GAZA ON THE BRINK OF CIVIL WAR

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Following the failure of efforts to reach agreement between Hamas and Fatah on the formation of a government of national unity, there are growing fears among Palestinians that the two movements are now on the brink of an all-out civil war. Indeed, some argue that the war has already begun, albeit still on a small scale.

There are several explanations for the failure of the negotiations and efforts to mediate between the two sides. The prevailing opinion in Israel is that the failure stems from the refusal of the Damascus-based political leadership of Hamas to accept the Quartet's demands (recognition of Israel, endorsement of previous agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, and non-violence), especially the demand to recognize Israel, even if indirectly. This refusal is expressed in Hamas' rejection of the Arab peace proposal (the "Saudi initiative") as one of the guidelines of a national unity government. This explanation may be a handy excuse for the two parties, but their inability to agree also stems in large measure from the internal fragmentation and power plays in both camps.

For Fatah, there is nothing new in this situation. Fatah is divided between the elected Chairman of the Palestinian Authority (Abu Mazen), other elements in the territories who demand internal party reform and are angry at Abu Mazen for his failure to carry it out, the "old guard" leadership in the territories that wants to preserve its status, and the "outside" leadership headed by Farouq Qaddoumi, who has consistently opposed the Oslo Accords. To this mix are added various armed elements pursing their own agendas or those of outside supporters such as Hizbullah.

Unlike the situation in Fatah, such divisions within Hamas are a relatively recent phenomenon and have become significant only since the movement's victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in January 2006. Since then, major rifts has appeared, particularly between the civilian echelon inside the territories and the political leadership in Damascus, headed by Khaled Mash'al. That leadership is linked to the military echelon (the Izz e-din al-Qassam Battalions) and it is able to dictate the organization's policy concerning terrorist attacks. These rifts derive from the differing perspectives of the civilian wing inside, which now controls the Palestinian government and must provide for the public's needs and meet its expectations, and of the political leadership in Damascus, which can more easily maintain its devotion to Hamas' traditional policies and

ideology. Beyond this division over principles, however, there is also, and perhaps primarily, a power struggle. The political leadership in Damascus fears that its standing will be undermined by the "inside" leadership, which enjoys several advantages following its electoral victory and its formation of a government. The outside actors therefore rely on whatever levers are left to them – the claim of ideological purity and control of the military wing – in order to frustrate attempts by "inside" elements to assert their primacy.

Beyond the detrimental effect of political rivalries on the national dialogue, the policy of the United States also contributed to the failure. During the recent visit of Abu Mazen to Washington, Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice made it clear that the U.S. would not content itself with indirect or ambiguous recognition of Israel. As a result, Hamas felt that that there was no point in continuing to discuss with Abu Mazen compromise formulas; the organization, at least at this stage, is still incapable of undertaking a radical change in its position.

In the aftermath of the breakdown of talks, both sides are now preparing for a decisive showdown. Accelerated arms smuggling through the tunnels along the border with Egypt is not just part of preparations for a confrontation with Israel; it also reflects the determination of the various militias to be better prepared for the expected internal clash. In Hamas there is a growing belief that Abu Mazen and Fatah, with the assistance of the United States and Israel, are preparing a *putsch* against the legitimate Palestinian government. Hamas elements interpret the strengthening and reinforcement of the Presidential Guard in Gaza as an effort by Abu Mazen to set up an armed force that can defeat them with the help of other power centers in Fatah, which support such a coup. That is also the way they understand other ideas that Abu Mazen is considering: dispersal of the elected government and appointment of a government of

technocrats or a referendum on new elections. Both measures would be of dubious constitutional legality.

Of course, all of these preparations may just be part of a complex negotiation in which each side actually wants an agreement on national unity, though on terms clearly favorable to itself. And widespread public hostility to internal strife could act as an additional constraint on both parties. But a large-scale direct clash might nevertheless break out. If it does, it is quite likely that Hamas would prevail in Gaza, where its forces are better organized and disciplined, but in the West Bank, where the IDF is more actually forestalling the formation and activity of armed groups, Fatah would have a clear advantage despite its internal divisions. If that turns out to be the result, then the consequence could be a division of the territories into two quasi-states, each with a different government. For many Palestinians, that would be their worst nightmare.

Nor would a Palestinian civil war necessarily work to Israel's advantage. A situation in which armed Palestinian groups are attacking and weakening each other might appear, on the surface, to be beneficial to Israel. In fact, it might be argued that if a civil war results in two separate governments – Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank – that could make it easier for Israel to maneuver between them. But things could well turn out differently. Both such governments would be weak and in their competition to further weaken the other they might see more attacks on Israel as the most effective instrument. In any case, Israel would be even less able to find an authoritative Palestinian partner. For purposes even of deterrence and conflict management, not to speak of conflict resolution, a coherent enemy could still be preferable to anarchy and the absence of any address at all.

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