

Talking Points on the Current Situation in the Gaza Strip January 3, 2009

From the Jewish Council for Public Affairs

For years Israel has sought reconciliation with the Palestinian people on the basis of two states living side by side in peace and security. It has been negotiating to achieve that goal with the Palestinian Authority (PA) under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayad, and, in recent months, significant strides have been made to enhance the security and economic situation for Palestinians living in the West Bank.

On the other hand, Hamas, which is unabashedly dedicated to Israel's destruction -- and recognized widely by the international community as a terrorist organization -- ousted the PA from Gaza in a violent 2006 coup.

It also should be remembered that Israel unilaterally dismantled settlements and withdrew its troops from Gaza in 2005. Thus, it cannot be argued that there is Israeli "occupation" in Gaza. Instead of using Israel's withdrawal to create better living conditions for the population there, Hamas has used the last two years to turn Gaza into a terrorist base. It has created a series of tunnels from the Sinai, which are used to bring sophisticated weapons into Gaza, including from Iran.

The goal of the current Israeli military operation in Gaza, which should be the goal of diplomacy at the UN and in world capitals as well, is to create conditions that will prevent Hamas from continuing to rain rockets down on cities in southern Israel. Over 10,000 rockets have been launched against Israeli civilian population centers during the last eight years. Israel now is engaged in stopping the rockets and destroying the tunnels.

When a rocket is fired indiscriminately into Israeli population centers, as has happened hundreds of times in the past two weeks, Israelis literally have 15 seconds to run for cover. Imagine what daily life is under such conditions, from simply taking a shower to putting a child on a bus to go to school.

The fundamental responsibility of any government is to protect its citizens from external attacks and threats. If rockets were being fired at American cities, we would expect the U.S. government to take the necessary action to protect our people.

A couple of weeks ago, Hamas declared an end to the six-month "lull" that had been brokered by Egypt and intensified the attacks against Israel. Indeed, almost one hundred rockets were fired on December 25, Christmas day.

Israel, as always, is doing everything within its power to limit non-combatant casualties in Gaza, an enormous challenge since Hamas intentionally operates within heavily populated neighborhoods, as well as in schools and mosques. Israel often puts its soldiers at greater risk in order to minimize non-combatant casualties. Even Palestinian statistics show that the vast majority of fatalities are combatants, not civilians. Nevertheless, we know that innocents inevitably will lose their lives on both sides, and we deeply mourn these losses.

Some express anger over the disparity in casualty figures. This is explained, in part, by the fact that Israel does all it can to protect its citizens, while Hamas uses non-combatants in Gaza as human shields in contravention of basic international norms.

While carrying out military actions against the Hamas terrorist infrastructure, Israel continues

to facilitate caravans of trucks transferring humanitarian relief supplies to the Palestinian civilian population in Gaza.

There will be enormous pain and suffering in the short term, but the weakening of Hamas in Gaza could lead to an opening to expand Israeli-Palestinian cooperation toward a durable and sustainable peace.

IN ADDITION, as much as possible, it is important to personalize the situation. Following is a very personal piece by Yossi Klein Halevi.