

Hamas Ramps Up Its Quest for International Recognition

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Brief Analysis

Absent proactive international pushback and constructive, energetic PA outreach to foreign partners, Hamas might continue to score small but cumulatively significant diplomatic achievements.

Recent weeks have witnessed a marked increase in diplomatic activities by Hamas officials. In June, the group's leader, Khaled Mashal, met with outgoing Quartet peace envoy Tony Blair; the two have reportedly met again since then. In July, a Hamas delegation led by Mashal conducted a three-day visit to Saudi Arabia, during which they were received by King Salman and a host of other senior Saudi officials. On August 3, Mashal met with Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, who invited him to visit Moscow in the future. And on August 12, Mashal met with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Hamas is also claiming that a delegation led by Mahmoud al-Zahar, a senior Gaza-based official with strong ties to the organization's military wing, will soon visit Tehran.

Substantively, there is no common thread between these meetings, as each dealt with different issues. The meetings with Blair focused on Gaza reconstruction and consolidation of the ceasefire that ended last year's clashes with Israel. The Saudi visit was widely interpreted in the context of the kingdom's efforts to create a Sunni front to counter Iran's increasing regional influence, particularly in the wake of the nuclear deal; as for why Hamas officials would risk being associated with such an agenda, the trip may reflect internal divisions within the group, as discussed below. The meeting with Lavrov, which took place on the margins of his visit to Qatar, was simply a continuation of Russian relations with Hamas. And Turkey is a longstanding Hamas supporter that routinely welcomes the group's top officials as guests and residents.

Nor do these activities necessarily reflect a united Hamas front or, as the group is trying to portray, an unequivocal improvement in its international relations. For one thing, Blair's initiatives have repeatedly come up against strong Egyptian opposition to anything that would benefit Hamas given the organization's ongoing interference in Cairo's

affairs. They have also faced internal resistance due to strong differences within Hamas regarding many aspects of Gaza reconstruction, including the role of the Palestinian Authority and the extent of limitations that would be imposed on Hamas during the process.

Second, the delegation to Saudi Arabia notably did not include any members close to Hamas's highly influential military wing in Gaza, and was not without its fair share of detractors from that camp. Additionally, Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir downplayed the visit's significance.

Third, the Turkey meetings come amid reports that Ankara recently asked Saleh al-Aruri -- a senior Hamas figure linked to terrorist activities in the West Bank -- to leave the country, where he has been based since Israel him released from prison in 2010. Hamas denials of these reports have not been definitive, and Turkish officials, while not confirming Aruri's expulsion, have stated that he is no longer in Turkey.

Fourth, the announcement of Zahar's purported trip to Tehran comes soon after Iranian authorities canceled a previously scheduled visit by Mashal. If the Zahar visit materializes, it will add further credence to reports of a growing rift between the group's Gaza military wing and its diaspora leadership.

Despite these distinct agendas, the recent visits have one important commonality: they are all being vocally advertised and played up by Hamas, often beyond what their substantive significance would warrant. The group seeks to turn these activities into a public relations victory, in keeping with its longstanding strategy of presenting itself as an acceptable interlocutor in the international arena. Yet aside from Hamas's traditional backers in Qatar and Turkey, these efforts have so far largely failed to produce any international engagement beyond meetings with the occasional Western academic or parliamentarian.

Even so, the group is presenting this close succession of diplomatic events as a breakthrough. Hamas will no doubt use them to build momentum behind its bid for international legitimacy while avoiding the measures required by the international community: recognition of Israel, renunciation of terrorism, and adherence to past agreements.

As for the PA and the Palestine Liberation Organization, both have been largely silent on these developments, with the exception of a few vaguely worded statements by mid-level officials and spokesmen warning of "ploys to separate Gaza from the West Bank." Worryingly, these reenergized Hamas efforts coincide with a marked absence of robust high-level diplomacy by PA officials. In particular, the PA's relations with its traditional moderate Arab allies are at a low point, ranging from tepid to openly hostile.

To be sure, Hamas is no closer to breakthrough where it really matters: with the United States, other Western states, or key Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates. Yet without proactive international pushback and constructive, energetic PA outreach to foreign partners, Hamas may well be on its way to scoring additional small but cumulatively significant diplomatic achievements.

Ghaith al-Omari is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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