

Introduction

The recent Middle East peace conference convened on 27 November 2007 in Annapolis rekindled hopes that after a bloody interim of seven years, Israel and the Palestinians would return to the path of negotiations. Representatives of 49 states—including Arab, Islamic, European and Asian countries—convened in Annapolis in support of reviving the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process. At the opening of the conference, Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared that Israelis and Palestinians 'no longer have the privilege of clinging to dreams which are disconnected from the sufferings of our peoples, the hardships they experience daily and the burden of living under ongoing uncertainty, with no chance for change or hope. We want peace'.ⁱ The President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Mahmoud Abbas, reciprocated by saying that Annapolis marks 'a juncture in the history of our region - a juncture between two eras: The Pre-Annapolis era and its aftermath... the possibilities offered by today's conference must not be wasted'.ⁱⁱ

The Annapolis conference reflected, and was a product of, a rare convergence of factors supporting the revival of the peace process: Prime Minister Olmert's and President Abbas' pragmatism; the recent Arab Peace Initiative (API); the realisation by the Bush administration that this was the last chance of rescuing its diplomatic credentials in the Middle East. As such, the process that was begun in Annapolis represents a credible opportunity for achieving an end to the conflict in the foreseeable future. However if the current phase of negotiations fails, this will deal a fatal blow to the prospect of a peace agreement between the two sides from which it may take years to recover. If no progress is made and the conflict continues along its current trajectory, the situation on the ground could develop in such a way that will make a two state solution increasingly less likely to be achieved. Some specific scenarios may develop that could jeopardise future prospects for peace, including:

1. Hamas may increase their popularity further and come to dominate Palestinian politics not only in Gaza but in the West Bank too, as their ideological commitment to oppose the peace process will seem vindicated by the lack of

progress on the ground. This would undermine the prospect for any constructive engagement between Israel and the Palestinians that is necessary for a negotiated two state solution.

2. Israeli settlement construction may continue and could make it more difficult for Israel to easily extricate itself from the Palestinian territories. This would undermine the chances of a viable Palestinian state being established on contiguous territory closely equivalent to the 1967 borders and make it difficult for either party to make the necessary concessions for reaching a peace agreement.

3. The political Right in Israel may be strengthened by the lack of progress in the peace process and their popularity reinforced by the threat of Iran. Hard-line security policies will gain support amongst the Israeli public and this would make the prospect of constructive engagement with the Palestinians increasingly difficult. The political and religious Right is less willing to make concessions on the issues of territory, security and Jerusalem.

4. The rise of Iranian influence in the region, specifically their funding of spoiler terrorist organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah, would bolster those actors committed to destroying any hope for a negotiated two state solution.

Yet despite the significance of this current round of negotiations, the glimmer of hope that had been sparked by the Annapolis conference has been seriously threatened by the harsh reality of the conflict. President Abbas and his Fatah party have so far been unable to challenge Hamas—militarily or politically—since the Islamic movement took control of the Gaza Strip by force in June 2007. Qassam rockets and mortars, launched from the Gaza Strip by members of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, fall daily on the Israeli southern towns of Sderot and Ashkelon, as well as on the surrounding villages. Suicide bombings and terrorist attacks inside Israel have recently resulted in one woman being killed in an attack in Dimona and eight students being killed in a shooting in Jerusalem. Israel in response has carried out incursions into the Gaza Strip, involving the killing of militants and Palestinian

civilians. The threat emanating from Gaza has meant that Israel has been unable to loosen the security measures it has imposed on the West Bank. As a result, ordinary Palestinians and Israelis continue to carry the burden of the conflict on a daily basis.

Given the significance of the current round of negotiations within the grand scheme of Israeli-Palestinian peace making, this paper aims to explore how the Annapolis process may be salvaged. It will analyse the role of three of the main protagonists – Israel, the Palestinians and Egypt. The report concludes with recommendations to the UK government and international community on how, amid the current crisis, the Annapolis process may be revived and its chances of success enhanced.

Israel's fragile politics

Olmert's political standing since the Annapolis conference has been shaken but not weakened. His parliamentary majority was reduced from 77 to 66 out of 120 Knesset seats following the resignation of the Minister for Strategic Affairs and the head of the Right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu Party, Avigdor Lieberman, in protest at Israeli concessions made at Annapolis.ⁱⁱⁱ Recent polling suggests that Olmert and his government have managed to recover from this coalition crisis, primarily because Olmert unexpectedly survived the publication of the Winograd Report (the official inquiry into Israel's conduct in the Second Lebanon War). Though the report was harsh, its criticisms were not strong enough to bring down the government nor force Olmert, or any senior members of his government, to resign as some had anticipated. A public poll released recently suggests that 53% of Israelis—as opposed to 68% some six months ago—think the Prime Minister should resign. Amongst centre-left Israeli voters—the main constituency of Olmert's government—the percentage calling for his resignation is even lower.^{iv}

Despite his improved public profile, Prime Minister Olmert still has significant domestic political constraints that he must take into account as he embarks on the current round of negotiations. Shas, the ultra-religious party and

key partner in the coalition, has already vowed to leave the government if further concessions are made to the Palestinians, particularly in relation to negotiations over Jerusalem. However, while this would pose a significant problem for the government, Shas' resignation would not necessarily force its collapse. Olmert could still proceed with the negotiations with the support of the Arab members of parliament and the small leftist party Meretz, who together have 15 seats. If significant progress was made on the peace process then it is likely that these parties will support Olmert's government and save it from falling through a non-confidence vote, but without joining the coalition itself. Maintained in power by parties who support the peace process but are *not* officially part of the coalition, the Olmert government could survive despite having a parliamentary minority, as long as the peace process continues. If Olmert manages to maintain the support from these parties for long enough to reach a final status agreement with the PA, this could serve as the platform that he presents to the electorate at the next general election. This political strategy presents an opportunity but there remain many hurdles that make such a solution difficult to achieve in practice; members of Olmert's party, Kadima, may defect to the opposition and the strategy may be thrown off course by a deadly rise in attacks inside Israel which would severely jeopardise the chances of any government winning an election on a platform of concessions and territorial compromise.

Internal Israeli politics are not the only problem facing the Olmert government. A more significant political challenge stems from the deteriorating security situation in Israel since the Annapolis conference, particularly in the south of the country. The daily bombardment of Qassam rockets and mortars sometimes over fifty a day on the towns of Sderot, Ashkelon, and the surrounding villages has caused human and material damage, instilling fear in the population and unravelling community-life.^v Despite the various counter-measures taken by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) since the Annapolis conference, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad have been firing missiles in ever increasing numbers. Meanwhile, terrorist attacks and suicide missions against Israelis have resumed.

The deteriorating security situation challenges the revived peace process on two fronts:

- First, the Israeli government is obliged to defend its citizens by attempting to eliminate the missile threat through a combination of economic and military means. As a result, it has been difficult to adopt any significant measures to improve the livelihood and freedom of movement of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip as incursions, sanctions and targeted strikes continue. In addition, Israel cannot loosen the security measures it has imposed on the West Bank given the possibility that Hamas activists might develop missile-launching capabilities in this area, putting all of Israel's main population centres, as well as Ben Gurion international airport, at risk of attack.
- Second, the worsening security situation in the south of the country has translated into growing political support for the right wing opposition party, Likud, and its leader Benjamin Netanyahu. Only recently, Netanyahu criticised the government by saying that it should eliminate the military threat posed by Hamas and the Islamic Jihad by conducting a full-scale military campaign in the Gaza Strip, instead of pursuing what he termed as the current strategy of 'attrition'.^{vi}

The Olmert government has so far resisted this pressure, but it is unlikely that it will be able to do so for much longer. Assisted by Iran and possibly by Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have increased the range and deadliness of their rockets, posing an immediate threat to nearly 190,000 Israeli civilians, including the main industrial town of Ashkelon, which amounts to around 2% of the population overall. Having exhausted all available options and amid a further deterioration of the security situation in Israel, the government may soon be left with no choice but to carry out a full-scale military offensive in the Gaza Strip. While this may bring a temporary respite to Israel's southern border, a military campaign may also reinforce the hard-line stance advocated by Netanyahu and in doing so, could potentially further undermine Olmert's ability to carry forward the peace process his government began in Annapolis.

Crises and violence in Palestine

Like his Israeli counterpart, President Abbas faces formidable challenges to his political standing since Annapolis. Unable to bring Hamas to relinquish its control over the Gaza Strip—taken by force in June 2007—Abbas now presides over only 60 percent of the Palestinians. The political ranks of his Fatah party are in disarray. Since Fatah held its Fifth General Conference in 1989, a third of the twenty-one member Fatah Central Committee (FCC) have departed the scene, weakening the committee's authority and standing within the party. The surviving members are mainly over 65 and are seriously fragmented into multiple competing power centres consisting of networks based on patronage, shared history, geography, foreign sponsorship, ideology, policy, or various combinations of the above. The resulting allegations of endemic corruption said to characterise internal Fatah politics, lies at the heart of their current unpopularity with the Palestinian electorate. Thus while preparations for a Sixth General Conference have begun with the aim of reviving the FCC, given the advanced state of Fatah's disintegration, it may well be a case of too little too late.^{vii}

The weakening effect of Fatah's internal fragmentation has been compounded by the record of Abbas' relations with Israel since Annapolis. The President has been unable to convince Israel to release any more Palestinian militants jailed in Israeli prisons and the IDF maintains a strong presence in the West Bank in the form of checkpoints, arrests of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad militants and targeted assassinations.^{viii} These measures have proven to be effective in terms of reducing terrorist activities against Israelis, but politically they have cost President Abbas dearly. Even more problematic for Abbas has been the ongoing expansion of Jewish settlements since the Annapolis conference. Although Olmert has agreed to a freeze on all new settlement building, the Israeli government continues to expand a dozen existing projects in the West Bank and Jerusalem. According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, the settler community grew by 5.45 percent during the first half of December 2007 and Olmert has recently sanctioned the expansion of existing settlements in

East Jerusalem and the West Bank.^{ix} President Abbas' credibility to negotiate with the Israelis is severely undermined by his perceived failure to secure any basic improvement in the living conditions for ordinary Palestinians in the process. If despite such challenges, the post-Annapolis negotiations do yield a final agreement between Israel and the PA, it remains doubtful whether President Abbas has the political power to implement any such deal given Fatah's internal weaknesses and more importantly his lack of authority in Gaza.

Unlike Abbas, Hamas' political standing has improved since the Annapolis conference. In defiance of the Palestinian President, Arab states and the international community, Hamas has tightened its grip over the Gaza Strip and refused to return the control over the area to the PA. Instead, Hamas has used the Gaza Strip mainly to maintain military pressure on Israel. Indeed, in a break with the past, the use of the Qassam missiles today is *strategic* rather than sporadic, as Hamas tries to create a balance of deterrence between the organisation and Israel. Hence, after 5 Hamas militants were killed by the IDF on 27 February, Hamas fired no less than 50 Qassam missiles on Sderot, killing a student at the Sapir College and a further four Grad missiles on the town of Ashkelon, causing damage to the city's Barzilai hospital. The message Hamas is sending is clear: the IDF's operations against the Qassam threat will be met by increasingly heavier bombardments of Israeli towns and villages.

Hamas has benefited politically from its coordinated response to the Israeli decision on 19 January to impose an economic and infrastructure siege on the Gaza Strip. Hamas exploited the very declaration of a reduction in fuel deliveries by turning off the electricity throughout most of the Strip and successfully focused international criticism on Israel.^x Then, on the night of 22 January, Hamas militants set off a series of dramatic explosions along the border wall with Egypt allowing a human wave to surge across the frontier into Egypt.^{xi} The blowing up of the border wall at Rafah dealt a blow to Israel's policy of trying to influence Hamas through economic sanctions backed by the use of military force. The border breach also further undermined Abbas' political authority by exposing him as a leader who, unlike Hamas, was unwilling or unable to

resist Israeli policies towards the Palestinians in such a dramatic and public way. This perhaps explains why Abbas, conscious of his declining authority, has recently stated that while at present he sees negotiations as the means for dealing with Israel, he does not rule out in the future a return to armed struggle.^{xii} These comments reveal the extent to which Hamas' improved political and military standing poses a political and security threat not only to the Olmert government but also to the PA and its self-proclaimed aim to reach a negotiated final agreement with Israel by the end of 2008.

Egypt: The reluctant gate keeper

Egypt has also been affected by the ominous developments in the relations between Israel, the PA and Hamas. In the period leading up to the Annapolis conference, Egypt's main role was that of a mediator between Hamas and Fatah. Egyptian officials had tried, hitherto to no avail, to reconcile the two factions and re-establish the government of national unity which collapsed after Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip by force in June 2007. The blowing up of the border wall and the flow of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip to the Egyptian town of Rafah posed significant challenges to Egypt. The pictures of Palestinians crossing the border, only to be confronted by Egyptian soldiers, tainted the Egyptian government in the eyes of its own public and the Arab world. After clashes between the soldiers and the Palestinians escalated, resulting in casualties on both sides, the Egyptian president, Hussni Mubarak, authorised Palestinians to enter Egyptian territory. However, this policy was later reversed by Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit, when he threatened to 'break the arms and legs' of anyone who tried to cross the border using force.^{xiii}

The Gaza border breach also posed a security threat to Egypt. During the twelve days in which the border was open, Egypt's security forces apprehended fifteen armed Palestinians out of which twelve were members of Hamas and a further group of five Palestinians carrying explosives near the Taba terminal on the Israeli-Egyptian border.^{xiv} Armed Palestinians in the Sinai Peninsula could potentially perpetrate

terrorist attacks against Israeli tourists who flock to the area regularly. Besides the loss of life and the friction this would cause in Israeli-Egyptian relations, an attack would have an adverse impact on the tourist industry, a mainstay of Egypt's economy.

The situation on the border with the Gaza Strip also impinged on Egypt's role as a mediator between the Palestinian factions. Khaled Mashal, head of Hamas' political bureau based in Damascus, announced after the border wall was blown up that the Palestinians in Gaza would like their electricity and gas to be supplied exclusively by Egypt rather than Israel. Mashal also called for changing the current system of managing the border crossing—whereby Egypt, the PA and European inspectors operate the crossing—to an arrangement whereby Hamas and Egypt would operate the terminal jointly. These demands put Egypt in a catch 22 situation. If it agrees to Hamas' requests it runs the risk of provoking a hostile reaction from Israel, the US (on which it is heavily reliant for aid) and the PA who oppose any compromise with Hamas. Resisting Hamas' demands however, risks a similar border confrontation and, like January's incursion, will further compromise Egypt's image, security and economy.

One way for Egypt to extricate itself from this sensitive situation would be to renew its efforts to restore a Palestinian unity government. In this context specifically, the role of Egypt and the Arab League more broadly could be the key to unlocking the current deadlock between Fatah and Hamas, as well as between Hamas and Israel. If a unity government were established under active Arab mediation, it could be encouraged to endorse the Arab Peace Initiative (API) as a basis for allowing constructive engagement with Israel and the wider international community^{xv}. This could also be a credible way to ensure that the API and the Arab League are part of the peace making efforts.

Since the API coincides with the positions that Fatah has accepted, endorsing this agenda should not present a problem for President Abbas. As for Hamas, its leadership has in the past recognised the need to negotiate with Israel, if through intermediaries, on several issues ranging from day-to-day affairs e.g. transit permits for merchandise

and workers and the transfer of the tax monies that Israel collects for the PA, to political issues such as prisoner exchanges. Its leadership has previously stated that the movement is not opposed to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations under the umbrella of the Arab League, as long as these negotiations do not require Hamas to recognise Israel. Furthermore, a partial agreement with Israel, serving as a stage in Hamas' strategic goal of 'liberating' Palestine, may be acceptable to the movement on condition that it is approved by the Palestinian people.^{xvi} Thus conceivably, Hamas may not object to the Arab League mediating between them and Israel. A unity government established under these principles could provide an opportunity for advancing the peace process in a more stable Palestinian political environment.

Conclusion

The Annapolis conference in November set in motion a fragile process aimed at establishing a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians by the end of 2008. The process is being led by two pragmatic politicians, Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas. It enjoys widespread international support and both parties can draw on the past fifteen years of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations during which mistakes but also some progress has been made towards ending the conflict.

The process that was set in motion by the Annapolis conference represents an opportunity perhaps the last one in the foreseeable future for achieving a sustainable two state solution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict. However there remain difficult challenges that could hamper its eventual success: Hamas' political and military consolidation in the Gaza Strip; Israel's inability to implement significant confidence building measures; the expansion of Jewish settlements; and President Abbas' and Fatah's domestic political weakness and consequent limited ability to negotiate and implement a final deal. In light of these obstacles the international community - including the UK government - should take the lead in promoting measures aimed at overcoming these specific challenges. The overall strategy should be focused on putting an end to rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip, while concurrently

strengthening and supporting President Abbas to empower him to effectively negotiate on behalf of the Palestinian people and implement any final status deal when such a time comes.

On the issue of Hamas' political and military consolidation in the Gaza Strip, which constitutes the most serious threat to the current phase of the peace process, there are two possible responses.

- The first and least desirable one, is that Israel conducts a full-scale military campaign in the Gaza Strip. It is unlikely that Israel would reoccupy Gaza, but a sustained presence of the IDF along the so called "Qassam belt" along the border with Israel, specifically aimed at quelling the rocket attacks, is plausible. This may provide short-term relief from the incessant rocket bombardments that currently threaten Israeli civilians, however it brings with it many added complications that may prove costly in the long run for both parties. A full scale incursion, as events in the last weekend of February illustrated, would no doubt result in a high death toll on both sides.^{xvii} Deploying the IDF for a prolonged period may rally Palestinian and Arab support around Hamas, undermining President Abbas' authority further. Moreover, Israel's experience in the second war in Lebanon raised doubts that the IDF are able to put an end to the threat of ballistic missiles through the use of force alone. Furthermore the possibility of negotiations with Abbas continuing alongside an Israeli military presence in Gaza are very slim. Crucially Israel has not developed a clear exit strategy that would put a final end to the rocket fire and would therefore no doubt prefer to avoid going into Gaza if alternative options were available to them.

Hamas, for its part, while potentially gaining politically from an Israeli attack, is extremely wary about the material damage the movement might sustain in the process. Ultimately Hamas risks losing control of the Gaza Strip if Israel use the incursion as a means of removing them altogether.

- Given these considerations, the second and far more desirable response would be for the international community to bring an end to the rocket attacks from Gaza by sponsoring an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.

This ceasefire should be complimented with a prisoner exchange for captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. This would help boost Israel's credibility at the negotiating table as a partner willing to make difficult concessions for the sake of peace and security along its borders. Any kind of ceasefire should be followed by the reopening of the Rafah border-crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip under the conditions stipulated in the Agreement on Movement and Access negotiated by Israel and the PA in 2005. These measures together would minimise the security threat posed to Israel which currently impedes its ability to make changes on the ground and concessions at the table.

Concurrently, the international community needs to help strengthen President Abbas by taking the following measures:

- Encouraging Israel to fulfil its commitment to meeting its obligations as laid out in stage one of the Road Map – including a total freeze on settlement activity and dismantling of illegal outposts. This would increase Abbas' credibility amongst the Palestinian people by demonstrating that only through constructive and peaceful negotiations can real improvements on the ground be achieved.
- Continue to isolate Hamas until it agrees to the three demands made by the Quartet - recognising Israel's right to exist, renouncing violence and respecting previous agreements. Any deviation from this position would undermine President Abbas and the recent steps he has taken towards peace. It would also serve as a tacit endorsement of the violent coup Hamas staged in Gaza and offer legitimacy to the possibility of cutting Gaza off from the West Bank and any final status deal.
- Charge Egypt, and the Arab League more widely, with the task of restoring the Palestinian national unity government. This measure is crucial since it has been Abbas and his Fatah party, not Hamas, which has been most weakened by the current political fragmentation in Palestinian politics. If a unity government is restored, Abbas would be seen to be cooperating with the wider spectrum of Palestinian and Arab political actors and in doing so would increase his credibility to continue negotiating with

Israel. Deeper Arab involvement would also compensate for the current weakness of the Palestinian political system. Whereas in the present domestic situation Palestinians cannot on their own take the historic decisions that making peace with Israel entails, let alone carry them through, they could perhaps do so with the backing and political cover of the entire Arab world.

The current priority at this stage of the peace process, for local actors and the wider international community, is to buy time for both Olmert and Abbas to see it through as far as it can go. A two pronged policy aimed at stopping the rocket attacks from Gaza and strengthening President Abbas - through confidence-building measures including the cessation of settlement building, reinstating a Palestinian national unity government and ensuring Egyptian and wider Arab support for the process - will not ensure a peace agreement by the end of 2008, but it is a prerequisite for keeping this dim glimmer of hope alight. The alternative is the collapse of the fragile peace process the Annapolis conference set in motion, plunging Israel, the Palestinians and possibly the region into yet another, more bloody and dangerous, cycle of violence.

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i Quoted from the Israeli Prime Minister's official web-site, <http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Communication/PMSpeaks/speechannapolis271107.htm>, as viewed on February 18th, 2008.

ii Quoted from the Institute for Middle East Understanding official website, <http://imeu.net/news/article007146.shtml>, as viewed on February 18th, 2008.

iii See Haaretz Website, 'Israel Beiteinu leaves government', <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/945458.html>, as viewed on February 19th, 2008.

iv See Haaretz Website, 'Sharp decline in the demand for Olmert's resignation',

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/objects/pages/PrintArticle.jhtml?itemNo+950343>, as viewed on February 3rd 2008.

v Since 2001 over 7000 rockets and mortars have been fired killing 25 Israelis injuring over 600 people and thousands are suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome as a direct consequence of the attacks. Since Hamas' violent takeover of Gaza in June 2007, the frequency of rocket attacks rose by 150% to more than 250 rockets and mortars a month. This means, on average, one rocket is fired at Israel every three hours. In 2007 over 2,000 rockets and mortars were fired. (Data taken from Statement by Counsellor Gilad Cohen to UN Security Council on 22 January 2008 – available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.il>)

vi See Mijal Greenberg, 'Israel begins reducing electricity supply to Gaza', <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/952255.html>, as viewed on Haaretz Website on February 7th.

vii See Mouin Rabbani, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19968&prog=zgp&proj=zdr1,zme#rabbani>, as viewed on Carnegie endowment official website March 8th 2008.

viii On the number of checkpoints and other physical obstructions see http://www.btselem.org/english/Freedom_of_Movement/Checkpoints_and_Forbidden_Roads.asp, as viewed on B'Tselem official website March 11th.

ix On Abbas' political weakening and for figures see Amos Eilon, 'Olmert and Israel: The Change', New York Review of Books, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21015>, as viewed on February 19th, 2008.

x Yossi Alper, Gaza's Agency, Israel's Choice, OpenDemocracy, <http://opendemocracy.net/node/35675/print>, as viewed on January 31st.

xi Jonathan Marcus, 'Tough choices follow Gaza breakout', http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/world/middle_east/7222540.stm, as viewed on February 20th, 2008.

xii Yoav Stern, Abbas not ruling out a return to the armed struggle, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/959130.html>, as viewed on Haaretz website, February 28th, 2008.

xiii Yoav Stern and Avi Yissascharof, 'Egypt: we will break the hand of those who cross the border', www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/objectives/pages, as viewed on Haaretz newspaper website on 9/2/08.

xiv Amos Harel and Avi Yissascharof, 'Dangerous Relations', www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/object/pages, Haaretz newspaper website as viewed on February 4th, 2008.

xv The API, which was reaffirmed by the Arab League in March 2007, demands that Israel withdraws fully from territories seized in the 1967 war and agrees to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, with East Jerusalem as its capital. It makes provisions for the refugees - and in return, the Arab states will normalise relations with Israel effectively ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. It also stipulates that the Palestinian refugee problem should be resolved in accordance with UN Resolution 194, which states that Palestinian refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date.

xvi Hamas' foreign minister, Mahmoud Al-Zahar, gave expression to these views in interviews he gave to the Israeli liberal daily, Haaretz, on February 5 and April 27 2006. Quoted in Klein, Menachem, 'Hamas in Power', in Middle East Journal, vol. 61 no.3, 2007, pp. 443-444.

xvii Following the increase in rocket attacks resulting in the death of one Israeli on 27 February, Israel escalated its campaign to stop rocket attacks from Gaza on 29 February - 2 March, launching ground and air attacks in the Strip. Israel's operations in Gaza since 29 February killed over 110 Palestinians. Two Israeli soldiers died during the fighting and at least four were injured. Palestinian sources and some Israeli human rights organisations have said around half of Palestinians killed in recent incursions were civilians, but IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi told an Israeli Cabinet meeting on Sunday (2 March) that of the 100 fatalities over the weekend, 90 were armed militants.

