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Hamas: Toward Palestinian Reconciliation, or Abdication of Governmental Responsibility?

Gilead Sher, Kobi Michael, and Liran Ofek

The announcement by the Hamas leadership of its willingness to disband the administrative committee for the Gaza Strip, which was founded six months ago as an act of defiance against Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas, resulted from a buildup of internal and external pressure and constraints on the organization. In its announcement, Hamas stressed that it was responding to the Egyptian effort to achieve internal Palestinian reconciliation, based primarily on the principal understandings achieved with the mediation of Egyptian intelligence: the Gaza Strip administrative committee, a quasi-alternative government, will be dismantled; the Palestinian government headed by Rami Hamdallah will be invited immediately to the Gaza Strip to fulfill its duties; general elections will be held; Hamas accepts the Egyptian invitation to discuss implementation of the 2011 Cairo agreement with Fatah; a national unity government will be formed on the basis of a partnership between the Palestinian factions that signed the agreement; and Abbas will cancel the sanctions he imposed on the Gaza Strip.

The road to reconciliation is still long. Past efforts at reconciliation, including the Mecca agreement (February 2007), the Sana'a declaration (August 2008), the Cairo agreement (May 2011), the Doha declaration (February 2012), and the Gaza agreement (April 2014), as well as other declarations and announcements designed to provide a basis for healing the rift between Fatah and Hamas, and between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, have all failed. Yet while prospects for the latest effort appear slim, it cannot be totally ruled out that the current circumstances will yield a different result.

In practice, Hamas is the sovereign ruler in the Gaza Strip, and as such, is responsible for the extreme distress of the population, the soaring unemployment, and the humanitarian crisis there. From a regional perspective, for some time Hamas has waged a political battle for survival, after having been left with problematic allies: Iran, whose ability to provide aid is limited; Turkey; and Qatar. Hamas's announcement fits in well with the trend in its

policy over the past year of seeking legitimacy in the Palestinian, regional, and global arenas. In this context, the burden of its governmental responsibility for the Gaza population, combined with its military and ideological resistance to Israel, has only grown. The document of principles issued by the organization in May reflected pragmatic moderation over the 1988 Hamas Covenant, and a switch from an emphasis on Islamic religious ideology to an emphasis on national political discourse. The revised document is designed to position Hamas as a legitimate player in the Palestinian and international arenas, and to pave the way for repairing relations with Egypt. Recent developments relating to the internal Palestinian arena should thus also be considered through this prism.

Egypt has three motives for the massive pressure on Hamas to disband the administrative committee and resume reconciliation talks: the drive to regain its leading status in the Arab world and the role of mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict; the desire to dictate policy to Hamas; and the fear of being an outcast in the Arab world because it remained indifferent to Palestinian suffering in the Gaza Strip. For its part, Hamas surrendered to Cairo's demands regarding security of their common border; a halt to cooperation with the Islamic State in Sinai; extradition of wanted Islamic State operatives; and sealing the tunnels, including those not in use, and stationing the PA presidential guard at the Gaza Strip border crossings. Tightening the connection with Egypt is the key to what Hamas's leadership regards as most important of all at the present time – salaries for the 35,000 Hamas government workers to be paid by the PA, opening the Rafah border crossing to regular traffic, including movement of people and goods, and a steady supply of electricity to ease the severe humanitarian distress in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, Egypt benefited from Abbas's efforts to maintain good relations with it in order to keep Egypt as an anchor for future diplomatic maneuvers. From now on, Egypt will be effectively involved in carrying out any agreement.

Given its internal strategic predicament, Hamas had to yield to Abbas's demand for a return of the Palestinian government to the Gaza Strip in order to renew the flow of essential funds. This move by Hamas, however, poses a difficult dilemma for Abbas: if the Palestinian government □ under the military control of Hamas □ indeed returns to the Gaza Strip, it will have to assume the heavy responsibility for reconstruction in the Gaza Strip and the welfare of the population. This is liable to divert public criticism from Hamas to the Palestinian government. Moreover, currently Abbas has no interest in either general elections, which he might well lose, or Hamas joining the PLO institutions, as stipulated in the Cairo agreement. If he refuses to fulfill his part of the understandings, he will be accused of thwarting reconciliation, which will arouse the anger of Egypt.

Fatah is already celebrating a victory (one senior official referred to "Hamas with its tail between its legs"), because the agreement is perceived as the result of the intensified

sanctions against the Gaza Strip and Hamas in recent months. However, implementation of the reconciliation process and the restoration of the PA government's effective control of the Gaza Strip is very unlikely. Hamas will not readily cede its most important strategic assets – its independent military power and its security control of the Gaza Strip – and the PA government will be subject to the good will of Hamas. Under these conditions, Hamas is disavowing civil responsibility for residents of the Gaza Strip and putting the entire burden on the PA, without the PA being able to fulfill this responsibility. The result stands to be a decline in Abbas's status and the legitimacy of his government, and the acceptance of Hamas's demands constitutes recognition of the organization's enhanced status as a full, albeit junior, partner of Fatah in the Palestinian government.

Since the selection of Yahya Sinwar as head of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Ismail Haniyeh as head of Hamas's political bureau, the organization's leadership has been in the hands of natives of the Gaza Strip, who are more sensitive to the events and hard times there, in contrast to the previous leadership led by Khaled Mashal, who is from the West Bank. Despite more militant opposition led by Mashal and Saleh al-Arouri, Hamas's leadership is moving the organization steadily in directions indicative of institutionalization and awareness of popular opinion. The military element and behavior patterns of a terrorist organization remain prominent, but they are curbed by the prevailing circumstances, and the Israeli deterrent against attempts to undermine the security calm is apparently still effective.

Although his name was not mentioned in the Hamas announcement, it appears that Mohammed Dahlan will assume an important role in the process, both as an emissary of Egypt, which is suspicious of Hamas, and the United Arab Emirates, and as the one responsible for the reconstruction funds. The inclusion of Dahlan in the new order is likely to make it easier for Hamas and Israel to expedite the reconstruction process in the Gaza Strip: it will be easier for both sides to operate through Dahlan, rather than directly. The importance of Dahlan, a bitter enemy and a threat to the status of Abbas, does not add to Abbas's peace of mind. It is possible that in order to make the initiative more palatable to Fatah, Dahlan will operate through Samir Mashharawi, his right hand man.

Israel has no substantive influence on the current maneuvers for reconciliation in the Palestinian arena, and should not intervene in them at this stage. Israel is seeking to maintain its deterrence against Hamas and prevent the next round of violent conflict, or at least delay it for as long as possible. In addition to defense measures, such as building a new barrier along the Gaza Strip border, it is important and morally correct that Israel reduce as much as possible the humanitarian distress in the Gaza Strip, and help improve the population's welfare and quality of life. At this stage, there is no change in the political view of Hamas: it refuses to recognize Israel, put aside its "weapon of resistance," and be

a full partner in a settlement based on the two-state principle. It is therefore desirable for Israel to demand that measures for more comprehensive reconstruction in the Gaza Strip, in which it will be a partner, be made contingent on a prolonged security lull and a halt in Hamas's military buildup.

Some will regard the Hamas announcement and the processes led by Egypt toward internal Palestinian reconciliation as an achievement for the hard-line policy of Abbas and the positions taken by Fatah and the PA. However, it is quite likely, rather, that Hamas has maneuvered skillfully, given the approach of its current leadership, and has successfully caught Abbas and the PA in a honey trap. Nonetheless, and despite the doubts concerning the PA's ability to fulfill its obligations in the Gaza Strip according to the understandings, the PA is still the most comfortable partner for Israel in rebuilding the Gaza Strip, following many years of cooperation in the civilian and security spheres. If the PA is unable to return to the Gaza Strip, Israel will have to deal officially with Hamas, as it has done in practice in recent years. Israel's interest mandates aid for reconstruction in the Gaza Strip and acceleration of the process, while trying to enlist Egypt in the undertaking and carefully overseeing the use of the raw materials sent into the Gaza Strip for reconstruction purposes.