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## **The Murder of the Teenagers and the Escalation in the Palestinian Arena**

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What considerations drove the members of the Hebron-based Hamas cell that abducted and then murdered three Israeli teenagers, instead of trying to use them as bargaining chips in a prisoner exchange deal, are still unclear. We also do not know if the cell was operating on instructions of the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip or Hamas representatives in Turkey, or if the initiative was local and inspired by Hamas' standard policy, which encourages the abduction of Israeli soldiers. However, the kidnapping has already taken a high toll of the Palestinians in the West Bank in general and of Hamas operatives in particular, and could decide the fate of the Palestinian unity government. It has already caused a security escalation that could lead to a large scale operation in the Gaza Strip as well as an extensive outbreak of violence in the West Bank, demonstrating yet again that in the Palestinian arena, isolated tactical events can have strategic ramifications.

It seems that although the abduction was planned thoroughly long before, the perpetrators erred in not understanding that given the security situation in the West Bank, they would be unable to smuggle the victims somewhere beyond Israel's reach, and that their chances of obtaining the release of hundreds of prisoners – including leaders that Hamas was unable to free through the Shalit exchange – were slim. They also erred by abducting high school boys rather than soldiers, an act that even many among the Palestinians who support the abduction of soldiers for use as bargaining chips to free Palestinian prisoners considered beyond the pale.

Israel, which failed to prevent the kidnapping, has responded with dogged pursuit of the abductors, taking a hard line against Hamas operatives and damaging Hamas infrastructures, in order to communicate clearly that it exacts a steep price of anyone who dares to abduct Israeli citizens or soldiers and will also settle accounts with those who ordered the action. These steps are also taking a toll of large segments of the Palestinian population.

The central actors in the Israeli-Palestinian arena now face difficult dilemmas: how to behave in the immediate post-abduction period given the mutual escalation in violence.

The firm position held by Abbas (Abu Mazen) – who publicly denounced the kidnapping at the Arab League meeting in Saudi Arabia and expressed reservations about using violence against Israel in the struggle to establish a sovereign Palestinian state – has earned him some points in the international arena, though it has harmed his popularity with the Palestinian public. Thus far it is unclear what Abbas' position will be regarding the partnership with Hamas in the unity government. Should he decide to cancel it, he is liable to embed his image as collaborator with Israel further and damage his position in Palestinian society. He will also lose his standing as the one who represents the Palestinian population in full in the territories vis-à-vis the international community, and the opportunity to gain a foothold in the Gaza Strip. On the other hand, should he continue the partnership with Hamas, he will verify the suspicions against him in Israel, i.e., that he speaks out of both sides of his mouth, whereby the rhetoric of pragmatism complements cooperation with an organization that perpetrates terrorism against Israel.

Hamas too faces a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, its leaders publicly expressed support for the abduction, calling it a legitimate means of trying to free prisoners from Israeli jails; on the other hand, they denied responsibility for the action. In practice, the murder of the three teens was an attack against the Palestinian unity government, though this is a patent Hamas interest. Israel's harsh steps have severely damaged Hamas infrastructures in the West Bank, and Hamas could stand to lose the legitimacy it tried to attain when it agreed to the establishment of the unity government so as to be a partner in future decisions about the Palestinian Authority and share responsibility for the government's relationship with Israel.

The security escalation in the West Bank has also touched off escalation in the Gaza Strip. On the one hand, non-Hamas elements there view this as an opportunity to increase rocket attacks against Israel. In turn, Israel finds it hard to ignore pressure on its domestic arena and avoid responding harshly to attacks on Israel coming from both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and operate in Gaza in a controlled manner that will keep the terrorists from attaining their goal: dragging Israel and Hamas into a widespread confrontation in the Gaza Strip. Thus, both Israel and Hamas find themselves in a dynamic in which they are dragged into growing escalation and widespread confrontation even though this is not in the interests of either side. As the rocket attacks continued, Hamas too participated in the fire against Israel, thereby increasing the probability that the current escalation will end in a large scale military operation.

Israel is certainly committed to continuing the intelligence and operational effort to catch and punish the abductors, and it has an ongoing interest to exact a price of Hamas. However, it too faces a tough dilemma. After the failure of the negotiations mediated by US Secretary of State John Kerry, stability in the Palestinian arena is a fundamental Israeli interest. Internationally, the blame for the failure of the talks is laid primarily at Israel's doorstep. If there is a new round of violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a result of the present dynamic, Israel will pay both the direct price of a severe security confrontation with the Palestinians and the indirect costs on the international arena.

The Israeli government must assess critically the value of a large scale operation in the Gaza Strip in order to effect – as proponents of such an action in Israel posit – “a harsh blow against Hamas’ strategic capabilities to harm Israel,” i.e., the ability to launch long range rockets toward large parts of the country. This goal is liable to emerge as a short term gain carrying a hefty price tag. Hamas has proved it has independent capabilities of manufacturing such rockets in the Gaza Strip, even after Egypt severely damaged the tunnels through which arms are smuggled into Gaza. Hamas would need little time to reconstruct its long range missile reserves after an extensive military operation. Therefore, given that Israel and Hamas share an interest in calming the current furor and stopping further escalation, it is preferable to do so with Egyptian mediation. As has become clear from the events rocking the Arab world, a strong, stable enemy regime that rules its territory with a firm hand and can be deterred is usually better than a motley collection of sub-state organizations that operate without internal checks and that are difficult to deter.

It is similarly unclear whether focusing on applying pressure to Abbas to cancel the reconciliation agreement and the Palestinian unity government is the right policy toward the Palestinian Authority and whether this would best serve Israeli interests. It might perhaps be better to take advantage of Abbas’ clear policy – one that combined unequivocal condemnation of the kidnapping and security cooperation with Israel – to create a new atmosphere in the relationship between the Israeli government and the Palestinian leadership. To do so, it is necessary to avoid steps entailing collective punishment in the West Bank, take a determined, unbending policy against Israeli hooligans looking for vengeance against Palestinians and against the attendant incitement, and enter into a direct dialogue with the Palestinian leadership – something that the Prime Minister avoided for the nine months of negotiations. There is no guarantee that cancelling the reconciliation agreement is in Israel's best interests. Hamas, after all, entered the agreement from a position of weakness. The Palestinian unity government is not really a unity government, but rather a Fatah government supported by Hamas so that Ramallah can to pay salaries in the Gaza Strip and provide services to the

population. This is also an opportunity for Fatah and Abbas to gain a foothold in Gaza. In all, the reconciliation agreement strengthened Abbas. Israel, which wants both to stabilize the situation in the Palestinian arena and progress, albeit in tiny steps, towards settling or at least managing the conflict with the Palestinians in non-violent ways, should be interested in strengthening Abbas.

