

One Month after the Start of the Escalation: The Fog Dissipates

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The escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, ongoing for over a month, is the product of a process planned and orchestrated by Hamas several months before Ramadan. As a lesson from the conflict of May 2021, Hamas sought to use the holy sites in East Jerusalem to foment a mass protest that would once again muster Palestinian solidarity in Jerusalem, throughout the West Bank, and in Israeli territory. Although the masses did not respond to the call, the organization gained achievements in three areas: the Palestinian issue returned to the international agenda; most Arab countries, including those with normalized their relations with Israel, criticized it and even reprimanded its representatives; and the weakness of the Palestinian Authority and the crumbling Fatah movement were highlighted. Is it right to continue to think in terms of punitive measures against Hamas aimed at deterrence and moves aimed at improving the lives of residents in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank – ideas that weaken the Palestinian Authority and give Hamas extra power? And beyond that, does the lack of political feasibility of a settlement justify a lack of thinking in political terms about ways to halt the deterioration in the PA's status?

Neither restless young people nor a rebellion of adolescents. However, the beginning of escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena over the past six weeks was marked by two terrorist attacks in the cities of Beer Sheva and Hadera (March 22 and 28, respectively) and were carried out by Arab citizens of Israel affiliated with ISIS. It continued with two more attacks, in Bnei Brak and Tel Aviv, waged by individual terrorists from the Jenin area, and was followed at the end of Ramadan by a shooting attack in the city of Ariel by two terrorists from a nearby village and an attack on Independence Day in Elad.¹ But the main expression of the escalation is in the popular resistance – ongoing friction between Palestinians and police and soldiers. The points of friction are the holy places in East Jerusalem and its surroundings; Jenin; the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron; and other places in the West Bank. The escalation is a planned product of a campaign led by Hamas in cooperation with Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front.

¹ The attack in Elad occurred on May 5, 2022, and therefore is not mentioned in the Hebrew version of this article, which was published on May 2, 2022.

The younger generation has a part in it but does not lead it, and mainly find in Hamas's initiative and in the atmosphere of escalation that it is creating an outlet to release the steam that has accumulated for a long time. In other words, one should not infer from the younger generation's participation in the escalation that there is consensus between it and the Islamic organizations regarding the approach toward Israel and the resolution of the conflict.

As early as January 2022, Hamas began laying the groundwork for the Ramadan escalation. The organization "warned" against Israeli attack on the al-Aqsa Mosque – against breaking into it, expanding Jewish freedom of worship and ascent of Jews to the Temple Mount, and duplicating at the mosque the arrangement at the Cave of the Patriarchs, where, following the massacre by Baruch Goldstein (1994), a new regime was established with a separate timetable for the prayers of Jews and Muslims, which in the view of the Palestinians is biased in favor of the Jews.

Hamas's claims lack factual basis, but the organization's goal was to breathe life into the Palestinian public in the West Bank, the Palestinian diaspora, and Israel in advance of and during the escalation in Ramadan. Israel's policy, since the current government was formed in May 2021, has been to avoid any controversial action that could undermine the coalition. Therefore, the government has not taken any steps to change the status quo existing in East Jerusalem and around the holy places during Operation Guardian of the Walls – the campaign between Israel and Hamas in May 2021, which began in Jerusalem and focused on the Gaza Strip.

In fact, the current escalation is the second chapter in the same confrontation that erupted following the cancellation of the elections to the Legislative Council by Palestinian Authority Chairman Abu Mazen. The cancellation denied Hamas the opportunity to win the election and realize its hopes to be part of the leadership that represents and spearheads the Palestinian issue, thus putting an end to the exclusivity of the Fatah movement in the leadership, with Abu Mazen at the helm. This is a strategy that developed during the Trump administration, whose attempt to impose

on the Palestinians the "deal of the century" was met with Palestinian-wide opposition and a rapprochement between rival Palestinian factions – which for some time made Palestinian national reconciliation a viable option.

The cancellation of the elections brought Hamas back into the circle of confrontation, but in a different format from the confrontations that took place until 2014. Until then, Hamas's demands had focused on lifting the blockade on the Gaza Strip, opening the crossings to and from the territory, and improving the lives of its residents. Following the conflict in 2014, Hamas found it difficult to justify to the Gaza public in the Strip the continued armed resistance to Israel and began to adopt methods of popular resistance, which were manifested in widespread and popular protests along the border with Israel in the Gaza Strip. Senior members of the organization explained the shift as a necessary move due to the change in circumstances, including public fatigue in the Gaza Strip as well as a lack of Arab support and prospects for internal Palestinian reconciliation. On the eve of the current escalation, Hamas reiterated several times that the Gaza Strip has contributed greatly to resistance to Israel and that the time has come for the West Bank to play its part. It was also emphasized that the Strip will not stand to the side and will join the struggle, depending on the dimensions of the escalation that will develop.

But the goal set by Hamas for itself was not only opposition to the "occupation," but also, and perhaps most importantly, the exploitation of the Palestinian Authority's weakness and the complete failure of the political strategy in the face of the "deal of the century." This served to unite the Palestinian public around the broadest common denominator possible, deepen its antagonism towards the PA, and strive for the realization of the change that failed to result from the elections.

In May 2021, Hamas was able to connect the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem, and the Arab citizens of Israel through the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy sites in East Jerusalem, and to inspire hope among Palestinians hoping for change. One year later, with the approach of Ramadan, Hamas sought to create an event that would achieve equal results to this confrontation. But the spontaneity

that characterized the multi-front Palestinian mobilization in 2021 was lacking. The attacks in Beer Sheva and Hadera – and it is not yet clear if there is connection to the desired escalation beyond inspiration – did not elicit waves of mass identification with the terrorists on the part of the Palestinian citizens of Israel. The condemnation heard from all the levels of this sector's leadership was clear and widespread, effectively preventing the opening of this front.

Regarding East Jerusalem, Hamas managed to recruit many Palestinians from the area itself, the West Bank, and Arab citizens of Israel, who stood on the eve of Ramadan in front of the many policemen stationed there to deal with the expected riots. Hamas reiterated familiar allegations of Israel's violating the status quo, allowing Jews to pray at the Temple Mount, and more, aiming to create a semblance of danger to al-Aqsa from Israel.

In the Jenin area, home to the perpetrators of the Bnei Brak and Tel Aviv attacks, another area of tension developed. Clashes erupted between IDF soldiers and local militants, including Fatah members, Islamic Jihad, and others, followed by disturbances and cases of stone-throwing involving many local residents. The Jenin refugee camp once again stood out as a hotbed of terrorism, forging partnerships between various organizations, and even some rivals, such as Fatah and Islamic Jihad.

However, both in Jerusalem and in the West Bank masses did not take to the streets, in the style of the intifada that erupted in late 1987, which attracted international and inter-Arab attention and within a few years set in motion a far-reaching political process. In the current reality in the Palestinian arena, the masses can take part in such a campaign in one of two situations: in coordination between Hamas and Fatah, which alone have the power to create a consensus, or as Hamas claims, with increased friction and casualties with the Israeli police, especially around the holy sites in East Jerusalem. But coordination between Hamas and Fatah is not viable today and there is no Palestinian consensus on a widespread confrontation with Israeli security forces. Moreover, the preparations of the Israeli police and the defense establishment in time to deal with the friction

without causing many casualties in fact prevented mass involvement, which is so vital to Hamas, from developing.

Hamas has so far failed in its attempt to achieve the main escalation target. No further fronts of confrontation have developed and the confrontation itself has not expanded. However, Hamas has gained achievements in three areas. The Palestinian issue, after a resounding absence from the Negev Summit in March, returned to the international agenda; the UN and the international community dealt with what was happening, and most Arab countries intensified criticism of Israel over the holy places. Jordan, which is more threatened than other Arab countries by the escalation in Jerusalem, reprimanded an envoy from the Israeli embassy and even convened a forum of the Arab League that discussed escalation and condemned Israel. Hamas also illustrated the weakness of the Palestinian Authority and the crumbling Fatah movement, including indications of rebellion in its ranks. The PA's criticism of Israel was sharp: Israel was accused of creating the escalation and thus the PA echoed Hamas messages and poured oil on the fire.

The month of Ramadan has ended, but sensitive days lie ahead, and it is possible that the picture will later include the Palestinian popular perspective. Still, it is estimated that Hamas has taken another step on its way to being perceived by the public as an alternative to the Palestinian Authority. Despite the distinction between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which was allegedly illustrated by the current escalation in Gaza's non-joining of the campaign, it is clear to all that the connection Hamas made through the escalation from the Gaza Strip or the Gaza Strip's military backing reflects the connection between the two areas. The decline of the Palestinian Authority, Fatah, and Abu Mazen is evident, in the face of the rise of Hamas as a fresh and enterprising force.

Is it right for Israel to continue to focus on solutions regarding economics and infrastructure, and to continue to think in terms of punitive deterrence measures against Hamas? Is it right to continue to ignore the fact that a lack of political strategy only increases Hamas' s power and undermines the

Palestinian Authority? Political thinking is not necessarily reaching a settlement and signing an agreement, but first and foremost a recognition of the need for dialogue to clarify problems and outline ways for an agreement. The absence of such thinking is tantamount to avoidance, and avoidance will forever demand the attention of the one who hides in the dark.