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**The Limits of Restraint:  
 Hamas in Gaza and a Confrontation with Israel**

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In the decade since it seized control of the Gaza Strip, Hamas has expanded and upgraded its military power and restored capabilities damaged by rounds of fighting with Israel. However, on the civilian front, Hamas, as an entity ruling over two million Palestinians, is faced with a growing crisis. The civilian situation in Gaza, including deplorable living conditions and an unemployment rate of above 40 percent, has worsened since Operation Protective Edge. Primary reasons for this plight include the difficulty of repairing the damage incurred by the fighting and the ongoing conflict between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, which has delayed the start of a large scale reconstruction project in the Gaza Strip. The crisis is reflected inter alia in the meager supply of electricity, (no more than six hours a day over the past year), and frequent delays in salary payments to Hamas employees. Solutions involving a political arrangement with Israeli involvement that could accelerate reconstruction and development processes with international security supervision are not imminent. While the Hamas-PA reconciliation process promoted by Egypt brings potential for genuine improvement in Gaza, its success is still in doubt, given the dead end that followed previous reconciliation attempts.

Faced with the distress in Gaza, Hamas's leadership has attempted to enlist economic aid through regional diplomatic channels, by easing tensions with Egypt, which controls the southern gateway of the Strip (the Rafah crossing) and forging closer relations with other regional states, including Turkey and Qatar, to increase civilian aid, including via their contacts with Israel. In the framework of this diplomatic activity, Hamas also seeks to shed the image of an Islamic terrorist organization and promote its status as a political alternative to the PA. Therefore, on May 1, 2017, the organization issued its new Document of General Principles and Policies, reflecting the outcome of an internal debate lasting four years and marketed mainly by Khaled Mashal, the outgoing head of Hamas's political bureau. The document accepts the formula of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders – albeit without deleting the principle of non-recognition of Israel, a stipulation emphasized in Hamas's original charter and differentiates between the organization's political platform and that of Fatah/PLO and the PA. Even if the recent document expresses no essential change in Hamas's stance on Israel, the fact that it was issued and

paraded before the Arab world and the West indicates that Hamas's leaders are keen on improving the organization's international standing and are eager to earn greater legitimacy against their competition, namely, the Fatah leadership, led by Abu Mazen.

In tandem, Hamas has controlled itself militarily. It is not "playing with fire" liable to draw it into another exhausting round of fighting with Israel, which would deny it the possibility of reaping the rewards of its diplomatic efforts. The current Hamas policy of restraint is manifested in several ways at the military and media-propaganda levels:

- a. Hamas is not targeting Israel with high trajectory weapons, even in response to Israeli attacks that damaged the organization's military infrastructures and facilities that were in retaliation for rocket fire at Israel by Salafist organizations.
- b. Threats have hinted at the intention of avoiding large scale escalation if and when the organization chooses to respond to Israeli attacks (Hamas websites have published analyses with the "rocket-for-rocket" formula, for example). Following the assassination of Mazen Fuqaha, a Hamas operative, which according to Hamas was carried out by agents who cooperated with Israel, the organization issued threats against senior Israelis and encouraged attacks in the West Bank but avoided issuing threats about reprisals from the Gaza Strip itself.
- c. In light of the deterioration in relations between Hamas and the PA and the increased efforts at forging closer relations between Hamas and Egypt, organization spokesmen have issued messages of calm aimed at the Palestinian public in Gaza and Israel, whereby a long round of fighting with Israel that attempts to change the situation in Gaza as well as the rules of the game is not on the table.

To be sure, Hamas is preparing for a military confrontation, testing improved weaponry and issuing occasional threats (as it did before Operation Protective Edge) that the continued Israeli blockade and the refusal of PA President Mahmoud Abbas to solve the Gaza Strip's financial troubles create a highly volatile situation. Nonetheless, despite their comparison of Gaza to a keg of gunpowder, Hamas spokesmen do not explicitly state that the organization wants war. It seems it wants to warn of a possible explosion but without doing much to make it happen anytime soon.

For its part, Israeli security can benefit from the signals sent from Gaza if Israel allows increased civilian aid provided by regional nations to reach the Strip. The more room Hamas has for diplomatic maneuvering, leading to moves helping to reduce tensions in the Gaza Strip and postponing the danger of escalation, the less Hamas has an incentive to choose the military option. Yet to preserve the restraint to remain it is also necessary to calculate the extent of the response to military challenges that emerge from Gaza sporadically, i.e., rocket fire by rogue factions. A response going beyond a limited military "message" to Hamas to rein in those organizations – for example, the

assassination of a Hamas leader or a large scale operation to destroy military infrastructures – is liable to cause Hamas to end its policy of restraint and make good on its threats of responding from within Gaza itself.

In recent months, Hamas has itself undergone considerable internal changes: Yahya Sinwar is the newly appointed leader in Gaza and Khaled Mashal has been replaced as head of the political bureau by Ismail Haniyeh. The need of these leaders to promote Hamas's interests, especially by starting a new chapter in relations with states with which relationships had soured in recent years – Egypt on the one hand and Iran on the other – is, for the new leadership, a practical test of the ability to gain financial support and build regional partnerships.

Hamas's leadership is at a crossroads. Egypt is capable of providing a solution to the civilian problems in the Gaza Strip, while Iran can help the organization construct its military force. After a period in which Hamas's senior leaders in Gaza signaled their intention to improve relations with Tehran, they are now focusing their diplomatic efforts with on relations with Cairo.

A new chapter in relations with Cairo could ease the crisis in the Gaza Strip immediately if the Rafah crossing is re-opened to goods on a regular basis. Indeed, in recent weeks Egypt has opened the gates at regular hours on the basis of messages delivered to Gaza inhabitants. Continued and expanded Egyptian aid to Hamas depends on the organization's close security cooperation with Cairo, especially in terms of disrupting smuggling and infiltrations by Salafists from Gaza to the Sinai Peninsula. At the same time, Cairo is attentive to Israel's routine security needs, as Israel is Egypt's strategic partner in the Gaza border triangle. The next few months will constitute a test of Egyptian-Hamas relations. In and of itself, this test reduces the risk that Hamas will intentionally engage in an armed escalation with Israel from the Gaza Strip.

Another backup player courted by Hamas (though his ability to provide long term aid is questionable) is Muhammad Dahlan, the former Fatah senior leader and Abu Mazen's fierce rival, now living in Abu Dhabi. Dahlan's and Hamas's interests partially overlap: both are Abbas enemies, and this enmity has grown in response to Abbas's countermoves, especially ending money transfers to the Hamas regime. Hamas Deputy Foreign Minister Razi Hammad spoke recently about solidifying ties with Dahlan. According to Hammad, given regional developments, especially the growing tensions between Saudi Arabia and its allies on the one hand, and Iran and Qatar on the other, some want to close Gaza's gates and punish Hamas for its relations with Iran and Qatar. Hammad's comments suggest that Hamas's decision to approach Dahlan is an attempt to maneuver in the maze of regional interests or appease the camp opposed to Iran and

Qatar. In Hammad's view, Dahlan is part of the regional struggle for influence over the Palestinian arena: Dahlan would like to use Hamas to once again become a player in the Palestinian political game and is therefore also promising to help resolve the Gaza crisis.

Israel must consider whether contacts between Hamas and Abu Mazen's enemy may also have a political and security effect on the West Bank. In other words, can the partnership between Dahlan and Hamas fuel the motivation to undermine Abbas's rule by means of terrorism and disturbances of the peace, as Hamas unsuccessfully tried to do in the past. For now, it seems that Hamas's incentive to forge closer relations with Dahlan is only monetary, just as Hamas is concurrently embracing the Egyptian effort toward Palestinian reconciliation, spurred by hopes of financial benefits should the PA resume bearing some of the costs of managing the Gaza Strip.