



OPERATION CAST LEAD IN THE WEST BANK

ROBERT BLECHER

Scattered protests aside, life in the West Bank continued “normally” (by West Bank standards) during Operation Cast Lead. The relative quiet stemmed from political disillusionment and the heavy-handed control exercised by the Palestinian security services. Whereas some thought that the Israeli campaign would mark a turning point, in fact it deepened the paralysis of the Palestinian political system. With Hamas failing to achieve tangible gains and Fatah increasingly at odds with itself and the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah—itsself pursuing a “good governance” strategy that few believe will end the Israeli occupation—Palestinians’ faith in their own political establishment has dropped to a new low.

PALESTINIANS WERE GLUED to al-Jazeera during the three weeks of Operation Cast Lead, which had killed 1,430 Gazans and wounded another 5,300 by the time Israel and Hamas declared cease-fires on 18 January 2009. The television screen was about as close as most West Bankers got to entering the fray. Despite the ferocity of the assault, the Jewish state’s eastern flank remained largely quiet, if tensely so. The West Bank saw a single daylong strike (a second followed in East Jerusalem), a series of demonstrations in the larger cities, and a few scattered clashes with Israeli troops, which resulted in a handful of deaths. But security coordination between the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel continued apace, and while diplomatic negotiations formally were suspended “in light of the circumstances,” as a senior PA official put it, they were not severed.

The relative passivity amounted to a referendum on the Palestinian political system writ large—Hamas, the PA, and Fatah alike. While Palestinians were nearly unanimous in seeing the Israeli campaign as an attack on Gaza’s population as a whole and not only its rulers, resentment over the 2007 Hamas takeover, as well as the difficulty of manifesting solidarity with the Strip’s people without showing support for its government, kept many at home. Sympathy for the victims of Operation Cast Lead and respect for resistance as a political strategy initially boosted Hamas’s standing, but many subsequently soured on the movement when the fighting (and consequent suffering) failed

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to secure any tangible dividends for Gaza, and Hamas scored few successes beyond self-preservation. After Hizballah's 2006 war with Israel, one of Ramallah's main thoroughfares had been renamed "Bint Jbayl Street" in recognition of its performance, but Hamas's efforts this past December and January earned it little praise.

Nor was Fatah able to turn the moment to its favor. With the former standard-bearer deeply fractured and many of its leaders at odds with one another and with the PA, no consolidated leadership was able to galvanize a popular protest movement in the West Bank. The lack of familiar and credible faces at the demonstrations gave free rein to the PA security services, whose aggressive measures inhibited any display that could have been considered sympathetic to Hamas. The result was a deepening of the already pervasive sense of alienation in the West Bank, bringing the level of trust in established political bodies to an all-time low.

THE DEMONSTRATIONS

With elections nowhere on the horizon because of the rift between Hamas and Fatah, many observers looked to the demonstrations—or lack thereof—as a barometer of factional support. In most cases the anticipation turned out to be more fervid than the demonstrations themselves, but drawing conclusions about the relative popularity of the factions on this basis is no simple matter, given both widespread disillusionment and heavy-handed surveillance.

At the outset of Operation Cast Lead, PA governors around the West Bank forbade demonstrations in order to "maintain public order," as they put it, and to prevent friction with Israeli troops that could precipitate the same cycle of clashes, deaths, funerals, and further clashes that had stoked the second intifada. Exceptions were Nablus, which saw a few small demonstrations attended by less than a hundred people, and Ramallah, where protests occurred almost daily during the first week of the war. (Fatah leaders in Hebron would later win permission to hold a demonstration in their city.) Veteran activists in Ramallah commented that the inclusive atmosphere and heavy civil society participation at the initial demonstrations were reminiscent of the first intifada. They pointed to the crowd that formed after noon prayers the first Friday of the war outside the 'Abd al-Nasir Mosque, which included professionals and other elites who rarely mobilize for political events, as well as representatives of Fatah, Hamas, leftist parties, and civil society. Organizers called for flying only the Palestinian flag, not those of the factions; this gesture of national unity in the shadow of the ugly political divide that separates Gaza from the West Bank led a commentator to remark, "I had been missing that flag." Such wistful observations were frequent at the beginning of the Israeli campaign, but even at the time they seemed overly optimistic. While the protests might have conjured heady memories of more unified days, the fighting in Gaza pointed up the sharp polarization of the Palestinian political scene. Had the main factions ordered their people to stay home, they likely would have.

The demonstrations—which attracted three to four thousand people the first Friday in Ramallah and perhaps slightly more the following week in Ramallah and Hebron—were the largest in the West Bank since 2002, but they were still quite small by historical standards. They were dwarfed more recently by the attendance at Yasir Arafat’s burial in 2004, which drew tens of thousands of people, and by the hundred thousand Palestinians who gathered in Nablus in late February 2009 to urge unity on the eve of the Fatah-Hamas dialogue in Cairo and to support the PLO after Hamas politburo chief Khalid Mishal called for the establishment of a competing national authority. The most populous protests in Israel/Palestine against Operation Cast Lead took place within Israel itself, in the city of Sakhnin, where a demonstration drew fifty to sixty thousand people.

The noble sentiments of the protest organizers coincided with the PA’s less high-minded ban, in place since Hamas took over Gaza in June 2007, on any public manifestation of support for the Islamic movement. Any hope that the prohibition would be relaxed during the war to allow for expressions of solidarity with Gaza was quashed quickly. In Nablus and reportedly elsewhere as well, plainclothes security personnel surrounded mosques on Fridays during the war. In Ramallah, at one of the early demonstrations, a Fatah supporter who raised a Hamas flag in what he intended as a gesture of solidarity was immediately set upon by the police. “He was under the mistaken impression that he was living in a democratic country,” a bystander commented wryly. The authorities proscribed Fatah banners as well in order to minimize the potential for factional strife. The security services, however, converged much faster and more aggressively on Hamas supporters, though women and children sporting the occasional green headband or scarf generally were not harassed.

Within a week or so, the demonstrations were controlled, routinized, and limited to the city centers. In Nablus, protesters were confined to a tent

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designated for the purpose, leading a local Fatah leader to complain, “That’s where you protest what’s happening in Darfur, not what’s happening in your own country.” In Ramallah, demonstrations were restricted to the area around Manara Square. For many who wanted to direct their voices at Israel, foreign states, and international organizations, the limitations drained the protests of political relevance and discouraged would-be protestors from participating. A civil society organizer related that her personal breaking point was when the security services blocked a demonstration in which she was participating from delivering a letter to the representative office of the Czech Republic (which had defended Operation Cast Lead as self-defense) because

its path passed near PA headquarters. Another Ramallah-based organizer commented: “For some people, chanting at the Manara might have assuaged their guilt, but I didn’t need to buy a moral indulgence. I am from Gaza and it was

my family and community who were under attack. Standing there and doing nothing felt worse than staying home, since it didn't actually matter." Given her long history as an activist, she knew well the danger of approaching the checkpoints, "but at least we would have shown that we are one people under the same occupation facing the same enemy." As the government restrictions grew, the number of protestors dwindled.

They surged again the second Friday of the Israeli campaign, which marked the official end of Mahmud Abbas's presidential term as well as the funeral of Nizar Rayyan, a Hamas leader assassinated in Gaza. TV cameramen, journalists, and curious onlookers at the Manara mingled with Palestinian police and Preventive Security personnel ostensibly disguised in plainclothes but in fact easily identifiable in their jeans and identical black jackets with faux-fur collars. They awaited the arrival of two dueling demonstrations: first, the same amalgam that had formed outside the mosque the week before, and second, a Fatah procession that set out from PA headquarters. More than a few disgruntled Fatah supporters, unwilling to join the movement's pro-Abbas wing, joined the mosque crowd. Demonstrators in the official Fatah procession hoisted pictures of Abbas and Palestinian flags, whereas at the head of the other march, protesters pointedly raised a picture of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, who had expelled the Israeli ambassador shortly after the beginning of the Israeli campaign, and his country's flag.

As at previous protests, the PA used force against unarmed protestors. When Hamas supporters chanted a movement slogan, security forces in Ramallah rushed in, letting loose with pepper spray and (a short time later) tear gas and batons. As the crowd fled, someone on the Fatah sound truck pleaded for everyone to "behave themselves" because "the whole world is watching." It wasn't clear if he was addressing the demonstrators, the security services, or both. About a dozen protestors were arrested, including a young boy with his mother as she clutched a Quran. The demonstrations were filmed by the security agencies for later review, and there were reports of subsequent arrests. In Hebron, protests on several occasions turned even nastier. Hamas stone-throwing met with gunfire from both Israeli and Palestinian forces, resulting in multiple injuries and several deaths, at least one at the hands of the PA. Fatah leaders publicly rebuked PA officials, who pledged better conduct, but their sincerity was never tested, as by that time a zero-tolerance message had been received. The last Friday of the war, the demonstrations were considerably smaller, with more onlookers than protestors. When the Fatah sound truck pulled up outside 'Abd al-Nasir Mosque in an attempt to corral worshippers into a single march, a Hamas banner was unfurled and quickly confiscated. The crowd then melted away.

Few were surprised by the PA's conduct during the Israeli operation, in large part because people already had seen what the PA could and would do. According to human rights groups, PA security activity, especially against Hamas, increased in October 2008 as the end of Abbas's term loomed and Egypt prepared a futile attempt to convene a factional dialogue. The roundups and intimidation

during (and since) Operation Cast Lead were an unbroken continuation of that effort. In some West Bank areas people hesitate or even refuse to talk politics in the streets—not without reason, given the presence of undercover intelligence agents, whose numbers multiplied during the war. As a furtive young man, who declined to give his name, not so subtly warned a journalist in the aftermath of a demonstration in Ramallah, “This place is crawling with informants, and nobody will answer your questions. You should know better than to ask. Move on.” Human rights workers testify to continuing torture in prisons, though some of the uglier work during the fighting was done by freelancers. In retribution for attacks on Fatah members whom Hamas accused of abetting Operation Cast Lead, Fatah cadres broke into the apartment of a lawyer accused of working with the Islamic movement and shot him in the legs; similarly, the car of a professor at Al-Najah University in Nablus, reputedly close to Hamas, was torched.

With the PA determined to deny Hamas a public platform, the movement for the most part joined protests led by others. On the few occasions it tried to organize by itself—by necessity without official permission—the security services quickly dispersed the “unauthorized” gatherings. In Hebron, Hamas organized from within the Israeli-controlled area of the city to avoid PA control. Despite PA harassment, Hamas leaders in the West Bank insisted that they still would have been able to heed Mishal’s call for a “third intifada,” but many of them disputed the wisdom of such a move. Not only would a mass mobilization have exposed Hamas’s remaining networks in the West Bank, but, as a Hamas legislator said, “It would result in a civil war, and what good would come of that? There is no political leadership that could make good use of an uprising now, so it wouldn’t pay.” Such words sound self-serving given the pressure the movement is under, but subsequent discoveries of arms caches around the West Bank suggest that Hamas has yet to submit. PA security officials are sanguine about their ability to prevent a mass uprising, but they recognize it is nearly impossible to prevent small-scale attacks that aim to disrupt the sense of stability.

Palestinian security forces were pleased with their performance during the operation. They effectively ensured that the demonstrations didn’t get “too large,” as an official delicately phrased it. Despite the tension, Palestinian security chiefs maintained regular contact with their Israeli counterparts, sharing information and intelligence, apportioning responsibility for arresting wanted men, and coordinating the movement of their respective forces. Palestinian forces operate only within certain areas; when ordered to stand down and make way for the Israeli army, they do. For the most part, however, it seems that Israel reduced its incursions in the West Bank during the war to avoid antagonizing the forces preventing the eruption of a new front against it. The PA also did its part to prevent friction by keeping groups of youth away from checkpoints. Notably, in areas in which Palestinian forces were not permitted to operate, six young men, all but one affiliated with Fatah, were killed in clashes with Israeli troops.

PA STRATEGY

For the architects and supporters of the PA's strategy, the quiet during Operation Cast Lead was a positive sign, an indication of a new "maturity," in the words of an advisor to President Abbas. "People have grown up and don't want to repeat the mistakes of the second intifada," he said. "They don't want any more martyrs." Abbas himself was insistent from the outset of the Israeli campaign that "we will not go back to the old ways," including stone-throwing. Despite the emotions stirred by the Israeli campaign, the PA hewed to the good-governance agenda it has pursued since Salam Fayyad formed his government in the West Bank in June 2007. The theory in Ramallah is that Israel eventually will reciprocate with political concessions and that if it does not, the international community will compel it to. In the eyes of the PA leaders, therefore, Operation Cast Lead might have posed a challenge, but it also demonstrated that their strategy was bearing fruit. The relative quiet, as they saw it, was neither tantamount to passivity nor an indication of hopelessness, but rather a demonstration of their success in rejuvenating faith in the very idea of the state.

For a much larger number of Palestinians, however, the appropriate term was not "maturity" but "anomie." From the start of the Israeli campaign, Abbas and his advisors pinned the blame on Hamas, a blunder that for many signified everything that was wrong with Ramallah's political strategy. The PA's harsh rhetoric against fellow Palestinians during a time of war was jarring; it reinforced the view that the president was insensitive to the suffering of his people and inexplicably fixated on a futile diplomatic process with Israel. Unflattering comparisons with his more charismatic predecessor were inevitable: one disgruntled Fatah supporter complained, "Arafat would have smuggled himself into Gaza to adopt the resistance." Such talk reflected the longstanding perception of Abbas as aloof and perhaps too comfortably ensconced in the enclave of Ramallah. West Bankers are well aware that during his official presidential term, Abbas never visited the towns of Jenin, Tulkarm, and Qalqilya and made only single visits to Nablus, Hebron, and Salfit. To his constituents, he appears more at home on the international circuit than in Palestine (and is arguably more popular there as well).

Operation Cast Lead brought little visible change in the West Bank, but it did deepen existing trends and highlight the strategic cul-de-sac in which the Ramallah leadership is caught. Out of options, Abbas cast his lot with conservative Arab regimes—and, implicitly, Israel—against his own compatriots, indicating that the longstanding tension embodied in the PA between national liberation and quasi-state administration had been resolved in favor of the latter. "The problem is not that the PA is against armed struggle," complained a protester at one of the larger demonstrations. "It's that the PA is against any kind of struggle, period." While senior officials in Ramallah believe that "good governance is the highest form of resistance," others are skeptical as they watch their government morph into a bureaucratic entity increasingly

isolated from its political roots. Many Palestinians fear that, intentionally or not, the PA is on its way to becoming what one analyst cynically referred to as the “City Leagues”—that is, a twenty-first-century version of the Village Leagues, which Israel formed in the late 1970s and early 1980s to marginalize Palestinian nationalists.

GROWING DISENCHANTMENT IN FATAH

As Hamas stood up to Israel while the PA coordinated with it, Fatah found itself on the defensive and more discontented with its leadership than ever. Many Fatah members skipped the demonstrations not out of opposition to Hamas but because they did not want to be seen lining up behind Abbas or because of intramovement rivalries on the local level. A Fatah leader in a village near Jerusalem recounted that he had been asked to assemble a group of men to bring to a Fatah-led demonstration in Ramallah, but that he couldn’t find enough volunteers to make it worthwhile. In Nablus, an aide in the governor’s office managed to convince his boss to allow a demonstration, but a boycott led by his rivals in Fatah rendered turnout virtually nil. Those who did show up at the protests were not necessarily more sympathetic to the movement’s leadership; a Fatah supporter defiantly raised a Fatah flag in Ramallah and railed against the “Dayton Government,” an epithet used (more commonly by Hamas) to accuse the PA of subservience to U.S. Security Coordinator Lt. General Keith Dayton. The growth of such sentiments led a Fatah leader to comment in the waning days of the Israeli campaign that “[a] change has taken place in Fatah’s thinking. The conflation of the movement, the PA, and the PLO is no longer bearable.” Some even wondered if they were witnessing the consolidation of rival Fatah blocs—one pro-PA, the other so-called “nationalist.” Given the degree of personal rivalry within the movement, however, it seems naïve to express Fatah’s predicament solely in ideological terms.

Likewise, while some lamented that the Israeli operation constituted yet another blow to the “peace camp,” Palestinian faith in the Annapolis process—and indeed in the diplomatic track spawned by the Oslo Accords—had long since evaporated. “[Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi] Livni, [Defense Minister Ehud] Barak and [Prime Minister Ehud] Olmert were supposed to be our partners,” said a Fatah leader in Nablus, “but they are the chief aggressors in Gaza.” He had overcome his skepticism “to give Abbas a chance,” he explained, but nothing came of it: “In the West Bank, these supposed partners gave us only cantons, expanded settlements, and the wall. There is no other way to describe it but humiliation. Meanwhile, Fayyad got rid of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades to make Israel’s life easier.”

Behind these words lay a fundamental tension brought to the surface by Operation Cast Lead: the tension between the PA’s program of earning Palestinian sovereignty through good behavior, and Hamas’s insistence on fighting for it. As the bombs fell on Gaza, with Abbas unable to stop them, resistance at least for a time acquired a new luster. “Everything is resistance now,” said

an office manager in Ramallah during the fighting. "When my kids don't want to eat lunch, they call it 'resistance'." Some in Fatah want to pursue a popular struggle not dependent solely on negotiations; they see Prime Minister Fayyad as the chief obstacle to this and as all the more dangerous for his bureaucratic competence, financial acumen, and accomplishments in the security realm. They believe his good governance agenda targets Fatah no less than it does Hamas. The Islamists have been forced underground, they say, but Fayyad continues to chip away at Fatah patronage networks and to transform the PA into a strictly administrative body. Others in Fatah continue to support the prime minister, but only as a means to an end; his technocratic disposition will never win their allegiance. They see him as useful for garnering international support, but they are convinced that they can "pull the chair out from under him" when they need to. Such confidence, however, seems excessive in light of Fayyad's international backing and his successes as a political operator over the past two years.

Operation Cast Lead highlighted other tensions within Fatah as well. Planning for the movement's Sixth General Congress, moribund because of internal squabbling, was renewed as the membership grew more restive. Around the West Bank, local and young leaders were unprecedentedly outspoken, publicly airing grievances about Abbas's handling of the crisis and demanding explanations of their leaders' strategy. Meanwhile, with many attributing the Israeli operation to the division between the West Bank and Gaza, reconciliation with Hamas became a widespread public demand. Before the Israeli campaign, most Palestinians believed in the necessity of national unity, but with the political atmosphere polarized, they were reluctant to mobilize for fear of being accused of disloyalty to their own movement or government. But with the trauma of the fighting and weakening of all established leaderships, people began to speak loudly and often. While the mood within Fatah had long been divided on dialogue, Operation Cast Lead shifted the balance decisively in favor of those who supported it, at least nominally.

With the war raising frustrations to new highs, some imagined it would be a tipping point for Fatah, the PA in Ramallah, or even the Palestinian territories as a whole. But the emotions stirred by the fighting soon ran aground on the tectonic impediments of the Palestinian political scene. When the shooting ended, Fatah—along with the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip—lurched into a holding pattern from which it has yet to emerge. Gaza remains under siege; Islamist activists in the West Bank are in jail or deep underground; Fatah is more fractured than ever and under no less pressure in Gaza than Hamas is in the West Bank; Palestinian-Israeli negotiations are on hold; and reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah is stalled. The PA had been on life support long before Operation Cast Lead, and it remains so today. With Abbas continuing to await salvation from Washington, and Hamas banking on his failure, the revered Palestinian strategy of steadfastness has degenerated into paralysis.