



## Israel and the Palestinians

### From bad to worse

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#### More trouble in strife-torn Gaza

Reuters



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EILAT, a cheerful seaside resort at Israel's southern tip, has up to now been virtually unscathed by the violent impacts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. So the suicide bombing that killed three Israelis and critically wounded two others on Monday January 29th was a terrible shock to the city, especially as such attacks are now a relative rarity.

It was, in fact, only the second suicide bombing in Israel proper since Hamas won control of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in March, though Israeli authorities say they have foiled a great many other attempts. Undoubtedly the growing West Bank separation barrier, the tighter seal around Gaza since Israel pulled out its settlers and troops in 2005, and the Israeli army's constant arrests and killings of suspected Palestinian militants have all contributed to stemming the flow. As with the last bombing, Hamas did not claim responsibility—that went to three other armed groups, among them loyalists of the ousted Fatah party—but did not condemn it either.

The immediate question is with what severity Israel will respond. After several months of intense shelling and raids that followed the abduction of an Israeli soldier last summer, the two sides agreed a ceasefire in Gaza, which Israel's army has largely adhered to. Gaza's militants, on the other hand, have not; nearby Israeli towns have endured a constant drizzle of Qassam rockets. If, as one of the militias now says, Gaza is where the Eilat bomber came from, then Israel's leaders may calculate that a swift, sharp but limited retaliation is the best response. Israel's first strike was an air attack on a tunnel near the border between Gaza and Israel, apparently to be used to launch attacks in Israel. Coming after two months of restraint it may bring home to Gazans the message that it is their own militants who are the source of their woes.

In reality, though, any action will be mainly for the Israeli public's consumption. Gazans hardly need reminding of what trouble their own gunmen bring. In the past few days, clashes between Hamas and Fatah fighters have killed 30 people in Gaza, including several innocent bystanders and children. The tit-for-tat feuding is also spilling over into the West Bank, with militants in towns like Nablus and Hebron taking revenge (as they call it) for the attacks on their brethren in Gaza. Both factions agreed to a ceasefire beginning in the early hours of January 30th, just as Israel's war planes were attacking. A lasting lull is unlikely though; in the past these pauses have proved short-lived. The violence has dashed hopes that Fatah and Hamas, whose leaders met earlier this month in Damascus, might at last conclude the deal on a unity government that they

have been pursuing for months.

Each accuses the other of trying to sabotage such a deal, but the truth is that neither has had enough of an incentive to make it work. Hamas does not want to relinquish the power it won fair and square in a democratic election. Fatah does not want to share responsibilities with Hamas unless the Islamist party agrees to a political platform that persuades the Western world to lift its economic embargo of the PA. This would include, at the very least, an implicit formal recognition of Israel's right to exist, which Hamas has so far rejected. As the situation worsens both parties risk losing power and control entirely, giving them a growing incentive to form a unity government. But internal divisions currently prevent each of them from taking that leap of logic.

Nor is the West doing much to help. It has not made any clear promises about what it would do to push Israeli-Palestinian peace after a unity government is formed. And rather than encourage compromise, it is supporting Fatah and its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, in the hope that if he cannot reach a deal with Hamas, he might force it out of power or subdue it. As things are going, none of those outcomes looks realistic.

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