



There are six ingredients to my identity, someone will hate me for one of them - I am Wafa Fa-houm, a lawyer, an Arab, a Muslim, a woman, and an Israeli — Wafa Fahoum



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The Gaza war and the Syria-Israel front

Carsten Wieland

The strategic and diplomatic fallout from the war Gaza leaves the future of a major regional peace initiative open, says Carsten Wieland.

5 - 02 - 2009

The strategic and political reverberations of Israel's military operation in Gaza are being felt across the middle east. Amid intense diplomatic efforts to end the continuing violence and to agree a framework for Gaza's [reconstruction](#), all the major players involved in the core Israeli-Palestinian conflict - including the United States and Iran - are sifting through the rubble in search of opportunity.

How, then, will the three-week war affect the course of developments in the region in 2009? The answer to this question depends in turn partly on an assessment of the likely consequences of the Gaza events for the previously "secret" Israel-Syria talks, whose revelation was one of the major stories of 2008 (see ["The Syria-Israel talks: old themes, new setting"](#), 27 May 2008).

A walk on ice

The timing of the war was in narrow terms well [calculated](#) by its architects. Israel's [campaign](#) began on 27 December 2008, near enough to the scheduled general election in Israel to have a political impact; and ended on 17 January 2009, thus avoiding any overlap with the moment Barack Obama stepped into the White House three days later.

At the same time, the results have been inconclusive for Israel - even in terms of its immediate aim of preventing Hamas's (or other militias') rockets being fired into it from Gaza. Its wider strategic implications, moreover, are far from comforting (see Paul Rogers, ["After Gaza: Israel's last chance"](#), 17 January 2009).

When it was revealed in May 2008 that Turkey had been [mediating](#) the process between the two bitter enemies for a year, the news was welcomed with relief by many observers. Now, after Gaza, the talks are on ice. The Syrian government bitterly condemned the Israeli attacks, and the fallout of the destruction included a spectacular public [criticism](#) of Israel by Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

The immediate "fronts" on both the Israeli and Syrian sides - and across the region - also seem as hardened as ever, a condition if anything accentuated by the internal politics of (pre-election) Israel and of the Palestinians in the wake of Hamas's survival of an intense assault (see Khaled Hroub, ["Hamas after the Gaza war"](#), 15 January 2009).

The war has also made the calculations of the incoming administration in Washington more fluid. It became clear in think-tank circles there towards the end of 2008 - but before the attack on Gaza - that Barack Obama intended to begin his middle-east policy via the "Syrian front". The idea was to create a more peaceful (or at least predictable) neighbourhood for Israel before tackling the increasingly complex [Palestinian](#) problem. A part of this reasoning was to loosen Syria's alliance with Iran by returning to Damascus the Golan heights, [occupied](#) by Israel since 1967; this would have the additional benefit of weakening Hizbollah in Lebanon.

The diplomatic fallout from Gaza for the moment complicates this line of thinking. How far it may be pursued in 2009, as was planned, now also depends on the evolving regional [dynamics](#) across the middle east (see Khaled Hroub, ["The 'Arab system' after Gaza"](#), 27 January 2009).

Carsten Wieland is a historian and political scientist, specialising in Syria and the middle east. He lived in Damascus for several years, and worked as a correspondent for DPA in Tel Aviv. His books include *Syria: Ballots or Bullets?* *Democracy, Islamism, and Secularism in the Levant* (Cune Press, 2006) and *Syria at Bay: Secularism, Islamism and 'Pax Americana'* (C Hurst, 2006).

His website is here

Also by Carsten Wieland in **openDemocracy**: "Syria's quagmire, al-Assad's tunnel" (9 November 2006)

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A lost chance

In many respects the [news](#) of the Syria-Israel talks in May 2008 should not have come as a surprise. The states were in contact frequently since the [Madrid peace talks](#) in 1993 - even in times of high crisis such as after the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In many ways, everything that has to be discussed by the countries already has. Many possible compromises have been proposed regarding the few dozen hectares of land that are the core issue of dispute, including [transforming](#) the Golan into a demilitarised nature-park with access for both sides.

The situation in the early months of 2009 seems less favourable to a settlement than did the same period in 2000 - when Syria's ailing president, [Hafez al-Assad](#) (who was to die in June that year, and be succeeded by his son Bashar) met Israel's prime minister Ehud Barak (now defence minister, and notably hawkish during the Gaza war).

The two sides [convened](#) at Shepherdstown, West Virginia. For a short time, Israel was ready to return the Golan heights in exchange for far-reaching concessions by Syria in the areas of security and the normalisation of relations. But at the end of the negotiations, Barak - fearing public opinion at home - [pulled back](#). Hafez al-Assad considered this an affront, and refused to concede a single metre east of Lake Galilee. A golden opportunity was wasted.

A fist of four

Indeed, there are four reasons that make a rapprochement between the two sides more unlikely today than in 2000 - yet (below) seven reasons why cautious hope is still justified.

The four more pessimistic factors are as follows:

First, Israel has experienced consistent shelling from the Gaza strip since its [withdrawal](#) from Gaza in August 2005. The new Israeli government formed after the [election](#) on 12 February 2009 will in these circumstances have a harder time selling to its voters the idea of giving up another stretch of occupied land - namely, the Golan heights.

The way that [Hizbollah](#) renewed its strength in southern Lebanon after Israel's withdrawal in May 2000 - and again quickly rebuilt its force levels following the [July-August 2006 war](#) - reinforces the Israeli public's sense of insecurity. This makes it even more essential that security arrangements and promises are credible. But trust between Tel Aviv and Damascus, despite the Turkey-mediated talks, remains low.

Second, the governments of [Israel](#) and Syria are weaker today than in 2000. They are alike confronted with threatening domestic enemies (in Israel, a strong opposition and splintered party landscape; in Syria, hostile groups who threaten domestic peace). In order to succeed, peace talks need governments strong enough to keep their promises and convince their populations to accept an agreement even against prevailing public sentiments. In addition, the infirmity of the George W Bush administration for several years before its departure has had [negative effects](#) on peace [prospects](#) in the middle east.

Third, Syria has since the war in Iraq began in March 2003 increasingly drifted towards alliances with anti-western actors: mainly its traditional ally Iran, but further afield with Venezuela and North Korea. This has been in large part the result of a lack of of foreign-policy alternatives in the context of Washington's polarising and exclusionary approach. It will be very difficult now to persuade Syria to break from allies that have stood by its side in threatening times.

Fourth, Syria's alliances with Iran and Hizbollah have acquired particular importance for Syria since the early 2000s. Hizbollah's political weight in the fragile fabric of Lebanon has markedly increased (see Robert G Rabil, "[Hizbollah and Lebanon: the curse of a state](#)", 21 May 2008). Indeed, it is arguable that Syria today is more dependent on Hizbollah than vice-versa, a reversal of the situation when Hafez al-Assad was in power.

In addition, both western and Israeli politicians have demanded that Damascus stop sheltering radical Palestinian organisations and leaders. In September 2008, some media outlets reported that Hamas leader Khaled Mashal would be asked to leave Syria. This has not yet happened - and the war in Gaza has made it less likely.

A hand of seven

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These four factors reflect the greater insecurity in the region situation since 2000. Yet there are seven reasons for cautious optimism.

First, political developments in Israel-Palestine also favour negotiations with Syria. After the [Gaza war](#), Israel's situation with the Palestinians seems even less solvable; and in Palestine's more fissured political as well as territorial landscape, Fatah has lost ground to its more militant rival Hamas. This encourages leading decision-makers in Israel's political and intelligence community to voice support for negotiations with Syria.

Some politicians, such as prime minister Ehud Olmert and foreign minister Tzipi Livni, favour a "two-track" approach that deals with Syria and the Palestinians at the same time. But even if the hard-right Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu becomes prime minister after the 12 February election, there is a possibility that negotiations with Syria could advance, if only to settle one flank and be able to pursue a tough line on the Palestinian issue.

Second, it is an advantage that the Syrian and the Palestinian portfolios have been [separated](#). In May 2003, Bashar al-Assad picked up the secret concession his father had made at Shepherdstown in January 2000 - and declared his readiness to accept any decision by the Palestinian leadership in peace negotiations with Israel. This implies that Syria could be ready for peace with Israel even before the Palestinian [question](#) is satisfactorily resolved.

Third, also in 2003 Syria ended its practice of stating preconditions before resuming negotiations with Israel. This implied that Syria would get back the whole Golan within its 1967 borders, a promise first given by Israel's then prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. Damascus's greater flexibility offers a further modicum of hope for progress.

Fourth, neither Israel nor the United States currently has an interest in a forced regime-change in Damascus. The bitter experience of the US war in Iraq has empowered a pragmatic-realistic school that considers a dictatorial but [secular regime](#) in Syria to be better than intervention which creates the probability of ethno-religious violence and a political vacuum perhaps to be filled by radical Islamists and terrorists.

Fifth, the fact that a regional actor like Turkey has come to play a pivotal [role](#) in the Syria-Israel talks has introduced a new dynamic. Washington and Brussels at different times and for different reasons failed as mediators in the middle east. Now, for the first time, a region-centred constellation has a chance.

Sixth, however, the negotiations will require some United States involvement. Syria especially puts great stress on the need for any peace deal to be in the end mediated and guaranteed by Washington. In January 2009, Bashar al-Assad again underlined (in an interview with *Der Spiegel*) that he was ready to cooperate with Barack Obama.

The Israeli political scientist and diplomat [Shlomo Avineri](#) has pointed out too (in an article for the [Heinrich Böll Foundation](#)) that Washington plays its most influential mediating role in the middle east in one of two scenarios: when it gets involved in a situation of open war, or when contending local parties have already laid the groundwork for negotiations but need external pressure to clinch the deal. The latter scenario could be on the horizon.

Seventh, Syria has in the second half of 2008 taken remarkable steps to end its isolation from the west and prepare the way for future negotiations. For example, it normalised relations with Lebanon: this included exchanging ambassadors for the first time in the history of these states, regulating open-border issues, and declaring a commitment to non-intervention in each other's internal affairs. Damascus's changed attitude has calmed Beirut's long political crisis.

A fine balance

A number of indications suggest that Syria's toughest period of isolation is over. They include invitations to attend the political meetings of western groups, such as the European Union summit in Paris on 12 July 2008 that founded the Mediterranean Union (see Fred Halliday, "[Mediterranean mirage: Europe's sunken politics](#)"). Even an academic delegation of Americans close to the Barack Obama camp visited Syria at the end of 2008.

Damascus has also tried to please Washington with stricter controls at the Syrian-Iraqi [border](#) in order to prevent the infiltration of Islamist militants. It may also be that the Syrian secret service knew of and tolerated the controversial US military operation in the vicinity of Abu Kamal, eastern Syria, in October 2008, which killed several Syrian citizens. Only when the mission had obviously failed and created innocent victims forced Damascus to express indignation. In any case, Syria and the United States have a common historic interest that could come to the [forefront](#) again: the fight against radical Islamism and its

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terrorist outgrowths.

But Bashar al-Assad has, like his father, many [interests](#) to balance. He must at the same time preserve Syria's alliance with Iran and Hizbollah and pursue a rapprochement with the United States and the European Union; maintain influence in Lebanon while accommodating the interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia; allowing Syrian *ihadis* the safety-valve of access to Iraq while pursuing good relations with Baghdad and Washington; nurturing ties with Hamas and Hizbollah yet negotiating peace with Israel.

The international situation is more complex than during the cold war, and [Bashar al-Assad](#) lacks some of the political instincts of his wily father. But he has managed to widen his room of manoeuvre by well-judged and important concessions. The political reforms he announced when he came to power in 2000 were under more pressing conditions of regional instability and domestic opposition [succeeded](#) by a focus on tight internal security. The suffocation of any internal opposition, no matter how moderate and secular, has been another negative repercussions of Syria's isolation. A diplomatic opening could also have internal political benefits that include a greater measure of freedom for elements of Syria's civil society.

It will be another hard balancing-act. Yet because Syria has the potential to be both problem and solution in the Levant, it remains indispensable to any plan for regional peace and security. At present, the time for successful peace negotiations with Israel is not yet ripe. The protagonists are interested, but not yet strong enough to contemplate the painful compromises and secure the political backing that will be necessary.

But the progress made in 2008 may yet survive the destruction and embitterment of the Gaza war, and bear fruit in 2009. Syria and Israel are, in the right conditions, ready to move. When the domestic situations in Israel and the United States have consolidated, further steps could follow. Until then, the negotiations are in the safe hands of Turkey.

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syed mahdi (not verified) said:

Thu, 2009-02-05 22:02

Mr. Wieland qualifies as Grand Master in (Middle East) Chess. Unfortunately for him and fortunately for the Arabs, the Middle East is not a chess board and chess pieces do not move on the whim of the players. The real game is much more complex and unpredictable because every piece on the real board are humans, with bodies, brains, feelings, desires and intelligence and hence the moves they make are their own individual or collective moves which, in principle, can not be controlled or ordered by grandmasters like the US, UK, France and Israel. And, thank God for that! In the "BODY" of the Real Middle East , there is Cancer, Israel, implanted

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by UK, France and USA! The "Body" has been 'rejecting' this foreign body for over six decades but the cancer is stronger than the rejecting body, courtesy of US 'blank check' funding and arming and re-arming of Israel through the 'ultra-secret' "Israel Account" at CIA and openly through Foggy Bottom, Pentagon and AIPAC; billions of dollars. Since Cancer is cancer, it behaves and grows like cancer till such times it is removed surgically or cut down in size by radiation therapy or kills the body.

Jaap (not verified) said:

Thu, 2009-02-05 16:41

The Gaza war (or the Gaza massacre, as it is called by Arabs) was indeed well timed. The first Israeli provocation was at the time of the American presidential elections. On 4 November Israel killed six Palestinians.

Israel claimed the Palestinians wanted to abduct an Israeli soldier, and had already dug a tunnel for this purpose. However, if the Israeli's already knew this, the attempt at abduction would be futile anyway. If Hamas really wanted to do this Israel could wait for the Hamas men, arrest them, and exploit this in the media.

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