TSUNAMI IN ARABIC

The outpouring of Internet donations in the West for the Southeast Asian tsunami was not replicated in the Arab world. In part, the tsunami was a relatively smaller story there. With ongoing violence and incipient elections in both Iraq and the Palestinian territories, it tended to play below the fold or well into many newscasts. Also, some saw the tsunami as an act of God that called for introspection rather than compassion.

Governments donated in traditional ways, but few of the new and unorthodox vehicles that appeared around the world got much footing in the Arab world. Partly this is due to the unprecedented scrutiny now given to Islamic charity, but part of the problem has to do with the state of the Internet in the Arab world itself.

Two prerequisites to online donations are Internet access and credit cards, and the Middle East is relatively poor in each. Only two or three percent of Egypt's 70 million people have Internet access, and just over one percent have a credit card; most credit card transactions are processed overseas. Even on bilingual sites—and tsunami relief almost always played bigger on the English than on the Arabic side—online donations often could only be made in English. What used to be new now seems old fashioned, but it works: a Saudi telethon last week reportedly raised more than $80 million, partly in jewelry, tents, and blankets. ∎   *- LW*

PRESIDENT, BUT COMMANDER IN CHIEF?

By Haim Malka

Now that Mahmoud Abbas has won the Palestinian presidential election, there will be enormous pressure on him to crack down swiftly on militant groups. Doing so would be a mistake. Urging a clash when the leadership remains weak and lacks a credible security force would be inviting failure. Further, it would ensure that Palestinian politics remain mired in violence and lawlessness. It seems an attractive option, but in fact, it takes things in precisely the wrong direction.

Max Weber defined a state as having a "monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a given territory." In this, the Palestinian proto-state has been an abject failure. Because the Palestinian Authority (PA) failed to prevent militants—including some members of its own security apparatus—from attacking Israeli targets at their whim, Israel cracked down. Palestinian police forces are restricted from carrying weapons in many areas that fall under the jurisdiction of the PA, while armed militants publicly brandish arms and disregard the PA's dictates.

Without viable police capabilities, the newly elected Palestinian government will remain impotent. It will be unable to improve the lives of its citizens or to effectively renew negotiations with Israel. Rebuilding the police apparatus to form a legitimate and accountable security force is a vital first step in the long process of increasing Palestinian law-enforcement capacity.

After four years of war, the Palestinian security force is a shadow of its former self. The PA holds only marginal control over the territory under its jurisdiction, and anarchy reigns in places were warlords do not. The PA's security forces need to be rebuilt. The reforms outlined in the past, including the transparent payment of salaries and the consolidation of the security apparatus into three security branches under civilian authority, are vital steps.

Training and rehabilitating the image of security forces is equally important. An effective force could rebuff interference by Iran and Hizballah, who are arming,

NEW FELLOW: HAIM MALKA

The CSIS Middle East Program is delighted to welcome Mr. Haim Malka as a permanent fellow with the program. Malka, who previously worked at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, will support all aspects of the program's work, concentrating especially on North African issues and the integration of militant groups into political processes. He is a graduate of the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs and the University of Washington, and he worked for several years for both Fox News and Reuters in Jerusalem. He speaks Hebrew and Arabic and is the author of "Must Innocents Die? The Islamic Debate on Suicide Attacks." Malka can be reached at (202) 775-3133 or at hmalka@csis.org. ∎

financing, and training Palestinian militants. Achieving this capacity will take time, but it is key to ensuring that the Palestinian government is strong enough to enforce its laws. This viability is also critical for engaging in any peace process with Israel.

This is not the time for a showdown, however. Prime Minister Sharon himself recognized this fact after the death of Yasser Arafat, when he described the issue of disarming Palestinian militants as "complex." PA security forces need to concentrate on maintaining order and enforcing internal arrangements between the PA and various Palestinian factions. This process includes establishing the acceptable limits of nonstate violence. Violence will not end completely in the near term, but defining the acceptable parameters of such violence and holding violators accountable will strengthen the rule of law in the PA. Israel and Hizballah engaged in vague and informal agreements in 1993 and again in 1996, restricting attacks against civilians. President Mahmoud Abbas must set similar rules.

For example, Abbas needs to crack down on the firing of Kassam rockets into Israel. The principal effect of such attacks is to demonstrate that those firing them can do so with impunity—they have no strategic value and they poison Israeli public opinion and provoke harsh Israeli reprisals. Abbas needs to put an end to them. A recent poll from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research shows that 58 percent of Palestinians would agree with this approach at the outset, provided it was part of a mutual cessation of violence. Effectively enforcing such a prohibition against missile attacks would not only help Abbas with Israelis, it would also strengthen his hand domestically and help him overcome his image as a malleable and weak leader.

To his credit, Abbas has sought to establish a common set of principles and guidelines through a "national dialogue" between the Palestinian factions. However, a more comprehensive strategy to bring these groups into a political process has failed to materialize thus far.

Ultimately, Abbas' goal needs to be to provoke a split within Hamas and other militant organizations, between people who can be co-opted and those who must be coerced. This process has already commenced, as Hamas candidates who choose politics over militancy now dominate the municipal councils of 9 out of the 26 West Bank towns that held local elections last December. Hamas officially boycotted the presidential election, but they show every intention to compete in parliamentary and municipal elections later in the year.

If Mahmoud Abbas is to have any future, he needs to ensure that the price militants pay for admission to Palestinian politics is forgoing independent armed action. If he can point to an improvement in the lives of his citizens on the one hand, and the coercive power of his security forces on the other, the people will break with him. Some in Hamas will follow, but his security forces will need to crush the remainder. If he tries to make that deal now, with neither asset to point to, he will certainly lose. ■ *12/10/04*

Links of Interest

Islam Online provides information on donating to tsunami relief efforts in Arabic:
http://www.islam-online.net/Arabic/In_Depth/AsianQuake/2005/01/article03.shtml

And in English:
http://www.islam-online.net/English/In_Depth/DisasterVictims/index.shtml

Islamic Relief is an international relief and development charity:
http://www.islamic-relief.com

The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research:
http://www.pcpsr.org/