



Political

update:– Gaza conflict polarises the Arab world around those who seek practical steps towards securing peace in the region and those who support Hamas – 22 January

Key points:

- Egypt condemns Hamas for provoking Israeli military response
- Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey all support ceasefire negotiations and calls for Palestinian reconciliation under Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas
- Saudi Arabia pledges (US) \$1 billion for Gaza reconstruction effort
- Syria, Qatar and Iran support Hamas' rocket attacks on Israel from Gaza
- Syria calls for the Arab Peace Initiative, which offers normalised relations between Israel and the Arab states, to be scrapped
- Iran funds and supplies Hamas' with rockets and continues to support its arms smuggling from Egypt into Gaza

Divisions in the Middle East

- Egypt was one of the first countries to blame Hamas' rocket attacks against Israel for provoking Israel's military response on 27 December. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said on 28 December that Hamas had ignored Israel's warning that it would respond militarily to rocket attacks. He said:

“For quite some time Egypt has been warning. Whoever tried to confuse or ignore this warning must bear the responsibility. The Prime Minister of Israel warned the Hamas and said: ‘You must stop, otherwise we will take measures in response.’ In response to what? To not renewing the calm, to the rocket fire.” (28/12/08)

- Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, like Egypt also condemned Hamas for provoking an Israeli military response on 27 December, saying on 28 December that “we are against the rocket attacks that we call acts of foolishness.”
- Egypt has been integral in negotiating the current ceasefires, announced on Saturday (17 January) by Israel and Sunday (18 January) by Hamas. Egypt's actions, with the support of Saudi Arabia and Turkey, have contrasted with those of Syria, Qatar and Iran who have supported Hamas' rocket attacks against Israel.
- On 2 January Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak met Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Cairo for discussions on how to end the violence. On 6 January Mubarak made a statement with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, calling for a limited humanitarian truce, to precede negotiations over a full ceasefire. Since then Egypt, which is tasked by the 22 state Arab League with negotiating with Hamas, has

successfully led the ceasefire negotiations. Saudi Arabia is also working closely with Egypt to negotiate a lasting ceasefire between Hamas and Israel.

- Like Egypt, Turkey has been integral to the negotiations that led to the current ceasefires. Following two weeks of shuttle diplomacy between Cairo and Damascus, Turkey's top envoy for the Middle East, Ahmet Davutoglu, offered on Monday (19 January) to mediate between Fatah and Hamas to forge a consensus over a lasting ceasefire in Gaza. Davutoglu said:

“Palestinian reconciliation is a must in order for peace to be lasting... If that is achieved, then the road to peace will be opened.” (19/01/09)

- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in contrast to the efforts of the moderate Arab states, told CNN on 7 January that Syria supports Hamas' cause and “their position as they defend themselves.”
- Two Arab summits in the last week, held in Qatar (16 January) and Kuwait (19-20 January) have further demonstrated the polarisation between those leaders that wanted to work towards a ceasefire and those that wanted the fighting to continue:

Qatar Summit

- Egypt and Saudi Arabia both boycotted a summit of Arab leaders in Doha, Qatar on 16 January. Egypt, which leads the ceasefire negotiations and Saudi Arabia, which has promoted the Arab Peace Initiative (API), reportedly feared that the Doha summit would be used to undermine the efforts of the moderate Arab states.
- The summit was attended by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Syria, as well as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. It was used by Syrian-based Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal to tell the regional leaders that Hamas “will not accept Israel's conditions for a cease-fire.”
- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad also used the Qatar summit to declare the API “dead” because of Israel's operation in the Gaza Strip.

Kuwait Summit

- A second Arab summit on Monday (19 January) and Tuesday (20 January), held in Kuwait, demonstrated the same divisions, with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and Syria and Qatar, failing to come to an agreement on how to deal with the aftermath of the conflict.
- The two-day gathering was expected to announce a fund to reconstruct Gaza and a unified statement about how to end the crisis there. Saudi Arabia, however, was the only Arab country to donate money to the Gazan reconstruction effort, announcing a (US) \$1 billion contribution.
- Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas used the Kuwait summit to call for immediate reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas. He said:

“What is required today... is to form a national unity government which will then conduct presidential and legislative elections simultaneously.” (19/01/09)

- Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak urged the regional powers to accept that a peaceful settlement in the Palestinian territories remains the only realistic option:

“It should be taken seriously by Israel and international big powers... Middle East peace is an urgent necessity” (19/01/09)

- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in opposition to Egypt and the Palestinian Authority, however called for Arab leaders to use the Kuwait summit to adopt a resolution declaring Israel a terrorist entity:

“We should show our clear support for the Palestinian resistance. I suggest this summit officially call the Zionist entity a terrorist entity.” (19/01/09)

- On the day the summit in Kuwait took place, Hamas spokesman Abu Ubeida told journalists in Gaza that the international community cannot prevent Hamas from rearming. He said:

“Do whatever you want. Manufacturing the holy weapons is our mission and we know how to acquire weapons.” (19/01/09)

Iran’s support for Hamas

- Iran, in its support and funding of Hamas, was instrumental in causing the recent Gaza conflict. During the conflict Hamas fired Iranian-produced Grad-Katyusha rockets, smuggled into Gaza from Egypt via underground tunnels, allowing militants to target civilians within 40km of the Gaza strip, putting 900,000 Israelis at risk.
- An Egyptian official involved in the current ceasefire negotiations warned on 11 January that Iran was exerting pressure on Hamas not to accept a ceasefire with Israel. The official said that Ali Larijani, Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, and Said Jalili of the Iranian Intelligence Service, had in the previous week threatened to stop weapons supplies and funding to Hamas if they agreed to a cease-fire with Israel. Larijani and Jalili reportedly met with Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal and Islamic Jihad Secretary-General Ramadan Shallah, in Damascus. During a visit to Lebanon on 8 January Larijani criticised the efforts of the moderate Arab states to negotiate a ceasefire, saying:

“We agree that these proposals do not protect the rights of the Palestinian people. These proposals are proposals ... resembling honey injected with poison.” (8/01/09)

- Iran has also continued to defend Hamas’ smuggling of weapons into Gaza. Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Manouchehr Mottaki, told Iran’s IRNA news agency on Wednesday (21 January) that militants in Gaza had the right to have access to weapons:

“A government or a people who would like to defend themselves, it is very natural they will do their utmost to get weapons from whatever place possible... Resistance struggles around the world, those who struggle against colonialists, it is their right to defend themselves and to stand up to attacks by the enemy and to secure the release of their land, to continue with their struggle... and to do that it is their natural right to have access to weapons.” (21/01/09)

Divisions in Hamas

- The conflict in Gaza has also revealed divisions within Hamas, between the leadership based in Syria, with the support of President Bashar al-Assad’s regime and the leadership based in Gaza. Whilst both elements support the destruction of Israel and rocket attacks against Israeli civilians, the Syrian leadership throughout the conflict expressed even less of a willingness to establish a new ceasefire with Israel.
- Hamas’ Syrian-based leader Khalid Mashaal rejected all ceasefire proposals on 11 January, saying that Hamas will keep fighting. Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas’ leader in

Gaza, however, said in a televised speech that Hamas would cooperate with any initiative that would see an end to the Israeli military operations as well as the reopening of the Gaza crossings.

- Amos Gilad, the head of the Israeli Defense Ministry's diplomatic bureau, played down Mashaal's rejection of the truce proposal, saying:

“The extremist declarations from Damascus come from those who feel safe and immune to attack... I am not sure that the leadership in Gaza feels the same way.” (11/01/09)

- Khaled Meshaal's rejection of all ceasefire proposals on 11 January and at the Arab summit in Doha also contradicted a report in London's al-Sharq al-Awset newspaper on 16 January, that Hamas is prepared to accept a conditional ceasefire with Israel in the Gaza Strip to start on Saturday (17 January).