

Gaza Protests Can Contribute to Outside Pressure on Hamas

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Brief Analysis

Although the unusually bold demonstrations are unlikely to shake the group's local control, they have cracked the barrier of fear that Hamas nurtured inside Gaza and offer an opportunity to amplify alternative Palestinian voices.

This week, protests against Hamas have intensified in the Gaza Strip, with many residents taking to the streets and demanding that the group relinquish power, leave the area, and cease hostilities with Israel. Although definitive numbers on the scope of the demonstrations are not yet available, videos suggest several hundred participants at each protest site, indicating that several thousand people may be participating in total.

So far, the main protest hubs are in Gaza City and the northern part of the Strip—areas where the current war's devastation is most apparent and from which the Israel Defense Forces has instructed civilians to evacuate amid renewed combat. Yet the unrest appears to be spreading to the central and southern regions as well. The movement likely erupted spontaneously, with various actors stepping in after the fact to organize and drive further demonstrations, including local clan leaders, Fatah-affiliated elements inside and outside Gaza, and figures associated with prominent Fatah exile Mohammad Dahlan.

Protests against Hamas are not unusual, even during the war, but the scale and boldness of the criticisms voiced this week are unprecedented. Over the past year, Hamas has worked to suppress such dissent through intimidation and violence, and it may resort to such tactics again. The “Day of Rage” that some demonstrators have called for on March 28 could say much about the protest movement's intentions and the potential Hamas crackdown.

Whatever happens on Friday, the movement's ultimate success will depend on its ability to establish leadership,

articulate unified messages, and rally broader public support. Hamas holds a distinct military and organizational advantage over the protesters and continues to control all civilian and economic institutions. Even so, the group may find it difficult to suppress a widespread, well-organized movement without severe repercussions.

For their part, Fatah and the Palestinian Authority are using this week's developments to pressure Hamas into accepting President Mahmoud Abbas's postwar plan for Gaza, which includes relinquishing its grip on power and disarming. In response, Hamas has projected unwavering commitment to its stance. It has also sought to curb expressions of support for the protesters on social media and limit media exposure of the marches—notably, with significant help from Qatar's Al Jazeera network, in contrast to major media outlets in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have covered the demonstrations heavily. Meanwhile, Hamas spokespeople are employing a carefully nuanced narrative to contain the situation—they have expressed understanding for the protesters' grievances while simultaneously questioning their motives and warning against external influences.

On the latter point, Hamas has cautioned protesters not to shift blame away from Israel for their dire humanitarian situation. Yesterday's rocket fire from Gaza may have been the group's attempt to provoke an Israeli response that would undermine the momentum and legitimacy of the protests.

Policy Implications

Even if the demonstrations do not achieve the (currently unlikely) goal of undermining Hamas rule in Gaza, they have broken—or at least cracked—the barrier of fear surrounding the group. They also reflect emerging changes in Gaza's public discourse, with growing legitimacy accorded to those who advocate ending the war and challenging Hamas's image as the people's sole representative.

Outwardly, this shift could push Hamas to become more sensitive to public grievances and acknowledge some degree of responsibility for conditions in Gaza. Internally, it may give greater weight to voices within Hamas who advocate a more flexible stance in the stalled negotiations over planning and implementing **phase two of the ceasefire (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gaza-phase-2-sorting-out-political-and-security-scenarios>)** and exchanging hostages and prisoners.

The protests could also give outside mediators leverage to intensify pressure on Hamas—particularly Egypt, whom some protesters have asked to assume administrative responsibility in Gaza. Cairo is already amenable to taking action of some sort inside the Strip, if only to sidestep those who would pressure Egypt into opening its border and providing safe haven to Palestinian refugees displaced by the renewed warfare. Moreover, all parties should consider taking the following steps in response to the situation in Gaza:

- **Amplify the protests.** Open and explicit external support—especially from Israel—could be counterproductive, enabling Hamas to delegitimize the movement. Yet amplifying the protesters' messages and depicting the movement as a broad, authentic public voice could force Hamas to acknowledge their demands to some extent. Additionally, integrating protest leaders into humanitarian aid distribution efforts (see below) could strengthen their public standing.
- **Weaken Hamas's sources of power.** If the ceasefire goes back into effect and humanitarian aid provision resumes, the parties must have a plan for distributing this aid without Hamas seizing control of the process again. This entails American support, as well as Emirati financing to deploy security contractors on the ground.
- **Formulate a political plan and consider how to include elements from the protest movement.** If the protests expand, they will further erode Hamas's legitimacy to remain in power after the war. Yet this scenario also puts the spotlight back on the difficult, long-delayed task of formulating a practical alternative for governing Gaza in the absence of an effective replacement. Therefore, it would be prudent to increase the involvement of notable local actors—such as clan leaders, municipal officials, and local Fatah representatives—in the future governance

framework.

- **Closely monitor the situation.** Given the uncertainty surrounding the protest movement, close monitoring is necessary to track its evolution in Gaza and potential influence on communities in the West Bank and beyond. If a “Gazan Spring” is in bloom, it could conceivably evolve into a broader Palestinian or even regional movement.

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