

Gaza conflict 'remains unsettled'

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Crooke warns that conflict in the region could grow “more bitter and more uncompromising”

Hamas and Israel are observing separate ceasefires after a 22-day Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip.

Alastair Crooke, founder of the Conflicts Forum think-tank, shares his thoughts on the conflict, the region and what Obama might bring to the mix.

Al Jazeera: Can Israel be said to have achieved its aims through its offensive on Gaza?

As time goes on, it will become more and more clear that Israel has not achieved the aims that it set for itself. The intended aim – that by an overwhelming show of force it would make people both docile and deterred – has not been achieved.

The core of the conflict itself – the rockets and the issue of the opening of the crossings [into Gaza] – remains completely unsettled. And Israel has not defeated Hamas in a military sense, despite massive destruction of property and people’s lives.

Inside Israel, there was enormous support for this operation. It wasn’t the same with the Jewish community outside Israel, where we have seen very clear differences of opinion about it, but in Israel there was a strong sense of the righteousness of what was being done in Gaza.

There was a desire to see Hamas emerge defeated and humbled, and there is some sense among the public that this is what has been achieved, but, I think, as they observe the anger and they see how much the recent Israeli successes in the Arab world – handshakes and meetings and attempts to widen their support base and their legitimacy within the region – have been swept away, I think they will re-assess it in a very different light.

Was Israel likely to defeat Hamas militarily?

I think you could see different voices emerging in Israel. Many of them would have said it

was impossible because Hamas is not a Western military structure. It doesn't really have command centres and military formations in the conventional sense.

Equally, there were others who were arguing very strongly to take this forward to a "complete victory", and that envisaged going house-to-house through places like Gaza City and Rafah, clearing every house room by room.

That is laborious and it would have taken far longer than a week or two. I think, in the end, the cabinet declined to go down that route - probably realising it wouldn't be able to inflict this kind of damage on Hamas's military formations - which is probably why they decided to withdraw and claim a political victory.

Qatar and Syria have called for Arab states to take a firm stance on Israel over the conflict and suspend the 2002 Arab peace initiative, while Saudi Arabia and Egypt want to take a softer line. How has the Gaza conflict changed relations in the region?

I think relations have become extremely polarised by this conflict.

Egypt has, to some extent, used this conflict, certainly seen it, as a means to weaken Hamas and bring Mahmoud Abbas [the Palestinian president, also known as Abu Mazen] back to a position in Gaza. At least two Arab states have been seen, whether fairly or unfairly, as taking a contrary view [to Egypt].

We've also seen many states and countries supporting the resistance - not just Hamas.

If you like, it has reignited the Palestinian issue as an Arab cause across the region - which it hasn't been for some time. Hence the division we are seeing in the Arab world.

How will this affect regional relationships in the future?



Hamas is asking to be engaged in the political process [AFP]We're moving into a new era in the region. What we see is that the United States and Europe are ebbing out of the region and there is going to be no colonial power that is going to step in. Russia and China may play a role in a trade sense, but they are not stepping in to play a political role.

What is being revealed by Gaza is the skeleton of the internal struggle over the future of this region - of those who are committed to the status quo and those who are committed to change. And it is a struggle that may become more bitter and more uncompromising as time goes on.

Khaled Meshaal, the Hamas political leader, has called for Hamas to be engaged in the political process. Do you see the West engaging with Hamas in the future?

Well I don't think there is a conference room in Washington with a chair 'Hamas' written on it. I think it will be a slow process.

Clearly all of the Europeans are operating on the old mode – they haven't pressed the re-set button on their policies. They are perhaps waiting to see which way the [new] US administration will go.

They're trying to re-launch Abu Mazen, almost holding reconstruction and humanitarian assistance as hostage, almost trying to force Hamas to re-mandate Abu Mazen [whose term of office expired on January 9]. Not surprisingly, Hamas has expressed great anger at that.

If the Europeans try to hold the opening of the crossings hostage to Hamas re-legitimising Abu Mazen, I fear we might end up with another round of conflict in Gaza.

Meshaal also said that Hamas 'gained legitimacy' as a result of the conflict. With ceasefires in place, how has Hamas emerged in a stronger position subsequent to the conflict?

Yes it is. It's stronger because of this.

You can look at it through a Western empirical frame and say 'there have been so many houses destroyed and so many people killed, so it must be a victory', but if you look at it in terms of a narrative of images and symbols – particularly coming against the backdrop of Ashura [the Islamic festival commemorating the events of the battle of Karbala] – it is the image of a small Muslim stand against overwhelming odds pursued in the interests of justice. That's an image which will bring out huge emotional and religious sentiment – a sense of re-establishing dignity.

I think what we're seeing is a strengthening in two ways. Symbolically Hamas sat in the Palestinian chair at the informal summit in Doha [held on January 16 and boycotted by Egypt and Saudi Arabia].

Secondly, they have achieved enormous depth in terms of public opinion. Millions have mobilised – in Europe too – in support of the concept of resistance against occupation. These things may seem a little intangible but they are nonetheless real assets.

To what extent do you think Barack Obama's presidency will affect the peace process and developments in the Middle East?

It's still quite early, but I think generally we will see Obama being quite cautious. From his perspective, at the top of his list is going to be Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran.

There will be advisers who will be saying to him, 'just be careful of your political capital'.

The Israeli-Palestinian issue is one where you can expend your political capital very quickly and there are elections in Israel coming up. I think he'll be cautious and things will take some time.

Obama looks set to appoint Senator George Mitchell, a man you've worked with in the past, to be the US special envoy for the Middle East. How would his appointment advance the peace process?

I think Senator Mitchell is one of the few Americans who has credibility in the region and in the West. He's probably now almost the only one, which is a reflection of the scorched-earth diplomacy of the past eight years.

What's important is to see who he is a special envoy for. Only when we see the confirmation of his appointment will it be clear if he is a presidential envoy or if he is a super-envoy or a delimited envoy - in other words, whether he will stay within certain limits.

He does depend on what is the mandate that is given to him. He's a good listener and he actually hears. He will change the language and he will introduce changes, but unless he has a mandate, he can do nothing.

You also have to ask if he is being appointed too late. One of the signals that can be seen in Gaza - where there was almost a suspension of certain moral considerations in terms of civilians - is the suggestion that we are not entering an era of politics and compromise. Gaza was a message of uncompromising military absolutism, not of openness.

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