



trying to think

"When statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties, they lead their country by a short route to chaos." Sir Thomas More

"The opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction" - Thomas Jefferson

"In a democracy that is free and robust, an opinion is no more disqualified for being religious than for being atheistic, or psychoanalytic, or Marxist, or just plain dumb" Richard John Neuhaus

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2009

➔ A compelling read about West Bank/Gaza

I came across this article and I HIGHLY recommend reading it just for the perspective. I found it at the link below so if you want to go there and read it go ahead, I just present it here for those who don't want to bounce around, and because you may never stumble across the article on your own. I think it's a fascinating discussion.

<http://www.michaeltotten.com/archives/2009/02/a-minority-repo.php>

A Minority Report from the West Bank and Gaza

Khaled Abu Toameh is not your typical Palestinian journalist. He began his career at one of Yasser Arafat's newspapers and today he writes for the Jerusalem Post. He has produced video for European TV stations, and even blogged for a while at Commentary Magazine in New York. It's impossible to cram Toameh into a convenient ideological box, though that doesn't stop some people from trying.

I met him briefly a few weeks ago on my trip to Israel sponsored by the American Jewish Committee when he gave a talk to me and my colleagues and answered some questions at the end. I'm reproducing the entire transcript here because I think he deserves a full hearing.

Hamas, Fatah, Americans, Israelis, Europeans, Arab governments, American foreign correspondents - just about everybody involved in any way with the conflict comes under some well-deserved fire. There's something here for just about everybody to like and dislike,

Let's Go!



About Me

macman
aka, Norbert, closet philosopher,
wanna be theologian, loves to
read, has no time to read, but
occasionally peruses First Things,
Aquinas, Dubay and various news
items on a blackberry. Plays a
Warrior bass guitar but will
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fretless. Generally congenial but
known to lose his sanity when
trying to comprehend politicians
and the stock market.

and I'm publishing what he said without quote-shopping or cherry-picking his words for convenience.

Khaled Abu Toameh: When I finished high school the PLO offices hired me as a correspondent, and I worked for a PLO newspaper for seven years during which time I attended university in Jerusalem. After I graduated I had to make a decision: do I go back and work for the PLO, or do I try to become a real journalist? It took me about two seconds to make that decision. I decided to work with the international media and the Israeli media.

When I say "work with the international media," what does that mean? We have hundreds of foreign journalists who come to this part of the world - every year, every month, and sometimes every week - to cover the stories here. Now there are two stories here. There's the one that's happening inside Israel, and there's the one that's happening inside the Palestinian areas.

Fortunately for us, Israel is an open country that allows people to write whatever they want, criticize the prime minister, the defense minister, the IDF. You can write all these horrible things against Israel and still walk in downtown Jerusalem. But when it comes to covering the Palestinian territories, the story is completely different. You can't wake up in the morning as a foreign journalist and drive on your own into a Palestinian village. You can't just show up and say "Good morning, I work for the New York Times, can I speak to Hamas please." It doesn't work like that for a number of reasons. You don't know the language and need a translator. You don't know your way around. And most important, it's not safe.

So foreign journalists who want to cover stories in the Palestinian areas rely on fixers. And that's where I fit in. For the past twenty years or so I've been working as a fixer, translator, advisor - call it whatever you want - with most of the foreign media. And of course in this work with the international media I got myself a number of jobs, one of which I'm still doing. I even have colleagues here. For the past twenty years I've been working with NBC News, and I was blogging for Commentary Magazine also. I was writing for U.S. News and World Report, occasionally for the Wall Street Journal, and a number of British tabloids. In the course of this work with the international media I became a writer and analyst of Palestinian affairs and a film producer for the BBC.

About eight years ago, when the Second Intifada started, I started writing for the Jerusalem Post about Palestinian issues. And I still work with the international media. My job is to serve as the eyes and ears of the international media.

Some of you may be wondering what's going on with this guy who started working as a journalist for the PLO and ends up writing for a Jewish newspaper. Some people ask me "when did you become a

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Zionist? When did you become pro-Israel?" Well, I'm not pro-anything other than the facts and the truth. As a journalist I don't have any problem working for any newspaper that provides me with a platform. I don't care if it's Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or even Buddhist.

And to be honest with you, I find it ironic that as an Arab Muslim living in this part of the world that I have to work for a Jewish newspaper or for the international media in order to be able to practice any kind of real journalism. Why? Because we don't have any free media. In the Palestinian areas we didn't have it when I was working there in the 1970s and 1980s, we didn't get one when we brought Yasser Arafat in to start the Palestinian Authority, and of course we don't have a free media today under Fatah, Hamas, and the rest of the gangs that are running the show out there. And this is very sad.

Sometimes I wish the problem with the media was the only problem that we have over there, but as you all know it's a very messy situation. I'm one of those who has been arguing for the past fifteen years that things have been going in the wrong direction in this part of the world. For a few months after signing Oslo we reached the point where many Jews and many Arabs missed the good old days before the peace process began.

Now, what do I mean by that? Oslo was not bad. Oslo was based on the idea of a two-state solution and ending the military occupation in one way or another. So the idea of Oslo was not bad. Separation between Jews and Palestinians who did not want to live together. And as such I supported it. I thought it was a good idea.

But the way Oslo was implemented brought disaster on both Jews and Arabs. The assumption back then in the U.S., in Israel, and in many places in Europe, was that if you bring the PLO and thousands of PLO fighters and you dump them into the West Bank and Gaza and you give them millions of dollars and guns that they will do the dirty job of policing the West Bank and Gaza. They would replace the occupation and fight Hamas and Islamic Jihad. They would do all these wonderful things. Why? Because they're on our payroll.

So the international community and Israel gathered all these PLO fighters from around the world, released thousands of PLO fighters from Israeli prisons, gave them uniforms and guns, and called them security forces. And the result was the people who had never received any basic training, people who had never finished high school, became colonels and generals in Yasser Arafat's Authority. He established sixteen different security forces with the help of the Americans, the Europeans, and the Israelis. And they started pouring money into this regime that they called the Palestinian Authority. Billions of dollars with the hope that Arafat would deliver.

Now, there's no need to elaborate. As you all know, Arafat turned out to be a crook. Most of the money that was sent to the Palestinian Authority literally went down the drain and supported the

shopping sprees of Arafat's wife who was living in Paris. Instead of building us a hospital, Arafat built a casino in Jericho, as if the Palestinian revolution aspired for forty years to get us a casino. And the chutzpah was that he built that casino across the street from a refugee camp. So Palestinians did not see the fruits of peace.

My argument is as follows. The fact that Arafat was crooked didn't surprise us Palestinians. We were only surprised by the fact that the international community kept giving him money and refused to hold him accountable when he stole our money. Why didn't they invest something? They didn't want to believe it.

When I tried to alert my foreign colleagues in 1995, 1996, and 1997, to the fact that there was corruption in the Palestinian Authority, many of them asked me if I was on the payroll of the Jewish Lobby. I wanted to know where was this Jewish Lobby? If there was one maybe they would pay me.

I told them: "This is what I am hearing. The writing is on the wall. Come and listen to what Palestinians are saying." And they told me they weren't interested in that story. They told me they wanted anti-Israel stories because it made their lives so much easier. They told me they didn't want to write anything bad about Palestinians, that Arafat was a man of peace and should be given a chance. I heard this from major American journalists, by the way. Leading American journalists. I don't want to give you their names right now, but I was really frustrated. And angry.

Listen. For all these years we've been attacking the military occupation. So why is it that when I tell you something that Arafat is doing, suddenly you don't want to report it and think it's Jewish propaganda? Most of these journalists did not even want to make any effort.

By depriving these people of money, what did Arafat do? He radicalized the Palestinians who did not see the fruits of peace. So that's reason number one why Palestinian society is radicalized.

But there are other reasons. Reasons number two is that you gave Yasser Arafat guns so that he could kill Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but instead he directed those guns against anyone who said they wanted reform or democracy. Arafat used your guns, your weapons, provided by the United States of America, to suppress the leaders of a new leadership.

Let me give you an example. In 1997, 29 Palestinian professors signed a petition demanding Yasser Arafat end the corruption. They found themselves either shot or killed or thrown into jail or they had to run away from the country. And of course this is not a story you would see on CNN. I don't think even the New York Times reported that.

So Arafat cracked down on the reformists and the democrats and the people who wanted good government. And he sent the rest of the

people into the open arms of Hamas. He cracked down on the reformists and he refused to crack down on Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Reason number three. You gave Yasser Arafat money to open a TV and radio station. And on this TV and radio station Arafat said "Jihad, jihad, kill the crusaders, kill the Jews, kill the infidels, kill everyone but me." Now you may ask yourself why Arafat was inciting against his peace partners in Israel, why was he inciting against the Americans and Europeans who were feeding him? It doesn't make sense.

Well, to us it does make sense. This is how our Arab dictators survive. They constantly blame the miseries of our people on the Jews and the West and the Crusaders and the infidels and the Zionist lobby and the imperialists. They use all these slogans. Arab leaders always need to make sure that their people are busy hating somebody else, preferably the Jews and the Americans. Otherwise their people might rebel, and God forbid they might demand reforms and democracy.

This is exactly what Arafat did, but he did it in Arabic. The international community - and even Israelis - did not want to listen to what Arafat was saying in Arabic. They only cared what he said in English. They said that what he said in English was good.

I said "Excuse me, folks, but in Arabic Arafat is telling people to kill you." But they did not want to listen to the incitement. They underestimated it. They said "you Arabs are all corrupt and don't know anything about democracy so you deserve a dictatorship."

This incitement drove people into the open arms of Hamas. Arafat was telling people how evil the Jews are, and people then said "Hamas is right, Jews are the sons of monkeys and pigs. Why should we make peace with them?"

A fourth reason, which is a lot less important in my view, is that Israelis brought the PLO into the Palestinian areas, armed the PLO, helped create all these security militias and gangsters and mafias, and then said they needed to protect themselves from their peace partners. And how did they protect themselves? By imposing restrictions and curfews, by surrounding Palestinian communities with checkpoints. Why? Because they needed to protect themselves from the militias and mafias that they brought into the West Bank and Gaza. So Palestinians lost faith in the peace process.

All this radicalized Palestinian society to the point that when Hamas decided to run in free and democratic elections under the banner of "change" and "reform" they won. It was all very obvious. The writing was clear on the wall that anyone who challenged Arafat back then....believe me that if even Ehud Olmert had run in the Palestinian elections promising change and reform and democracy he would have won. Because in January of 2006, the parliamentary elections that were held in the Palestinian Authority were largely

about internal reforms in the Palestinian areas. Hamas was ready to deliver. What did they do? They came to the Palestinians and said "Listen, folks. You've tried all these PLO people. They're corrupt. They're bad. Arafat was a thief. Abu Mazen is also a total failure. These guys stole your money. These guys are US agents, they are CIA. Why don't you try us now? We will show you that we can establish good government. And, by the way, look at what we've done for you since 1988. We've established a vast network of educational, social, health, and economic services. Arafat built a casino, and we built two universities. Arafat gave his wife 100,000 dollars a month so she can do her shopping while we gave poor people money. Arafat built bars and restaurants in Ramallah while we built orphanages and charities." So the Palestinians said "Let's try Hamas. If they come to power there is nothing left to steal. They can't be more corrupt than the PLO."

That was the basic line. I'm not saying all those who voted for Hamas in 2006 were registering a vote of protest. We have to be very careful. Hamas does have a lot of supporters. What I'm saying is that had it not been also a vote of protest against the PLO, Hamas would not have won. Why? Because I know Christians who voted for Hamas. I know centrist Palestinians who voted for Hamas. I even know PLO people who voted for Hamas because the name of the game back then was "Let's punish the PLO." And how do you do it? By voting for Hamas, their main rivals. And it worked. And Hamas came to power.

What has been happening since then is also very interesting. The U.S. government, with the help of some Europeans and some Israelis, after Hamas won the election, they went to the guys who lost the election and said "folks, here are guns and here is some money. Go bring down this democratically elected government." And what was the result of this U.S. meddling in Palestinian affairs? It backfired. It played into the hands of Hamas and even boosted Hamas' popularity on the street.

What did Palestinians think when they saw Condoleeza Rice and George W. Bush openly campaigning against this democratically elected government? Their sympathies went to this democratically elected government even though it was Hamas. And when Palestinians see PLO people, the Fatah people, openly conspiring with the Americans and the Israelis to bring down a democratically elected government, they're going to hate the PLO even more.

So U.S. and European meddling in Palestinian affairs in the aftermath of the Hamas victory further strengthened Hamas to the point where in June 2007 Hamas says "Everyone is trying to bring me down. No one is giving me a chance. The whole world is against me. You corrupt PLO people are conspiring against me. I won in a free and democratic election. If you don't believe me, ask Jimmy Carter. He supervised the election. What does everyone want from me?"

And they staged a coup. Some people call it a coup. They threw the Fatah people out of Gaza. Fewer than 10,000 Hamas fighters defeated more than 70,000 American-backed Fatah policemen. The

question is, how did they do it?

The answer is very simple. As soon as Hamas started shooting, these people did not fight. They ran away. They surrendered to Hamas. They basically went to Hamas and said "No, no, Hamas, please. We will give you all the guns, everything. Just leave us alone." And they ran away.

First they tried to run away toward Egypt. But Mubarak is not stupid. He sealed the border. I was there when it happened.

Israel was the only country in the world that sent troops and helicopters and gunships and ambulances to save Muslims from being slaughtered by Muslims, to save the PLO people from being slaughtered by Hamas. Israel took them and dumped them in the West Bank.

And where are we standing today? I told you before that I'm one of those people who support a two-state solution. I think it's a wonderful solution. But in the end we're getting a different kind of two-state solution. We have two separate entities. One in Gaza, and one in the West Bank.

The one in Gaza is an Islamic state run by Hamas and supported by Ahmadinejad, Syria, Hezbollah, and some people say Al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood. It's a very dangerous situation, and as a moderate Muslim that's the last place I want to live on this earth.

What we have in the West Bank is the secular, corrupt, powerless regime of the PLO. Abu Mazen, Abu Shmazen, all these Abus. The Arafat cronies who failed their people over the past fifteen years. Who lost the election in January 2006 because of the corruption. Who were kicked out of Gaza because they failed. Who have lost control over half the Palestinians who live in this part of the world. And they are sitting in Ramallah. These people are in power only thanks to the presence of the IDF in the West Bank. If the Israeli army were to leave the West Bank tomorrow morning these PLO people would collapse in five minutes and Hamas would take over.

The question we should ask ourselves in the wake of this scenario is whether or not there is really a partner on the Palestinian side for any deal, let alone a peace agreement. Any kind of deal. Is there really a partner on the Palestinian side? And the answer is simple. No.

Hamas is not a partner for any peace agreement because Hamas is not going to change. All these people who believe that Hamas will one day change its ideology, that pragmatic leaders will emerge in Hamas, these people are living under illusions. Hamas is not going to change. To their credit we must say that their message has been very clear. It's the same message in Arabic and in English. They're being very honest about it. They're saying "Folks, we will never recognize Israel. We will never change. We will not abandon the path of the resistance." They're very clear about it.

After they won the election, by the way, the international community went to Hamas and said "Listen. If you want us to deal with you, accept Israel and everything will be okay." And Hamas was very honest. They said "No. We are not going to renounce terrorism. We are not going to recognize previous agreements between Palestinians and Israel. And we are not going to recognize Israel's right to exist." They were very clear about it. And they say the same thing today.

Ten days before the Hamas coup in Gaza I was invited by some U.S. diplomats to tell them about what was happening. I told them "Hamas is about to kick the PLO people out of Gaza because you are openly with the PLO and it has discredited them on the street. You're making them look like CIA agents."

The U.S. diplomats said "You don't know what you're talking about. The PLO has 70,000 people. Who is Hamas? They will crush them. You will see."

My prediction was not 100 percent accurate because I expected it to happen in three weeks. It happened ten days later. The writing was very clear on the wall.

There are so many things that are obvious in this part of the world that international leaders, diplomats, all these people in the West who are dealing with the Palestinian issue turn a blind eye to and don't want to see. Before we go to the Q&A and I take your questions, I want to give you one small example of how people in the West don't want to understand what's going on over here.

Before the January 2006 parliamentary election, the PLO people went to Condoleeza Rice and said "You are making a huge mistake by forcing us to go and have a free and democratic election. Our people don't trust us. We are corrupt and we will lose. Hamas will win. So please let's not hold an election. This is not the right time."

"No, don't worry," she said. "Let Hamas participate in the election. Hamas will not win. Everything will be okay."

They asked her how she knew Hamas was not going to win. She said she warned the Palestinians that if they vote for Hamas, she will punish them.

That warning, by the way, gave Hamas ten more points in the election. Hamas took Rice's statement and made huge banners out of it that said Condoleeza Rice says no to Hamas.

So Rice, knowing that Hamas is a terrorist organization, did not set any preconditions for Hamas' participation in the election. Even in Israel, by the way, Hamas candidates were openly campaigning in Israel, in Jerusalem. In East Jerusalem, okay, but in Israel. They were campaigning openly. They were saying "reforms, democracy, and by the way we want to destroy Israel."

What made Rice, after they won the election, say Hamas is a terrorist organization? Before the election they were not a terrorist organization? She bears responsibility for the fact that Hamas is in power. It was a huge mistake. Instead of learning from their mistakes after Hamas came to power, they continued with the same mistakes. And look at the mess we are in now.

I don't know how to solve this problem. Talking about a Palestinian state today is a joke. Where would that state be established? Israel controls nearly half of the West Bank. These PLO people can't deliver. If Israel gives up the West Bank, you will have to go to Cairo or Amman to take a flight back to America because snipers will be sitting on the hilltops above Ben-Gurion airport.

If you keep up this policy of supporting one party against the other, Gaza will move to the West Bank and we will end up with more anarchy and lawlessness and God knows what else is going to happen. It's a very unpleasant picture. It's very gloomy, I know.

Anthony Cordesman, Center for Strategic and International Studies: Let's see if we can steer this back to the Gaza issue. Given what you've said, what will the impact be on this fighting in Gaza and in the West Bank?

Khaled Abu Toameh: All those talking about how Hamas is finished or on the verge of collapse or that it's only a matter of time before the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip revolt against Hamas, I'm sorry to tell you that I don't share these assessments. Hamas may have suffered a major blow. Many of its institutions have been destroyed. It has been undermined in many ways. But what worries me is that Hamas still enjoys a lot of political support. Hamas continues to be as strong as it was in Gaza.

Why? I've been saying this for a long time: the only way to undermine Hamas and eventually bring about its collapse is to offer the Palestinians a greater alternative to Hamas. Not by bombing their headquarters and destroying their military arsenal. That's good, but it's not enough.

If I were the Americans and the Europeans after Hamas came to power, I would have gone to the PLO people who lost the election and, instead of giving them guns and money, I would have told them "Listen, folks. Hamas is in power because of your corruption, your mismanagement, and because you guys are thieves. Why don't you guys reform yourselves? Get rid of all these corrupt people in the PLO and Fatah. Form a youth party and challenge Hamas in the next election." That's one way.

But I'm afraid that under the current circumstances Hamas is going to be around for a long time. Many Palestinians today will tell you that Mahmoud Abbas is a traitor, that all these people were actually in the IDF headquarters watching the war. Hamas is already saying that Mahmoud Abbas was passing information to the Israeli about the

whereabouts of Hamas leaders.

These allegations are very serious, by the way. I don't know if you saw my story today in the Jerusalem Post about how Hamas in the past 48 hours has been waging a massive crackdown on Fatah in Gaza. They've killed or wounded maybe 100 Fatah people. They're dragging them into the streets and shooting them in the legs. They've even gouged the eyes of some of them out. Maybe you're going to have lunch later, so I don't want to go into graphic descriptions of what's happening to Fatah over there. But Fatah is really under attack, and I don't see anyone moving to save them.

I don't see a mass movement rising against Hamas. Not now. I've been talking to many people in Gaza. I haven't heard one person there blaming Hamas for the destruction of his house. I'm hearing a lot of voices against Israel and against the Arab states. And much of the anger is being directed against Mahmoud Abbas. This operation makes the moderate Arabs look like fools. It makes them look as if they were on the wrong side. When you have Al Jazeera, the most popular TV station in the Arab world, daily and nightly inciting against the Arab leaders and giving a platform for people who are saying our Arab leaders are traitors, that our Arab leaders are in collusion with the Israelis, that our Arab leaders were hoping to enter Gaza in Israeli tanks...you know, this is reverberating. Most of the protests on the Arab street in Cairo, in Khartoum, in Yemen, wherever you go, you will hear people chanting slogans against Arab leaders and Mahmoud Abbas before they chant slogans against Israel and America.

And now there's all this talk of bringing Mahmoud Abbas to Gaza. Excuse me, but if Mahmoud Abbas enters Gaza he will be executed in the public square within minutes. You have all these militias roaming the streets. Most of them weren't fighting. They were hiding. They became "civilians" as soon as the Israelis launched their attack. They were all in hiding or they were all dressed as civilians. When they were brought to hospitals they were without their guns. They were counted as civilians.

We don't know exactly what's happening over there, but I don't see any attempt by the local Palestinians or other forces to challenge Hamas openly.

Max Boot, Council on Foreign Relations: What about the Israeli expectation that with these attacks they will have established deterrence against Hamas? Do you think that's true?

Khaled Abu Toameh: Yes. Yes. Look. The West Bank was quiet during the attack in Gaza. Now, I was talking to many people. You know what they were saying? And this is the funny part. "You know what?" they said. "The Jews have gone mad. This is not the time to mess around with them." And, you know, when you hear this from the man on the street, it really does create deterrence. I would rather see deterrence created in another way, but there is this perception on the Arab street today that the Jews have gone crazy, there are

no more red lines, nothing, they don't care, and we should be careful. So in that sense, yes, there is some kind of deterrence, for the short term at least.

Before this war, four days before the war, I interviewed a number of Hamas guys. I published it in the Jerusalem Post. And the headline was Hamas Mocks Israel's Nonresponse to Qassam Attacks. What were they saying, the Hamas leaders? Basically that the Jews are cowards.

They think Israel ran away from Lebanon, that Hezbollah defeated them. They thought the Jews were scared and would not come into Gaza. They were really confident that Israel wouldn't fight back. Really. They were. They thought at most that Israel would send a few tanks into open fields just to calm Israeli public opinion. So the response really caught them by surprise, especially the first day.

So yes, there is this perception today in the Arab world that our neighbor has gone mad.

Anthony Cordesman: I was in the West Bank this summer, and it's amazing what they've achieved even though an awful lot of that money is still going to senior officials and not to the Palestinian people.

Khaled Abu Toameh: The other day someone came for the first time ever to this part of the world, and he called me and asked me to take him to Ramallah. So I drove him to downtown Ramallah and we stopped there. The man was shocked. He said "Where are the refugee camps? Where are the mud houses? Where's the poverty?"

I said "Why are you asking me these questions?"

He said "I'm shocked. Look how nice it is."

You know, there are things that are contradictory and don't make sense over there. Some of the restaurants in Ramallah are more expensive than the restaurants in Tel Aviv. There are people with a lot of money.

The corruption hasn't been stopped, but it has been reduced. Some Americans and Europeans continue to pour money on the PLO people without holding them accountable under the pretext that this money will produce a moderating effect.

Max Boot: There does seem to be this sense that the West Bank has been doing better economically.

Khaled Abu Toameh: Yes.

Max Boot: Does that translate into better politics?

Khaled Abu Toameh: No.

Mario Loyola, National Review Magazine: One American strategy in

the Bush Administration's foreign policy has been to make conditions in the West Bank so much better than in Gaza that the people in Gaza start to say, "Look, it's better under Fatah."

Khaled Abu Toameh: They are saying that. But at the end of the day they're not going to vote for Fatah. Why? Look. People won't do that for two reasons, or they will vote for Hamas for two reasons.

One, Hamas is not corrupt in power, they didn't steal money. No one gave them a chance, so Palestinians won't hold it against them. Hamas are victims in the eyes of the Palestinians. And as such people's sympathies go to Hamas.

Two, when they look at the PLO guys, all these Abus sitting in Ramallah, they don't see any change. They don't see that the PLO people, the Fatah people, have drawn any conclusions from their own defeat. Fatah has been trying to hold internal elections for the past eighteen years, and they've failed. Mahmoud Abbas promised to hold general elections inside Fatah, two years ago, three years ago, four years ago. The power struggle between the old guard and the young guard inside Fatah has been ongoing. People look at Fatah and don't see that there is a viable alternative to Hamas.

General Tom McInerney, Fox News Military Analyst: Is there a solution to this problem?

Khaled Abu Toameh: You Americans are always asking us that. Why are Americans always asking me if there is a solution? A solution to what?

Michael J. Totten: The whole thing.

Khaled Abu Toameh: What is the whole thing?

Anthony Cordesman: Is there anything useful that could be done this year?

Khaled Abu Toameh: Listen. Look. We must stop dreaming about the New Middle East and coexistence and harmony and turning this area into Hong Kong and Singapore. If anyone thinks a Palestinian will wake up in the morning and sing the Israeli national anthem, that's not going to happen. If anyone thinks an Israeli Jew will go back to doing his shopping in downtown Ramallah or to see his dentist in Bethlehem or eat fish in Gaza City, that's not going to happen. There has been a total divorce between Jews and Palestinians. We don't want to see each other.

I think that's good. Separation is good. Separation doesn't need harmony and coexistence. Forget about that. That's not going to happen. Let's focus on managing the conflict. Instead of talking about real peace, let's first of all try to stop the violence, reduce the level of bloodshed, and maybe that will pave the way for future peace. The only solution now is total separation between these two communities. Israel should not be involved in the internal affairs of

the Palestinians, but at the same time Israel has the right to look after its own security. They should disengage from the Palestinians completely and tell them, "Listen, folks. Don't mess around with us anymore. We're going to strike back if you fire rockets at us. And if you want to have Hamas, Fatah, or whomever, go and do it over there without our help." That's the only way. I don't see a real peace emerging over here. We should stop talking about it.

Max Boot: But earlier you said that if Israel disengages from the West Bank, Hamas will be in power in five minutes.

Khaled Abu Toameh: I mean the Israelis should disengage under the proper circumstances. Under the current circumstances, they should not disengage. Only if they have a partner on the Palestinian side.

Max Boot: The circumstances aren't going to change any time soon.

Khaled Abu Toameh: Yes. Okay. So don't do anything. You know what? Some Israelis ask me what they should do. I say "Nothing. You just sit there. And wait."

If I were an Israeli Jew I would go to the Palestinians and say "Listen, folks. I'm prepared to give you a Palestinian state and the Israeli majority approves of that, not because we love the Palestinians, but because we want to be rid of the Palestinians."

There's a majority of Jews today who want to disband most of the settlements and take only two percent of the West Bank. My Israeli Jewish friends say to me, "You know, Khaled. You Arabs can take whatever you want. Just leave us alone. It's no longer a territorial dispute for us. We'll give you anything you want if you just go and leave us alone." Some of them even go further than that. Some of them say "Just leave us Tel Aviv, the airport, and the beach."

In the wake of these positive changes that have happened inside Israel, all you need is a strong partner on the Palestinian side. There is some hope, but only if there is a strong partner on the Palestinian side.

General Tom McInerney: But not Hamas.

Khaled Abu Toameh: I don't care. If I were Israeli I would talk to any Palestinian who wants to talk to me, and I would shoot any Palestinian who shoots at me. I wouldn't ask if they were Hamas. You know what? Believe me, if you listen to Hamas and Fatah in Arabic there isn't much of a difference, especially these days. Fatah fought alongside Hamas in Gaza. Today they said they lost 36 fighters and fired 900 rockets at Israel. Fatah.

Mario Loyola: Hamas pretends its casualties are lower, and Fatah pretends its casualties are higher.

Khaled Abu Toameh: Look. Look. As I said before, let's stop saying "Fatah" and "Hamas." Talk to anyone who wants to talk. Talking to

Hamas does not mean that you recognize Hamas or that they become your buddies. The funny thing is that Israel went to war against a party that it doesn't recognize. And in the end Israel made a cease-fire unilaterally and negotiated with the Americans and the Egyptians for how to end it. And Hamas is still sitting there.

There's nothing wrong with Israel talking to Hamas if they want a ceasefire. Israelis can't ignore the fact that Hamas is in power. And Hamas continues to enjoy tremendous support over there.

Dr. Barry Posen, MIT Security Studies Program: I'm interested in going back a couple of steps and asking for your assessment of Hamas' strategy to let the ceasefire lapse and accelerate the firing of rockets. You already mentioned that they miscalculated the Israeli reaction, but what were they hoping to benefit? And what does that tell us about deterring Hamas in the future?

Khaled Abu Toameh: I think this is something many people in Israel and the West don't hear. I hear it in Arabic, and I hear it directly from them.

Dr. Barry Posen: That's why I'm asking you.

Khaled Abu Toameh: Just before the ceasefire expired, Hamas went to Egypt and said "Listen, folks. We agreed to the previous ceasefire because you, the Egyptians, promised us you would open the Rafah border crossing. And it didn't happen. And we, Hamas, were committed to this. We did our best to honor the ceasefire."

Okay, there were some violations here and there, but Hamas did in a way honor the ceasefire. They arrested people who were firing at Israel.

Mubarak said "To hell with it. I'm not going to open the Rafah border crossing unless you allow Mahmoud Abbas to come back into Gaza. Do whatever you want. I'm under pressure from the Israelis, the Americans, and Mahmoud Abbas not to open the Rafah border crossing."

Mahmoud Abbas went to Mubarak before the ceasefire expired and said "President Mubarak, please don't reopen the Rafah border crossing because that will strengthen Hamas. If you want it to be open, only give it back to me in line with the 2005 US-brokered agreement."

And so, if you think about it, Mahmoud Abbas and Hosni Mubarak bear indirect responsibility for this war. When Hamas saw that they weren't going to open the borders, Hamas said "To hell with the ceasefire" and started firing rockets again. Israel reacted and now we are where we are today.

So now we are back to square one. Hamas is still making the same demand. They said "Okay, we agree to a ceasefire, but reopen the border." They keep saying "reopen the border."

Max Boot: Do you think there is going to be any change in Mubarak's attitude? Is he going to do anything to help out that he wasn't doing before?

Khaled Abu Toameh: No. We're back to square one. Look. For Mubarak it's better if these weapons go into Gaza and kill Jews, because if these weapons don't go into Gaza to kill Jews they might end up on the streets of Cairo. They might end up in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Smuggling is a business. We're doing Hamas an injustice by saying they're the ones who established the tunnels. These tunnels have been there since 1967. In the 1970s I visited some of the tunnels. In the 1980s I visited the tunnels. When Arafat was there I visited the tunnels. These tunnels are part of the culture. It's a cultural thing over there. If you have your own tunnel it's like you have your own business. Hamas now takes taxes and gives people a license to build their tunnel.

Listen. The Egyptians are hypocrites. They are busy killing African refugees who are trying to get asylum in Israel. They opened fire on an African mother and son who were trying to run away from Sudan and were trying to seek refuge inside Israel. I haven't heard that the Egyptians are destroying tunnels or anything. I haven't heard it.

Dr. Barry Posen: What was Hamas' theory about how the rocket fire would work? Was the rocket fire meant to bring hawks to power in the election here? Were they trying to bring back attention? Were they trying to affect Israeli-Egyptian elections? Because in a weird way it seems to me that this war had a funny objective, that both Israelis and Hamas were fighting for Egypt.

Khaled Abu Toameh: Look. I believe this war could have been prevented. Really. Had we gone to Hosni Mubarak and the Americans and said "Okay, let's forget about the 2005 agreement. Let's come up with a new agreement." Hamas would have agreed to have some Palestinian Authority representatives at the border in return. But no one wanted to listen. They all said "Bring down Hamas, bring down Hamas."

To answer your question, Hamas thought that if they fire rockets at Israel that the Israeli public would revolt and start complaining and would go to their leaders and say "Go and find some kind of solution." Israelis don't want war and can't afford to have war on the eve of elections. So they thought the Israeli public would revolt, that the Egyptian government would come back and negotiate a new ceasefire of Hamas' terms. They really thought these rockets would bring about some kind of international response or a response from the Israeli public.

Mario Loyola: Isn't violence for Hamas both a means and an end?

Khaled Abu Toameh: Of course. Of course. But in this specific case

they used the rockets to put pressure on Israel and the West and the Egyptians with the hope that they could extract some concessions. Hamas believes they have created a balance of terror with Israel, and they're trying to imitate Hezbollah.

Anthony Cordesman: What are Palestinian attitudes going to be toward Iran and Syria? And what are Palestinians going to think about Europeans?

Khaled Abu Toameh: First of all, Hamas and Fatah are fighting over who is going to receive the international aid. This is very bad, and they are already accusing each other of stealing some of the aid that has come in from the West and from the Arab countries.

Now Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, the Muslim Brotherhood, all these people are playing a very negative role in this part of the world. Iran did not want Hamas to sign the ceasefire. Iran wants to fight to the last Palestinian. And they will do it through Hamas, through Hezbollah. They have their own agenda, these Iranians. Hamas could not have taken control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 had it not been for support from Iran and Syria. They had logistical and financial support, which means weapons. Most of the weapons coming into Gaza are being financed by Iran and facilitated by Syria.

So how do the Palestinians relate to them? They are some Palestinians who will tell you that the Iranians are bad, that we don't want them meddling in our affairs, look what they've done, these Iranians and Syrians are responsible for the divisions among Palestinians, they are inciting Hamas. Others will tell you they welcome Iran. There are mixed views. But I don't think the majority would like to see aid from Norway, Switzerland, or Canada instead of from Iran and Hezbollah.

Post-script: If my work from the Middle East is worth something to you, please consider a contribution and help make independent reporting economically viable. More dispatches are coming from Iraq, from Lebanon, and from the border with Gaza.

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