

The Forgotten “Humanitarian Crisis” in Gaza

By [Anthony Newkirk](#)

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We have been showing restraint due to the international storm caused by the incident on the Gaza beach – but no longer. Israeli Defense Minister Amir Peretz (13 June, 2006)[1](#)

It goes without saying that it’s hard to have a partner for peace if you don’t renounce violence. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (13 September, 2006)[2](#)

Next month, the Shurat HaDin Law Center will sponsor an eight-day “exploration of Israel’s struggle for survival and security” that includes briefings by intelligence officers, demonstrations by masked commandoes, visits to military trials of Hamas members, and a “tour of the IAF [Israel Air Force] unit who carries out targeted killings.” Evidently, a tour of the beach in Gaza where Israeli artillery fire killed seven picnickers in early June is not on the agenda. In any case, one needn’t go on such a bizarre “exploration” in order to grasp the U.S. role in Israeli “peacekeeping” methods in the Occupied Territories and the Palestinian National Authority (PA).[3](#)

On August 29, the U.S. State Department issued a public notice warning U.S. citizens not to travel in the Gaza Strip due to the “conditions of lawlessness” and “[v]iolence between the Israeli Defense Forces...and militant groups” there. While the George W. Bush administration took no pains to conceal its role in the most celebrated act of Israeli aggression this summer – Lebanon – many Americans see their government as an innocent bystander in the Occupied Territories, particularly the long and bloody siege of the Gaza Strip. Not so. In fact, U.S. officials have been at the center of the controversy over Hamas’ threat to Israel’s security – that is, if one considers the electoral process to be a threat in the first place. But when President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice discussed the matter with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on the side-lines of the 61st Session of the United Nations General Assembly last month, it was not abstract notions about democracy or even the welfare of the Palestinians that concerned them.[4](#)

Ever since the establishment of a Hamas-led government last spring, the United States and the European Union have waged economic warfare against the PA with remarkable solidarity. Then, on June 28, Israeli tanks “entered” Gaza in force ostensibly to rescue a member of an Israel Defense Forces raiding party captured in reprisal for the seizure of two PA citizens by IDF commandoes three days before (the sequence of these events has received little attention in the United States). As Operation Summer Rains – openly called half of a “two-front war” by Israel’s mainstream press – has reduced Gaza’s population deeper into misery, the EU now states that it will not restore aid until the PA “commits” to peaceful relations with Israel (the record shows that Western powers have a fickle definition of this concept). Concerning the resumption of direct U.S. aid, Deputy National Security

Advisor for Global Democracy Strategy Elliot Abrams stated on September 20 that “the ground rules won’t change” until the PA embraces U.S. conditions.[5](#)

Largely because of studied ignorance by the mainstream media, few Americans are aware of the details of the IDF’s summer maneuvers in the Gaza Strip. But the details are plain enough: Shootings of civilians of all ages, fire fights with various groups besides Hamas, assaults on PA ministries, mass detentions of Hamas legislators, house demolitions, concentrated artillery barrages, airstrikes on the infrastructure, and a naval blockade. Although Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert indicated willingness last month to wind down IDF operations, there is no sign of this happening. Moreover, talks among Palestinian factions about forming a governing coalition are inconclusive and a Fatah-Hamas civil war is in the offing.[6](#)

A week before Operation Summer Rains got underway, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that from January to mid-June the IDF fired 8,380 artillery shells into the tiny Gaza Strip of 1.4 million inhabitants and armed Palestinian factions fired 896 home-made Qassam rockets into Israel. In early August, over a month after the start of Operation Summer Rains, the UN reported \$15.5 million in infrastructure damage, at least 3,400 refugees, over 70% of the population dependant on food aid, and 25 Israelis injured. Doctors also reported treating Gazans with wounds caused by illegal cluster bombs. Coinciding with Prime Minister Olmert’s announced plans to open talks with Abbas and the first anniversary of Gaza “disengagement” in early September, the Palestinian Centre on Human Rights released a report claiming that 228 Palestinians were killed during the IDF campaign, nearly half of whom were “civilians” and 48 were children. The PCHR also reported 813 wounded, including 216 children, 30 women, four paramedics, and four journalists. Violent acts continue to occur daily in Gaza.[7](#)

Meanwhile, what is happening on the West Bank? Olmert gave an indication at the beginning of this year when he was Ariel Sharon’s Deputy Prime Minister: “We will keep the Jordan Valley. It is not possible to relinquish control of Israel’s eastern border.” The expansion of West Bank settlements – essentially real estate schemes backed by a mix of racist legislation, military-spending programs, state subsidies, and financial irregularities – is proceeding apace. Early last month, a few days before Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres announced that his government had abandoned plans to close West Bank settlements, the Housing Ministry put notices in Israeli newspapers asking for bids on hundreds of new settlement houses near Jerusalem.[8](#)

What does the United States have to do with any of this? The notorious Mr. Abrams’ comments about “ground rules” are best understood in the context of a report prepared by several neoconservative intellectuals in the U.S. foreign policy establishment ten years ago. Written for Benjamin Netanyahu, Isreal’s new Prime Minister at the time, much of the advice in *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm* has been born out by events – notably recommendations to attack Lebanon and to exercise “the right of hot pursuit” in the Occupied Territories. An otherwise disparate number of political analysts see institutional links between the *Clean Break* “study group” and current trends in Israeli and U.S. foreign policies.[9](#)

These links are more than suggestive. En route to the G8 summit in Russia in July, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters that “Israel, of course, has the right to defend itself” in response to the “abduction” of three IDF soldiers inside Lebanese territory.

She added that “our Israeli colleagues” were nevertheless showing “restraint.” A few days later, Dr. Rice noted that President Abbas “was engaging with elements of the elected government” – i.e. Hamas – in order to “try and move” it to support the “road map” backed by the United States and the Quartet on the Middle East. In the same week, the President made the intriguing observation that taking enemy soldiers prisoner in combat is an act of terrorism.[10](#)

On balance, though, U.S. policy-makers tend to have few illusions about Gaza. America’s unconfirmed UN Ambassador John R. Bolton explained on July 13 why he vetoed a watered-down draft resolution critical of Israel’s “disproportionate use of force” in Gaza. He explained that the “unacceptable” and “unbalanced” draft sponsored by Qatar demanded too much of Israel and “would also have undermined the credibility of the Security Council, which itself must be seen by both sides as an honest broker in the Middle East conflict.” Moreover, the virtual ambassador hastened to add, events in Lebanon made the draft superfluous.[11](#)

Not surprisingly, last week’s passage of the \$447.6 billion defense budget for 2007 went unnoticed in the United States. But not in Israel. *Yediot Ahronot* noted that a “military aid package” for Israel worth \$500 million is buried inside the bill (this is besides the \$2 billion in military aid that Jerusalem already receives every year). The Federal government will subsidize a project of Raytheon and Israel-based Rafael Armament Development Authority to build short- and medium-range missiles used by U.S. and Israeli forces, the improvement of Rafael’s airborne “targeting pod” carried on U.S. warplanes in Iraq, and the development of two unmanned aerial vehicles by Israeli Aircraft Industries (IAI). The largest items are the Boeing-IAI co-production of an anti-ballistic missile and Rafael’s upgrade of the U.S. Bradley Armored Fighting Vehicle.[12](#) U.S. industrial and financial interests stand to profit handsomely.

Astonishingly, the Congress voted on versions of this bill throughout the summer as Gaza and Lebanon burned. This should put to rest claims that Washington is helpless in the face of events in the Occupied Territories or even that Jerusalem is the “the tail wagging the dog” in the U.S.-Israeli alliance, as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue (the less well-known report by Frida Berrigan and William Hartung at the World Policy Institute is far closer to the truth).[13](#)

On her latest junket to the region, Dr. Rice warned Palestinian factions to make peace with each other. According to *The New York Times*, U.S. “security coordinator” for the Middle East Lieutenant General Keith Dayton has offered to beef up Abbas’ guard force.[14](#) It would appear that the Bush administration is not interested in ending Gaza’s forgotten humanitarian crisis.

Notes

1 Chris McGreal, “Two children among 11 killed in missile strike on Gaza City,” *The Guardian*, 14, June, 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1796777,00.html>

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3 Lysandra Ohrstrom, "Israeli travel firms capitalize on Mideast's agony," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), 5 September, 2006, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=3&article_id=75234; "Mission to Israel," *Shurat HaDin Israel Law Center* (accessed 14 September, 2006), <http://www.israellawcenter.org/template.php?sectionfiltered=MI>; Irit Rosenblum, "Touring the Katyusha Trail," *Ha'aretz*, 30 August, 2006, <<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/755679.html>>; Eric Silver, "Palestinians killed on Gaza Beach by Israeli gunboats" *The Independent* (London), 10 June, 2006, http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/article754405.ece; Chris McGreal, "Who really killed Huda Ghalia's family?" *Guardian*, 16 June, 2006, <http://www.guardian.com.co.uk/israel/Story/0,,179558,00.html>.

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9 Richard Perle, et al, *A Clean Break: A Strategy for Securing the Realm* (Jerusalem: Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, 1996), <<http://www.iasps.org/strat1.htm>>. For political analysts, see e.g. Seymour Hersh, "Watching Lebanon," *The New Yorker*, 21 August, 2006, <http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060821fa_fact>; Jim Lobe, "Neoconservatives retain U.S. policy momentum," *Daily Star*, 14 October, 2003, 3; James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

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12 Yitzhak Behhorin, "US boosts Israel aid by half a billion," *Yediot Ahronot*, 30 September, 2006, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/o,7340,L-3309771,00.html>>; Nathan Guttman, "Congress okays joint project funding," *Jerusalem Post*, 30 September, 2006, <<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?id=1159193348715&pagename=JPost%FJPArticle%2FShowFull> |>; News Release, "Raytheon, Rafael Selected for Short-Range Ballistic Missile Defense Interceptor Development," *Raytheon Media Relations*, 24 May, 2006, http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/micro_stories.pl?ACCT=742575&TICK=RTNB&STORY=/www/story/05-24-2006/0004368542&EDATE=May+24,+2006; *idem*, "Boeing, ATK Team for Israeli Short Range Ballistic Missile Defense Competition," *Boeing News*, 27 March, 2006, http://www.boeing.com/news/releases/2006/q1/060327a_nr.html ; Ann Scott Tyson, "Congress Approves \$70 Billion For Wars in Iraq, Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, 30 September, 2006, A08; Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the President on H.R. 5631, the 'Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2007'," *White House*, 29 September, 2006, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060929-15.html>; *Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2007*. H.R. 5361 (passed House and Senate).

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14 Staff, "Rice, Abbas show united front on past deals," *Daily Star*, 5 October, 2006, 8, 9; Steven Erlanger, "U.S. Plan Would Expand Palestinian Leader's Security Force," *New York Times*, 5 October, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/05/world/middleeast/05crossing.html>.

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