

Hamas After the Ceasefire

September 25, 2014

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The open-ended ceasefire between Hamas and Israel is followed by indirect talks under Egyptian auspices. Set to start at the beginning of October and preceded by "exploratory discussions" with Egypt, these indirect negotiations are aimed at resolving outstanding issues between the parties and moving toward a more long-term period of calm. But with uncertainty concerning where the process is headed, it is unclear whether calm will prevail and whether each side will be able to improve its position in the post-ceasefire period. For Hamas, the main challenge remains translating its short-term tactical and populist gains from the war into more long-term achievements such as ending economic restrictions on Gaza.

Hamas began the war in a position of weakness, facing growing international isolation, severe financial pressure, and rising internal tensions. The unity deal with Fatah failed to provide the fast economic relief the group sought, while an extensive Israeli campaign to hit Hamas in the West Bank following the kidnapping of Israeli students further complicated the group's outlook. Hamas calculated that entering a short-term military escalation would allow it to extract concessions from Israel, restore its reputation at home, and keep internal conflict at bay.

As it hoped, Hamas secured some gains. Militarily, the group was able to showcase a much improved capacity since Operation Cast Lead of 2008-09, with the Qassam Brigades using both unconventional and more high-risk standoff tactics. The improved military performance also resulted in a higher number of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) casualties. This, together with other small tactical victories—including the temporary closure of Ben Gurion International Airport, the impact of the underground tunnels, and the ability to continue to fire rockets until the end of the conflict—allowed Hamas to brand its military operations a success. What is more, Hamas's repeated refusal to accept ceasefire proposals gave it the primary role in the war-termination process. Hamas cited all these factors to market its performance as a victory for Palestinians, and the group's popularity received a significant boost in the immediate post-ceasefire period.

Outside the battlefield, Hamas was able to withstand resulting organizational pressure. Although the conflict led to repeated clashes between the Gaza-based political leadership, the Qassam Brigades, and the external leadership led by Khaled Meshaal—over the question of accepting a ceasefire or prolonging the fight, among other issues—the group was able to preserve internal cohesion. Each faction observed and ultimately backed the ceasefire agreement. Also, even despite the rising tensions with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, the unity government with Fatah has remained standing, and will now be extended to Gaza.

Nevertheless, the August 26 ceasefire agreement has yielded few material gains for Hamas. Although the ceasefire referred to immediate relaxations of border crossings, an extension of nautical miles allowed to Gaza fishermen, and a widening of the buffer zone between Gaza and Israel in the agreement, these measures are insufficient for kickstarting Gaza's economy. As for key Hamas demands, the ceasefire has postponed indirect negotiations on these topics, including releasing Hamas prisoners arrested in the West Bank since June 2014 and establishing a Gaza airport and seaport. Even though all these issues will likely be discussed in the upcoming indirect talks, the chances of concessions to Hamas are slim, as both Israel and Egypt still hope to squeeze the group out of Gaza.

With respect to Egypt, the situation remains largely unchanged. Hamas needs to come to an understanding with the Egyptian government—whose closing of the Rafah crossing and crackdown on tunnels have greatly harmed Hamas over the past few months—just as much as it needs to gain concessions from Israel. Yet Egypt, far from being a neutral mediator, seeks to wrest as much control as possible from Hamas, with the ultimate goal of seeing its power eroded and control of Gaza broken.

In several regards, the war has proved quite costly for Hamas. It brought devastation to Gaza, with serious damage to virtually all infrastructures, impacting the strip's residents and affecting access to health care, water, sanitation and hygiene, shelter, and education. Up to 18,000 homes were destroyed and 100,000 people left without shelter. Hamas's military infrastructure and leadership have also been damaged; the group lost roughly two-thirds of its arsenal and at least half of its weapons production facilities.[1] And re-arming will likely prove challenging to Hamas, given the current Egyptian efforts to monitor the Egypt-Gaza border closely and crack down on tunnels.

These post-ceasefire terms highlight the complexity of Hamas's current predicament. For Hamas to translate the short-term popularity boost into long-term political capital, it needs to obtain a meaningful easing of restrictions on goods and people, along with reconstruction assistance and a long-term commitment to paying Hamas's civil servants. To achieve this, however, Hamas agreed to give up at least some of its control and power in Gaza, by allowing the unity government to take control of the strip in return for a commitment to paying public salaries. This situation will have to be extended for international investments in the reconstruction of the strip to be carried out and coordinated by Palestinian Authority (PA) institutions, bypassing Hamas. Just as importantly, Egypt's conditions to normalize the border between Gaza and Egypt include

the redeployment of PA security forces, another measure that will erode Hamas's political power in Gaza.

But giving up control over Gaza, as Hamas seems to have agreed to on September 25, is risky for Hamas because it could marginalize the group politically and sow internal discord. Herein lies the Catch-22: Hamas is only able to obtain the political concessions it seeks by relinquishing some control and putting the brakes on its armed wing. But if the political leadership gives in too much to both Israel and Egypt in the ongoing ceasefire negotiations, then it risks encountering strong opposition from the Qassam Brigades.

Therefore, Hamas will likely try to walk a fine line, balancing its external need to cooperate with Egypt and the unity government with its internal interests in maintaining the "resistance" and protecting its weapons. The group's predicament gives Israel and the international community the opportunity to use the immediate political and practical needs to advance the vision set forward in the ceasefire. By easing the restrictions on Gaza and setting up an international mechanism to fund reconstruction in the strip (through the PA and the unity government), the international community would empower Gaza economically and the unity government politically, in turn weakening Hamas indirectly. This would be a better approach than directly attempting to pressure Hamas through calls for disarmament, a strategy that—if poorly handled—could lead to yet another round of war.

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1. Based on interviews the author conducted with Israeli officials. ↩

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