

# Reckless in Gaza

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Editorial

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Ehud Olmert, Israel's perpetually embattled prime minister, probably thought he was performing a daring display of political balancing this week. First he saw off the visiting President Bush with grand words of peace. Then he announced that he opposed any major ground incursion into lawless Gaza. The next day, his troops opened up the bloodiest day of Israeli-Palestinian fighting in more than a year.

It was a classic Olmert juggling act: playing to every side in turn, hoping to give all involved just enough to keep them on board, but managing instead to leave everyone fuming. His advocacy of a negotiated deal with the Palestinians, blunter than any Israeli prime minister before him, has thoroughly alienated his traditional allies on the right. But his clumsy military forays, ostensibly meant to quell rocket fire from Gaza, probably sabotaged the very negotiations on which he has spent so much political capital.

As for the rocket fire, it only grew in intensity. Israel certainly has a right to act to defend itself against the steady bombardment of its civilian towns near Gaza. The rockets disrupt ordinary life in Sderot and nearby villages, terrify the residents and cause real damage. Three people have been killed by rockets in the past year. This week's barrage, unleashed in the wake of the Israeli incursion, was one of the most intense yet. It left nine people injured — five with cuts, four treated for shock, including two small children. Along with the rockets, Palestinian gunmen opened fire on Israeli farmers near the border fence, killing an Ecuadorian kibbutz volunteer.

On the Palestinian side, the day's fighting left 19 dead, of whom 15 or 16 were rocketeers, terrorists and combatants. The rest were civilians. It was the highest Palestinian civilian toll in weeks. Israel does not deliberately target civilians. The same cannot be said of the Palestinians. If Palestinian civilian deaths are the inevitable price of Israel's self-defense, there can be little argument.

But Israel's actions provide it no defense. It strikes again and again, killing Palestinian fighters and not a few civilians, yet more gunmen spring up and attacks on Israel continue.

In the past two years, Israeli forces killed 810 Palestinians in Gaza, as the director of the Shin Bet security service, Yuval Diskin, told a Cabinet meeting last week. Of the total, about 200 were not clearly linked to terrorist organizations — that is, bystanders. A separate study by the Ha'aretz newspaper found that the civilian toll was actually higher, totaling about 360, of whom 152 were under age 18, including 48 children under age 14.

Israel's death toll from terrorism in 2007, reported this month by the human rights group B'Tselem and confirmed by the military, totaled 13, including seven civilians. That was the lowest toll since 1999. The toll that year, the last full year that the Oslo accords were in effect, was zero.

For all that, the Palestinian war against Israel "is not being checked, but is actually intensifying."

the internal security minister, Avi Dichter, reported at the same Cabinet meeting. Dichter, a former Shin Bet chief, estimated that there are some 20,000 Palestinian fighters in Gaza, of whom Israel has killed about 5%. He said the army should shift gears and step up its efforts. It wasn't clear how much killing he thought would suffice.

Israeli political and military leaders argue that by targeting Palestinian gunmen and their handlers, they will eventually force Hamas to knuckle under, recognize Israel and swear off terrorism — or collapse and be replaced by the more moderate Fatah. Israel has vowed repeatedly that it will not discuss anything with Hamas, directly or indirectly, until Hamas agrees to those terms.

But Israel has been doing exactly that: negotiating indirectly with Hamas about a prisoner exchange and an open-ended cease-fire, including a halt to all attacks on Israelis. The talks' lynchpin, from the Israeli viewpoint, is the release of Corporal Gilad Shalit, kidnapped by Hamas gunmen in June 2006. Hamas has been pushing for months for the multi-part deal, especially the cease-fire. Israel won't admit it's interested, but Palestinian officials have been saying that the deal is almost done. Now, however, the whole deal may be off, including Shalit's freedom. Among the dead in the Gaza incursion was the 24-year-old son of Muhammad Zahar, a leader of the hawkish wing (yes, there is one) of Hamas. Zahar is now gaining stature along with sympathy, strengthening Hamas opponents of cease-fire and accommodation.

The Gaza killings have also raised the ire of Fatah leaders in the West Bank, including Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who is supposed to be Olmert's partner in broader peace talks. President Bush has a great deal riding on those talks, presumably his last chance to leave a legacy. Olmert, too, wants the talks to work. Whoever replaces Bush in the White House in a year will be much less likely to tilt the scales in Israel's favor.

Whatever Bush and Olmert were hoping, the chances of those talks going anywhere were slim already. Now they're much worse.

But that's not the only thing Olmert has done of late to undermine his — and Bush's — dream of peace. Just before Christmas, Olmert's government announced 300 new apartments going up for sale in East Jerusalem's Har Homa neighborhood, annexed by Israel in 1967. Olmert's aides indicated that he had been sandbagged by bureaucrats in his own housing ministry, and the prime minister promised Abbas in a meeting days later not to do anything “that will hurt our ability to arrive at final status negotiations with the Palestinians.” Immediately afterward, however, spokesmen indicated that Olmert would not block the new construction. His government also put \$50 million in next year's budget to subsidize the flats.

The news brought sharp protests from the Bush administration. Two weeks later, on the very eve of Bush's Israel visit, Jerusalem city hall approved construction on 60 new apartments in an even more controversial East Jerusalem development, Ras al-Amud.

Palestinians claim the two developments, Har Homa and Ras al-Amud, effectively shut off the last potential corridors between the West Bank and their future capital in East Jerusalem. Olmert doesn't want to negotiate the topic, and seems to hope the buildings will end the discussion without hurting his “ability to reach final status negotiations.”

It is, by any standard, a risky game of chicken. The stakes are nothing less than the peace

negotiations that Olmert repeatedly says are crucial to Israel's survival. If he believes what he says, his actions are inexplicable. It may be that Olmert simply can't control the actions — military forays, construction permits — of his own government. He may actually be helpless. Or he may simply be reckless.