

The Countdown to the Second Gaza War has Begun

The Looming War in Gaza: Can Obama Stop it Before it Starts?

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

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Next week, or the week after, Barack Obama may well see intelligence reports of tank battalions moving south and west along Israeli highways, and whole infantry brigades setting up camp in the western Negev.

The countdown to the Second Gaza War has begun in earnest. Date it, if you like, to Sunday, and a coolly terrifying [analysis](#) by Yom Tov Samia, former overall Israeli military commander of the Gaza Strip and the adjacent Negev.

Or date it, if you prefer, according to the axiom of contemporary Israeli history which reads: A future war becomes all but inevitable the moment a key IDF reserve major general [declares](#) it so.

Alternatively, date it from the moment that selective amnesia allows Israeli political figures to court the illusion that Hamas can be invaded to death.

All this and more was to be had from an interview Samia gave Army Radio this week, which should give pause not only to the Palestinians and Israelis who may fall victim to a Second Gaza War, but to Washington as well.

If last year's brutal fighting is any indication - and there is every reason to believe that it is - a full-on drive to prevent the looming Israel-Hamas confrontation in the Strip belongs at the top tier of Obama's already staggering pile of priorities.

Another Gaza war, this one likely to be an even more bitter onslaught, could not only prove lethal to what is left of Israeli moral credibility, it could undermine and cripple Obama's military-political offensives in Iraq, Afghanistan and, slipping further down the slope, Yemen.

If Obama still nurses hopes of brokering a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, his first task must be defusing the war wagon before it once again engulfs Gaza - and, this time around, Tel Aviv as well. As it is, war in Gaza has shifted Israel's political landscape, and not in Obama's favor.

The 2005 disengagement from Gaza, with its resultant rocket fire against the Negev and lack of any peace dividend, proved a huge blow to the Israeli left. But it was the Gaza offensive a year ago, a war supported at first even by Meretz, that was the end. It was the end of Meretz, the end of the Labor Party, the end of a leftist alliance with Israeli Arab parties.

Can Barak Obama stop the coming war in Gaza? Only if he acts fast. And only if his advisors

study and apply with care lessons from the last war, in particular the period which immediately preceded it.

One logical place to start is another [analysis](#), also broadcast by the IDF radio station, this one five days before the last war began. It was by Shmuel Zakai, a retired brigadier general who served under Samia and later commanded the IDF's Gaza Division.

Zakai urged a fundamental reappraisal of how Israelis should regard Hamas. At heart, "The State of Israel must understand that Hamas rule in Gaza is a fact, and it is with that government that we must reach a situation of calm."

Should he wholly adopt the peacemakers's role, Obama has resources and conditions which were unavailable a year ago.

It is, of course, no coincidence that what may prove a crucial test of the Obama administration coincides with the anniversary of his taking office. Cast Lead, pointedly launched at the interregnum between the outgoing Bush administration and the incoming Obama White House, ended with a unilateral Israeli case fire barely 48 hours before the president-elect took the oath of office.

At the time, a scandal-plagued, lethally unpopular prime minister desperate to redeem a reputation for military misjudgment that complemented his record of personal malfeasance, took advantage of a power vacuum in Washington to mount a war that failed to achieve any of its stated objectives, casting Israel, in the world's eye, as an unapologetic aggressor.

This time around, the Obama administration has a number of elements in its favor. One is the present predicament of Hamas, which has promised its constituents a prisoner release in exchange for captive IDF soldier Gilad Shalit and, having greatly raised expectations across the Palestinian territories, has yet to deliver. Hamas, ever-attuned to Palestinian public opinion, can also ill afford another devastating campaign in the ravaged Strip so soon after Cast Lead.

Another is a potentially proactive and newly constructive role on the part of Egypt, which until recently has sat largely passive, if apprehensive, on the sidelines. Analysts have said Egypt's huge iron wall project now underway along the border between Gaza and Egyptian Sinai sends a strong message to both Hamas and Israel.

With Samia hinting that in a new war the IDF might capture and occupy the tunnel-honeycombed Philadelphi Corridor which borders the new wall, Professor Yoram Meital of the Negev's Ben-Gurion University said this week that to Israel, "The message is that Egypt is setting out a border, and views any effort to touch it as an attack on its national security."

"To Hamas they are saying 'We will not under any circumstances lend our hand to the establishment of a mini-state in the Gaza Strip,' and are thus closing the Rafiah crossing nearly hermetically, and erecting the iron wall in the bowels of the earth.'"

One of the most important lessons of last year's bloodletting is that war or no war, Hamas and only Hamas decides when and if rockets are to be fired from Gaza into Israel. Rockets flew throughout the three-week war, and stopped only at Hamas' order, several hours after Israel stilled its guns.

The mayor of rocket-scarred Sderot, David Buskila, said this week that, "By the close of

Operation Cast Lead, we understood that the military solution cannot be a comprehensive one, it's a solution that can create breaks between escalations."

In the end, Israel holds perhaps the most significant card to play, a move which may depend on a uncharacteristically hands-on Obama White House. With third-party international mediation, Israel could offer to resurrect the 2008 truce by significantly alleviating its stranglehold embargo on the Strip.

To decide to do that, however, Israel would also have to abandon its longtime belief in firepower as a lever to bend Gaza to its will. And that means abandoning reasoning that goes precisely like this:

Samia: "The State of Israel is not doing this to replace the regime in Gaza. The State of Israel is doing this because [of] a situation in which Hamas controls the Gaza Strip and the basis of its world view is to annihilate the State of Israel and to fire on schools and kindergartens and to carry out terror attacks in restaurants.

"For the State of Israel, it doesn't matter if Hamas calls itself a regime or a just a terror organization it's a terrorist organization in every way, and we must deal with it and annihilate it.

"If, at the same opportunity, the moderates rise and come to power, that's good enough for us, we'll be pleased."

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