

ST. Mary's Professor says Israeli attacks increase support for Hamas in Gaza - The Catholic Voice

*By Barbara Erickson
Special to The Voice*

As Israel has bombed and invaded the Gaza Strip, killing hundreds and wounding thousands, its aim of destroying Hamas, the ruling party in the territory, is having the opposite effect, according to a St. Mary's College political science professor.

"In the medium and long term," said Hisham Ahmed, a native of Palestine, "this aggression has strengthened Hamas immeasurably in Palestinian society." Although Hamas is an Islamist party, he said, its popularity has now grown beyond Muslims. "Even Christians say they are considering seriously joining Hamas," Ahmed said. "That is unheard of before."

Although Israel claims it attacked the Gaza Strip on Dec. 27 in order to stop rocket fire into southern Israel and crush Hamas, Ahmed said, "What they're doing is exactly the opposite." Even beyond Gaza, in the West Bank and into the Arab world as a whole, Hamas has regained popularity that it had been losing in recent months. "They have tripled it, if not even more than that," he said.

Sympathy for Hamas has grown as casualties reach into the thousands, with more than 900 dead as The Voice went to press, and more than 4,200 injured. The dead included 270 children and 95 women, according to the Israeli human rights group B'tselem, which also reports 10 Israelis dead, seven of them soldiers.

The International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN charge that the Israeli army prevented them from providing aid to the besieged Gazans by firing on ambulance escorts and sealing off neighborhoods. When the Red Cross was finally allowed into one area, the organization reported finding several young children weak from hunger among their dead mothers and other relatives.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, called for an independent war crimes investigation in Gaza after reports that Israeli forces shelled a house full of Palestinian civilians, killing 30 people. And Cardinal Renato Martino, head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, decried the "continual massacre" and called Gaza "a big concentration camp."

Israel and Hamas signed onto a cease fire last June with the understanding that rocket fire would stop and Israel would open the borders to allow the movement of people and supplies in and out of the area. Rocket fire fell to less than 20 in the ensuing four months and according to an Israeli spokesperson, none of them was fired by Hamas. However, Israel did not lift its blockade and allowed only a trickle of food, medical supplies and building materials into the area.



Hisham Ahmed, a Palestinian, is a professor of political science at St. Mary's College in Moraga.

KAREN KEMP PHOTO/ST. MARY'S COLLEGE



A major explosion follows an Israeli airstrike in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip Jan. 13. More than 900 Palestinians have been killed in the Israeli offensive against Hamas since it began Dec. 27. Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world.

CNS PHOTO/BRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/REUTERS

infrastructure and left a thousand dead, Hizbollah gained popularity.

The same scenario is occurring in this conflict, Ahmed said. Hamas flags are appearing at rallies in the West Bank, which is controlled by its rival Fatah, and he said, "Even in churches, there are campaigns of solidarity with the Gaza Strip."

Support for Hamas has grown, Ahmed said, because it is the weaker party in the conflict, "the David that is being eaten up by the Goliath." Hamas has been building crude rockets with outside help from Arab groups, while Israel is armed with American F-16s, tanks, war ships and other sophisticated weaponry.

Moreover, Gazans have no bomb shelters or early warning systems, like those in Israel, and no way to escape from the tightly sealed territory. The entire area has been cut off from all but the most minimal aid and supplies, prompting The UN, the Red Cross and other international organizations to raise the alarm about a humanitarian crisis in Gaza well before the present attacks.

In 2005 Israel removed Jewish settlers who had moved into Gaza, but it has continued to occupy the area, controlling all the border crossings, the airspace and the sea. After Hamas came to power in 2007, the blockade grew even tighter. Since November even humanitarian workers and the press have been kept out.

The attacks on Gaza began long before Hamas came to power, Ahmed noted, and according to B'tselem, 2,990 Gazans were killed by the Israeli military between June 2000 and the end of last July. The group reports that 11 Israelis died from Gazan rocket fire between 2004 and 2007.

The killing and destruction in Gaza have pushed the Arab and Muslim world into a more radical stance, Ahmed said, and they have given Al Qaeda a new recruiting tool. After months of silence, the terrorist organization spoke out in January, citing the deaths in Gaza as a "crusade against Islam and Muslims" and calling for action against the US and Israel.

The rocket fire increased after Israel invaded Gaza Nov. 4, killing six Palestinians.

Ahmed claims the rocket fire is only a pretext for the attacks. "It has nothing to do with Hamas rockets," he said. The invasion, he said, is an effort by Israeli politicians to gain support before elections on Feb. 10 and to restore the prestige of the army, damaged by an unsuccessful invasion of Lebanon in 2006.

In that conflict, Israel said it was targeting the Islamist party Hizbollah, but after massive air and ground attacks, which destroyed much of the country's