

BRACING FOR WORSE: Having cut off contact with the PA, Israel needs the U.N. to provide aid more than ever

KEVIN FRAYER / AP

The Lesser Evil

Matti Friedman

THE CHICKENS PUT Israel in an uncomfortable position. In March, just when hundreds of thousands of them were being killed in Israel by health workers after cases of avian flu were discovered, an outbreak was reported in the Gaza Strip, only a few miles away from communities in the Negev. Two months earlier Israel might have been able to coordinate attempts to contain the disease with the Palestinian Health Ministry, but it couldn't this time, because on January 28 Palestinian voters had put the Health Ministry, along with the rest of their government, in the hands of Hamas. Israel had sworn to boycott the terrorist organization and the Palestinian Authority institutions it now controlled, a move that was firmly backed by the United States. But there was no boycotting the avian flu.

The problem was solved by the United Nations in the person of Ambrogio Manenti, an Italian doctor with pink-rimmed glasses who runs the U.N.'s local World Health Organization office from behind an East Jerusalem desk covered from end to end with

The U.N. agencies working with the Hamas-controlled Palestinian government are undermining Israel's attempt to isolate the terror group, but are also helping stave off a humanitarian disaster in the PA. It's a trade-off Israel may have to learn to live with.

stacks of paper more than a foot high. Manenti promptly went about setting up meetings with officials of the Palestinian Health Ministry, which became the fiefdom of Hamas minister Bassem Naim at the end of March. He couldn't avoid meeting with Naim himself, because the minister chairs the avian flu committee. Manenti organized the containment effort, which included a number of U.N. agencies, as well as low-level contacts between Israeli and Palestinian officials. Avian flu receded from the headlines in a matter of weeks, but the episode's central feature — emergency-driven and effective contact between U.N. representatives and Hamas officials — is becoming increasingly common and is unlikely to go away.

Over the past few months, the U.N. agencies that are a vital part of the fabric of life in the Palestinian territories have seen their workload increase as Israel, as well as the

U.S. and other donor countries, have cut off ties with the PA government, leaving the territories teetering on the brink of economic disaster. "If there is a disruption of the PA Health Ministry — if there are no more immunizations, for example — there could be an outbreak of communicable disease, and this would be extremely dangerous for Israel as well," says Manenti. "We channel funds and help get support to the Palestinians, and this is more important for Israel than it was before." The financial siege of the Palestinian Authority followed the Hamas victory and its refusal to meet the benchmarks set by the Quartet (the U.S., U.N., EU and Russia) for renewal of funding and official contacts: The new government must recognize Israel, renounce violence and commit to previously signed agreements. Israel doesn't want to deal with the Hamas-led PA and doesn't want the U.N. to either, but neither does it want the growing poverty in the territories to deteriorate into a full-blown humanitarian crisis. Senior U.N. staffers say that these two desires cannot be reconciled. And in fact, though U.N. directives require avoiding contact with Hamas officials, there is no blanket ban and meetings are allowed where deemed necessary.

This has not served to improve the U.N.'s

Navigating a New Reality

The U.N.'s top envoy to Israel and the Palestinian territories, Alvaro de Soto, says the U.N. can't honor Israel's boycott of the Hamas-led PA

What's changed in U.N.-Israel relations?

There has been a warming of political relations in the last few years. Secretary General Kofi Annan has worked hard on this, and so has Israel. We value the progress that has been made, and we want it to continue. When it comes to the work of the U.N. agencies on the ground, there remains considerable suspicion on the part of some Israeli officials that people involved in aiding the Palestinians must be on the Palestinian side in the conflict. I understand why a country such as Israel — which doesn't have wide experience participating in multilateral international cooperation or peacekeeping — sometimes finds it difficult to fully fathom and appreciate the role of the U.N. as an impartial player. We don't take sides by definition.

The agreement [between Israel and the Palestinians] on border crossings, for example, has been haphazardly implemented, and, in parts, not at all. Because of security concerns which we have no way of assessing independently, the Karni crossing was closed for months, with no outgoing Palestinian goods at all, only some humanitarian aid going in. Perhaps it's a natural tension — the aid agencies want things to move to bring aid to people who need it, and Israel prefers to err on the side of prudence to protect its citizens. Still, it's difficult for us to understand the systematic closure of Gaza, both before and after the formation of the new PA government. Of course, it is regrettable that the new Palestinian govern-

ment has not committed to upholding this and other agreements, even though President Abbas's position is clear. This adds to the difficulties.

Why is the U.N. continuing its contacts with the PA even after most Western governments have cut off ties?

The decision by Israel was that starting from the swearing-in of the [Hamas] government, or even of the Palestinian parliament, the whole apparatus has been tainted. It's a reasoning we find difficult to follow — considering all employees in ministries, like doctors and nurses, as terrorists, when they weren't until recently. In most cases, it's the very same people who were there before. This demand enormously complicates our job. You can't just dump the sack of flour in the street, you need someone to deliver it. Cutting off contact could mean cutting off basic services. The PA is based on a bureaucracy that was created pursuant to agreements between Israel and the PLO. It provides services that the Geneva Convention requires the occupying power to ensure are provided. There is concern that with the drastic cutting off of ties, we would be undermining the very institutions that we helped create.

We work with the PA to the extent that this is required by our operational needs. A lot of work can be and is done at the operational level. But sometimes you find that a decision from the political level is required. As in many small countries, ministers need to be involved. A good example was the bird flu — it was necessary to deal with the Health Ministry, and with the minister of health, who is the chairman of the Palestinian committee on avian flu. This should not be seen as a political act in any way. There is concern that we are bestowing legitimacy, but as we see it, legitimacy was

bestowed by the voters at the polls. Our political focus should be on their policies, and the need for them to change.

Isn't that a violation of Quartet policy?

Israel, like the United States, understands that the U.N., because of its job of delivering assistance, falls into a category of its own. There isn't a Quartet policy [on contact with the PA government] — U.S. policy is one thing, EU is another, and Russian policy is another still. Everyone agrees that there is a need for the government to respect the wishes of the Palestinian people as confirmed in poll after poll, and support a two-state solution. And there are principles articulated by the Quartet that the government must meet — the recognition of Israel's right to exist, non-violence, and respect of previous agreements and obligations. If there were a demand for no contact, Russia would be in violation. [Russia hosted a Hamas delegation in early March.]

We are working with Israel to reconcile its concerns while filling the gaps caused by the donors pulling out and by the financial crisis in the PA. Israel declares that it does not wish to cause Palestinians to suffer. At the same time it feels the need to tighten existing restrictions on movement, including of U.N. personnel. It is difficult, as a practical matter, to reconcile these two goals.

Do you understand Israel's security considerations?

There is understanding on the part of U.N. staff, to the lowest member, that Israel isn't applying restrictions because of hostility to the United Nations, but because of its security concerns. It doesn't take much to put oneself in the place of Israeli authorities. They are responsible for the security of their people, even if they occasionally go further than one would like.

M.F.



DE SOTO: There's a 'natural tension'

image in the eyes of its Israeli critics. "If the U.N. wants to be part of the Quartet and to be taken seriously as an impartial mediator by Israel, they have to cut off all ties with Hamas," says Dore Gold, Israel's former U.N. ambassador and author of "The Tower of Babel: How the U.N. Has Fueled Global Chaos."

Active almost exclusively over the Green Line, the world body is the second-biggest

employer in the territories after the Palestinian government. No fewer than 25 U.N. agencies are represented here: a mass of acronyms — UNSCO (coordinating office), UNICEF (child welfare), UNTSO (truce supervision), UNDP (development), UNDOF (Golan monitoring) and so forth — with an annual operating budget of \$400 million. The U.N. presence is headquartered in southern Jerusalem, at Government House, a

compound on the Hill of Evil Counsel that was home to the British High Commissioner for Palestine before 1948. It now houses the offices of the U.N. Special Coordinator, today the Peruvian diplomat Alvaro de Soto (see "Navigating a New Reality," box, above).

Israel's relations with the U.N. agencies have rarely been smooth. Much of the tension has been with the Relief and Works Agency

(UNRWA), which is responsible for Palestinian refugees. Israel's long list of complaints against UNRWA ranges from the very minor (building violations at its Jerusalem headquarters) to the relatively minor (the fact that its headquarters are in Jerusalem at all, which Israel sees as an insult to its sovereignty) to the more serious (employing Hamas members). In early 2005, Dore Gold charged in the *Washington Post* that the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) had knowingly transferred funds to two charities that were fronts for Hamas; the U.N. claimed it had been unaware of the Hamas connection. The last major hiccup came in October 2004, when an IDF drone above a Gaza refugee camp filmed people loading what the army said were rockets onto an UNRWA ambulance. A few days later army officers admitted that the objects had likely been stretchers after all.

MANY OF THE WARNINGS OF an impending crisis are coming from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which releases weekly press reports on the situation in the territories in addition to looking after the movement of food, medi-



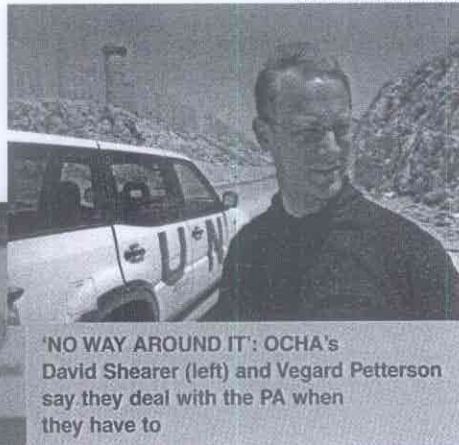
cine and money. It is headed by David Shearer, a tall and amiable New Zealander who is a veteran of 10 U.N. humanitarian operations from Sri Lanka to Kosovo. He runs OCHA from an old stone mansion in East Jerusalem where the U.N. had its liaison office between the Israeli and Jordanian sides of the city before 1967.

The PA employs 160,000 people with 1 million dependents, says Shearer, and has for the last decade received foreign money to pay those salaries. But the money isn't flowing anymore, and Shearer says his agency is bracing for a "massive increase" in poverty, one that will demand a hike in the agency's budget — currently \$215 million — by as much as 100 percent over the next six months. It will also demand close coopera-

tion with the PA, because its bureaucratic machinery is the only way of getting aid to the people who need it.

"The U.N. can't walk in and take over the Health Ministry, or any ministry," Shearer says. "We do humanitarian assistance. We can't replace the Palestinian institutions." In some cases, that means contact with Hamas. "We deal mostly with technocrats," he says, "but if necessary we can go through the minister. I'm not looking to do that, but if I have to I can. The instruction from the secretary general is to continue operations, and meet with the PA as the situation requires. We don't ask, 'Are you Hamas or Fatah?' We haven't been put in a straitjacket in which we can't move. If we're in Nablus, we have to meet with the mayor, there's no way around it."

Shearer thinks Israel understands that the U.N. must do what it takes. "Not too long ago, Israel and UNRWA were head to head," he says. "Now I think Israel sees the U.N. as



PHOTOS ESTEBAN ALTERMAN
 'NO WAY AROUND IT': OCHA's David Shearer (left) and Vegard Pettersen say they deal with the PA when they have to

the lesser evil. Israel can't deal with Hamas, but it has to avert a humanitarian crisis. We've seen a change in attitude since the Hamas victory."

The Israeli Foreign Ministry rejects any suggestion that Israel is quietly approving of the U.N.'s maintenance of Hamas-tainted connections. "The directives are absolutely clear: There must be no meeting with figures in the Hamas-led Palestinian institutions," says Rony Adam, one of the ministry's top officials dealing with the U.N. "There is an explicit government decision stating that anyone meeting with Hamas can't meet with us. There is no wink, no covert approval." Hamas has to meet the benchmarks set by the Quartet, Adam says.

As for the U.N. agencies' claim that there is no way of bypassing the PA, Adam charges that they haven't really tried. "There hasn't

been an honest attempt to find alternative ways of preventing a humanitarian crisis," he says. Israel is pinning its hopes on an alternate funding mechanism currently being set up by the Quartet, which Adam says he hopes will be in place by June.

On May 19, the Foreign Ministry publicly protested to China's envoy to Israel, Chen Yonglong, after the Chinese government invited Hamas leader and PA Foreign Minister Mahmoud al-Zahar to an economic conference, following an earlier meeting between Chen and Hamas representatives in Gaza. The WHO's Ambrogio Manenti's links to the Hamas-appointed Health Minister, on the other hand, have drawn no such reprimand. And the April 11 government decision banning meetings with foreign officials who liaise with Hamas representatives did not prevent Foreign Minister Livni from meeting with UNRWA director Karen AbuZayd a month later, though AbuZayd had met with Atef Adwan, the Hamas-appointed minister for refugee affairs.

Adam does confirm that Israel's approach to some U.N. agencies — notably UNRWA — has changed in the wake of the Hamas victory. "After the disengagement, there were expectations on our part that UNRWA would scale back its daily activities in health and education and transfer them to the Palestinian government," Adam says. "After the Hamas victory we abandoned this direction and came to the conclusion that UNRWA was one of the bodies that could deal with humanitarian aid."

The Hamas victory has served to ratchet up Israel's expectations from the U.N., but the U.N. has its own agenda. Not talking to people goes against its nature. David Shearer of OCHA has dealt with "all kinds" in his postings to conflict zones around the world: "I don't necessarily like the people I work with, but I do it to get the job done," he says.

At the new Kalandia checkpoint terminal in Jerusalem, Vegard Pettersen, a 34-year-old OCHA field worker from Oslo, parks his white U.N. jeep by the massive concrete wall that now divides the capital's northern suburbs from the southern suburbs of Ramallah. "It's simply impossible to do our job without going through the PA," Pettersen says, watching yellow taxis come and go along the road parallel to the wall on the Palestinian side. When an aid shipment gets stuck somewhere, the U.N. will call a PA minister, if that is necessary, to get it unstuck, even if that minister is from Hamas. Pettersen thinks the U.N. is setting the trend. "In a few years," he says, "I think everyone will be talking to Hamas." ●