



Foreign Policy

Research Institute

E-Notes

A Catalyst for Ideas

Distributed via Fax & Email and Posted at www.fpri.org

February 2009

A TALE OF TWO CRISES

By Harvey Sicherman

Addressing the American people as president for the first time on January 20, 2009, Barack Obama declared that “America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.” Two crises, already in motion, challenge that role. First, the Israelis and Palestinians have just written another bloody chapter in their seemingly unending conflict, this time in Gaza, despite an American-sponsored peace process. Second, India and Pakistan, after a few hopeful years of mending relations, again under U.S. prompting, are in danger of violent relapse following a bout of terrorism.

The two crises have much in common. First, both the Palestinians and Pakistanis are severely divided peoples. Second, the Arab-Iran rivalry, and in South Asia, the Afghan war, add regional complexity. Finally, terrorist actions by small groups with state connections--fostered by Iran in the Middle East and by the Pakistan-sired local Taliban in South Asia--exacerbate each problem.

GAZA: FAILED STATE POLITICS

The Gaza drama was shaped by Palestinian political failure. During the 1990s, the Palestinian national movement, led by Yasser Arafat, achieved recognition, even from Israel, of a right to a state that might enjoy American patronage. In the end, however, Arafat preferred the role of revolutionary to that of state-builder. The abortive Camp David Summit in summer 2000 followed by the second intifada convinced the Israelis and both Presidents Clinton and Bush that Arafat was not the man to make peace with Israel.

Washington hoped that, after Arafat's death on November 11, 2004, the election of his long-time aide, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), would put the near-derelict Palestinian Authority into shape for statehood. But a deadly conjunction of events--Abu Mazen's tepid leadership, his agreement to allow the anti-Oslo Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) to run for the Palestinian Legislative Council; Israel's “unilateral” withdrawal from Gaza; and Washington's insistence that the poll proceed despite PA and Israeli misgivings--brought Hamas to power on a 44.5 percent vote. It was a protest against the corrupt and chaotic status quo.

The new men offered the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's familiar mix of social welfare and political violence, all justified by a broader objective, namely, a holy war to restore the lost Islamic Caliphate. Hamas quickly and predictably refused demands by Abu Mazen, Israel, and the international Quartet (the United States, EU, UN, and Russia) to recognize Israel, reaffirm the PA's agreements, and renounce terrorism. At best, one might expect an extended truce until the next stage of jihad.

STRANGLE OR SMOTHER?

The Palestinian split endangered the already shaky two-state solution and threatened fresh menace to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan. Only Syria and Iran could profit. But how to defeat Hamas? Israel did not wish to resume responsibility for running the Strip, nor did Egypt; Abu Mazen lacked the strength. So instead, the nascent coalition, aided by the United States and Saudi Arabia, tried to strangle or smother Hamas. They failed.

Economic blockade, political isolation, and punitive raids certainly embittered the population but did not stop short-range missile attacks and other forays against southern Israel's border area. On June 25, 2006, the Palestinians captured an Israeli soldier. When Hezbollah attempted to duplicate the feat in the north, it ignited the second Lebanon War. That conflict soon revealed Iran's extensive support for the Lebanese movement and also a new military strategy: well-trained infantry using Israeli civilians as the targets and Lebanese civilians as shields. Israel's air power exacted a heavy price from Hezbollah but also provoked international outrage over civilian casualties while its ground campaign was bungled, costing the Olmert government its public support. Iran and Syria soon resupplied their proxy, although an international military force was

posted in southern Lebanon to prevent a repeat of the crisis.

Hoping to avoid similar violence on the Gaza front, the United States encouraged an Arab effort, led by Saudi Arabia, to smother Hamas through a unity agreement with Abu Mazen. King Abdullah also offered a large cash promise intended to wean the Islamists from Iran. But the Mecca Agreement of February 8, 2007, consecrated by a joint prayer session at the Grand Mosque, did not last long. One June 17, 2007, Hamas seized Gaza, its main political base, killing or suppressing Abu Mazen's loyalists.

THE TAHDIYA

The Bush Administration then tried another diplomatic track, using the Annapolis Conference (November 27, 2007) to renew negotiations between the Olmert government and Abu Mazen and pressing them to conclude an agreement within a year. Gaza was left to a war of attrition. Choosing neither massive firepower nor an invasion, the Israelis attempted to kill the middle- and upper-level Hamas commanders. But the Islamists began to escalate, using longer-range rockets smuggled through tunnels under the Egyptian border to endanger Israel's more populous southern coastal cities.

Hamas also raised the stakes with Egyptian President Mubarak. On January 23, 2008, the Palestinians suddenly broke through the border barriers in a massive outburst of the civilian population. Taken by surprise, the Egyptians were further alarmed by the Muslim Brotherhood's support of the action. Cairo's policy, a porous blockade intended to avoid confrontation with either Israel or Hamas, was now undone.

The Egyptians then mediated what Hamas called a tahdiya or "calming," an indirect understanding on June 19, 2008, to end the rocket fire while easing the siege. This satisfied Israel's desire to avoid a major military action, relieved Egypt of further clashes with the Palestinians, and gave the Islamists time to consolidate, rearm, and press for recognition. But no one got everything: the rocket fire diminished dramatically but never stopped; the Israelis never lifted the blockade fully; the soldier remained captive; and the Egyptians neither confronted Hamas over the tunnels nor opened the Rafah crossing.

The calm also gave the PA, under the more vigorous Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, time to function more effectively. This included the suppression of the Hamas organization in the West Bank and training a professional military force for the PA with U.S. assistance. But a discredited Olmert government and a weak Abu Mazen were unable to reach an overall peace agreement.

As the six-month mark of the tahdiya approached, so did American and Israeli elections. Hamas also grew bolder, rejecting Egyptian mediation over both the Israeli soldier and the Hamas-PA split, behavior that began to exhaust Arab patience. Was it the Hamas leadership in Damascus that sought confrontation? Had economic deprivation in Gaza eroded its popular support?

Whatever the reason, on November 5, there was a heavy exchange of fire, Hamas' pretext being an Israeli attack on a tunnel near the border fence that killed eight Hamas men. Rocket launches and Israeli retaliation increased apace. Twenty rockets and eighteen mortars had been fired between June 19 and early November. Two hundred more had been launched by December 18, when Hamas officially ended the tahdiya. Six days later, the Palestinians fired a heavy barrage, including longer-range Grad missiles, against numerous Israeli targets. The Hamas leaders apparently thought themselves safe from a big Israeli reaction. They were wrong.

THE "LAST INCH" CAMPAIGN

Israel began Operation "Cast Lead" on December 27 with a debilitating air attack and soon developed what might be called the "last inch" campaign. Israeli forces would press Hamas to within an inch of its life but its life would not be taken lest Israel be stuck with Gaza. Tactically, the IDF would demonstrate its recovery from the Lebanon fiasco but would err on the side of firepower, using its soldiers sparingly and cautiously. This meant more Palestinian civilian casualties undercutting the diplomatic campaign to cast Hamas as the villain. The Israelis, however, exhibited a rare national unity in rejecting foreign critics, who, among other things, simply accepted the Hamas-controlled Health Ministry's casualty estimates at face value. Nor did the Olmert government trust the international media to cover the war fairly, excluding them from the battlefield. That left the al Jazeera network to perform its usual incitement.

Although Qatar closed its resident Israeli trade mission, Jordan withdrew its ambassador, and Mauritania broke diplomatic relations, most Arab leaders were not prepared to go beyond condemnation of Israel. Some, ignoring sporadic street protests, notably Egypt, also criticized Hamas. Regional lines were drawn once more: the Gaza Emergency Summit in Doha, Qatar, on January 16, featuring a joint appearance by Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hamas' Khaled Mashaal, competed with the larger Egyptian and Saudi-dominated Arab League Economic Summit in Kuwait three days later.

Egypt soon emerged as a crucial mediator. By the end of hostilities, Hamas had been forced to return to Cairo for both a cease-fire agreement and another round of unity talks. Egypt, too, held the key to Israel's exit. Unwilling to wait upon Hamas' agreement, the Israelis declared a unilateral cease-fire on January 19, 2009, after persuading the United States, Egypt, and the EU to make a fresh effort against the smuggling tunnels.

Abu Mazen looked indecisive if not irrelevant. But what could he do? Take Hamas' side? Open another military front? Reportedly, PA Prime Minister Fayyad persuaded Secretary of State Rice to support a UN resolution on January 8, 2009,

demanding an immediate cease-fire, a maneuver that occasioned a last minute Israeli reproach, and a U.S. abstention after presidential intervention. But this mishap could not help Abu Mazen much.

The Israelis claimed that Cast Lead killed 400 to 600 fighters, destroyed sixty percent of the tunnels, and eliminated forty percent of the rocket arsenal at a cost of thirteen dead (among them three civilians killed by Hamas fire, four soldiers by friendly fire). Hamas claimed 167 lost, including two of their top leaders. The Palestinian Ministry of Health reported 1,300 killed, including 410 children and 104 women; and 5,300 injured, including 1,855 children and 795 women. The World Health Organization reported these figures on January 19-20, 2009, but noted that they could not be verified. Everyone agreed, however, that Gaza's already weak civilian infrastructure had been badly damaged and hundreds of millions of dollars would be needed to rebuild them. It was, by all accounts, the bloodiest bout in Gaza's grim history.

Hamas, like Hezbollah before it, touted its very survival as victory, the civilian casualties as proof of the demonic enemy, and the lack of Israeli casualties as, well, a lie to conceal the real prowess of Allah's fighters. Brutal revenge was exacted on Fatah supporters suspected of aiding Israel. Nor could Israel be certain that Hamas would not be able to rearm, or that reconstruction monies would be denied them. Operation Cast Lead therefore bought time for the large hope that post-conflict diplomacy would seriously delay if not prevent Hamas' recovery. It ended before the presidential inauguration in Washington and a good three weeks before Israel's own elections.

On balance, then, the "last inch" campaign weakened Hamas' capabilities, strengthened Egypt's role, and improved Israeli morale. More a brigade-sized raid than a war, as one Israeli analyst called it, it did not, and could not settle the Palestinian divisions or the larger Iranian problem.

PAKISTAN

On January 28, 2009, Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari wrote in the *Washington Post* that "Pakistan has repeatedly been identified as the most critical external problem facing the new administration." Pleading for a special partnership with the United States, Zardari asserted, "We are willing to act to save our nation." Saving Pakistan from itself, if not from others, may indeed become the real stake in the Afghani war. Therein lies another twisting tale of national division, regional complexity, and aggravated terrorism.

Unlike the Palestinians, the Pakistanis have a state, but one that was (and is) perilously close to failure. Since its founding in 1947, Pakistan relied on the United States, China, and Saudi Arabia to make its way against an India allied with the Soviet Union. The country's patchwork of tribal and familial alliances, its semi-feudal economy, and a small, highly capable elite had been run by alternating military and civilian masters, few of whom died of natural causes. After three lost wars with India, the last costing the country its Bengal province (now Bangladesh), the Pakistanis sought to balance India through the development of a nuclear weapon (financed in part by clandestine equipment sales to the likes of Libya, Iran and North Korea) and what the Pentagon calls "asymmetrical warfare"--succoring guerrilla movements to harass the Indian army in the disputed province of Kashmir and tribal rivalry to incapacitate the "back door"--Afghanistan. This strategy reached its apex in the middle 1980s when Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) became the conduit for American and Saudi aid to the Afghans battling the Soviet occupation while three Indian divisions were tied down in Kashmir.

Once the Russians left and the Cold War ended, however, the Americans abruptly lost interest. Worse yet, by the middle of the nineties, the Indians finally concluded that Russia was not coming back. The way was gradually opening for a new era in U.S.-India relations. But Pakistan appeared increasingly a state that, like Yugoslavia and Somalia, would implode without an external oxygen supply.

THE MUSHARRAF ERA

In 1999, Pakistan's perilous political system did implode as a widely despised corrupt civilian government under Prime Minister Nawaz Sherif was evicted by chief of staff General Pervez Musharraf. Musharraf, heretofore a stolid, unremarkable figure, managed to survive two years by simply restoring some order. Then came 9/11.

By all accounts, the United States offered Musharraf a deal he could not refuse. If he facilitated an assault on al Qaeda then Washington would reopen the taps. And so the general abruptly reversed Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy. The Americans also insisted that support for groups such as Lashkar-i-Taiba (Army of the Pure) troubling Indian Kashmir be suppressed if Pakistan were to become a bona fide partner in the war on terrorism.

Was this new relationship to be a lasting alliance or a passing rental? The leases on the latter, to borrow from Hobbes, tended to be "nasty, brutish and short," and subject to sudden termination. Musharraf had reversed course on long-held and broadly popular policies that reflected a Pakistani penchant for blaming the country's troubles on India, America, and, in a special subplot, the Israelis. Hence, Pakistan's ability to bear the long-term strategic weight of the American war on terror was problematical.

The general extracted over the next several years some \$10 billion from the United States, most of it for his military. The rest stimulated important but not widespread economic growth. Musharraf, the army, and the ISI also hedged their U.S. bet. Reportedly, the Taliban remnants were given safe haven in Balochistan province bordering Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Osama bin Laden survived in the remote, mountainous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a region notorious for its very lack of federal administration. Its tribes prized the virility of combat and a severe version of Islam. They were best left alone.

Musharraf also hesitated about India. Following a December 2001 terrorist attack, originating in Pakistan, on the Indian parliament, the United States intervened to avert a war. Thereafter, the general allowed a slow warming of relations, culminating in a cease-fire over Kashmir in November 2003. Among the Pakistani establishment, there were those who, like their Indian counterparts, saw the end of the rivalry as the key for both countries to reap the benefits of a roaring international economy. These new connections proved sturdy enough to survive a terrorist attack on Mumbai's railways in July 2006 that claimed 150 lives.

LOSING THE STATE: THE "AFGHAN MODEL"

The United States made poor use of the three or four years rented from Pakistan to reconstruct Afghanistan. Convinced that nation-building was not America's business, and encouraged by the rapid formation of a new Afghani government under the attractive Hamid Karzai, the Bush Administration turned its attention to Iraq. Afghans themselves, assisted by international aid, could do the job without a major U.S. presence or so thought Washington.

Thereafter, Karzai had to rely on a gaggle of well-meaning NGOs, the UN, and then a hydra-headed NATO mission to make his way. A residual U.S. force concentrated on hunting al Qaeda and Taliban remnants. Dispersed effort and divided command wasted resources. The NATO forces were also badly hobbled by national "caveats" that gave Kabul a large foreign garrison but deprived the countryside of adequate forces. Predictably, firepower rather than counterinsurgency doctrine, determined combat operations. In the midst of this fatal dispersal of effort, Karzai was reduced to "mayor of Kabul" while the rural areas once more became the province of warlords and the largest poppy crop in the world. It was not long before corruption became a byword.

Afghani-Pakistani relations were soon frayed. Karzai and Musharraf disliked each other. Worse, from Islamabad's viewpoint, India emerged as the largest single source of aid for Afghanistan, contributing nearly a billion dollars annually. Predictably, ISI and other Pakistanis concluded that India was encircling Pakistan once more. Moreover, the U.S.-India nuclear pact, finally ratified on October 8, 2008, after a two-year effort, suggested a long-term relationship Pakistan lacked. The American rental was becoming more and more problematical.

Rested, rearmed in their Pakistani haven, and reinforced by foreign fighters, the Taliban regained the initiative, using new tactics, such as suicide bombings. Strong U.S. diplomatic pressure forced Musharraf to throw the Pakistani army into the hopeless task of subduing the FATA. Over a thousand soldiers were killed in a series of irresolute actions that only inflamed the tribes while stirring public anger over Musharraf's policies. Were the real enemies of Pakistan its own people? Was the alliance with the Americans worth a civil war?

In 2006, and then again in 2007, Musharraf's government negotiated cease-fires with the tribes that gave a free pass to cross-border raids while demoralizing the army. Worse was yet to come. In the heart of Islamabad, the so-called Red Mosque developed into a center for Muslim fanatics within walking distance of the seat of government. When Musharraf belatedly ordered their suppression on July 10, 2007, it proved a bloody affair; a large arsenal was also discovered.

From that time forward, the so-called Pakistani Taliban decided to intimidate the state itself through suicide bombs that damaged the army and government's prestige. Musharraf then compounded his trouble. His attempt to prolong his presidential tenure by suborning the Supreme Court united most of the country against him.

MUMBAI

Short of support, the General was forced to recall from exile two previously discredited prime ministers, Nawaz Sherif and Benazir Bhutto. The latter, herself a onetime sponsor of Lashkar, campaigned strongly against both Musharraf and the Islamic militants. Her murder on December 27, 2007, still not entirely explained, shocked the Pakistani establishment to the core. Bhutto's husband, Asif Zardari, became head of the party that won the election. Its first order of business was to force Musharraf's resignation on August 18, 2008. Zardari replaced him. He wanted close American ties but his control over the Pakistani army and the ISI was openly questioned. Pakistan seemed paralyzed.

The army, chastened by its foray into politics, finally attacked the Muslim insurgents who had seized much of the Northwest Frontier Province, menacing its capital Peshawar, less than a hundred miles from Islamabad. The so-called Pakistani Taliban also threatened the main American land corridor for military supplies to Afghanistan that ran from Karachi through the Khyber Pass. This campaign, however, was overshadowed by the sensational news that American drones were firing into Pakistan and U.S. Special Forces were conducting cross-border raids.

Then on November 26, 2008, came the terrorist attack on Mumbai, India's commercial center. Ten men, well-armed, rehearsed and guided by cell phones attacked the city's leading hotels and a small Jewish center, murdering 164 and injuring 308. India's reaction revealed dangerous security gaps that prolonged the drama for three days. Once more all evidence pointed to Lashkar; like Musharraf before him, Zardari temporized; and once more, the United States undertook emergency mediation to avoid a smash-up.

India's patience had run out. The Zardari government now faced a two-front war. Pakistan's strategy of hedging its bets had come a cropper as the very integrity of the state was under assault.

TWO VETERANS FOR TWO CRISES

President-elect Obama had been resolutely silent about Gaza and quite emphatic about the centrality of Afghanistan. Once inaugurated, he lost no time telephoning Abu Mazen, Ehud Olmert, Jordan's King Abdullah, and Hosni Mubarak while granting an interview to al Arabiya. On his second day in office, he also appeared at the State Department to join Secretary of State Clinton in launching two veterans for two crises. Former Senate Majority Leader and long-time Democrat, George Mitchell, architect of the Irish Good Friday Agreement and the Mitchell Report on the second intifada, drew Gaza and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Former Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, author of the Dayton Agreement that ended the Bosnian War, was assigned Afghanistan and Pakistan.

These envoys will soon bring the President familiar information. Mitchell will report the Arab demand for a show of American evenhandedness best demonstrated by opening a quarrel with Israel over settlements. He will hear too that, like the IRA in the Irish case, many think that Hamas has to be part of the peace negotiations. And some are convinced that only an American plan imposed on Israel will produce the two-state solution. But he will also hear from the Israelis that the Palestinians are a failed state in the making; that Hamas' neutering also depends on military measures not simply diplomatic ones; and that so long as Iran appears to have an upper hand any peace agreement can be scuttled by violence. Securing a durable cease-fire, as opposed to the tahdiya experiment, will depend, in Israel's view, primarily on whether Hamas really fears another round of fighting, not rewarding it with a diplomatic role.

Holbrooke will find an exasperated India, a Pakistan incapable of handling two fronts simultaneously, and a plea for new support from Zardari to keep his government financially afloat. He will have to prolong New Delhi's patience while pressing Islamabad to break Lashkar and other groups in its own interest not simply U.S. or Indian pressure. Pakistan's investigation has yielded important arrests, but that story is far from over.

Simultaneously, Obama will have to approve General Petraeus' new plans for making sense out of the allied campaign in Afghanistan. This will require more resources from the Europeans, more central command authority for operations, and a serious attempt to co-opt (or corrupt) those Taliban willing to switch sides. And it will have to be done in the field, as it was in Iraq. The United States can no longer expect its money's worth from either Karzai or the Pakistanis when it comes to splitting the opposition.

Harvey Sicherman, Ph.D., is President of FPRI and a former aide to three U.S. secretaries of state.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684.

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email fpri@fpri.org or visit us at www.fpri.org.