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The Gaza Conflict: US Sidelined **Where is US President-Elect Obama?**



The Israel-Hamas war launched Saturday, Dec. 27, was the first Middle East conflict in 60 years in which the United States played no role.

It was also the first conflict in which none of the players and would-be mediators, European and others, referred to Washington before embarking on diplomatic ventures.

Bush administration's exit year has been marked by Washington's non-presence in more than one key Middle East event.

In May, the United States opted out of the Lebanese Unity Accord negotiated and signed in the Qatari capital of Doha. This deal juggled around the balance of power in Lebanon. It hoisted the extremist Shiite Hizballah back into the coalition government with new veto powers and extended de facto recognition to restored Syrian influence in Beirut, which the Bush administration had fought long and hard to purge.

This transaction was cobbled together by a new bloc formed by Qatar, Iran, France, Syria and Turkey. It marginalized not only the United States but also Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Since then, American officials have been striving to limit some of the damage wrought in Doha - with mixed results. A large US military mission has taken up position in Beirut to back up the pro-Western factions in government. However, Hizballah and Syria are steadily deepening their destabilizing grip on Lebanon, with al Qaeda lately adding to the ferment.

Not a murmur from Washington

When Israeli warplanes thundered over Gaza last Saturday, there was scarcely a murmur from Washington, but the Gang of Five which engineered the Doha accord swung into action. France, on the eve of its handover of the European Presidency, tried to jump into big American shoes by proposing an immediate 48-hour "humanitarian ceasefire" in Gaza, hoping to run ahead with the larger project of an Israeli-Palestinian peace mission and apply it to the fate of the Gaza Strip.

Not only was the US thrust aside by these initiatives; so too were Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

But the shoes proved to be too big for America's challengers. The truce venture was premature because neither the Palestinian Hamas nor Israel was ready to play.

Hamas avenged Israel's stunning aerial bombardment, which had claimed 400 Palestinian lives by Thursday, Jan. 1, with devastating volleys across the border against southern Israel at the rate of 90 missiles and rockets a day.

As Hamas extended its range, a million citizens - one-tenth of Israel's



population – fell within the sights of Hamas' Qassam missiles and the far more sophisticated Grad Katyusha rockets. They were condemned to lockdown until further notice. Schools, shops and workplaces were shut down to reduce casualties, after five important towns, including Ashkelon and Ashdod ports and Beersheba, capital of the Negev, were hit along with a host of smaller communities.

No truce with Israel's election due in 40 days



Israeli leaders have no hope of putting the lid on the sizzling South by accepting a truce at this juncture. The targeted population is clamoring for the IDF tank and infantry to finish the job by going into Gaza and ending their long nightmare once and for all.

Two of the leading decision-makers, defense minister **Ehud Barak** of Labor and foreign minister **Tzipi Livni** of Kadima, have not lost sight of the general election 40 days away, while caretaker prime minister **Ehud Olmert** wants to end his term in office on a high note. Washington's lassitude in the Gaza crisis may owe much to the Bush presidency having only 20 days left to run, **Barack Obama** spending his last moments of pre-presidential freedom on a Hawaii beach with this family, and the US army beginning to pack its bags for leaving Iraq.

On the other hand, Obama and his transition teams made key cabinet appointments before he went off. So where is designated secretary of state **Hillary Clinton**? And why is the designated national security council chairman **Gen. James Jones** not meshing with the outgoing NSC and its head **Stephen Hadley** to put out the fire blazing in the Middle East?

A joke is going around Washington that the Obama gang is thankful Israel went ahead before he took over.

However, once Israeli tanks and boots hit the ground in the Gaza Strip, there is no guarantee that the conflict will wind up any time soon. Israeli officials are all talking about a long haul and, on the last day of 2008, deputy defense minister **Mattan Vilnai** spoke in terms of weeks.

The Gaza conflict will confront Obama as president

Three optional eventualities are visible on the near horizon:

1. The fighting will still be raging when Obama is sworn in on Jan. 20, 2009.
2. Israeli forces will break Hamas' back and its fighting leadership will flee to the Sinai Peninsula, smashing its way past the blocking presence of Egyptian forces in Rafah.
3. French president **Nicolas Sarkozy** and his Qatari partner-in-mediation **Sheikh Hamas bin Khalifa Al-Thani**, will succeed in parlaying a truce between the combatants without involving the United States.



Whichever of the three developments comes to pass, it will present the incoming US president with a quandary.

He will be called upon to address a burning Middle East crisis without any real levers for determining its course or its outcome. This is hardly the controlled scenario his transition team charted for handling the problematical

Iran, Syria, the Palestinians and the Muslim world at large.

According to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Washington sources, some of Obama's confidants have reacted to Israel's Gaza offensive by pointing out that, for three years, Israel never really hit back for the Palestinian missile attacks which followed its disengagement from the Gaza Strip. Jerusalem went on the warpath now, they say, after looking at three options:

One, striking Iran's nuclear sites; **two**, destroying Hizballah's missile and weapons arsenals; **three**, going for Hamas.

Jerusalem plumped for the third, say these Washington insiders, not just because the daily missile and rocket buffeting was intolerable, but as a way of maneuvering Obama into reconsidering his presumed strategy for engaging Iran, Syria - and even possibly the Palestinian extremist Hamas.

Israel's Gaza operation aims at cutting Iran, Syria down to size



Israel has not formally spelled out the practical targets of its Gaza operation, beyond "reshaping the security situation in southern Israel to allow the population to live normal lives free of missile terror." Some ministers have sworn to smash Hamas and terminate its rule of Gaza. But a prime,

unspoken strategic goal is undoubtedly to take the Middle East extremists down a peg or two or more – terminally, if possible - before the new US president starts dealing with them.

The Israeli offensive has a broader, long term aspect, say the Washington insiders: It is a counterattack against Iran, Syria and their bellicose pretensions to regional domination at the head of a flock of non-state extremist organizations by exploiting the explosive Palestinian issue to destabilize and delegitimize the mainstream Arab governments – especially those committed to a negotiated peace with Israel.

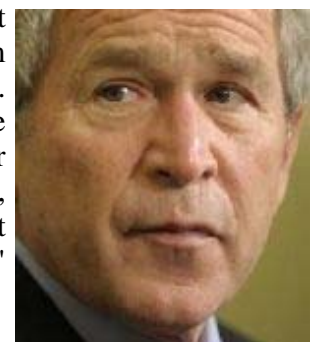
By parading its awesome military might, Israel aims to show the pretenders up as useless when it comes to saving one of their own. Tehran may have trained Hamas commanders, supplied its rockets for shooting at Israel, egged it on to challenge "the Zionist entity" - and even sent an al Qods general to design its Gaza bunkers - but when it comes to rescuing Hamas from doom at Israel's hands, the Islamic Republic is a paper tiger.

Without a proven long-reaching military arm, Tehran would forfeit its claim to be the preeminent regional power and lose its case for being treated in this capacity by the Obama administration as the precondition for their dialogue.

Similarly, Syria and its president **Bashar Assad**, who poses as the great protector of the Palestinian Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other radical non-state terrorist groups and hosts their commands in Damascus, will lose face and share Iran's fate as a second-rater.

Hamas' plight forces cracks in Arab-Muslim alignments

Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah has been brazening out his failure to open a second front against Israel from Lebanon to ease the pressure on his ally, Hamas. Night after night he postures before the Shiite masses in his Dahya stronghold in Beirut to offer sage strategic advice in the spirit of "Hang in there, time is on your side" - anything rather than act out his role as the heroic guru of the Arab "resistance" movement against Israel.



If Israel's military excursion against Hamas ends in victory, President Obama will find a Middle East quite different from the one he reckoned on and a Tehran and Damascus cut down to size.

It is too soon to tell how the Israeli campaign, which still faces several stages, will turn out. For now, Obama, Clinton and Jones are watching from the sidelines. There is no sign that they are about to revise their thinking on Middle East tactics, or break away from the conventional truisms which dominated the Bush administration's Middle East policies.

With America out of the fray for now, **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Middle East sources trace the deep rift developing in the Arab-Muslim camp – the first fruit of Israel's challenge to the radical camp.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia, ranged on one side, would dearly love to shrink Hamas back to his former size as a side product of the Muslim Brotherhood movement and an inconsequential faction of the pro-Western Palestinian Authority. Since sweeping to victory in the Jan. 2006 Palestinian elections and wresting the Gaza Strip from the Palestinian Authority in June 2007, Hamas has run out of control.

Ranged on the opposite side are Syria, Qatar and Iran, who are determined to maintain Hamas' dominance in the Palestinian movement.

Surprisingly, at this point in the Gaza crisis, a leading European power and Turkey have broken away from their support for the moderate US camp in the wake of Washington's lead and lined up behind the radical Islamic-terrorist bloc. These new realignments will be analyzed in separate articles.

Last minute bulletin: In the face of opposition from secretary of state **Condoleezza Rice**, President **George W. Bush** informed prime minister **Ehud Olmert** Thursday night, Jan. 1, that the Gaza operation could run without a time limit and he would veto any UN Security Council resolution that condemns Israel and demands a halt to its military operations. US intelligence's latest estimate is that Hamas is crumbling.

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The Gaza Conflict: Arabs Divided

Sarkozy Tries His Hand again with the Radical Iran-Syria Camp



The Arab world's profound schism over its attitude towards Hamas and the Gaza conflict was epitomized at the Arab League's foreign ministers' emergency meeting in Cairo Wednesday, Dec. 31, on the fifth day of the war. In 16 hours of hammer-and-tongs debate, they failed to agree on common action.

Their communiqué was a cop-out, too bland to paper over their argument: It called on Palestinian factions "to put aside their differences" and urged the UN Security Council to issue a resolution demanding an immediate cease-fire between Israel and Hamas.

The foreign ministers of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, **Ahmed Abul Gheit** and **prince Saudi al Faisal**, engaged their Qatari and Syrian colleagues, **Walid al-Moallem** and **Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jabr Al-Thani**, in a heated debate on a single point: How Hamas ought to come out of the current crisis.

Having lost its quasi-parental status with Hamas after the fundamentalist Palestinian group seized power in the Gaza Strip in 2007, Cairo wants to see it beaten badly enough to crawl back to the Palestinian Authority and under

the wing of its chairman **Mahmoud Abbas**.

Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia want the PA restored to power in the Gaza Strip as well as the West Bank, so healing the Hamas-Fatah rift and reuniting the two Palestinian territories

Riyadh poured millions into Hamas' coffers to back its hoped-for rise as a kind of Palestinian Taliban, a strong Middle East Sunni militia to counter the rising power of the Lebanese Shiite Hizballah. In their worst dreams the Saudis never expected to discover their protégée in the arms of the enemy, Iran, Syria and the Lebanese group.

Mubarak throws Hamas and Gaza to the winds

Qatar has taken on the Saudi role as Hamas' senior banker.

The Al-Thanis support the molding of Hamas into the Tehran-Syrian-Hizballah operational arm in the Palestinian community. This foothold has given the Iranian-led camp regional standing in the Arab arena and a jumping-off point for challenging the two Sunni powers, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

With these gaping differences, it is no wonder that

the Arab foreign ministers meeting in Cairo could not agree on how to help Hamas extricate itself from being crushed by Israel.

Egypt has the biggest stake of them all in the outcome of the Gaza conflict, **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Middle East sources report – which is why President **Hosni Mubarak** is out there walking a tight rope.

Since Israel went to war on Hamas Saturday, Dec. 27, Mubarak has made a point of spurning Egyptian responsibility for the Gaza Strip. Notwithstanding Israel's evacuation of the territory in 2005, he insists it is under Israeli occupation and therefore Israel's responsibility. Egypt refuses to reopen the only Gaza crossing to Sinai at Rafah until the termination of hostilities and demands that Israel open its six crossings for humanitarian aid.

Israel has in fact has allowed up to 100 truckloads of aid to go through one gateway to Gaza every day since Sunday, Dec. 28.

Mubarak's actions are guided by his anxiety over a serious problem thrown up by recent history.

Hamas, which started out as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement, has won a Palestinian election and acquired a sovereign territory. He fears that the appetite of the parent movement, the outlawed Brotherhood, will be whetted by the Hamas model and it may try by covert means to emulate it. The Egyptian president would prefer to see Hamas crushed by Israel before the Brotherhood gets the idea of seizing a slice of Egyptian territory and ruling it with the help of an Islamic militia of its own.

Sarkozy on a truce mission to salvage his flagging Mid East policies



He and his military, intelligence and financial advisers also fear that the Hamas rocket offensive against Israel may be turned against Egypt somewhere down the road and threaten the regime.

Therefore, Mubarak is going to great lengths to prevent any link between the Gaza Strip and Egyptian territory and, by definition, between Hamas and the Egyptian Brotherhood.

These concerns do not reach the public domain. In

fact, foreign minister Gheit subscribed to the Arab League meeting's decision to send PA chairman Abbas to the UN Security Council with a demand for a resolution halting the Israeli assault.

At this point, Cairo's path crossed with that of **Nicolas Sarkozy**, who decided in mid-week to invite himself to a whirlwind tour of Middle East capitals including Jerusalem next week. His official mission is to promote the 48-hour "humanitarian ceasefire" he proposed to the European Union. What he is really after is a chance to save his flagging Middle East strategy.

Sarkozy's trouble is that he found out too late that he had mistakenly trusted Syrian president **Bashar Assad** to break with Iran, dump his terrorist friends and stop meddling in Lebanon for the sake of being lionized by the French president.

Sarkozy made him guest of honor at another failed venture, the francophone Mediterranean Union, which never took off. Assad went straight back from Paris to join his radical friends.

He was not the first Western leader to be taken in by Assad as more than one US emissary can testify. After enthusiastically backing the Doha Lebanon Unity Accord in May, 2008 and its avowed goal of stabilizing Beirut, the French leader discovered that the much hyped accord was nothing but a fig leaf behind which Damascus and Hizballah could quietly sink their claws into the Lebanese government and military.

When Israel launched its offensive against Hamas, Sarkozy pounced on another chance of cutting a figure as a global diplomat.

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The Gaza Conflict: Tactics

The Second-Biggest War on Terror: An Interim Report



Israel's campaign against the Palestinian Hamas group in Gaza is the second biggest war on an Islamist terrorist organization controlling a territory after the US-led war in Afghanistan. Never before has a military force this formidable been deployed against a territory as small as the Gaza Strip, proportionately comparable only to the Russian army fighting in Chechnya in the 1990s.

For comparison -

Gaza's area is 41 long by 6-12 kilometers wide = 360 square kilometer. Its population: 1.5 million. Hamas combatants are estimated at 15,000.

Chechnya is 15,300 square kilometers.

Iraq's Anbar Province is 137,808 square kilometers. Al Qaeda deployed 4,500 fighters, the Sunni insurgents 100,000.

Pakistan's tribal area of **North and South Waziristan** is 11,585 square kilometers. Its population: 600,000. Taliban fields 4,500 fighters, Al Qaeda 1,500.

Israel deployed one-third of its estimated 600 fighter-bombers, more than half of its helicopters and drones in the first five days of its aerial offensive against Hamas.

Three armored divisions and 45,000 fighting men are deployed around the Gaza Strip awaiting orders to move in.

By launching its attack on Saturday, Dec. 27 – the Jewish Sabbath day - Israel took Hamas and Western observers by surprise. Wave after wave of bombers struck Hamas military and government installations from 11.30 a.m.

Hamas was taken unawares by this massive aerial bombardment, which in its first four minutes accounted for 205 Palestinian deaths. Israel's military planners achieved their first goal of sowing confusion in Hamas ranks and catching them off-balance.

Israel's six initial tactical objectives

The other six objectives of this stage of the offensive were:

1. To wipe out Hamas' arsenal of Iranian-made Grad rockets whose range is 45-60 km. Hamas had stocked app. 300, stored in fortified underground stores, the largest number of these Katyusha type rockets stocked by any non-state Islamist group apart from the Lebanese Hizballah.

Less than half were destroyed.

2. To eliminate the short-range primitive Qassam missiles. Hamas started out with some 8,000.

Nearly 1,800 were wiped out on the first day of the bombardment.

3. To demolish the 200 military tunnels running under the Philadelphi zone bordering Egyptian Sinai (as distinct from the 1,000 or so private tunnels owned and managed by Palestinian mafias) used by Hamas for smuggling in arms, ammunition, fuel and reinforcements.

Some 110-120 were destroyed and others were abandoned by their controllers for fear of being buried alive, leaving about 30 tunnels still active.

This tunnel network was designed to be both Hamas' weapons lifeline and as bolt-holes for high-ranking Hamas leaders to exit the Gaza Strip in a war emergency. The Iranian al Qods operations chief organized the tunnels to allow the Hamas leadership to get out in a hurry. They were supposed to head for the Palestinian communities in the northern Sinai town of El Arish and conduct the war from there.

This plan has fallen apart because of the flare-up of an unannounced feud between Hamas and Egypt. Cairo threatens to throw any Hamas operatives attempting to cross the border into prisons in the Egyptian heartland far from the Gaza Strip.

Hamas' government infrastructure flattened

4. To destroy the underground *bunkerland* Hamas has sunk under much of the Gaza Strip's surface. It is there that its top political and military echelons are hiding, along with weapons caches, TV and radio stations and Internet connections. An estimated 82 km of subterranean corridors are buried in several tiers under the 41 square kilometers of the enclave.

According to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** military sources, *only 30 percent of this underground system has been demolished so far.*

5. To destroy the workshops and laboratories turning out the Qassam missiles, mortars and launchers, improving their performance and inventing new devices. Hundreds of these small facilities are scattered across the Gaza Strip. *Roughly 80 percent of the workshops were demolished in Israel's air strikes.*

All the laboratories and testing sites housed in the Islamic University of Gaza were wiped out.

6. To eclipse Hamas' governmental structure and symbols of power, i.e. ministerial premises and education, health and social welfare societies, as well



as the offices and homes of its high officials and senior commanders.

Almost all these targets were flattened.

Wednesday, Dec. 31, **Nizar Ariyan**, a high-profile terrorist operative, climbed out of one of the tunnels for a morale-boosting mission. He walked through the streets and shouted to dispirited passers-by that Hamas leaders had not fled or lost control of government and were managing the war from bunkers.

The next day, an Israeli bomber killed him on a visit to his apartment.

Hamas rallies, extends missile reach to 60 km

Israel's Gaza operation showed at least six defects:

- On Day 3, Monday, Dec. 29, the Israeli Air Force had run out of pre-determined targets and was picking out random hits.
- Hamas was allowed to start rallying from the devastating blows of the first three days.
- Whereas Israeli intelligence had calculated that Hamas would hit back with 200 missiles and rockets a day, from Monday, they launched no more than 80. But that scale too was enough to place a million Israelis within range and in lockdown, quadrupling the pre-war figure pinned down by Palestinian missiles.
- Israeli intelligence estimated before the war that the furthest reach of Hamas rockets was 42 km. By Thursday, Jan. 1, they were hitting locations, hitherto considered safe, 60 km from the Gaza Strip border.
- Hamas became inured to Israel air strikes and fell into a routine of hitting Israeli towns almost without pause. Its remaining stocks are enough to keep the barrage going for another two months. The Palestinian Islamists are therefore reconciled to carrying out a lengthy war of attrition until a life-belt is extended from some quarter, even if it comes in the form of an enforced truce.



Therefore, the Hamas prime minister of Gaza, **Ismail Haniya**, said in his first (taped) speech Tuesday, Dec. 30, that his forces would not halt the war and its missile offensive until Israel promised to open all six Gaza crossings to the unrestricted passage of Palestinian people and goods.

Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority are all fiercely opposed to complying with this demand, because it would be tantamount to recognizing the legitimacy of Hamas rule over the Gaza Strip.

- Senior IDF officers believe a tactical and psychological mistake was made in omitting to follow the first stage of the aerial offensive with an immediate ground incursion by armored and infantry forces. This would have prevented Hamas from recovering its second wind. It is widely believe that this incursion has been scheduled for the end of this week or early next.
- Israel's leaders are not clear about their final objectives. Will halting the eight-year long missile war suffice to end the Israeli offensive or must Hamas first be wiped out as a military and political force?

If the latter, then what is to become of the Gaza Strip at the end of the war? Which Arab government will want to take over a virtual bomb site?

Can Hamas handle guerrilla warfare?

Hamas has developed a detailed plan for withstanding an Israeli invasion, whose main points are outlined in ***HOT POINTS*** of Jan. 1 below.

The Palestinian terrorists have no intention of battling Israel's armored columns or entering into hand to hand combat with Israeli infantry. The bulk of its army will stay safe in their underground bunkers and let the Israeli seize most of the Gaza Strip against sparse resistance.

Once Israeli siege troops are dug in around Palestinian towns, Hamas gunmen and suicide bombers positioned in civilian homes will come out at night and pick them off. As the war wears on, they calculate that Israeli casualties will mount.

The question now is how Hamas will stand up to its second blow, an Israeli invasion, and whether it is capable of developing a guerrilla campaign. The Gaza conflict is therefore far from over.

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The Gaza Conflict: A Diplomatic Rupture

America's Two Key Mid-East Military Allies Thrown Apart



One of the most serious casualties of Israel's offensive against Hamas is the rupture between America's two foremost military Middle East allies, Turkey and Israel. This falling-out is extremely detrimental and unlikely to be mended as long as **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** is Turkey's prime minister.

For six months, Erdogan sponsored indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria, initiated by Israeli prime minister **Ehud Olmert**. Nothing came of the talks, but the Turkish premier enjoyed the role of mediator.

On Dec. 22, Olmert flew to Ankara for dinner with Erdogan and an appeal to arrange for the talks to be switched to a direct channel. He spent six hours trying to persuade the Turkish leader to issue a statement to this effect. Erdogan was unmoved.

According to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** sources, the senior Turkish mediator **Daoud Togonalu** was sitting in the next room and holding an open line to Damascus and the Syrian delegate to the talks, **Riyad Daoudi**.

Togonalu paid out a running report on the Olmert-Erdogan conversation. But the Syrian official did not bother to brief the presidential office in Damascus, because he had been armed in advance with strict orders dictated by president **Bashar Assad** in person to block any suggestion of direct talks with Israel at any level.

The Israeli prime minister, catching on that his host had lined up with the Syrian president, returned home tired and disappointed.

Our sources in Ankara and Jerusalem disclose that during their conversation, the Turkish leader asked how Israel was planning to handle Hamas and its missile blitz from the Gaza Strip. The question arose because three days earlier, Hamas had blasted Ashkelon and Sderot with 21 missiles and rockets, shortly after Hamas politburo chief **Khaled Meshaal** announced formally that the six-month "truce" negotiated with Israel through Egypt was over.

Olmert calmed Erdogan's concern by assuring him that Israel was not about to start a military operation in Gaza and that he knew how to silence the hawks at home.

Israel accused of "disrespect" for Turkey

On Dec. 24, the day after Olmert returned from Ankara, Hamas unleashed a 60-missile and mortar barrage on a line of Israeli Negev communities as well as Ashkelon port, Sderot and Netivot.

The following day, a Lebanese fellah discovered 8 brand-new Iranian-made rockets with the markings of factory serial numbers in a pit. They were rigged to fire at the northern coastal town of Nahariya from a point near the border.

Friday, Dec. 26, Olmert summoned defense minister **Ehud Olmert** and foreign minister **Tzipi Livni** for a secret conclave in Tel Aviv to discuss the security deterioration on two fronts. They decided there and then that the time for restraint was over. The next day, Saturday, Dec. 27, Israeli bombers were thundering over the Gaza Strip.

The Turkish prime minister was livid. He felt cheated by Olmert, who five days earlier had promised him that no military action was afoot for Gaza. A seething Erdogan said publicly only: "We also told [Olmert] that we could offer help with Egypt in disputes concerning Israel-Palestine and Gaza-Israel."

He then accused Israel of "merciless" attacks and "disrespect" toward Turkey, which has been exerting efforts for regional peace, by launching the attacks only days after the two prime ministers had met.

In private, he was more scathing towards Israel and its prime minister, accusing him of stabbing him in the back and denouncing the Gaza attacks as war crimes.

That was not the end of Erdogan's anger. He forced deputy chairman of the Turkish-Israeli Inter-parliamentary Friendship group, Egemen Bagis, to resign as a mark of protest against the Israeli air strikes in Gaza.

Next, he announced he was embarking on a truce mission around Arab capitals and deliberately left Jerusalem off his schedule. From that moment on, he began taking the lead of an emerging anti-Israel Arab front taking shape.

Wednesday, Dec. 31, he was in Damascus for talks with president **Bashar Assad**, followed by Amman and meetings with **King Abdullah II** and Palestinian Authority chairman **Mahmoud Abbas**. Thursday, he joined Egyptian president **Hosni Mubarak** in Cairo and Saturday, he is due to fly to Riyadh to meeting with **King Abdullah**.

The close Turkish-Israeli military pact in jeopardy



Asked in Damascus if his itinerary included Jerusalem, Erdogan said he had no such plans at the moment.

"Turkey is deeply concerned by the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza and the Middle East's entry into a spiral of violence," he said.

In Ankara, president **Abdullah Gul** pulled out the stops to bring the military, which has worked closely with Israel's generals for decades, round to the government line.

A written statement was issued on Dec. 31, to the effect that Turkey's military leadership has decided to join the government in its call for an immediate end to Israel's attacks in Gaza.

"The meeting presided over by president Gul and the National Security Council brought together Turkey's top civilian and military leaders."

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's military sources report that the Turkish prime



minister appears to be angry enough to call off the regular joint Turkish-Israeli maneuvers.

If he perseveres in bringing the relationship to crisis point, the repercussions for US Middle East policy will be grave.

1. For years, the intimate military cooperation between Ankara and Jerusalem was a linchpin of Washington's regional security: Israeli fighters have been stationed and trained at Turkish air bases and Israeli warships docked at Turkish naval bases – and the reverse. These links may be about to be suspended.

2. The US, Turkey and Israel maintain close intelligence-sharing relations for the war on terror. These relations may also be tossed out.

3. According to information reaching Washington and Jerusalem, the Turkish prime minister is aligning his Middle East stance with that of French president **Nicolas Sarkozy** and the Qatari emir, **Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani**, both of whom have chosen to turn their backs on Washington and its Middle East positions.

Last-minute bulletin: When Erdogan arrived in Cairo Thursday, Jan. 1, in the course of his mission to mediate a truce in Gaza, he was met by an enraged **Hosni Mubarak**, who turned on him and asked what he was playing at by siding with the worst enemies of Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

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HOT POINTS

A Digest of DEBKAfile Round-the-Clock Exclusives in the Weeks Ending Jan.1, 2009

Hamas misled, surprised by Israeli air offensive

27 Dec. In an air offensive dubbed "Cast Lead," Saturday, Dec. 27, some 60 Israeli bombers struck 100 targets, destroying dozens of Hamas military compounds across the Gaza Strip in reprisal for the Palestinian long-term missile blitz.

The operation had two elements of surprise.

1. Official sources leaked media reports Friday, Dec. 25, conveying the impression that the major military operation approved by the Israeli cabinet had been called off.

2. Egypt misled Hamas, reporting reliable information that Israeli would not strike on Saturday, its Sabbath Day.

Olmert: Israel's objective is normal life for southern citizens

27 Dec. Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert defined the objective of the Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip as "improving the lives of citizens in the South and giving them a normal life." He addressed a televised speech to the nation Saturday night, Dec. 27, flanked by defense minister Ehud Barak and foreign minister Tzipi Livni. On possible outside intervention, he warned that Israel would not hesitate to fight off any aggression. He also vowed to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

At the same time, Hamas' Damascus-based politburo chief Khalad Meshaal outlined his objective for a ceasefire as being "an end to the Israeli siege" and opening of all the crossings into Gaza including the Rafah gate to Egypt. He called on West Bank Palestinians to launch an "intifada."

An Iranian aid ship due to dock in Gaza in 12 days

27 Dec. Iran's Red Crescent will send an aid shipment to the Gaza strip "in the face of the Israeli blockade," according to a state broadcast Friday. The cargo of 2,000 tonnes of food and medicines accompanied by 12 Iranian doctors will sail from Bandar Abbas, HQ of the Revolutionary Guards Navy, and arrive Tuesday, Jan. 6.

Israel air force pummels Hamas forces, blows up 40 Philadelphi tunnels

28 Dec. DEBKAF's military sources report that Hamas kept a reserve fighting force in and around the smuggling tunnels they dug under the Philadelphi border strip between the Gaza Strip and Egyptian Sinai. Sunday, Dec. 28, Day 2 of the Israeli air offensive, the Israeli air force struck 40 tunnels between 3 and 15 meters deep – some packed with explosives or fuel stocks. The heavy bombs triggered secondary blasts in a chain reaction.

A crowd of Palestinians trying to flee the Gaza Strip were stopped by heavy machine gun fire from Egyptian forces.

Chief of staff Lt. Gen. Gaby Ashkenazi reported to the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem that the first wave of air strikes in Gaza Saturday destroyed 50 percent of the "missile pits" which Hamas had scattered around the territory, some containing missiles operated by remote control.

Gaza Operation Day 2: Israel calls up 6,500 reservists, Hamas steps up long-range rocket attacks

28 Dec. The Israeli cabinet Sunday, Dec. 28, approved call-up orders for 6,500 reservists the day after Israel's devastating assault on hundreds of Hamas military sites in Gaza. Hamas activated its Iran-made improved Grad Katyusha unit, sending rockets as far north as Moshav Bnei Ayish near Yavne to the northeast and the big port city of Ashdod to the north, both nearly 40 km from the Gaza Strip. One fell in the yard of an Ashdod home. Two landed in Ashkelon, injuring three people.

The Israeli assault on Hamas continues to focus on aerial action.

Israel air strikes continue in S. Gaza after 271 killed in earlier raids of Hamas sites

28 Dec. Massive Israeli air raids destroyed Hamas compounds across Gaza leaving 271 dead and hundreds injured after a week in which Hamas fired 200 missiles at Israeli civilian targets.

Also hit was a Hamas military officers' passing-out ceremony in which several police chiefs were killed. The Israeli military spokesman said the Gaza operation is "just beginning" and would be expanded and intensified as necessary. Hamas and other Palestinian factions ordered its "fighters to avenge Israeli attacks." An Israeli man was killed in Netivot in its first reprisal raid.

Egypt condemned Israel for its military attack, but held Hamas responsible for refusing to heed warnings and failing to protect the Palestinian people. It has mobilized its rescue and medical services in Sina to aid Palestinian casualties.

The Israeli air attack began 11.00 a.m. local time Saturday, Dec. 27, eight days after Hamas terminated the informal Gaza ceasefire by showering missiles and mortar rounds on 250,000 Israeli civilians.

Since Israel evacuated the Gaza Strip in 2005, the Palestinians have fired

6,000 missiles.

Israeli bank interest slashed

29 Dec. The Bank of Israeli governor, Stanley Fischer, reduced interest by 0.75% to all-time low of 1.75%. he accused the commercial banks of not passing the saving on to their clients.

Hizballah leader thinks time is running out for Israel. Oil rises on possible Gaza invasion

29 Dec. Hassan Nasrallah in his second speech in two days on the Gaza crisis Monday, Dec. 29, did not offer to help Hizballah's Hamas allies, only advice. In his view, Israel cannot hold out for long with its air attacks but is wary of sending ground troops into battle because it expected a high casualty toll. Israel's Deputy chief of staff Maj. Dan Harel warned: The campaign has just started. It won't be quick. The worst part is not behind us but still ahead and we must be ready."

The Israeli officer added after dozens of air strikes and naval bombardment from the sea Monday: "Not a single Hamas house is left standing."

A possible Israeli invasion of Gaza has produced tangible international economic fallout: Oil prices have risen past \$40 the barrel, the dollar has slumped 1.5% against the main world currencies and the price of gold shot past \$882 an ounce.

FM spokesman in Tehran: Iran has begun preparing operations against Israel

29 Dec. On Day 3 of Israel's Gaza operation, the spokesman said Iran had embarked on preparations for operations against Israel in line with the directives laid down by supreme ruler Ayatollah Ali Khomeini in his speech Sunday.

In his speech, Khomeini issued a fatwa calling on Muslims to stand up and defend Palestinians against Israel. He said "true believers" were "duty-bound to defend" the Palestinians. Khomeini did not spell out what he intended. The foreign ministry statement said believers killed in their cause would be counted martyrs.

A group of hardline clerics is signing up volunteers to fight "against the Zionist regime" in the Gaza Strip "in either military, financial or propaganda fields."

DEBKAFfile: Egypt has led widespread Arab voices blaming Hamas for the Gaza crisis and accusing Iran of manipulating the Palestinian cause as a power play for its own ends.

Two Israeli armored divisions stand by outside Gaza

29 Dec. A Hamas truck carrying Grad rockets was blown up in Jebalya by an Israeli air strike.

The most important mission carried out by the Israeli Air Force Sunday was the destruction of 40 smuggling tunnels, severing Hamas' arms, fuel, ammunition and reinforcements lifeline from Iran and Syria via Egyptian Sinai.

Whereas Saturday, Israeli bombers struck with missiles, Sunday, they dropped Guided Bomb Unit-28 (GBU-28) on the Philadelphi tunnels. This laser-guided, 5,000-pound conventional munition was developed for

penetrating hardened Iraqi command centers located deep underground. It carries a 4,400-pound penetrating warhead.

Day 4 of Israeli operation: Israel military and Shin Bet deny recommending 48-hour truce

30 Dec. In Hamas' first public statement, a masked spokesman read out a "Jihad Letter, which said: "The sea of Gaza will run dry before Hamas surrenders. If Israeli attacks, Palestinian children will gather up their soldiers' body parts."

An Israeli officer told DEBKAF that even a small incursion of 1-2 km inside the Gaza Strip might ease the missile pressure on civilian towns and villages, by making Hamas units focus on self-defense instead of launching missiles.

On Day 3 of the conflict, Hamas overcame the havoc Israel's electronic warfare wrought to its communications system by deploying runners using every means of transport, from bikes to donkeys, to keep the chain of command intact.

Hamas' most pressing problem is morale. The top level of Hamas, government heads and commanders, including their "chief of staff" Ahmed Jabari and chiefs of divisions, battalions and companies, are hunkered down in underground bunkers, afraid to surface for fear of being struck down by Israel bombers alerted by Shin Bet intelligence spotters. Resentment of this is growing in Hamas ranks, including the missile crews who operate in the open and whose numbers have swelled the death toll.

Czech Foreign Minister defends Israeli strikes

30 Dec. The Czech foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg, who takes over the European Union's presidency on Jan. 1, defended Israel's right to strike Hamas.

"Let us realize one thing:" he said. "Hamas increased steeply the number of rockets fired at Israel since the cease-fire ended on December 19. That is not acceptable any more. Israel has the right to defend itself," he said after France condemned Israel's operation against Hamas and called on both to stop fighting immediately.

The Czech foreign minister indirectly blamed the Palestinian group for the growing civilian death toll, saying it put its bases and gun warehouses in densely populated areas.

Three Israelis killed, 32 injured in 100 Hamas missile attacks Monday

30 Dec. On Day 4 of Israel's Gaza operation, Hamas hit back hard with volleys of rockets and missiles at points closer to central Israel than ever before. The three Israeli dead were IDF career officer, Sgt. Maj. Lutfi Nasr e-Din, 38, from Daliat Hacarmel, at Nahal Oz, a woman motorist, Irit Sheetrit, 39, who sought shelter in the Ashdod bus terminus, 30 km from Gaza, and earlier in Ashkelon, Hani al-Mahdi, 27, a construction worker from the Bedouin Negev village of Ar'ur.

At the Nahal Oz facility, seven soldiers were injured, one critically, by incoming Palestinian mortar fire. Hamas' night barrage also struck Ashdod, Ofakim, Yavne (25 minutes drive from Tel Aviv), Netivot, Sderot and Shear Hanegv. Ashkelon was battered day and night. Ofakim, like Yavne, was hit for the first time by 3 missiles and suffered five injured.

Following this barrage, the Homeland Command extended the radius of

schools that would not reopen Tuesday, Dec. 30, after the Hanukkah holiday from 20km to 30km.

Overnight, the Israeli air force pounded the Hamas-ruled government compound in Gaza City, hitting the prime minister's office, and the foreign, finance and interior ministry buildings and Hamas command centers. The Palestinians raised their death toll to 360.

Israeli cabinet resolves to continue offensive against Hamas, MDA at top alert

31 Dec. Prime minister Ehud Olmert said: "Israel held back for years and finally decided to try a ceasefire. But it was violated by Hamas." His office said the French 48-hour truce idea was not on the table. If conditions change and a solution that guarantees a better security situation in southern Israel comes up, we will reconsider. But we are not there yet.

From Wednesday night, Magen David Adom goes on highest level of preparedness in all parts of Israel in view of the widening radius of Hamas missile attacks and forecasts for the coming weekend. For the first time in its history, MDA has enlisted hundreds of volunteers to man more than 600 ambulances, some brought out of emergency stores.

Hamas broadens rocket scope Wednesday, firing every few minutes

31 Dec. On Day 5 of the Gaza conflict, Wednesday, Dec. 31, Hamas loosed a massive hail of 35 rockets and missiles every few minutes as far as the 40 km-extremity of Beersheba, Ashdod, Yavne. DEBKAFfile's military sources attributed the Hamas recovery to three causes:

1. Heavy rain and mist over the region which inhibited Israeli air force action against missile sites in Gaza.
2. Hamas restored its chain of command.
3. It managed to transport large quantities of missiles from underground caches to firing positions.

Belatedly, by Tuesday night, the Israeli war command appreciated its error in omitting to launch a limited ground incursion on Day 3 of the campaign. Israeli leaders wasted precious time in futile discussions on international demands for a ceasefire, which had no chance of holding up.

Now, Israeli tanks and armored forces must wait for the weather to clear while watching Hamas broaden its swathe of attacks and suspect it of holding in reserve rockets with a range of 50-55 km, bringing them ever closer to central Israel.

Day 5 of Gaza operation: Beersheba under intensive Hamas rocket attack

31 Dec. Nine sophisticated, heavy Grad rockets had hit Beersheba by the end of Day 5 of the Israeli operation against Hamas, Wednesday Dec. 31. Most exploded in built-up areas. One dropped through the ceiling of an empty classroom. Twenty-one shock victims taken were hospitalized.

Beersheba's 250,000 citizens were ordered to stay close to solid buildings and schools shut until further notice. Beersheba University suspended studies. Missiles also struck Netivot, Ofakim, Yavne, the Eshkol farming district and Sderot, causing damage and light injuries. Omer and Hatzerim went on their first missile alert.

Beersheba is the largest town and the most distant, 40 km, from Gaza ever to come under rocket attack. When citizens complained the alert sirens were not

working, soldiers were posted to operate them manually. Local radio stations update Homeland Command directives to residents in several languages - including Russian and Amharic for new immigrants

Tuesday, as Palestinian missile and rockets against several Israeli towns and villages mounted to 50, Israel called up another 2,500 reservists and rejected ceasefire calls as premature.

The call-up order raises the number of reservists Israel has mobilized for the Gaza operation to 9,200. Israeli tank, infantry, armored and artillery units are massed outside the northern, central and southern Gaza Strip awaiting orders to go in.

Hamas plans to defeat Israeli ground incursion with epic "last stand" at Gaza City

1 Jan. Hamas strategists expect the Israeli ground operation to start with a simultaneous three-prong incursion of armor and special forces from the north, the east and the south. The invaders will occupy most of the 40x20-kilometer area of the Gaza Strip within 5 to 7 days at most, skirting and encircling Gaza City and other main towns. They will then, according to Hamas' calculations, carve the territory up into five pockets:

Pocket 1 will extend from the southernmost Philadelphi belt on the Egyptian border up to the southern outskirts of Khan Younis. Israeli units will then set about destroying the hundreds of smuggling tunnels.

Pocket 2 will cover the Khan Younes district up to the Kissufim junction.

Pocket 3 will cover the central region of the Gaza Strip up to the Karni Crossing, including the Moazi and El Bureij refugee camps.

Pocket 4 will encompass Jebalya, Beit Hanoun, Beit Lahiya, the primary rocket and missile sites, up to the northern border with Israel.

Pocket 5 An Israeli force will encircle Gaza City and send detachments into the town to liquidate Hamas targets and terrorist operatives.

Hamas believes the IDF force will be at its most vulnerable when its Gaza City siege force is faced with an active fighting front of 3,000-5,000 armed Palestinians. By day, they will mingle with the civilian population and by night emerge from hideouts in private homes to hit the Israeli armored forces from the rear with anti-tank weapons and suicide bombers.

The Palestinian group's leaders are counting on wearing the Israeli forces down over weeks and inflicting enough casualties to drive them into an ignominious retreat.

Thousands of Hamas combatants have begun infiltrating Gaza City and taking over civilian apartments after shedding their uniforms.

DEBKAFfile's military sources disclose that Israel's war planners have factored Hamas' thinking into their calculations and built tactics to catch them unawares.

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