

Changing Course and Discourse: The Intra-Palestinian Balance of Power and the Political Process

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During Operation Protective Edge, many in Israel stressed the advantages likely to stem from allowing Hamas to retain control of the Gaza Strip for the purpose of enforcing calm in the area. This confirmation of Hamas' hold on the Strip actually validated the split in the Palestinian arena. At the same time, the longer the campaign continued, the more Israel softened its opposition to coordination between Fatah and Hamas, increasingly aware of the benefits of involving the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the formulation of principles for a ceasefire and the administration of the Gaza Strip as part of a new arrangement in this arena. Indeed, the renewed presence of PA forces in the Gaza Strip may serve as a counterbalance to the Palestinian division, which currently limits PA influence in the Palestinian arena to the West Bank, and may possibly constitute a basis for comprehensive institutional coordination between the rival movements.

For its part, Israel may view the establishment of a unified Palestinian Authority as an opportunity to restart the political process, if the PA, in the spirit of Fatah policy, adheres to its commitment to a negotiated settlement. In order to increase the chances of this happening, Israel, in coordination with regional and international parties, must articulate a concrete political plan with relevance to both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The presentation of such a tangible political horizon could strengthen the status of the PA and at the same time reduce the attraction of the strategy of direct military confrontation with Israel as a means of breaking the deadlock in the sphere of conflict.

The Balance of Forces in the Palestinian Arena

Toward the end of the nine-month period designated by the US administration for talks between Israel and the PLO (July 2013-April 2014), when it was clear that the parties were mired in yet another futile attempt to agree on principles for a negotiated settlement, the PA reached understandings with Hamas regarding the establishment of a cabinet of technocrats as a step toward general elections in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. By appointing this cabinet, Fatah and Hamas intended to expand the base of their domestic support, albeit necessarily at the expense of one another. The PA sought a way to cover for its failure to promote a political process toward Palestinian independence. This was meant to bolster its status at home, against the background of an intensifying economic crisis and concern within the Palestinian arena, Israel, and the international community regarding the possible dismantling of the PA, if not as an intentional act of defiance then as an uncontrolled ongoing process. Hamas, for its part, wished to edge closer to the center of the Palestinian political arena, even at the price of the appearance of reconciliation with Fatah, in order to breach the walls of isolation imposed on the movement due to the inter-party rivalry and its refusal to meet the international demands that are a prerequisite for political dialogue.¹ (Indeed, Israel sees Hamas' rebuff of these international conditions as justification for its policy of separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.) One immediate motivation for the inter-party rapprochement was the economic hardship suffered by Hamas and the Gaza Strip population due to the deterioration in relations with Cairo following the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power in Egypt, and particularly the firm Egyptian actions against the network of tunnels in the Rafah area.

It was considered unlikely that the two rival movements would succeed in reaching an understanding regarding division of power and full cooperation within the PA and, in accordance with Hamas' demand, within the ranks of the PLO. Another obstacle to the reconciliation process was Hamas' refusal to accept the PA's monopoly on the weapons in the Gaza Strip. However, the mere announcement of closer relations between the two movements provided Hamas with a tactical achievement, especially when in response Israel suspended the political process (as it did in response to the renewal of the PA's international diplomatic efforts, in the form of requests to join the conventions of different UN organizations).

The joint cabinet lost all practical significance in the wake of a series of events that culminated in rapid escalation and the outbreak of violence between Israel and Hamas. The hostilities were preceded by the murder of three Israeli teenagers by Hamas activists in the West Bank, the retaliatory murder of a Palestinian youth, and a wide scale campaign against the Hamas infrastructure in the West Bank by the IDF in coordination with the PA security forces. All this occurred against the background of difficulties imposed by Israel on the transfer of funds to the Gaza Strip following the announcement of the joint cabinet and the disagreement between Fatah and Hamas regarding responsibility for the salaries of Hamas administration and security personnel. However, the issue of coordination between the two movements returned to the agenda as part of the talks regarding a security arrangement for the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of the war and the reconstruction required in the wake of the massive damage to the Strip during the confrontation.

The reconstruction process is intended to be undertaken with the cooperation of the Palestinian Authority. Egypt has insisted that the PA take part in the implementation of the new arrangements in the Strip as a step toward reestablishing its presence in the region, cognizant that all measures to this end require coordination between Fatah and Hamas. Beginning in the first days of the fighting, and more intensively as the war dragged on, PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas and his associates took part in Cairo's efforts to dictate the contours of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, as well as the principles of relations between Hamas, Egypt, Israel, and the PA. For its part Israel encouraged this policy, in an effort to rehabilitate the PA's status in the Gaza Strip.² Still, the viability of this effort was threatened by two developments that emerged clearly in the context of the fighting: international reaffirmation of Hamas' hold on the Gaza Strip and a rise in the Palestinian popular support enjoyed by the movement.

The understandings reached to bring the fighting to an end testified (once again) to the fact that from the perspective of Israel, the United States, Egypt, and other parties in the region, Hamas enjoys the status of a state actor. In the course of the fighting, official elements in Israel articulated the desire to strike Hamas. At the same time, in contrast to past statements regarding the need and intention to topple the Hamas regime, Israel also made a conscious effort to enable Hamas to retain the ability to enforce calm.³ This change in Israeli policy reflected concern that the collapse of the Hamas regime could

be followed by anarchy that would both saddle Israel with an economic-humanitarian, security, and political burden and would allow radical Islamic forces in the region to gain strength. This, in turn, would reduce the effect of deterrence that Israel achieved as a result of the campaign, as well as make it more difficult for Egypt to contend with the armed groups in the Sinai Peninsula and along the border of the Gaza Strip.

The international recognition of Hamas' hold on the Gaza Strip would compensate the movement for the lack of support, and in some cases, the sheer loathing it elicited from the leadership of Arab states; most prominent among the Arab disdain was the Egyptian leadership.⁴ Aid pledged to the Gaza Strip by Qatar and Turkey and by the European Union will help rebuild the civilian infrastructure in the region. Arab and Western elements that lend their support to the reconstruction project will not be able to avoid coordination with Hamas, marking another phase in easing the political-economic boycott of the movement. In turn, the Hamas leadership can be expected to use the civilian reconstruction effort to reestablish its civilian control of the region and rebuild its military infrastructure there.

The rise in popular support for Hamas as a result of its proven ability to withstand the military might of the IDF for a period of many weeks will help the movement achieve this goal. According to a public opinion poll conducted in the Palestinian arena near the time of the ceasefire (which qualifies the long term validity of its findings), most respondents expressed support for the transfer of responsibility for the security forces in the Gaza Strip to the joint cabinet, albeit following elections for the PA and based on their results. Another finding indicated that Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh would beat Abbas in elections for the PA presidency, were they held at that time.⁵ This trend should compensate Hamas for the public criticism that it has sustained for its provocation of Israel in the name of organizational survival and maintained control of the Gaza Strip, which resulted in an aggressive Israeli response that turned the Strip into a disaster area.

For this reason, the PA's ability to rehabilitate its status in the region will be dictated not by the official role it will be assigned in the realm of security, administration, and reconstruction but rather the scope and quality of the coordination it manages to establish with Hamas, in the Gaza Strip in particular and in the Palestinian arena as a whole. The official framework already exists. All that remains to be done is to renew, or actually to begin

the routine activity of the cabinet that has already been agreed to by the two rival parties.

Political Ramifications

The fighting between Israel and Hamas has accentuated the components of the security-political dilemma currently facing Israel, which is rooted in the rivalry between the two camps in the Palestinian arena and the balance of power between them. For years, in addition to the difficulty of bridging the gaps between their fundamental positions, relations between Israel and the Palestinians have been tainted by the division in the Palestinian arena in general, and Hamas' strategy of violent struggle in particular. The most recent military confrontation, which erupted shortly after yet another round of talks between Israel and the PLO ended in failure, inevitably heightened the doubts already existing in Israel regarding the practicality of negotiations with the Palestinians and the feasibility of implementing an agreement, as well as the concern over the inevitable accompanying security risks. Bitterness against Israel and perception of the recent confrontation as an achievement of Hamas' strategy of violent resistance can be expected to harden the PA's negotiating positions. In this context, both Israel and the PA will find it difficult to remove familiar stumbling blocks from the path to renewed political dialogue.

Against this background, the PA can be expected to renew its dialogue with Hamas. The disagreements between Fatah and Hamas on division of power are far from resolved. Abbas has charged Hamas with bringing disaster upon the Gaza Strip and seizing the humanitarian aid that arrived in the region after the ceasefire came into effect. However, he may also seek to add substance to the joint cabinet if the political deadlock continues, with the aim of expanding the PA's base of popular support. For precisely the same reason, the PA may well attempt to engage in dialogue with Hamas if talks with Israel are resumed, in an effort to strengthen the PA's image as a national representative enjoying broad support. The dialogue with Hamas is also likely to help the PA quell criticism at home for focusing on diplomatic measures and refraining from taking up arms against Israel while the residents of Gaza were collapsing under the pressure of the Israeli attack. For its part, the Hamas leadership is likely, from the relatively strong position it now occupies, to strive for coordination with the PA in an attempt to make the

most effective use possible of its increased popular support at home and the renewed recognition of its hold on the Gaza Strip.⁶

The political process will not be on the agenda of the coordination effort between the two movements, at least not at the beginning. Chances that coordination will be translated into a willingness to adopt positions that will make it difficult for the Israeli government to avoid a return to the negotiating table also remain slim. The PA itself will find it hard to dictate conditions and restrictions to Hamas, and its weakness will once again be demonstrated if the military wing of Hamas or other armed factions operating in the Gaza Strip insist on instigating renewed rounds of fighting. Still, closer relations between Fatah and Hamas have the potential to bring about a positive change in atmosphere in the sphere of the conflict. If cultivated, such relations could also pave the way to effective renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian political dialogue.

Israel should undertake an in-depth reassessment of the potential advantages of coordination between Hamas and Fatah, based on the assumption that a unified PA, which constitutes a designated, recognized authority with a broad base of legitimacy and overall responsibility for the happenings in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, is a distinct Israeli interest, especially if driven by a political platform that espouses Fatah's commitment to negotiations and a negotiated settlement. Israel, therefore, should support institutional coordination in the Palestinian arena and at the same time assure Fatah of a political breakthrough and the imperative of security calm, which will help improve the movement's standing and justify its opposition to violent struggle.

To this end, the Israeli government requires a concrete political initiative. It must therefore dedicate thought and resources to formulating an initiative, in preparation for the return of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to the international agenda as part of a plan of action to be drawn up by actors in the Middle East and beyond, with the aim of calming the tensions surrounding the conflict. This possibility fits in well with Mahmoud Abbas' declared intention to present an initiative under the auspices of the PLO, in an effort to translate the criticism of Israel for the scale of its campaign against Hamas and the scope of destruction and killing in the Gaza Strip into pressure on the Israeli leadership to return to the negotiating table from a position of relative weakness.⁷ To this end, Jerusalem will need to take advantage of the convergence of interests between Israel and pragmatic states in the Middle

East, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which for their own reasons seek to reduce Hamas' influence and stabilize the Israeli-Palestinian arena. It will also need to effectively utilize its convergence of interests with international actors, particularly the United States and European states. A binding Israeli initiative will better enable Israel to mobilize understanding and support for its demands, particularly in the realm of security. An Israeli initiative formulated with the cooperation of leading international parties could also possibly force the PLO/PA to soften its positions on issues regarding a final settlement.

At the same time, Israel will also need to take part in international efforts to rebuild the Gaza Strip. Especially if combined with a comprehensive political initiative, a reconstruction and development drive will not only reduce the motivation within the Palestinian public to join the ranks of Hamas and other radical factions but also help reduce the danger of local flare-ups in the Gaza Strip or the West Bank igniting the Israeli-Palestinian arena as a whole.

Notes

- 1 The Quartet conditions include the cessation of armed struggle, the recognition of Israel, and the honoring of past agreements signed between the PLO and Israel.
- 2 Barak Ravid, Jacky Khoury, Zvi Barel, "Yaalon: We are interested in having Abbas' forces stationed at border crossings in Gaza as part of the ceasefire," *Haaretz*, July 22, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2383812>; and Daoud Kuttub, "Israel Warms to Abbas as Gaza Mediator," *al-Monitor*, Palestine Pulse, July 22, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/gaza-war-israel-mahmoud-abbas-qatar-kerry-hamas-egypt.html>. Still, doubts remained as to the PA's ability to guarantee quiet. See Amos Harel, "Yaalon: The PA is Not a Neighbor that Can be Relied On," *Haaretz*, July 28, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/2.444/1.2228666>.
- 3 At the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), Hamas was charged with guaranteeing security calm in the Gaza region, although on the eve the operation, some official spokespeople in Israel presented the toppling of Hamas as the goal of the fighting. During Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012), official elements in Israel came to recognize the movement as an entity with which it was possible to conduct dialogue, albeit indirectly, with the goal of achieving security quiet.
- 4 Kareem Fahim, "Palestinians Find Show of Support Lacking From Arab Leaders Amid Offensive," *New York Times*, July 19, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/20/world/middleeast/palestinians-find-show-of-support-lacking-from-arab-nations-amid-offensive.html?_r=0; Khaled Abu Toameh, "Palestinians: The Arabs Betrayed

Us – Again,” July 21, 2014, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4463/palestinians-arabs-betrayed-us>.

- 5 “Special Gaza War Poll,” *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research* (PSR), September 2, 2014, <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/special-gaza-poll>.
- 6 Elie Hanna, “Meshaal: Full Partnership in the Palestinian Authority and a Palestinian State within Pre-1967 Borders,” *al-Akhbar*, September 6, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/21414>.
- 7 Jodi Rudoren, “Abbas is Seen as Ready to Seek Pact on His Own,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/world/middleeast/abbas-seen-as-ready-to-seek-mideast-pact-on-his-own.html?_r=0; Kifah Ziboun, “Abbas Devises Plan for Independent Palestinian State: Official,” *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 30, 2014, <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/08/article55336029>.