

# TOWARD A NEW U.S.-MIDDLE EAST STRATEGY

*A Saban Center at Brookings - Council on Foreign Relations Project*

*Toward A New U.S.-Middle East Strategy* is a joint Saban Center at Brookings – Council on Foreign Relations project staffed by Middle East experts from both policy establishments. The strategy group, formally launched in July 2007, is conducting in-depth research, fact-finding trips to the region, dialogue with regional officials, and consultation with American policymakers in an effort to develop a new Middle East strategy for the next president. The project marks the first time in the history of the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations that a group of their experts are partnering to develop policy recommendations.

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## COUNTERTERRORISM TRIP REPORT

### Israel and Jordan

March 2008

Daniel Byman\*

This trip occurred during the first two weeks of March 2008—a time of crisis in the Middle East. During my trip, Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip fired rockets against the Israeli cities of Sderot and Ashkelon. Issues of terrorism and security were certainly on the minds of Israelis, especially due to the terrorist attack on the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem. When I arrived in Jordan, Israel had begun conducting military operations in Gaza in response to the attacks.

In both Israel and Jordan, I interviewed a range of current and former government officials, as well as several prominent academics and officials from non-governmental organizations.\*\* In both countries the predominant mood was one of frustration and gloom. Israelis felt trapped between their sense that inaction would encourage more violence and their recognition that the military and political options looked unpromising. Jordanians fretted that the Israeli reaction to the violence would strengthen the radicals politically.

## AL-QA'IDA AND OTHER SALAFI-JIHADIST TERRORISM

Perhaps surprisingly, the regional view of al-Qa'ida and its affiliates was less alarming than that heard in Washington. In Jordan every official with whom I spoke emphasized the constant threat that Jordan faces from al-Qa'ida and its allies, as well as the broader danger that al-Qa'ida presents to the region. However, most of these Jordanians stressed that they saw matters as under control and that there had been an improvement since Jordan suffered simultaneous suicide attacks on three hotels in Amman in November 2005. One possible reason is that Jordan has

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\*\* A planned trip to Ramallah to meet with several Palestinians was first postponed due to security-related delays and then cancelled after Israel closed off access to the West Bank following the March 6, 2008 terrorist attack in Jerusalem.

increased spending on border security and on intelligence in general. Jordanian officials also stated that they believed other countries, including Saudi Arabia, are now less vulnerable to al-Qa'ida attacks.

Not surprisingly, given the daily rocket attacks and the still-sharp memories of the 2006 Lebanon war, I did not talk to many Israelis who put al-Qa'ida at the top of their terrorism agenda. Whenever terrorist threats were discussed, the Israelis first brought up Hamas, and then Hizballah. I did at times hear an argument that Hamas is a *jihadist* organization, as is al-Qa'ida, and thus the two are in cahoots. I find this argument both wrong and misleading, given the tremendous suspicion and hatred between these two organizations and how Hamas has at times worked to suppress al-Qa'ida-linked activities in territory it controls. Still, perception can become reality, and of course strange bedfellows are the norm in the Middle East.

That said, serious concerns remain. Several Israelis noted the danger of al-Qa'ida strikes abroad, like the November 2002 attacks in Kenya in which a car bomb exploded at the Paradise Hotel (a number of Israelis were killed) and almost-simultaneously, surface-to-air rockets were fired against an Israeli chartered plane. Concerns among both Israelis and Jordanians ranged from al-Qa'ida setting up shop in Lebanon to a growing *jihadist* presence in the Gaza Strip. (However, several interlocutors stressed that the reports of al-Qa'ida in Gaza were overstated: the Gazans involved were largely imitators, few in number, and not operationally linked to the al-Qa'ida core). Others with whom I met stressed the Iraq alumni issue as a growing concern: Iraq has proven to be a major training ground for the current and perhaps future generation of *salafi-jihadist* fighters. Both Jordanians and Israelis were far more pessimistic about Iraq's future than are many U.S. observers.

Growing zones of chaos are increasingly becoming a problem for Israelis and Jordanians. Even if Iraq is improving, Lebanon and Gaza are getting worse, and the West Bank's long-term stability is far from certain. *Salafi-jihadists* are creeping into areas where in the past they were not present. In addition, Pakistan is worsening, and progress there is vital for success in Iraq and for the security of the region. As one official noted: "There is no victory for al-Qa'ida in Iraq if al-Qa'ida loses in Pakistan."

## HAMAS AND GAZA

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Technology has profoundly changed the nature of the Gaza problem. Israelis believe that the growing range of Hamas rockets (particularly the "Grad," with its over 20 kilometer range, more than twice that of the Qassams) means that time is not on Israel's side. Israelis predict that Hamas will smuggle more Grads into Gaza. In general, Hamas' capabilities, its rockets, will improve. The rocket attack on Ashkelon in early March 2008 was particularly problematic for Israelis because as opposed to Sderot, which though attacked frequently is seen by many Israelis as far from the mainstream of Israeli life, Ashkelon is a major city. There was also general concern that the constant rocket attacks had eroded Israel's deterrent capacity.

Although there was widespread agreement about the nature of the problem, there was little agreement about the solution. Israelis feared a repeat of the 2006 Lebanon debacle during which an Israeli military campaign produced mixed results on the ground and led to a resounding Hizballah political victory. From a military perspective, stopping even the shorter-range Qassams is difficult, given the geography of the Gaza Strip. A *cordon sanitaire* like the "security

zone” in Lebanon (that Israel established from 1985 to 2000) is largely out of the question, as Gaza City is close to the demarcation line with Israel, so occupying even a part of the Strip means controlling part of the city. This means that any operation short of occupying a large part of Gaza City would only push the Qassams back with great difficulty and would have no chance with the Grads, as their greater range enables them to be fired from the middle of Gaza City. Israelis expressed a strong desire not to occupy Gaza indefinitely but also a worry that a limited operation would allow Hamas to claim victory, as Hizballah had in 2006.

One possibility I heard was for Israel to retake a slice of the border and simultaneously conduct near-constant raids into the Gaza Strip. Other Israelis discussed the need to talk to Hamas (“and to Hell with Abu Mazen,” one said) whereas others called for a massive punitive bombing campaign designed to destroy infrastructure in Gaza and impose costs on civilians. The argument here is an old Israeli one: make the civilians suffer, and the governments will eventually cave. The expectation here is that Hamas is now a real government and thus cannot evade responsibility.

Almost every Israeli with whom I spoke believed that the political heat is becoming unbearable and that politics, not strategy, will drive Israeli decision-making in the end.

One of the few optimistic notes was the hope expressed that in several years Israel would have an anti-rocket system that would enable it to shoot down various short-range rockets. My own limited research makes me skeptical that such a system would work in the comprehensive way necessary to halt the attacks and that it might be defeated by relatively simple countermeasures. Nevertheless, even a partial success would reduce this Palestinian means of pressuring Israel.

Hamas has been gaining in strength, both politically and militarily. It has received some training from Hizballah, thus increasing its tactical skill and has taken advantage of Israel’s 2005 unilateral withdrawal from Gaza to rearm, entrench, and prepare for Israeli attacks. Hamas has won out over Fatah in Gaza to the point that Fatah is not a strongly-armed organization there; ironically, now, we have “one gun” as Abu Mazen had long wanted, but it is Hamas who controls that gun. However, some people in the region noted the potential for Hamas to splinter, particularly if the political leadership of the organization engages in talks (unofficial or not) with Israel. Hamas has sensed the possibility of internal strife, and has stepped up its internal monitoring, particular of its own *da’wa* activities, to make sure that more radical elements (including *salafi-jihadist* types) do not hijack it.

There was an almost plaintive tone when Jordanian officials talked about Hamas and Israel. They stressed the need for Israeli restraint: they do not want Hamas to have a victory like the one Hizballah gained (in Arab public opinion outside Lebanon, at least) in the summer of 2006. I also repeatedly heard the call for the United States to back Abu Mazen, restrain Israel, and build up Palestinian capabilities.

## HIZBALLAH

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In addition to the concern about Hamas and events in Gaza, there was a strong sense in both Israel and Jordan that Hizballah is ascendant in the region. In Jordan, a number of people reported that some Jordanians linked to the Muslim Brotherhood are receiving training in Hizballah camps. Though the extent of this seems limited, it speaks to an overall concern in Jordan about increasing Iranian influence.

On the Israeli side, Israel has gone back to the 2000-6 containment strategy with regard to Hizballah. One person noted that the key to Hizballah's current strength is its domestic legitimacy. The United States and Israel cannot directly weaken this, although their interference can strengthen it. Before 2006, many Lebanese who did not necessarily support Hizballah's agenda accepted the idea of Hizballah as the defender of Lebanon. After the 2006 war and the resulting carnage, their view changed to seeing Hizballah as the "destroyer of Lebanon." In addition, Hizballah went from being viewed as a patriotic organization fighting a foreign occupier to being viewed by many, previously sympathetic Lebanese, as a tool of Syria and Iran. This has weakened Hizballah's legitimacy.

Rather fatalistically, most of the Israelis with whom I spoke saw a second round of battle between Israel and Hizballah as inevitable. However, no one saw renewed fighting as imminent. Having been burned once, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will be cautious, even if Hizballah retaliates massively for the recent killing of Hizballah leader Imad Mughniyeh. One expert thought that at some point Israel might conduct limited air strikes or send elite units on a dramatic raid. These actions, should they occur, would not fundamentally change the picture, but would make Israelis feel better (i.e. a political success).

## SYRIA AND IRAN

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In Israel and particularly in Jordan, the ascent of Iran, and to a lesser degree Syria, was on everyone's lips. Iran played into almost every negative issue. In many cases, officials emphasized the *salafi-jihadists'* ties to Iran—and Syria's active or passive support of them. Iraq, of course, was mentioned as a place where both countries backed militants. Some officials also stressed Iran's support for the Taliban in Afghanistan and backing of terrorists in Iraq to undermine the United States. Although I disagree with some of their assessments and the degree of influence they give to Iran, this was a constant message.

A few officials in Jordan argued that the links between Hamas and Iran had created a virtual border between Iran and Israel at the Erez crossing in Gaza. One official noted that Hamas in Gaza takes its cues from Khaled Meshaal in Damascus, who in turn is controlled by Tehran. Some officials also claimed that Hamas sought to export its model outside of the Palestinian territories, with Jordan being one likely destination.

To my surprise, several interviewees emphasized Iran's efforts to increase its influence in Jordan (and noted that it had succeeded in Syria) at a societal level. For example, they noted that Shi'i religious events now occur in Jordan. In addition to the potential for direct Iranian influence, there was a fear that this sort of activity could anger more conservative Sunnis. The information I was given on this, however, was anecdotal at best. Nevertheless the perception of Iranian meddling and of a risk being posed to Jordan's stability was real.

Syria was seen as rising in tandem with Iran. Officials in both Jordan and Israel believe that Syria continues to turn a blind eye to fighters going to Iraq, though several Jordanians thought Damascus was cracking down slightly on this issue. Some regional observers noted that Washington had reduced pressure on Damascus, due to other problems, notably Iraq, to the point that issues such as the Hariri investigation were effectively over. Moreover, people noted that the strife in Gaza is enabling Syria to shape the agenda in the region to its favor. For example, Jordanian officials believed that Syria would be able to shift the agenda of the March 2008 Arab Summit, where Syria's abuses in Lebanon were to be discussed, to focus on Israel and the Palestinians instead.

## IRAQ

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Although they admitted that Iraq had progressed in the last year due to the reported reduction in violence, the Jordanians and Israelis with whom I spoke were still universally pessimistic about Iraq's future. One person saw Iraq's best hope in the next 10 years as being a country with fairly established warlords and fiefdoms; other assessments were even gloomier. There was a general sense that the United States must remain involved or the chaos would grow tremendously. Underlying this sentiment were fears of Iran. As one official noted, "Iran would be on Jordan's border" if the United States withdrew. Although several officials expressed broader concerns about chaos in Iraq and terrorism, this was not the focus of the discussions: the concern was about how the Iraq crisis could ignite regional rivalries and domestic radicalization.

Many people expressed curiosity about the U.S. presidential candidates' views on Iraq. In general, I faced considerable skepticism when I said that the two leading Democratic candidates would both be under considerable pressure to begin a withdrawal from Iraq. The candidates' rhetoric in this regard was seen as political posturing. Most officials thought that the United States would not be "irresponsible" and leave the region to deal with the problems of Iraq.

For the most part, the Iraqi refugee story I heard in Jordan was a positive one. The Iraqi refugees in Jordan are mostly middle class, and whereas some are Shi'ah, most are Sunni—and the Shi'ah who came are relatively wealthy. As a result, crime has been very limited and political activity has been relatively muted. Perhaps a reason for this is that the refugee community is very (very) well watched.

My read, however, is that some of the refugee-related problems are serious, particularly as time goes on:

- I received highly inconsistent responses on the number of refugees, suggesting that the government is unaware of the extent of the problem;
- The refugees are consuming scarce state resources in education, jobs, health services, and, in particular, water. Therefore, long-term tension with Jordanians is possible given the intense competition for state services and resources;
- Although radicalization is limited, some groups in Iraq are using refugees for intelligence gathering and are trying to expand their presence within refugee communities;
- Some officials noted there were tensions among Iraqi refugees, while others denied this;
- There is no bilateral coordination on this issue with Syria, the other major refugee haven. As a result, the two countries could impose policies that undercut each other.

Most important, I had no sense of a long-term Jordanian refugee strategy. The refugees' own financial resources are being depleted, and they have no means of replacing them. Moreover, if regional assessments of Iraq's future are correct and the strife within Iraq persists, the refugees will have nowhere to go. When I noted that more refugees may come if fighting increases again, Jordanian officials said that "more are okay because they are only here temporarily." When I pointed out the likely error of this, the Jordanians told me that they might use financial penalties to encourage the

Iraqis who overstayed their welcome to leave, but then undercut this by saying Jordan could not abandon them. This led to a pitch (one I endorse) for the United States to take more refugees and for the international community to give more aid to Jordan to take care of the refugees. Both of those seem unlikely to occur and, even if they do, would only solve part of the problem.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

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The trip raised some classic counterterrorism problems that the United States is facing in its struggle against al-Qa'ida and its allies:

- First, Israelis believe they have lost their capacity to deter. Constant provocations from Gaza, and the uneven Israeli response, have led to the perception that Israel can be struck with impunity. However, Israelis also recognize that many responses would simply increase the stature of Hamas, so Hamas would win either way. The United States faces similar dilemmas with regard to the use of force against terrorists.
- Second, al-Qa'ida and the broader *salafi-jihadist* threat was not the main focus of people in Israel and Jordan. Although concern was real in both countries, Hamas and Hizballah were the paramount concerns. This difference may likely lead the United States to have different priorities on counterterrorism from its key regional partners.
- Third, there was a triumph of short-term thinking in both Jordan and Israel. For Jordan, the refugee issues were being handled as a day-to-day concerns rather than as long-term issues. For Israel, there seemed to be no effort to forge a comprehensive strategy on either Hamas or Hizballah. Politics and the opportunities of the moment are driving decision-making.

From a regional perspective, the problem of terrorism was inextricably linked to issues of regional stability and power politics, in contrast to the U.S. approach of treating terrorism distinctly from broader political issues. Moreover, in both Israel and Jordan, the politics of counterterrorism are paramount. The Israeli government is under enormous pressure to respond to rocket and other attacks. In Jordan, while open pressure on the government is limited, the terrorism problem is seen as a serious threat to domestic stability as it is linked to the dynamics between the regime and various Islamist parties.

With regard to the peace process and the strength of U.S. allies, continued terrorism is destroying the credibility of moderate voices. Regular terrorist violence and the Israeli response to it are creating a cycle where voices calling for negotiations and peace are drowned out by demands for revenge. The violence has empowered Hamas in particular. This has increased fears in neighboring states that Muslim Brotherhood-linked organizations may emerge stronger. In addition, there are concerns that Hamas' influence in the West Bank will grow.

Finally, the Middle East could become even less stable. Although Jordan itself does not seem prone to radicalization, daily violence and unrest are now common not only in Iraq but also in Gaza and Lebanon. This could easily spread to Syria and the West Bank. This is not a terrorism problem *per se* (though terrorism, of course, would be part of the challenge), but it reflects broader governance issues that are a problem for much of the Arab world.