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## **The Hamas Challenge: What Should Be Done?**

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### **Background**

The abduction and murder of three Israeli teenagers has returned the issue of Palestinian terror and the military threat from the Gaza Strip to the top of the public agenda. As a result, there is a strong demand to change Israel's strategic approach to Hamas and to terror and violence in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The government of Israel has leveraged the kidnapping in order to make it clear to the Israeli public and the international community that Hamas is a terrorist organization and that there should be no tolerance of a hybrid organization that plays on two fields, one political and the other terror-based, and that has an independent military terrorist wing. The Israeli government contends that internal Palestinian reconciliation lends legitimacy to terrorism and to incitement and hatred discourse. Therefore, the government has a political objective – to dismantle internal Palestinian unity based on the reconciliation agreement, and a military objective – to deal a hard blow at Hamas and its infrastructures, at least in the West Bank.

### **The Struggle against Hamas in the West Bank**

The murder of the three teenagers is considered a heinous act of terrorism that revealed the establishment of Hamas' civilian, terrorist, and political infrastructures in the West Bank. During the search for the kidnapped youths and their abductors, Israel gained legitimacy to pursue vigorous action to dismantle these infrastructures. The measures undertaken by Israel were accepted by the international community, in spite of its twofold position – identification with Israel's pain, along with a demand that Israel refrain from expanding its operations and avoid harm to uninvolved civilians.

While all signs and findings point to the fact that the abduction was carried out by a cell belonging to Hamas, there is no evidence that the order for the attack came directly from the Hamas leadership (in Gaza, the West Bank, or abroad) or that the timing of the kidnapping was determined by the military or political leadership. Thus far, Hamas has not taken responsibility for the attack, which may complicate Israel's ability to achieve international legitimacy for striking a hard blow at the movement's infrastructures, leaders, and operatives in the Gaza Strip and may restrict its freedom of action.

There are limits to Hamas's ability to perpetrate terrorist attacks in the West Bank because of a significant IDF military presence in the area, boosted by operations by Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces. This was the case, at least, until the reconciliation agreement. In addition, Hamas' Gaza branch has limited influence in the West Bank because of the separation between the sectors. At the heart of Israel's operational concept for confronting terrorism is the idea of continuous action to dismantle the terrorist infrastructures in order to prevent the creation of terror-enabled organizations and capabilities. In this context, there is no political or operational obstacle to pursuing Hamas terrorist operatives, dismantling Hamas cells and headquarters, or restricting the group's civilian, economic, and social activity, particularly that of the *dawa*, in an ongoing and uncompromising fashion.

After the abduction, hundreds of Hamas operatives were arrested, and the offices and institutions of the *dawa* were targeted specifically. This indicates that for reasons that have not yet been revealed, Israel's defense establishment had reduced the pressure on Hamas in the West Bank and allowed it to restore terrorist infrastructures and terror-supporting institutions. If Hamas operatives in this sector had been arrested and interrogated prior to the kidnapping, perhaps the result would have been different.

In a June 29, 2014 speech at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Prime Minister Netanyahu emphasized that Israel will not give up its presence in the West Bank or its security control, even with a political settlement with the Palestinians. In addition, Israel believes its military presence in the West Bank and the ongoing effort to dismantle Hamas infrastructures may actually strengthen the PA, led by Mahmoud Abbas, prevent infiltration of jihadi terrorists, and provide a wide scope for support of and security cooperation with the PA.

### **What Should be Done about Hamas in Gaza?**

Hamas in Gaza is at a low point: the new regime in Egypt has adopted a strong negative position toward it, Iran has turned its back and is busy with Syria and Iraq, Turkey's support is limited, and the distress of Gaza's residents is growing. The smuggling of weapons has almost ceased, even though Hamas has succeeded in establishing an infrastructure to manufacture long range rockets with a range that reaches the greater Tel Aviv area.

While Hamas has grown weaker, Islamic Jihad has grown stronger in Gaza. Its numbers have risen, and it is equipped with medium range rockets with a range of 40-70 km. With its radical agenda, irresponsibility, and disregard of the Gaza population, Islamic Jihad is challenging Hamas control, and cooperation with global jihadis who are even more extreme has intensified.

Since the Hamas takeover of Gaza seven years ago, Israel has debated between three ways to deal with the organization: 1. accept its rule in Gaza and consider it responsible for all terrorist acts emanating from there; 2. prolonged action to weaken Hamas rule and capabilities in Gaza until the PA can restore control; 3. an extensive military operation to overthrow the Hamas government in Gaza, destroy its strategic capabilities (medium and long range missiles and rockets), and strike at and arrest its leaders and terrorist operatives.

Thus far, the government of Israel has chosen a combined approach of weakening and isolating Hamas and viewing it as responsible for Gaza. In this context, the government has avoided ordering the IDF to undertake a military operation unless required by the situation, such as ongoing volleys of rocket fire with casualties on the Israeli home front. These operations were limited in their objective and focused on striking at Hamas infrastructures and capabilities. This was done to restore deterrence, achieve prolonged calm, and establish rules of the game that are favorable to Israel, usually with Egyptian mediation. An operation of this kind can focus on the battle against the rockets and mortars to damage Hamas's capabilities, and on targeted killings of the group's commanders and senior officials. At the same time, humanitarian support is needed for residents of Gaza.

The escalation in the Gaza sector and the barrages of rockets and shells fired at Israel for over a week invite consideration of other options, such as:

Focusing on Hamas's ability to produce missiles and rockets and launch them deep into Israel: Given that the Egyptian military is weakening Hamas and stopping the arms smuggling from Sinai, there is an opportunity to dismantle the Hamas and Islamic Jihad strategic launching capabilities. This would involve land maneuvers with ground forces entering deep into Gaza, including built-up areas. The goal would be to uncover and dismantle long range arsenals, destroy the infrastructure for rocket manufacture in Gaza, and strike at the launch chain against Israel. An operation of this kind does not require a prolonged IDF presence in the Gaza Strip.

Toppling the Hamas government in Gaza, which requires understanding the implications of such a move, including, who would fill the vacuum, since the PA presumably lacks the ability to regain control of Gaza, and it is very doubtful that Abbas would be prepared to accept control through the "gift" of the IDF. There is an idea of setting up an alternative government in Gaza (Muhammad Dahlan?) with Egyptian intervention. This would require close coordination with Egypt and an Egyptian willingness to accept responsibility and provide guarantees for Gaza's future. Past experience shows that there is little chance that Egypt would agree to be the main actor in implementing this option. In the absence of an

alternative to the Hamas government, the risk increases that radical jihadis would fill the vacuum, Israel's losses would exceed its gains, and a worse situation would replace the current reality. The result could make a prolonged IDF presence in the Gaza Strip necessary, and Israel would be responsible for the needs of the more than 1.5 million people there.

Advocates of the option of toppling the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip must also consider the following: 1. broad mobilization of the reserves on the scale of several divisions for operational activity in Gaza and reinforcement of defense in the other sectors; 2. placing the economy on an emergency footing; 3. a phased military effort to clear the terrorist infrastructures and thwart terrorism, which could continue for about six months and cause a delay in economic growth during this time; 4. a serious impact on daily life on the home front, from Tel Aviv southward, as well as the fear of a high number of casualties. All this activity would require a budgetary allocation estimated at some 15 billion shekels.

Therefore, it is best to have a modest and attainable strategic objective, which would involve, in cooperation with Egypt, mainly isolating and weakening Hamas. If Hamas continues to fire missiles and rockets or allows them to be fired from Gaza, Israel would expand its military operation to strike a hard blow at Hamas' launching capabilities, particularly medium and long range capabilities, and would use precision strikes to attack Hamas operatives and launch focused, limited ground invasions. The emphasis would be on strengthening deterrence and striking a harsh blow against the ability of Hamas' military wing to attack Israel, without occupying Gaza and without making the dismantling of Hamas the supreme objective.

