



Israel and Gaza: A Matter of Public Diplomacy?

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The Conflict in Gaza 2021: Hamas, Israel, and Eleven Days of War
by Jacob Nagel and Jonathan Schanzer

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Jacob Nagel and Jonathan Schanzer's *Gaza Conflict 2021: Hamas, Israel, and Eleven Days of War*, based on Schanzer's book of the same title published by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, tries to explain the background and the motives for the conflict between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 (Operation Guardian of the Walls) and discuss its bilateral and regional implications. The authors state in their introduction that the aim of the book is to explain Operation Guardian of the Walls, its context, and the reasons it erupted, and to enable readers to become familiar with the Hamas movement and how it rules Gaza (p. 20).

The book comprises 21 chapters followed by conclusions, discusses the background of the intra-Palestinian relations between Fatah and Hamas and Israel-Hamas relations, and surveys questions of arms and technology in Hamas-Iran relations. Two chapters are dedicated to the confrontation itself: Chapter 9 explores technological aspects of weapons use and the increase in Hamas's strength, which was revealed during the fighting. Chapter 13 deals with the unrest in Israel's cities with mixed Jewish and Arab populations, which was one of the unusual characteristics of this confrontation. The confrontation is interwoven in many other chapters that explain related phenomena, but in itself is not at their center.

The 2021 conflict was unique, unlike what Israel had previously confronted. It was characterized by simultaneous developments on multiple fronts: riots and friction in cities with mixed Jewish and Palestinian populations; rockets from the Gaza Strip; terror attacks from the West Bank and small-scale popular protests there; and above all the perception that Jerusalem and the holy places were the element driving all other fronts. Understanding this conflict and drawing the correct conclusions from it require the perspective of time, in-depth study, and analysis of the events that preceded the conflict and those that followed.

The book meets only some of these expectations. Readers curious about the conflict with the Palestinians will want to know more, because the book is limited to certain aspects, and those who follow Israel's relations with Hamas will not necessarily find new content here. The thesis that can be inferred from the book is that the conflict between Israel and Hamas is not the primary issue; the primary conflict results from the wide-scale threat Iran presents to Israel and the region. In this view Hamas is merely one part of the Iranian axis across the region, just like Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Several points catch the reader's attention, including:

a. *Cancellation of the elections*: In the introduction the authors complain that the Israeli media ignored Abu Mazen's decision to cancel the elections scheduled for May 2021, and state that due to this cancellation " Hamas tried to win the hearts and minds of the Palestinian people by other means—namely, fomenting conflict with Israel" (p. 19). But in the next chapter, they contend that "wars begin when the first shots are fired" (p. 23). Likewise in Chapter 9 on the actual military confrontation, they do not connect the canceled elections directly to the outbreak of the conflict. This disparity suggests that in the introduction, the authors, rather than claiming that the cancellation of the elections led to the breakout of war, sought to protest the media ignoring the cancellation or Abu Mazen's responsibility for the conflict. The authors partially describe the weakness of the Palestinian Authority, the rivalry between Fatah and Hamas, and the domestic political situation, but completely ignore the substantial contribution of Israel and the Trump administration to the PA's weakness. Both Israel, through years of ignoring the PA, and the Trump administration, through an insulting political plan ("the deal of the century") cast Abu Mazen and the PA as marginal and useless in the eyes of the Palestinians. This is an extremely dominant element in comparison to the other factors behind this weakness that the authors do discuss. Hamas, which wagered on those elections and pressed hard to make them happen in the framework of reconciliation talks with Fatah, due to its chances of winning in many districts, felt that the cancellation pulled out the rug from under its feet. It used Jerusalem, where it had already begun to fan the flames, as the glue to bring all the fronts together. The authors merely state that since Hamas launched the opening salvo of rockets, it was the initiator of the war, as if the context has no significance,

and as if this were a trivial matter and not a confrontation between a strong state and nationalist religious resistance/terror organization with a military wing, with interests that compel it to seriously consider the transition from electoral campaign to military conflict.

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- b. *Legitimation*: Abu Mazen's need for public legitimacy is not discussed in the analysis of the moves that preceded the elections and their cancellation. Abu Mazen is presented as a leader loathed by the public, clinging to his seat, and "chosen in an unclear election procedure resembling the selection of the Pope, just without the white smoke... This approach denies the Palestinian people the right to choose its leader for itself" (p. 69). Such a statement flies in the face of what is known to all observers of the Palestinian issue, that Abu Mazen was elected in a legitimate election in 2005 by a large majority of the public, on a platform presented to the public prior to elections of conducting political negotiations and ending the armed struggle. This is a fact that many Israelis tend to ignore, in spite of the fact that in Arab history it is unprecedented. It is worth asking why additional rounds of presidential elections have not been held since then, but the authors do not address this question.
- c. *Inaccuracies*: The authors claim that it is unclear why a few days before Biden was inaugurated, Abu Mazen declared that he would hold elections, when he was not under any public pressure to take such a step (p. 71). In practice, however, European countries led by Germany pushed him ceaselessly to call for elections in the months and years

prior to the announcement. Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel used to tell him how many terms she had been elected to since 2005—the first year of Abu Mazen’s presidency. The Biden administration didn’t demand this publicly, while Israel for its part applied heavy pressure to cancel the elections. From the moment elections were announced the Palestinian system was thrown into chaos. The winds of change blowing in the Palestinian street since elections were announced and the major crisis that was revealed within Abu Mazen’s Fatah movement made it clear that turning back the wheel and canceling the elections would exact a very heavy personal and political price. The correct claim that Abu Mazen sought to challenge Israel or blame it by insisting on holding elections in East Jerusalem ignores his sensitive situation and his need to retain an escape route.

- d. *Unrest in the streets of Israel*: Discord within Israel was one of the most concerning aspects of this conflict. Chapter 13 is devoted specifically to this issue, but it presents the matter in brief as an outburst by Arab rabble (p. 122) incited by Hamas. Sources for this incitement cited by the authors include the head of the American Jewish Committee Avi Mayer (p. 123), but they add, “There’s still not a convincing explanation as to why such violent riots broke out this time” (p. 124). Jerusalem and the holy sites as a motivating and connecting factor is not discussed at all as a potential explanation for the lack of clarity the authors raise. This is one of the central conclusions that must be drawn from this confrontation. Readers who expect explanation of tensions building up over the years in cities with mixed populations, where Jewish religious communities have taken up residence, will not find anything of the sort. The subject necessitates at least a mention of Israeli voices warning about this ongoing friction. It would also have been appropriate to discuss more

broadly the phenomenon of young Jews from the West Bank and other places who traveled to the mixed cities and, according to police officers who were responsible for maintaining order, contributed to the unrest. The authors also, bizarrely, blame the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel for the inequality from which they suffer. They attribute it to non-participation by many of them in elections and to the unwillingness of their parties to join governing coalitions; this is tantamount to claiming that your civil rights are not a function of your citizenship validated by an Israeli ID card, but rather depend on your participation in elections and the mechanism of government.

- e. *Hamas-Iran*: Throughout the book in various contexts the authors emphasize the achievements of Hamas in this war and find that aid and support from Iran are the source of their increased strength as a resistance movement. In the concluding chapter, they even state that Hamas-ruled Gaza is “ground zero” of the wider struggle between Israel and Iran (p. 194). Is their intention that this is not a conflict between a state and a non-state actor, but rather an international conflict? And if not, why do the authors say that this “shows how worthy Israel is of American aid” (p. 195)? It’s true that in this conflict the cooperation between Iran and Hamas was very noticeable, and that Hamas underscored efforts to contribute to the rebuilding of the Iran-led axis of resistance. The heads of Hamas themselves declared that they received extensive assistance in information, funds, and equipment, and emphasized the joint operations rooms that functioned in coordination throughout all the days of fighting. In appreciation they even broadcast the speech by the commander of the Revolutionary Guards on April 28, Jerusalem Day, which was marked by Hamas in Gaza City. But does this mean that Hamas is losing its independence? If so, what distinguishes it from Islamic Jihad? Would it

not be appropriate to clarify this point? Could it be that Hamas would forfeit its aspiration to be an alternative to the Palestinian Authority and become dependent on Iran, while knowing that such linkage would not be accepted by the public? Hamas tends to glorify its independent decision making and make clear that it will be willing to accept any aid, as long as the aid is not conditioned on a political price. Non-participation in the recent round of conflict (Operation Breaking Dawn) between Israel and Islamic Jihad is proof of the independence that Hamas seeks to maintain. The many explanations demanded of the heads of Hamas for this abstention show it was not well-received by the Iranians, in spite of whitewashing attempts by them and by Islamic Jihad.

- f. *Condescending tone:* The authors' point of departure is the attempt to "settle accounts" with the many writers and commentators who appeared before, during, and after this conflict, and analyzed the events in a way that does not accord with their worldview. In the opening chapter they already state that "this book aims to explain that war... better than it was explained at the time, primarily by Israel" (p. 15), or that lack of knowledge led to "flawed news and thin analysis that framed the war as just one more battle" (p. 19). The authors go on to offer readers, in a manner fitting those who believe those who have information or knowledge that others lack, "a better understanding of the history of Hamas, the way it rules Gaza, the inhumane way it fights its wars, and its decisive role in intensifying the conflict with Iran" (p. 20). Chapter 6 is dedicated to the struggle between the Fatah and Hamas movements, which they call "the war that isn't discussed"; the authors claim that international attention to the intra-Palestinian problem is minimal in comparison to the extensive reporting of clashes with Israel. This is a claim that, even if correct, ignores the substantial influence of

the domestic conflict on the decision making processes of the Palestinian Authority and Israel. To a large extent this conflict/division is a burden on all those interested in an Israeli-Palestinian political agreement or in maintaining quiet in the region. It is present, alive, and demonstrably influential on Palestinian daily life. If the authors had delved further into this issue, they would have discovered that to a large extent, and similar to Israel, domestic Palestinian divisions have created a deep social and political chasm, which is present in every household, every family, and every private and public institution. In addition, it has created identity politics, where one's stance on any issue is derived from the stance of the group to which he/she belongs or identifies.

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- g. *Details and sources:* The authors present readers with many details and sources with references throughout all chapters of the book. There is in fact a large collection of sources, but it is highly one-sided. Almost all are in English and there is not a single Arabic source, which impedes the ability to understand a group like Hamas or consider its character and its aspirations. A large portion of the details and sources relate to issues of weapons and technology, which do not necessarily contribute to advancing the stated aim of the book.

In conclusion, this is not an academic work—and rightfully does not present itself as such. The authors repeatedly state their intent of explaining what they believe must be explained, but in practice present challenging arguments on how the conflict between Israel and Hamas, and Hamas's deep connection to Iran, were and are covered.

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