

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

July 25, 2005

THE INTRA-PALESTINIAN DIMENSION OF RENEWED VIOLENCE

Anat Kurz

Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

On July 20, Fatah and Hamas agreed to end several days of fierce clashes on the streets of Gaza that had erupted following an escalation of mortar and rocket attacks by Hamas on Israel and an effort by Fatah to enforce the *tahdia* (relaxation of the violence) agreed to by Hamas in March.

The recent outburst of violence was not simply another stage in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. Instead, it reflected the intensification of the intra-Palestinian power-struggle. There is nothing new about the initiation and suspension of violence by Palestinian actors to enhance their organizational standing. But in the past few weeks, intra-Palestinian politics have become the primary engine of violence and left the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as little more than a pretext.

Both Hamas and Fatah have been preoccupied in recent months with improving their respective positions in advance of the approaching Israeli disengagement. But while the former aims to reinforce its claim of having driven Israel out of Gaza by force, the latter prefers a smooth pullout of Israeli forces from the Strip, if only to limit the damage done to its own prestige by Hamas' defiance of the March agreement. Thus, the current discourse between the two organizations focuses on shows of force – by Hamas, against Israeli targets; by Fatah, against Hamas' military

infrastructure in Gaza. And that discourse mainly concerns terms of power-sharing rather than issues of substance such as the social character of the future Palestinian state or the way in which such issues should be promoted.

The recent spate of rocket launchings reflects Hamas' self-confidence, which has been significantly augmented during the course of the *intifada* by two interconnected processes: the disintegration of the central administration in the territories (which has undermined the legitimacy of Fatah's traditional supremacy), and the democratization process of the Palestinian political framework (which has provided Hamas with the legal basis for challenging Fatah's claim to sole authority).

Although the most publicized demands on the Palestinian Authority to embark on democracy-oriented reforms have emanated from western donors, there has also been strong pressure from within. Abu Mazen's victory in the January 2005 presidential elections attested to the popular wish for the restoration of law and order and the normalization of daily life. Against the backdrop of the spreading chaos in the territories, reform became a matter of even greater urgency than a breakthrough in relations with Israel. The same wish for a restoration of public order worked to the advantage of Hamas in two rounds of municipal elections -- in February and May --

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

www.dayan.org/

because its candidates were perceived as much less corrupt and much more competent than Fatah's.

There is also an expectation that the changing balance of power between Fatah and Hamas will be reflected in the results of the pending elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council. Indeed, it was precisely to gain time to put its own house in order that Fatah resolved to postpone the elections, originally scheduled for July. But since this move was interpreted by Hamas to be a violation of the March agreement, Hamas responded with a breach of its own – the renewed rocket attacks against Israel.

Specifically, the recent rocket barrages were intended to convey three inter-related messages:

1. despite Fatah's efforts to allow for non-violent Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the disengagement will be carried out under fire and will therefore be credited to Hamas;
2. the Fatah-led PA will not be able to bring the violent *intifada* to an end without Hamas' consent and cooperation;
3. Hamas will not make it easy for Fatah to assume control over areas evacuated by Israel in the Gaza Strip (or elsewhere in the future).

Fatah's dilemma stems from the PA's inability to employ its security organs for maximum effect, because vigorous law enforcement measures are likely to further undermine its domestic standing. At least since the eruption of the current *intifada*, and to some extent even since the establishment of the PA in 1994, this trap has been effectively exploited by dissident factions within Fatah itself as well as by other groups such as Islamic Jihad, which was responsible for the July 13 suicide bombing in Netanya. But the greatest beneficiary of Fatah's institutional deficiencies and declining status has obviously been Hamas.

The IDF has already reacted to the recent escalation by resuming targeted assassinations of terrorists. These actions have been accompanied by threats to launch a massive retaliation campaign against the terrorist infrastructure in the Gaza Strip. But such an operation would probably redound to Hamas' advantage by dramatizing the PA's inability to enforce its will and depriving the PA of any effective threat against Hamas. And if the Israeli government decides to delay implementation of the disengagement because of the renewed violence – rather than because of domestic reasons – that will also have an adverse impact on Fatah because it will further buttress the claim that only Hamas is capable of inducing changes in Israeli policy.

Of course, Hamas aspires to be a broad-based political organization and it must also take account of the general public desire for the disengagement to proceed. And that concern, coupled with Egyptian encouragement, may induce Hamas to hold its fire for the duration of the disengagement process. Khaled Mashal, the Damascus-based Hamas leader, hinted at such a decision on July 16, and such reasoning may well lie behind the Hamas-Fatah agreement to cease fire. But even if Hamas does now restrain itself, it has already asserted its decisive role in setting the agenda of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation (as have Fatah and other actors) through the calculated use of violence, i.e., through both the initiation and the suspension of attacks in accordance with shifting circumstances, in order to satisfy organizational needs.

Thus, the recent outburst of violence provides yet another example of the intrusion of organizational needs into the tactical and even strategic choices of Palestinian actors. In this case, as in others, the violence was framed by intra-Palestinian politics even more than by the struggle against Israel.

KEYWORD: Palestinians