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Hamas Maneuvers in a Complex Theater

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In a recent meeting, GOC Sami Turgeman stated: “There is an independent rule in Gaza that runs like a state. Inside that state there is a sovereign entity, Hamas. As of now, there is no substitute for Hamas.” The organization, however, currently faces difficult challenges at home and from outside. First, it must advance the faltering, slow reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and raise the local standard of living. Second, it must improve its status vis-à-vis the leadership of the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority and lessen the increasing hostility and divisive split between them. Third, it endeavors to maintain its military infrastructure, for use in a next round of conflict with Israel. At the same time, Hamas must contend with Salafi jihad groups in an escalating struggle. Finally, it must maneuver politically and economically in the complex space between political Islam/the Muslim Brotherhood, as advanced by Qatar and Turkey; pragmatic Arab countries; and Iran, leader of the radical Shiite axis in the Middle East.

The Political Islam Axis: Unofficial Negotiations with Israel, in Exchange for a Long Term Lull

Reports of unofficial negotiations between Israeli representatives and Hamas have surfaced recently, apparently following a proposal raised by Turkey and Qatar to establish a seaport in the Gaza Strip in exchange for a lull that will continue for five to ten years. Reports of these contacts angered Fatah, as in the Egyptian plan that was the basis for the ceasefire that ended Operation Protective Edge, the issue of the seaport appears as an item for future discussion.

If such contacts are really taking place, they serve Hamas’ interests well. An actual attempt by Hamas to build a seaport in the Gaza Strip, even if it is forced into unofficial negotiations with Israel, could boost public support at the expense of the Palestinian leadership, particularly given the mutual recriminations between Hamas and the PA, which have delayed the transfer of funds designated for salaries and Gaza reconstruction. Thus far, however, there is no official confirmation of the contacts.

The Pragmatic Arab Countries: A New Palestinian Reconciliation Agreement?

In early May 2015, Mahmoud a-Zahar, a member of the Hamas political leadership, called on Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to promote a new reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah and establish a committee to oversee its implementation. A-Zahar asserted that the unity government agreed on in April 2014 (the Shati agreement) had failed in dealing with the Gaza Strip. He declared that Hamas opposed Abbas' demand for control over the Gaza Strip border crossings, and that a new agreement should therefore be formulated to resolve this problem. At the same time, the rift between the two organizations is widening, mainly due to the failure to rebuild the Gaza Strip, Abbas' concern about the isolation of Gaza under Hamas control from the West Bank, and criticism by Hamas of Abbas' policy toward Israel, regarded as weak and submissive. The slogan "Abbas, get out!" appears frequently in the media and in public discussion in the Gaza Strip.

A-Zahar's appeal to Saudi Arabia was designed to improve relations with Riyadh, and thereby rehabilitate Hamas' poor relations with Cairo. Egypt's el-Sisi defines Hamas as a terrorist organization, and has made the opening of the Rafah border crossing contingent on placing responsibility for the crossing in the hands of the PA. By indirectly relieving the friction with Egypt, Hamas hopes to alleviate, at least somewhat, the damage to its own status and to the Gaza population resulting from the closed Rafah crossing and the establishment of a buffer zone along the Gaza border. In this context, in addition to its attempt at rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, Hamas undertook in March 2015 to halt its media incitement against Cairo.

Consent of the Hamas leadership to proceed with a new internal Palestinian reconciliation agreement, with the support of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, is likely to be perceived as readiness to recognize – at least formally – the PA as the national Palestinian representative. Yet even if this measure is of some help, it will not be enough to overcome the bitter rivalry between Fatah and Hamas, exacerbated by issues such as control of the border crossings in the Gaza Strip and responsibility for payment of salaries to Hamas operatives employed by the Gaza government.

Hamas support for Mohammed Dahlan has recently been incorporated in this complex system of power games. Dahlan, a Fatah member who was expelled from that organization in 2011, has a base of support in the Gaza Strip, and is considered potentially influential given his connections with Egypt and the Gulf states. Dahlan is also regarded as a prominent competitor of Abbas for leadership of the PA. Already in August 2014, in a talk with the emir of Qatar, Abbas asserted that Hamas had close ties with Dahlan, who was transferring funds to the organization. There has also been a call in Hamas ranks, vehemently rejected by Abbas, for the appointment of Dahlan as president of the PA. For this reason, in addition to the other wide gaps between Hamas and Fatah, it

appears that there is little chance for reconciliation in the near future – formal or substantive – between the two camps.

Against Israel: Preparations for a Future Conflict with Renewed Help from Iran

Hamas is preserving its channel of communications with Iran. Mousa Abu Marzouk and Emad al-Alami, members of the organization's political bureau, are leading the activity along this track. Cooperation between the parties has been suspended at various times in recent years, in part due to the Hamas stance on the civil war in Syria and its opposition to the Assad regime, but the organization is once again emphasizing its recognition of Iran's regional status and its appreciation for the critical support that it grants Hamas' military wing.

Furthermore, the connection between Hamas and Tehran may be stepped up if the efforts by Mohammed Deif, recently reappointed commander of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, to achieve a signed document with Iran are successful. As reported in the new media and the social networks in the Palestinian theater, under this agreement, Tehran will supply training for the Hamas commando unit and in the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

Improved relations with Iran are believed to be one of the lessons learned by Hamas in Operation Protective Edge. Other lessons include the need to rebuild the tunnels infrastructure stretching from the Gaza Strip toward Israel, increased rocket fire range, and construction of fortifications along the border with Egypt. Deif himself regards weakening the economy and civil society in Israel as key objectives in a future conflict, including making Eilat a high priority target for attack and massive firing at the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip.

Implications for Israel

In his recent talk, Maj. Gen. Turgeman stated that he expected additional conflicts between Israel and Hamas, and that the recurrence of a military clash in the Gaza Strip every few years should come as no surprise. Many Israeli analysts and members of the Israeli defense and political establishment concur. Indeed, the operative goal of Hamas has been, and remains, removal of the blockade against it and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, and it appears that the organization will be inclined to move forward on any practical channel that would lead to achievement of this goal. At the same time, and despite the declaration by Gaza Legislative Council deputy speaker Ahmad Bahar that Hamas has "100,000 people willing to fight to liberate Palestine and expel the last Zionist soldier from our land," it appears that at the present time, the military wing has no desire at all to initiate a conflict, especially while it concentrates on learning the lessons from the last conflict with Israel and rebuilding its infrastructure.

Attaining a long term lull and reconstruction in the Gaza Strip are desirable goals for Israel, too. Furthermore, some believe that careful, controlled reconstruction in the Gaza Strip will greatly reduce Hamas' motivation for bringing about another round of violence. However, Israel must weigh carefully support for a move toward understandings on a lull with Hamas, which is liable to weaken the standing of the PA, against the benefit of achieving a temporary long term lull in the Gaza theater.

Hamas is currently trying to maneuver between positions with varying significance for its future path. Under these circumstances, Israel can pursue deliberate and cautious progress in reconstruction in the Gaza Strip, while conducting a dialogue with the official PA leadership and Egypt, and taking advantage of the security interests it shares with moderate Arab countries opposed to the spread of Iranian influence in the region on the one hand, and the rise of the Islamic State on the other. In any case, Israel would do well to monitor closely developments on each of the fronts relevant to Hamas' policy and to plan the measures it will take, taking into account their effect on the way Hamas will choose to act.

