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## **Cracks in the Palestinian Resistance Camp?**

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**The escalation between Israel and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) on November 12-14, 2019, following the killing of the organization’s senior military commander Baha Abu al-Ata, exposed cracks in the relations between the two main organizations in the Palestinian resistance movement – PIJ and Hamas – as well as the fragility of the situation in the Gaza Strip. Over two days, Hamas left PIJ to deal on its own with the Israeli airstrikes in the Strip that seriously harmed PIJ operatives, while expressing little solidarity with it – or for that matter, little at all. Even after eight members of an uninvolved family in the center of the Strip were accidentally killed during an Israeli attack, and despite the public anger, Hamas avoided involvement in the campaign. For its part, Israel deviated from its policy of recent years, and avoided pinning the responsibility for the rocket fire on Hamas, and focused its airstrikes on PIJ targets. This dynamic created a new equation, whereby Israel and Hamas found themselves on the same side of the equation, while Islamic Jihad was left alone against them. Beyond the specific incidents, therefore, a key question is whether the behavior of the two organizations reflects a new trend. Why was Hamas prepared to risk its image as the leading resistance movement and sustain criticism for remaining on the sidelines? Is Hamas not concerned about losing more of its public support? Moreover, does this round of violence show that PIJ readiness to act on its own rests on its ability to stand independently against Israel?**

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) distinguished itself from Hamas and the other resistance organizations in the Gaza Strip, and in contrast to the relative restraint shown by Hamas in recent years, demonstrated that it will not ignore an attack on its people and Gaza civilians. In an interview with *al-Meeidin* on November 13, 2019, PIJ Secretary General Ziad al-Nahala boasted of the independence his organization showed and its ability to withstand Israeli pressure. He thereby proved to his patrons in Iran and his Hezbollah supporters that he can engage Israel and shut down many parts of the country for some time. At the same time, the organization was forced to accept a ceasefire without having any semblance of victory to show for it. The damage caused to Israel was essentially to its morale, since there were no casualties or serious property damage, while the PIJ paid a heavy price in human casualties and in the destruction of infrastructure. The criticism voiced in the Strip, both regarding the early cessation of fire and regarding the organization’s separatist behavior, required its leaders to explain why the ceasefire

agreement does not mean an end of the resistance, and to argue that it should be seen as a tactical step dictated by circumstances of time and place.

The picture from the Gaza Strip at the end of the recent round of violence may explain what stood behind Hamas's reluctance to enter the fighting. Had it gotten involved, the dimensions of the destruction would have been much broader than what they are today. Hamas, which is bending under the burden it bears as a governing power due to the collapse of infrastructure in the Strip and its inability to provide for the needs of its residents since Operation Protective Edge (summer 2014) and even beforehand, is well aware of the risks involved in a broad military conflict. Since then, it has wanted to prevent resistance forces from providing Israel with a pretext for attacking the Strip again. For that reason, it established a joint operations room together with the other organizations, where the scope and timing of fire against Israel is decided. This process has won widespread public praise. The PIJ, which had reservations about the idea and strove to maintain its image as an elitist, quality, and highly motivated organization, viewed the process as part of a collusion that aimed to undermine all of the resistance organizations. It was joined in its view by Qatar, Egypt, and to a certain extent even Hamas and the other organizations, who were prepared to receive the money reaching the Strip from Qatar "through Ben-Gurion airport," in the words of Secretary General al-Nahala, provided that they kept the situation quiet, as a stage in the process intended to bring the resistance toward arrangements that come to terms with Israel's existence.

Hamas took a calculated risk by not getting involved. Its leadership is aware of the antagonism PIJ arouses among a significant portion of the public, and it thus believes it can deal with the criticism leveled against it. It may even be that the many messages Hamas has received from Israel through Qatar or Egypt in recent years, and apparently even during this round of violence, regarding the advancement of understandings that would ensure calm, taught its leadership that this was a calculated, worthwhile risk. Indeed, until a few years ago, Hamas itself was a target of Abu Mazen's criticism for firing rockets against Israel that were leading to a destructive response at the Strip, similar to what was directed at PIJ this time.

The days since the round of violence ended have proven that Hamas has not lost its stature in the Strip. Its actions have even won symbolic public approval from PIJ leaders, who rushed to the home of veteran Hamas leader Mahmoud Alzahar to apologize for the scathing criticism they leveled at him and for forcibly removing him from Abu al-Ata's home when he came for a condolence call. At the same time Ismail Haniyeh, the head of the Hamas political bureau, in a phone conversation with the PIJ Secretary General, affirmed that the "resistance" is unified and that they will not allow Israel to drive a wedge between the organizations. Even the two rockets that were fired toward Beer

Sheva on the night of November 15 by Hamas operatives – it is unclear whether they were launched with the approval of the leadership – can be seen as part of the attempt to show unity, but without dragging Israel into a massive response.

If so, the fissure that appeared in the wall of resistance in the last round of violence did not develop into a tear, but it reflects the differences in approach between the two organizations. Hamas, which has ruled the Strip for more than 12 years, has a good sense of the difficulty in balancing governance and resistance at the same time. Since the summer of 2014, the organization has expressed interest in a long term ceasefire and in reconstructing the Strip. It therefore wants to manifest resistance to Israel through mass demonstrations and physical friction in the area of the border fence, while avoiding the use of live fire. In October 2017, in contrast with its previous policy, Hamas expressed readiness to transfer management of civilian affairs in the Strip to the Palestinian Authority. Even in its political approach, it has tried to show flexibility and draw closer to PLO positions regarding the dispute with Israel, though this has not satisfied Abu Mazen, who has not allowed the two sides to move forward toward reconciliation.

In contrast, PIJ views this kind of increased flexibility as a risk to the “Palestinian problem.” It calls for abandoning any form of dialogue with Israel, and converging in the “resistance trench.” Ziad al-Nah’ala, who enjoys Iranian backing and whose selection as PIJ Secretary General injected a new combative spirit into the organization, recently asked, in view of the dialogue that is developing around elections to the Legislative Council: “Why are you rushing toward elections? What is the point of reconciliation talks when the largest divider is the Zionist enemy?” His answer: “We must all unite under the wings of resistance, for only this has the strength to connect us.”

It is therefore doubtful whether the contacts between Haniyeh and al-Nah’ala put an end to the tension between the two organizations. The Iranian and militant pressure that characterizes PIJ ensures further friction between the two and vis-à-vis Israel. Hamas will want to prevent any deterioration in its status as the leading resistance organization, and will strive to maintain quiet and promote an arrangement, in exchange for significant Israeli concessions, despite the tension this involves with Iran, which also supports it, while PIJ and/or other recalcitrant parties that may develop within it will want to prove to themselves, their supporters in the Strip, and Iran, that they remain loyal to the path of jihad.

For its part, Israel can sum up this round of violence as a relative success. The removal of Baha Abu al-Ata from the arena as an independent actor who could have dragged Israel and Hamas into a general altercation did not harm Israel’s main readiness at the current

time toward Iran or Hezbollah in the northern theater. The price that it paid for this round was limited, while it exposed the fissure in the Palestinian resistance camp.

The question remains whether Israel is prepared to leverage Hamas's nonparticipation, and encourage progress toward an arrangement that will ensure security calm in the Gaza sector. Is the crack between Hamas and PIJ deep and irreparable, or is it a localized crisis? As of now, both organizations are trying to show that they are drawing closer and to define the crisis between them as an expression of legitimate differences of opinion between two organizations with a common goal. However, it seems that Hamas's and Israel's interest in calm is currently stronger than the relations between the organizations. The joint operations room is intended, *inter alia*, to prevent uncontrolled fire at Israel not to coordinate fire. Therefore, formulating understandings regarding calm and lowering the violent dimension of the Palestinian resistance between Israel and Hamas, if it occurs, can be expected to arouse efforts to destroy it on the part of PIJ, and pose an ongoing challenge to the efforts to implement the arrangement. As such, the combination of Hamas's striving to advance the rehabilitation of the Strip and provide the area's residents with jobs, alongside Israeli deterrence of the recalcitrant factions, may not only extend the period of calm, but also deepen the disputes between Hamas and PIJ.