would tolerate a situation" where its "people live under a constant barrage of rockets and missile fire." True. But neither would any government tolerate a situation where its people live in what former Israeli official Shlomo Ben-Ami termed "an open air prison."

The policy is folly. Justified as denying Hamas construction materials and the like, the blockade enriches the movement, which taxes goods smuggled in. Wrecking the civilian economy weakens the private business community, which has the greatest interest in peaceful accommodation with Israel.

Yet Israel has not explained what it expects in return for lifting the blockade. Said Robert Wright in the *Atlantic*: “when you subject people to treatment like this, without even specifying the conditions under which the treatment would change, human nature pretty much ensures that bad things, including violent ones, will happen.”

Israel separates Gaza and the West Bank – it is difficult even for Palestinians to travel from one to the other. This eliminates any moderating influence from Ramallah and impairs creation of a responsible, united Palestinian government.

Finally, Israel has routinely used violence against Gaza, invading, bombing, and assassinating at will. Since 2006, Israel has killed more than 200 Palestinians just within an arbitrarily declared buffer zone. On November 5, Israelis killed an apparently mentally disturbed man. On November 8, Israeli forces invaded with tanks and killed a 13-year-old boy playing soccer. Two days later, rockets were fired in retaliation, leading to Operation Pillar of Defense. It is difficult to disentangle who provoked whom and when, but the blame runs both ways.

Moreover, Israel’s attacks are disproportionate. Israel has a long history of attacking civilians as a matter of policy. Decades ago, Menachem Begin admitted that earlier governments launched “retaliatory actions against civilian Arab populations; the damage was directed against such structures as the canal, bridges and transport.” The earlier Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, which took place in 2008-09, killed around 1,400 Palestinians, most of them civilians. Jerome Slater of the State University of New York at Buffalo pointed to numerous studies that found that “Israel intentionally attacked Gazan economic targets as well as other civilian infrastructures and institutions.” More than 160 Gazans died in the latest round, half of them apparently civilians.

Unfortunately, such policies have not protected Israel. Acknowledged top Israeli official Moshe Arens: striking Arab civilians in an attempt to end attacks on Israeli civilians, “only increases the support that the terrorists receive from the civilian population.”

Indeed, Israel’s policy, however successful militarily, has been a bust politically. Palestinians have been ill-served by their leadership, but so are Israelis

today. Foreign Minister Avignor Lieberman could be fairly called an anti-Semite if that term was used in reference to Arabs.

What popular support Hamas has lost from misgovernment it has regained by seeming to defend Palestinians. Hamas forced Israel to negotiate: the cease-fire requires talks on increasing the freedom of movement for people and goods and ending targeted assassinations.

In contrast, Israel has given nothing to President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. On my trip to Israel in August 2010, Israeli officials told me they respect PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad for cooperating in restraining terrorist attacks, yet he has no deliverables for his people.

Israel continues to expand settlements in the West Bank, many on land essentially stolen from Palestinians. For Israeli activists this represents a strategy of colonization and annexation. Knesset member Yaakov Katz looked forward to when more than a million Israelis would be living outside Israel's original borders, after which, he said, "the revolution will be completed."

In fact, Israeli policy seems designed to make peace impossible. According to an Israeli peace activist, Israel assassinated Hamas security chief Ahmed al-Jabari while he reportedly was negotiating over a cease-fire. Israeli peace activist Gershon Baskin argued that, "This blood could have been spared."

Mahdi Abdul Hadi of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs complained that the Israeli attacks "left Abbas politically naked." Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh declared: "after this war, even people in the West Bank are loving Hamas now."

While Hamas might not seem to be a good partner for peace, both Israel's Menachem Begin and Fatah's Yasser Arafat shifted from terrorism to negotiation. Power has moderated the views of some in Hamas; in fact, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak was quoted in a WikiLeaks cable admitting that Hamas was "making a serious effort to convince the other factions not to launch rockets or mortars."

Israel needs peace. Yet two states may become impossible as settlements expand – there already are 350,000 settlers in the West Bank, twice the number just a dozen years ago. At some point it will be impossible to uproot them as part of any agreement.

If not two states, then one. But eventually the number of Arab Israelis and Palestinians will exceed that of Jews, in which case Israel would either cease being a Jewish state or a democratic state. Leaving millions of Palestinians as modern helots would be both a human travesty and national disaster.

If Israel proceeds down this path it would become even more important for the United States to separate itself from Israeli policy. America is already blamed for Israeli mistreatment of Palestinians. A real friend states even unpleasant truths when giving advice. The United States should do the same to Israel.

The latest battle involving Gaza is a tragedy with no purpose. Without a shared commitment to peace, the violence will continue.