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Middle East Hot Docs: Ending the Gaza War, Minimizing Casualties, Diplomacy

Today's selection of timely reports

Posted January 7, 2009

Will Gaza Fighting End?: Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies asks whether there can be a "meaningful strategic outcome" to the violence in Gaza or whether "it will simply be another peak of violence in a continuing process of conflict." He writes that the "deafening silence of the Israeli government" on the goals for its military operation there raises "serious questions" about its ultimate intentions. This is also a "strategic liability" for the United States as it tries to work with moderate Arab governments elsewhere in the Middle East, he says. Cordesman calls the "lack of any credible future for Gaza" the "forgotten dimension of the war." He notes the current lack of opportunities for the Palestinians living there and writes that the new wave of fighting may leave Gaza's population "even more vulnerable to extremism and terrorism." He doubts that Israeli military victory would bring stability, and he advises all involved to "look beyond the fighting and take advantage of every other option that is available." Cordesman says that while there is "no panacea," the re-establishment of the Fatah government in Gaza, the creation of a "limited Palestinian state," and a new commitment to the peace process and international aid would be constructive steps.

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Minimizing Casualties in Gaza: The humanitarian organization Human Rights Watch warns that the current fighting in Gaza is likely to endanger civilians and urges Israeli and Palestinian forces to take "all feasible measures" to preserve their welfare. The group has documented past actions by both sides that have endangered or killed noncombatants, and it laments that a "lack of accountability" for such acts has sent the message that abuses will continue to be tolerated. Human Rights Watch concludes the report by offering recommendations to both sides to minimize civilian casualties, including avoiding attacks on populated areas and eschewing the use of "human shields." The group exhorts both the Israel Defense Forces and Hamas to "take constant care in accordance with the laws of war to spare the civilian population."

Bringing Diplomacy to the Middle East: The new administration should "renew diplomacy in the Middle East" by embracing a long-term, collaborative strategy, a new report advises. Martin Indyk and Kenneth Pollack of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings

Institution write that the region's problems are nothing new and that they run deeper than the current conflicts and threats in Gaza, Iraq, and Iran. They attribute the crises there to "serious underlying problems" with the region's governments, economies, and educational systems, as well as "a culture that feels threatened by globalization." They advise that to contribute to useful solutions, the United States should undertake "intensive, creative diplomacy" and support reform efforts originating from within the Middle East itself: "We cannot know better than the people of the region what they want, nor should we try to impose our vision on them." It will be a "tall order" to handle all of these issues at once, they admit, but they advise the president-elect that this may be necessary to "avoid having the Middle East force its way onto your agenda in even more problematic ways."



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