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NEWS ANALYSIS

Parsing Gains of Gaza War



Eyad Baba/Associated Press

Most Palestinians are furious at Israel over damage like that in Rafah, in Gaza's south, but there are signs that Gazans feel such pain that they will rein in Hamas.

By ETHAN BRONNER
Published: January 18, 2009

GAZA — The Parliament building here has been reduced to rubble. The five-story engineering department of the Islamic University is a pile of folded concrete. Police stations, mosques and hundreds of homes have been blown away.

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But now that the battle is over — or has paused, after **Hamas** agreed Sunday to a one-week cease-fire with **Israel** — what has been accomplished is unclear. Have three weeks of overpowering war by Israel here weakened Hamas as Israel had hoped, or simply caused acute human suffering? Israel knew it could not destroy every rocket or kill every Hamas militant. Israel said its central aim was deterrence, to make Hamas lose the will to keep shooting at Israel's cities. Did it succeed?

Israeli officials themselves said Sunday in briefings to the cabinet that even though Hamas institutions had been badly damaged, its militants might well keep shooting rockets just to prove otherwise. The chief of military intelligence, Amos Yadlin, asserted that even Hamas had to figure out how badly it had been harmed.

What is clear is that, despite vague Israeli hopes that Hamas could be completely removed, that has not happened. Much of the group's manpower remains, mostly

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because it made a point of fighting at a distance — or not at all — whenever possible despite the fury of the Israeli advance and bombardment.

The caution is at least in part because Hamas wants to keep ruling in Gaza, not return to its previous role as a pure resistance movement. Therefore, Israeli officials say, an offensive that caused average people to suffer put

pressure on Hamas in real and specific ways.

“Hamas is the dominant organization in Gaza,” a top military official said in a briefing last week that was given on condition of anonymity. “They are the regime and feel very connected to the people. They do not want to lose that connection to the people.”

The Israeli theory of what it tried to do here is summed up in a Hebrew phrase heard across Israel and throughout the military in the past weeks: “baal habayit hishtageya,” or “the boss has lost it.” It evokes the image of a madman who cannot be controlled.

“This phrase means that if our civilians are attacked by you, we are not going to respond in proportion but will use all means we have to cause you such damage that you will think twice in the future,” said Giora Eiland, a former national security adviser.

It is a calculated rage. The phrase comes from business and refers to a decision by a shop owner to cut prices so drastically that he appears crazy to the consumer even though he knows he has actually made a shrewd business decision.

The [Palestinians](#) in Gaza got the message on the first day when Israeli warplanes struck numerous targets simultaneously in the middle of a Saturday morning. Some 200 were killed instantly, shocking Hamas and indeed all of Gaza, especially because Israel’s antirocket attacks in previous years had been more measured.

When Hamas’s prime minister, Ismail Haniya, appeared on Hamas television from his hiding spot last Monday, he picked up on the Israeli archetype, referring in Arabic to the battle under way as “el harb el majnuna,” the mad or crazy war.

For most, of course, feeling abused like this has created deep rage at Israel.

“If you want to make peace with the Palestinians, they are tired of bombs, drones and planes,” said Mohammad Abu Muhaisin, a 35-year-old resident of the southern city of Rafah who is affiliated with [Fatah](#), the rival to Hamas that rules in the West Bank and was ejected from Gaza in June 2007. “But a guy whose child has just been killed doesn’t want peace. He wants war.”

There are, however, limited indications that the people of Gaza felt such pain from this war that they will seek to rein in Hamas.

Halima Dardouna, 37, from the northern city of Jabaliya, whose house was destroyed by an Israeli shell, said both Fatah and Hamas were to blame because of their rivalry, “and we are the victims.”

She added, “I will never vote for Hamas. They are not able to protect the people, and if they are going to bring this on us, why should they be in power? If I thought they could liberate Jerusalem, I would be patient. But instead they bring this.”

For Israel, Hamas’s rule here is anathema. But the fact that the group controls all facets of Gazan society gave Israel a rationale for attacking a wide range of institutions.

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Taghreed El-Khodary and Sabrina Tavernise contributed reporting.

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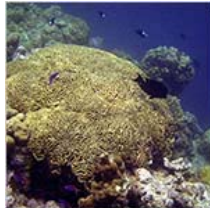
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