

Gaza: The Silver Lining?

The Israeli-Palestinian divide is so deep and the world has so many pressing economic and security challenges, it's no surprise that many foreign-policy experts put the Middle East low on any US priority list. But the longstanding plight of millions of Palestinians in the occupied zones reverberates and captures attention far beyond the region, explains Yale professor Gustav Ranis. Organizing aid flotillas, activists test Israel's will to enforce its blockade and document any brutality. Israel's hard-line stance divides its allies and unites Muslim nations in opposition. Reliance on force speeds radicalization of opponents throughout the Middle East and creates new security threats. The globe is impatient over this conflict. Every foreign-policy move in the region is scrutinized for the fairness promised by US President Barack Obama. Continuing Israeli obstinacy, bias, shortsightedness erode credibility for the US. – YaleGlobal

US focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could lift a bleak outlook for the Middle East

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Crisis management? The world looks on as Israelis block an aid flotilla and peace talks languish

NEW HAVEN: The flotilla incident off Gaza serves to remind us of the broad spillover effects of the long-simmering conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. And they place a big question mark on the view of some, for example Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, that stepping forward now to help solve this conflict represents a major and unwise distraction for the US.

Haass suggests that the Obama administration should keep its eyes

on the nation's many far-from-solved domestic issues and many international trouble spots that require urgent attention. According to that view, the US should not spend scarce diplomatic capital on an endeavor that has not yielded results over many decades, and is even less likely to do so now.

On its face, this seems to make good sense. The US domestic and foreign-policy plate is indeed overflowing, as the administration watches over and, hopefully, winds down two

wars; a European debt crisis that could impede domestic economic recovery; a nuclear challenge from Iran that is escalating; another from North Korea that remains unresolved; a potential powder keg in Pakistan; and a challenge from China that has yet to be properly defined, never mind addressed.

On top of all this, the US must constantly guard against terrorist threats that are increasingly serious and increasingly global.

Should the Israel/Palestine issue then be mothballed once again? This dispute is admittedly focused on a tiny piece of land, 360 square kilometers, in the Middle East.

Yet we cannot but notice that the conflict captures attention far beyond that neighborhood. Opposition to the Gaza blockade has the attention not only of every Arab in the region and every militant Muslim in Iran, but also of most moderate Muslims in such faraway places as Indonesia, Malaysia, India and Nigeria.

Turkey, once a sturdy friend of the West, now distances itself from the shrinking “international community.” And it is not, as US Defense Secretary Robert Gates has claimed, because of the European Union’s reluctance to admit Turkey into membership. Even presumably less intensely interested third parties around the world, such as those in Europe and Latin America, attach importance to the character of the longstanding U.S. effort to fashion a solution to this particular conflict.

In nations that are Israel’s most stalwart allies, citizens scrutinize the policies and question Israel’s tactics like the Gaza blockade. Plans are underway for another flotilla to test that blockade this fall, including ships from the US, Europe, India, Canada, South Africa and the Middle East.

In late July, the UN Rights Committee urged Israel to lift its military blockade of the Gaza Strip and allow an independent investigation of the May raid on the aid flotilla. Israel has since agreed to cooperate with the UN investigation.

What is at stake here is not just the ability to help settle one of many international disputes, but the credibility of US President Barack Obama’s announced shift to greater evenhandedness in dealing with it. Any indication that this administration will, after all, follow the path of least resistance and revert to its customary pro-Israel stance can be counted on to cost the US dearly in many current and future trouble spots around the world. Admittedly, Al Qaeda’s methods or objectives are presumably not affected either way. But any shift from evenhandedness could, for example, sway the Iranian

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opposition's willingness to shift from a "down with the US" to a "down with the dictator."

Some believe, along with apparently a majority of Israelis, that the Israel/Palestinian conflict is currently not ripe for ambitious diplomacy and that the US should focus instead on repairing any frayed ties with Israel while concentrating on Iran and its nuclear program.

But when will the time ever be ripe? The parties to this conflict have pursued the well-worn Oslo blueprint for decades with arms' length help from the US, without success. Time clearly is not on the side of reaching a two-state solution.

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Before Israel's May attack on the flotilla delivering aid, there were signs of a possible rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas and even a willingness on Hamas' part to consider a recognition of Israel's right to exist, along the lines of the Arab League's peace proposal, which is still on the table. If the Quartet – the United Nations, the EU, Russia and an indispensable US, in the lead – were willing to face reality, it would have to recognize that achieving a two-state solution requires participation of Hamas as well as Fatah.

It is often conveniently forgotten that Hamas won the election in Gaza fair and square. Admittedly, the US has labeled Hamas a terrorist organization and refused to deal with it, but this was true of the Stern Gang as well before the creation of Israel. It is relevant to recall that Obama wisely pointed out, both during the presidential campaign and since, that the US must talk to its enemies, not just its friends, to make progress.

Bringing Hamas into negotiations, both intra-Palestinian and with Israel, will undoubtedly raise hackles both in Israel, which already distrusts Obama, and in the US, where both the evangelicals and the Jewish lobby strive to out-hawk Netanyahu. It is hard to believe that it's impossible to convince Israelis that a policy of relying on force and standing pat is bound to be short-lived. Demography and the march of competitive technology militate against Israel over time, and so is the fact that Egypt and Saudi Arabia, possibly Jordan as well, are bound to become more radicalized once current leaders move on. Israel must realize that maintaining its current position of standing firm can eventually only culminate in a slide towards an unacceptable one-state solution.

As to the US, there are signs that rank-and-file Jews, in contrast to leadership voices, while still supportive of Israel, are ready to criticize policies when they appear detrimental to Israel's own long-term security interests. Peter Beinart in a recent *New York Review of Books* article pointed out that especially younger, non-orthodox Jews are currently less ready to find themselves in lockstep with a hard-right

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Israeli government. General David Petraeus recently pointed out that US ability to win over moderates in the Muslim world is endangered by an inability to settle this conflict equitably.

The possibility that Israel could become a liability rather than an asset for the US is no longer viewed as so farfetched.

It is time for those tepid indirect talks between the principals, apparently going on fitfully despite recent events, to morph into direct talks. The Arab League has just urged this on both sides. Even when a situation looks hopeless, tensions can ease, as was demonstrated in Northern Ireland. And a determined Quartet demarche, with the US in the lead, could be extremely helpful right now.

As unpleasant, even dangerous, as current events and so much finger-pointing may be, this Gaza cloud may have a silver lining after all – well beyond the short-term easing of Israel's Gaza blockade. It should remind all parties that Hamas cannot be ignored, if the US is serious about working energetically towards a two-state solution before the possibility fully recedes from sight. The aftermath of the flotilla incident represents a crisis that would be exceedingly costly to waste.

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