

# Between Hamas and Fatah: Implications of Operation Cast Lead

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Fatah was not directly involved in the Gaza campaign between Hamas, its rival, and Israel, its political and security coordination partner. Fatah was, however, a victim of Operation Cast Lead, as the campaign's immediate consequences and subsequent developments highlighted its weakness and advanced the leading role of Hamas in the Palestinian national movement.

The three weeks of fighting exposed the limits of Hamas' military capabilities, as well as its limited commitment to the safety and welfare of the Gaza Strip population. Criticism in the Arab world and soul searching within Hamas itself concerning its brinkmanship and faulty strategic assessment, which brought disaster upon the Gaza Strip, is inevitable.<sup>1</sup> However, the extensive damage to Hamas' military and administrative infrastructures in the Gaza Strip is not irreversible. Hamas can be expected to make full use of a lull in the confrontation and the economic resources that will flow into the Gaza Strip for rehabilitating its civilian establishment, military power, and institutions. Furthermore, the criticism in the Palestinian arena will likely not spark any sizable organized rebellion that will genuinely challenge Hamas' military wing. And in any event, criticism of the Hamas leadership will not necessarily translate into increased popular support for Fatah in the West Bank, and certainly not in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas' accomplishments in recent years, particularly national prestige and leadership, were earned at the expense of Fatah. The defeat of Hamas forces by the IDF did not undermine these achievements. Moreover, it is possible that the very fact of confronting the IDF in a

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campaign whose outcome was quite predictable, and the intense anger directed against Israel as a result of the death and destruction in the Gaza Strip, will even broaden support for Hamas in the Palestinian arena. In contrast, the abstention of the Palestinian Authority (PA) from taking a clear pro-Hamas stance during the confrontation, in addition to its determined effort to prevent any large scale response in the West Bank to calls by Hamas for protest demonstrations, weakened the already shaky public standing of Fatah in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.<sup>2</sup>

Since the outbreak of the second intifada, the violent struggle waged by Hamas in Israel and Israel's responses to terror attacks have played a decisive role in thwarting any attempt at renewal of the dialogue between Israel and the PA. The Annapolis process, launched following the June 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas, was designed to weaken Hamas while strengthening the PA, in order to improve the chances of reaching an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Hamas, however, contributed greatly to impeding progress within the Annapolis-formulated framework. Its military and civilian infrastructure in the West Bank and its ongoing effort to expand its influence there, combined with the threat posed by its entrenchment in the Gaza Strip, have delayed implementation of the first stage of the Roadmap in the

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West Bank, particularly the removal of roadblocks and transfer of areas to PA security control. The continual rocket fire from the Gaza Strip made it impossible to encourage willingness in Israel and the PA to make compromises and take related electoral risks. The talks in 2008 between Israel and the PA were imbued with distrust, reflecting first and foremost the difficulty in bridging the gaps on key issues. This distrust also embodied recognition that the political split in the Palestinian arena, together with the geographic separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, would thwart any progress towards an overall

agreement, and that Hamas opposition was expected to complicate implementation of understandings – even if these understandings were limited to the West Bank. This political situation was not changed

by the campaign in Gaza. Whatever damage Hamas sustained did not impair its ability to continue to dictate the Israeli-Palestinian agenda.

One significant asset that Hamas deprived of Fatah is its status as leader of the Palestinian resistance. Hamas' image as the herald of resistance to Israeli occupation, to Israel, and to what Israel represents, including a regional order that Israel will be part of, was reinforced by the fighting in the Gaza Strip. Hamas has filled the vacuum created by Fatah's pursuit of a political strategy and its waiver of the "entanglement strategy," which labored to exacerbate tension between Israel and its neighbors. Indeed, there was sharp evidence of newly created tension during the campaign. Protesting the extent of the damage to Gaza civilian infrastructures, the Jordanian ambassador did not return to Israel from vacation until after Israeli forces withdrew from Gaza. Turkey's harsh protest over the Israeli operation signaled a potential crisis between the two countries. For its part, Qatar suspended its economic relations with Israel.

However, Hamas did not create a crisis between Israel and Egypt. The weapons smuggling into the Gaza Strip, particularly since the Hamas takeover, has cast a shadow on relations between the two countries. Yet increasing Egyptian concern about popular protest in its territory against the killing and damage inflicted on the Gazan civilian infrastructure heightened Egyptian pressure on Hamas during and after the confrontation to agree to a ceasefire. This domestic concern overrode the possible consequences of being portrayed as a partner in Israel's efforts to suppress Hamas' militant strategy and military capabilities. In addition, in order to forestall future Israeli military action in the Gaza Strip, Egypt expressed greater willingness to combat the smuggling of weapons into the region. This development significantly limited the achievements Hamas could credit to itself as part of the effort, led by Iran and Syria, to form a regional anti-Israel front.

Nonetheless, Hamas is recognized as the ruler in Gaza. Egyptian contacts with the organization to persuade it to moderate its aggressive policy reflected acceptance of its hold on the area. Even Israel, in demanding that Hamas halt its rocket fire and weapons procurement and enforce a ceasefire on other

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militant factions, recognized Hamas' responsibility for what happens in the Gaza Strip and what is exported from it. Ideas proposed for renewing the Fatah presence in the Gaza Strip were limited to the possibility that Fatah might take part in reconstruction of the civilian infrastructure there and supervise the Rafah border crossing. These proposals, however, were not accompanied by any expectation that Fatah control of the area would be restored in the foreseeable future. International actors recruited for Gaza's reconstruction, whether Arab or Western, will be unable to avoid coordinating the details and processes of rebuilding with Hamas personnel. After the fighting stopped, France redoubled its efforts to make the Quartet's demands of Hamas more flexible. Even if this diplomatic process, designed to facilitate contacts between EU institutions and Hamas is not successful, coordination with Hamas is likely to constitute a step toward rescinding the boycott of the organization without its accepting the longstanding preconditions for conducting a dialogue.

Does recognition of Hamas control in the Gaza Strip entrench the split in the Palestinian arena – a political reality whereby Hamas' standing is strengthened while Fatah is weakened – and with it lessen the prospects of promoting a compromise settlement between Israel and the Palestinians? Not necessarily. Egypt has repeatedly stressed its intention of rehabilitating the PA by convening a unity government. Support for the Abbas presidency and the Fayyad government and measures designed to clip Hamas' wings suggest that Egypt still regards an integration of forces in the Palestinian arena as a means of easing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both as a goal in itself and as a means for moving the diplomatic process forward. Perhaps this approach harbors a way out of the predicament in which Hamas escalates its confrontation with Israel in response to progress towards a settlement, and escalation in turn impedes progress towards a settlement.

The rivalry with Fatah that began upon Hamas' establishment intensified when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip. The divide between the organizations, which deepened during the campaign in Gaza, is expected to widen further should real progress occur in Israel-PA dialogue. At the same time, political progress will likely aggravate tension within the Hamas ranks between the radical Damascus-based branch and the more pragmatic leadership in the Gaza Strip.<sup>3</sup> This in

turn may prepare the groundwork for a dialogue between Fatah and pragmatists in Hamas. Presumably, the more tangible the promise of a political breakthrough, the more likely there will be support among the residents of the territories for a resolution – even among those sectors that were led by the political stagnation to support Hamas. As such Fatah’s potential ability to head a national representation based on its platform will grow. From this perspective, persistence in the political process, even if the Palestinian national dialogue is renewed without an official recantation by Hamas of its fundamental anti-Israel positions, will make it more likely that understandings reached in the talks will approach the implementation stage. Conversely, political deadlock, regardless of whether a Palestinian unity government is formed or the split in the Palestinian arena continues and is institutionalized, will preserve Hamas’ ability to foil attempts to regulate Israeli-Palestinian relations, while a weakened Fatah will be unable to offer the Palestinian public or Israel a practical alternative in the spirit of two states for two peoples.

## Notes

- 1 “Khaled Mashaal: Hamas Believed the Operation would Last Three Days,” Yoav Stern, *haaretz.co.il*, January 20, 2009.
- 2 *Agence France Press*, January 15, 2008; *Christian Science Monitor*, January 15, 2008; *New York Times*, January 15, 2008.
- 3 Recent years have seen differences among the Hamas leadership regarding cooperation with Fatah and possible participation in the political process. These debates intensified in light of Tony Blair’s call to include the organization in the political process. See “Hamas Deeply Divided over Blair Remarks,” *Jerusalem Post* online, January 21, 2009.