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Though Hamas Is Interested in Negotiations, Gaza's Future Remains Uncertain

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Brief Analysis

The Gaza Strip has long been suffering from internal pressures resulting from its limited resources—including a lack of water and arable land, weak infrastructure, and many internal and external barriers due to the twelve-year long Israeli siege and blockade. This blockade has turned the Gaza strip into the largest open-air prison in the world.

This process began when Israel classified Gaza as a hostile entity after Hamas seized control of the coastal strip in the summer of 2007. Since then, Hamas has struggled to survive in a deeply hostile political environment, with its neighbors Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority (PA) each undertaking measures designed to weaken Hamas and push it to give up its security control over Gaza. In spite of this regional pressure, Hamas has managed to retain its hold on the strip, though its two million Palestinian residents are paying the price of siege, isolation, and deteriorated living conditions. Nevertheless, Gaza has its own way of survival.

Hamas's most recent efforts to change regional attitudes to the organization began when Hamas and other Palestinian factions, including the Islamic Jihad and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and other smaller factions orchestrated the Great March of Return on March 30, 2018. The march started as a popular non-violent protest against Israel's blockade but gradually developed into attempts to infiltrate the separation fence between Gaza and Israel and other violent activities such as flaming kites and balloons. The most recent development in this is a UN report released on February 28 stating that Israel has used disproportionate use of fire and intentionally shot at children and journalists. This recent UN report will be seen by both Hamas and Gazans as a victory to Hamas and the organizers of the protest. Hamas has vowed that the march will not end until Israel lift its siege and blockade of Gaza.

Ultimately, this strategy should be understood in the context of Hamas's hopes for a long-term truce with Israel and an end to Israel's siege and blockade. Such a truce would allow the organization breathing room after twelve years of

siege and three separate Israeli military offensives between 2008 and 2014, which inflicted heavy damage on the already devastated Gazan infrastructure. However, in August of 2018, the PA threatened to suspend its funding to education and health services in Gaza and make these sectors Israel's responsibility in order to prevent Israel from negotiating. The PA is motivated by a belief that a separate deal between Hamas and Israel would undermine its legitimacy and could lead to the creation of a permanently independent entity in Gaza under Hamas rule. Yet though the PA has so far managed to derail Hamas efforts to conclude any long-term truce, Hamas still believes that a long truce with Israel is possible—depending on the outcome of Israel's coming elections.

In the aftermath of this failed attempt at a truce, Egypt, the UN, and Qatar have each been making efforts to sustain the ceasefire brokered by Egypt at the end of Israel's offensive against Gaza in the summer of 2014. Egypt in particular has played a pivotal role in defusing the crisis, in part due to their concern that any eruption of violence between Hamas and Israel will have negative ramifications on its security in Sinai, which has 14-kilometer common borders with Gaza. This concern manifested into policy when Egypt opened the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt in mid-May 2018. And although the PA withdrew its security staff from the crossing in early January 2019 in protest of the ill treatment of its staff by Hamas, Egypt has decided to keep the crossing open to avoid further tension between Hamas and Israel and to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

It appears that Egypt's efforts to negotiate are continuing to draw strong participation from Hamas. Top Hamas official Ismail Haniyeh just returned from a 24-day visit to Cairo, where he met with top security officials and visited major Egyptian religious institutions like al-Azhar. Haniyeh concluded his visit by securing the release of four Hamas special force operatives—members of Hamas's military wing who were arrested in Sinai in August 2015 on their way from the Rafah Crossing to Cairo Airport. The return of these operatives to Gaza is seen by both Haniyeh and others as a significant achievement for Hamas that could relieve tensions with Israel, and others believe this could pave the road for a prisoner swap between Hamas and Israel. This recent visit also bolsters the widespread belief in Gaza that the relationship between Hamas and Cairo has improved significantly in the past two years.

In addition to Egypt's role in sustaining the cease-fire between Hamas and Israel, Egypt has also been mediating between Hamas and its rival Fatah for a number of years. However, these efforts have yet to achieve a breakthrough. Russia has also joined Egyptian efforts to end the Palestinian political division, including its invitation to a group of Palestinian factions including Hamas and Fatah in mid-February 2019. However, this meeting failed to conclude even with a joint statement.

Ultimately, it is safe to say that Hamas and Fatah have reached the point of no return; there is no chance of ending the political division and restoring Palestinian unity in the foreseeable future. The Hamas-Fatah political competition, divergent political ideologies, and their special interests have poisoned any chance of reconciliation between them. Moreover, the PA is not ready to discuss power sharing with Hamas in Gaza. Given the deadlock of Palestinian reconciliation and the deteriorating living conditions in Gaza, all involved parties—Israel, Egypt, Qatar, the UN, and Hamas—may be pushed to pursue direct negotiations on Gaza again.

Any major shift in Gaza's political, economic, or social situation must likely wait until after Israel's elections on April 9 and the formation of a new coalition government. Relief may also come with the United States peace plan, advertised as the ultimate deal, which may bring some hope for the desperate Palestinians in Gaza but is not likely to be released until after the Israeli elections. Until then, the United States should encourage Egypt, Qatar, and the UN to sustain the cease-fire between Israel and Hamas. The U.S. administration should also encourage Qatar and other Gulf states to help defuse any worsening of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza by continuing to fund fuel for the Gaza power station and other concrete projects that could help alleviate Gaza's poverty and unemployment. Thus, until international shifts occur, Gaza will have to continue to fight for its own survival in a volatile political environment. ❖



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