

The Gaza Crisis and the Clash to Come

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Articles & Testimony

The spike in violence and threats of new sanctions will only exacerbate months of simmering tensions between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority.

The death toll reached 18 on Monday after a weekend of clashes on the Israeli-Gaza border. Thousands of Palestinians took part in the start of a wave of protests ignited by Hamas, the Islamist terror faction in control of Gaza. As Hamas officials **insisted (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-success-on-friday-presages-more-protests-more-deaths-in-more-places/>)** the clashes would continue for weeks, their rival in the West Bank, Mahmoud Abbas, declared a national day of mourning over the weekend and **blamed (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5211924,00.html>)** Israel for the violence. These protests are taking place within an explosive context, amid a deep crisis in the peace process and among the Palestinian factions themselves, further increasing the risk of the situation in Gaza escalating out of control. Both Hamas and Abbas share a desire to ratchet up tensions with Israel and the United States, but not much else. Indeed, the recent outbreak of violence will surely only exacerbate months of simmering tensions between the two feuding Palestinian parties as each attempts to take credit for the protests.

Abbas seems keen on instigating a broader clash. The Palestinian Authority leader made headlines last month for **calling (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-abbas/palestinian-president-attacks-hamas-calls-u-s-ambassador-son-of-a-dog-idUSKBN1GV2CL>)** the U.S. Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, a "settler son of a dog" in a speech admonishing the Trump Administration's policies. The rhetoric was par for the

course for Abbas, who has steadily upped the insults since Trump's speech on recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December. Yet in the same speech Abbas also **directed** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-abbas/palestinian-president-attacks-hamas-calls-u-s-ambassador-son-of-a-dog-idUSKBN1GV2CL>) the bulk of his ire towards Hamas, the group that overthrew his Palestinian Authority in Gaza over a decade ago.

In slamming the Trump Administration's peace proposal before its release, Abbas is not hiding his impending rejection of the plan. And yet in blaming Hamas for an **explosion** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-hamdallah/palestinian-pm-hamdallah-survives-gaza-roadside-bomb-attack-idUSKCN1GP0VN>) last month that targeted his Prime Minister and intelligence chief, Abbas is publicly mulling whether to further sanction an already impoverished Gaza Strip. Indeed, amidst increasing concern over his deteriorating health, it appears the 83-year-old leader is looking to strike a confrontational tone in the final act of his presidency, no matter the costs.

It's these costs that are starting to concern Israeli security officials. Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman recently **accused** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/liberman-says-abbas-trying-to-force-hamas-into-conflict-with-israel/>) Abbas of attempting to incite another Hamas-Israel war by cutting off funds to Gaza. American officials echoed these concerns at a recent White House **meeting** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-palestinians-gaza/white-house-hosts-meeting-on-gaza-crisis-without-palestinians-present-idUSKCN1GP34M>) over the humanitarian situation in Gaza. These fears are well founded. In recent weeks, several Israeli soldiers have been **wounded** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/17/four-israeli-soldiers-injured-two-seriously-in-border-blast>) as militant factions in the Strip placed IEDs along border fences. This, coupled with Hamas's ongoing mass protests in Gaza, as well as any additional economic sanctions Abbas **may** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/israel-palestinians-us-hamas-mahmoud-abbas-speech-gaza-strip.html>) impose on Gaza, have many worried Liberman's accusation is accurate.

Abbas's antagonism is a far cry from his tone just a year ago, when during a White House visit he **told** (<https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/read-trump-and-abbas-full-remarks-1.5467988>) Trump: "Now, Mr. President, with you we have hope." Indeed, the Trump presidency has been a roller coaster for the Palestinian leadership, who initially worried his administration would bypass the Palestinians in favor of building regional support for a peace deal. These fears were largely assuaged when Trump **called** (<https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2017/03/20/trump-committed-two-state-solution-palestinian-official-says/2xa6OigOaSUrvea6aOSVaK/story.html>) Abbas in March and told him he was his "strategic partner" before inviting him to Washington. And yet throughout the preliminary talks that followed, reports continued to trickle out that the White House was looking for more regional involvement, stoking long-held Palestinian paranoia of foreign meddling in their politics.

But the turning point for Abbas was Trump's December **speech** (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem/>) recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which the Palestinians felt prejudiced the most emotive issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Minutes after the speech, Abbas blasted Trump's remarks, **insisting** (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/abbas-rejects-trump-s-jerusalem-speech-u-s-can-no-longer-mediate-between-israel-and-palestinians-1.5627965>) "the U.S. can no longer function as a [peace process] mediator"; a few weeks later he publicly **cursed** (<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5070977,00.html>) Trump, and then he criticized the U.S. Ambassador to Israel last month. Though the White House chastised Abbas's language, he's unlikely to pay a heavy cost at home: A recent **poll** (<http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/723>) found that while a majority of Palestinians want him to resign, a majority likewise supports his confrontational stance with the United States.

The same cannot be said for his policies towards Hamas. At the start of the Trump presidency, Abbas announced a sweeping and unprecedented wave of economic [sanctions \(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-abbas-keeps-up-pressure-on-hamas-with-new-economic-sanctions-1.5493194\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-abbas-keeps-up-pressure-on-hamas-with-new-economic-sanctions-1.5493194) against Hamas. For years, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank had shelled out millions of dollars for select resources in Gaza like electricity and for payments of PA employees, on the condition that they do not report to work under Hamas-controlled ministries. While this effectively created a Palestinian Authority subsidization of Hamas's control over Gaza, it also prevented a complete humanitarian collapse in the Strip. Fed up, Abbas halted the practice in early 2017, plunging an already desolated Gaza into further darkness. The average Gazan saw [mere hours \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-gaza-energy/energy-crisis-leaves-gaza-with-barely-four-hours-of-power-a-day-idUSKBN14W1YG\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-gaza-energy/energy-crisis-leaves-gaza-with-barely-four-hours-of-power-a-day-idUSKBN14W1YG) of electricity a day while sewage plants went offline and began pumping into the sea.

Under heavy criticism, Abbas eased some of the sanctions as the two sides [inked \(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/hamas-fatah-sign-historic-palestinian-reconciliation-deal-in-cairo-1.5457218\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/hamas-fatah-sign-historic-palestinian-reconciliation-deal-in-cairo-1.5457218) another reconciliation deal in late 2017. Yet that deal barely got off the ground before they began trading accusations. Hamas [allowed \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/01/hamas-hand-over-control-of-crossings-to-palestinian-authority\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/01/hamas-hand-over-control-of-crossings-to-palestinian-authority) PA forces to regain control of several checkpoints in and out of Gaza last November, yet the faction dug its heels in regarding its two most sensitive issues: the status of its civil service workers and its standing military wing. The group insisted that the PA find a way of incorporating its domestic bureaucrats into the budget while simultaneously refusing to disband its military wing, the Qassam Brigades.

It was during this stalemate that PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and intelligence chief Majed Faraj visited Gaza last month, only to have their convoy hit with an improvised explosive device soon after crossing into the Strip. Hamas denied responsibility for the attack, yet PA officials quickly blamed the group for the overall security situation. Abbas then went a step further, directly accusing Hamas and [vowing \(http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=KSroTua96957933369aKSroTu\)](http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=KSroTua96957933369aKSroTu) to take "national, legal and financial measures" against the group. Already teetering on the edge of humanitarian collapse, additional sanctions could push the Strip over the edge, leading inevitably to more instability.

The largest question mark is how Hamas responds to the additional pressure. The group's internal [elections \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/13/hamas-elects-hardliner-yahya-sinwar-as-its-gaza-strip-chief\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/13/hamas-elects-hardliner-yahya-sinwar-as-its-gaza-strip-chief) have already tilted the balance of power in favor of the local military wing's leadership, yet the group's Gaza chief, Yahya Sinwar, has charted a pragmatic course by all accounts. He even offered to relinquish Hamas's civilian control over Gaza (while insisting on retaining their military wing) and to re-align the group with Egypt, the sworn enemy of Hamas's traditional backers in Turkey and Qatar. Sinwar calculated that reconciliation with the PA and improved relations with Egypt would bring enough economic and humanitarian benefits to Gaza to outweigh anyone who would accuse him of appeasement. Yet in recent weeks, this gamble seems to have failed, forcing Sinwar to keep a very low profile—appearing only once in recent days—and clearing the way for more confrontational elements in Hamas to again come to the fore.

And indeed, the more confrontational elements within Hamas appear on the rise. Setting aside the bombing of a PA convoy, the group's rhetoric with respect to Abbas and the PA has also reached unprecedented levels, with some Hamas officials describing Abbas as a "[microbe \(http://shehab.ps/post/30600/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%89-%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%AB%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AE%D8%B1-](http://shehab.ps/post/30600/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%89-%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%AB%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AE%D8%B1-)

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%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9" and dubbing his rule illegitimate. Likewise, its approach to Israel is ominously following an all too familiar pattern. When faced with internal crises in Gaza in the past, Hamas has often opted to deflect attention through military escalation with Israel. The recent IED attacks against Israeli soldiers and the mass protests seem to follow this modus operandi. Indeed, Hamas **admitted (<http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Hamas-5-of-Gaza-dead-belonged-to-its-armed-wing-547609>)** that some of its soldiers were leading the protests against Israel this weekend. While it is not clear that Hamas is seeking an all-out war, these escalations will dramatically increase the chances of the situation spinning out of control.

But a cornered Hamas is not such a clear win for Abbas either. Since the Palestinian split in 2007, the Palestinian public has tended to apportion blame for the continued disunity in roughly equal measure between Hamas and Abbas's Palestinian Authority. This has changed since the last reconciliation agreement started to flounder, with the majority of the Palestinians now blaming Abbas and the PA for the failure: 45 percent in that same recent opinion **poll**

(http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/poll%2067%20press%20release_March2018_%20English.pdf)

compared to 15 percent who blame Hamas. With Abbas having long outlived his electoral legitimacy—and with 68 percent of his own public wanting him to step down—his hardline approach to Gaza will only add to the wider Palestinian polity's dysfunction.

Abbas's approach to Gaza has also deepened his diplomatic isolation. While his concerns regarding Hamas's military wing are legitimate, his inflexibility has antagonized Egypt and convinced many European officials that he is not interested in improving the situation for Gazans. The international community has so far been loath to bypass Abbas when it comes to implementing any projects in Gaza, as the world still considers the PA, not Hamas, as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians. However, faced with an imminent humanitarian collapse, looming military confrontation, and a Palestinian President who seems intent on doing nothing for Gaza, some international actors may choose to abandon such arcane diplomatic considerations. In seeking to pressure Hamas, Abbas may ultimately find himself more internationally isolated than he is today and with an even more tenuous claim on representing all Palestinians.

Abbas's recent combative tone and actions suggest he cares more about his legacy and less about the repercussions of his policies. In Gaza, a cornered Hamas appears to be replicating the playbook that led to previous wars with Israel. Neither side seems particularly interested in de-escalation. As the protests continue, the international community—and particularly those countries with the ability to rein in both Palestinian factions—should work to ensure cooler heads prevail. In the short term, the priority should be to de-escalate and ensure that a new war does not break out. In the longer term, however, stability in Gaza requires dealing with the humanitarian crisis there. For this, Abbas and the PA must be presented with a choice: Either be a partner in bringing relief to their compatriots in Gaza, or be bypassed in the international effort to do so.

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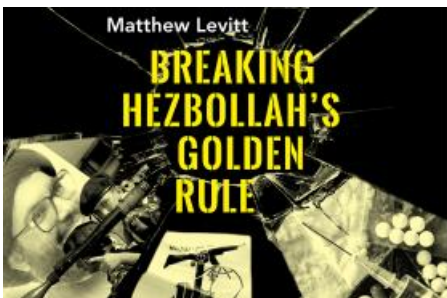
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