

# Gaza's Explosion Waiting to Happen

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Articles & Testimony

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## Conversations with Palestinian, Israeli, and international officials indicate that the simmering stalemate between Hamas and Fatah will not end well.

**M**ore than three months after the guns fell silent in and around the Gaza Strip, the postwar reconstruction of Gaza has moved forward at a snail's pace, plans for a more hopeful future are stalled, and another giant reckoning appears to be only a matter of time. "There will be an explosion," one former senior Palestinian intelligence chief in Ramallah told me. "Whether it's directed at Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) or Hamas, no one knows."

The Gazan population is growing increasingly agitated as conditions in the territory worsen, and all because of the continued standoff between Hamas and Fatah over Palestinian reconciliation. This was the deal that ended the fighting in late August -- reconciliation as a precondition to reconstruction -- and the deal that all the relevant parties -- Hamas, Israel, the PA, Egypt, as well as the United Nations -- ostensibly agreed to.

Seven years of Hamas control over Gaza would be gradually replaced by the Fatah-dominated PA, billions of dollars in donor aid would flow in, and the Gazan people would be liberated from the continued rule of an internationally-designated terrorist organization (and the continued need for an Israeli and Egyptian blockade around the territory). Or at least that was the idea.

But all these plans are on hold as Hamas and the PA engage in a game of political chicken, staring each other down, a reality confirmed to me over the past month in conversations with nearly two dozen Israeli and Palestinian officials (from both Fatah and Hamas), international diplomats and non-governmental sources based in Israel and the West Bank, some of whom requested to remain anonymous so as to speak more freely.

The most surprising aspect is the fatalism conveyed by both sides of the Palestinian divide. National unity was, to a man, held up as a necessity for the Palestinian people -- yet the actual welfare of those Palestinians living in Gaza has apparently been deemed secondary to the considerations of power politics.

For Fatah, the reconciliation agreement they concluded with their Islamist rivals last April and then again in September was viewed as a capitulation by Hamas, whose rule in Gaza was eroding due to economic constraints placed upon it by the new military-led government in Egypt. This situation was only exacerbated by two months of war in the summer and a renewed crackdown by Cairo on the remaining smuggling tunnels connecting Gaza to the Sinai Peninsula (a key lifeline for the territory and Hamas).

Thus, the initial reconciliation deal tilted heavily in Fatah's favor, in particular the new "national consensus" government seated in June containing key ministers deemed pliant to PA President Mahmoud Abbas. As Nabil Shaath, a Fatah Central Committee member, told me recently, "Hamas is crying for help out of weakness; they need unity."

This is where the "national consensus" government was supposed to step in, as the sole legitimate go-between for the international community's reconstruction efforts. "The PA government is the only practical way to change the dynamics in Gaza," said a senior UN official in Jerusalem deeply involved in creating the postwar framework. "If we don't have the PA in Gaza, this will not work."

All sides, including Hamas, agreed that the PA should return to the territory -- initially to take over the border crossings as well as the government ministries there, including the beginning stages of rationalizing the bloated public sector (which in theory consists of both Hamas- and Fatah-affiliated government employees). To date, the PA has done none of these things as long as Hamas has resisted surrendering control.

The agreement to take charge in Gaza was a "strategic mistake," one senior PA finance official explained. It was, he said, premature to publicly state this intention -- and raise the public's hopes and expectations -- before Hamas gave up not only nominal authority in Gaza, but effective authority.

Abbas himself has charged Hamas with continuing to run a "shadow government" in Gaza, and one high-ranking official from the PA's Preventative Security agency based in Ramallah told me that they would "not repeat the model of [Lebanon's] Hezbollah in Gaza" whereby one faction maintained a formidable militia outside the control of the central government. "How do you expect me to go work in the Gaza Strip," this official posited, "when the Qassam Brigades [Hamas's elite military wing] goes ahead of me in both power and weapons?"

Nabil Shaath insisted in our conversation that the PA's hesitation with respect to Gaza was grounded in such practical considerations. "Abbas does not want to become the policeman of the border," he said. "We need to reunify at the 'heart' of Gaza, and not just the perimeter." Practicalities aside, these officials, sitting in Ramallah, betrayed a certain amount of glee at Hamas's worsening position, "cornered," as one put it, "in the triangle of Gaza" and "drowning" in the oncoming winter rains.

"Abbas went to the mosque to pray," the former senior intelligence chief summed up in an allegorical flourish, "but he found the mosque door closed." In other words, Abbas had every intention to pray, but it was the mosque door (i.e. Hamas) that was at fault.

Needless to say, Hamas officials view things differently. In an allegorical flourish of his own, one such official, Mohammed Totah, highlighted the need for all sides to climb down from their respective trees, to end the standoff. "But," he went on to tell me, "Hamas has already climbed down. We're on the ground."

Totah, a Hamas parliamentarian originally from Jerusalem, was released from Israeli prison in September. Most of his fellow Hamas leaders weren't as fortunate. The Hamas parliamentary offices in Ramallah, where I met Totah, were nearly deserted -- the product of a wide-ranging Israeli arrest operation in June, undertaken after the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers by a Hamas cell in the West Bank. Those Hamas officials and activists that the Israeli army had not arrested, the PA security forces were now taking care of, embarking on an extensive crackdown of their own. Over the past three months alone, an estimated 300 Hamas members in the West

Bank have been arrested by the PA.

For Hamas, such behavior ran counter to both the spirit and letter of the reconciliation deal -- which calls for "public freedoms" in both the West Bank and Gaza to be reinstated, for Hamas and Fatah activities respectively. Yet Hamas wasn't innocent either. The Ministry of Interior in Gaza, a Hamas organ, is widely believed to be responsible for a string of bombings last month targeting the homes and offices of a dozen Fatah members in Gaza. While no one was injured, likely by design, the message was sent. "The atmosphere is poison," another senior Hamas official in the West Bank, acting as a mediator between his group and the PA, told me a few days after the bombings.

The Interior Ministry in Gaza isn't an exception. While nominally Hamas dissolved its government in the territory back in the summer, in actuality Hamas personnel still fill most positions up to the deputy ministerial levels. Moreover, sources in Gaza indicate that, among other functions, Hamas still levies taxes on local merchants, still operates checkpoints near the official border crossings, and still demands permits from international non-governmental organizations working on the ground.

In other words, Hamas continues to wield institutional authority in the territory, albeit with a rhetorical paean to overall PA control. "No one is stopping the [PA] government from coming back" to Gaza, the Hamas mediator argued. "No one in Gaza has refused an order from the government. Have they [the PA government] tried to do something and been refused? Give them orders, test them!" The PA had, in reality, not tested the Hamas public employees in Gaza -- yet this was likely beside the point. In the same breath the mediator argued that the Ministry of Interior, along with the other Hamas security organs in Gaza, could not be dissolved or replaced. "There will be a vacuum," he warned. "Now you have Hamas in charge and there are no rockets [fired at Israel]. They uphold security...you need them involved."

If this sounded like a threat, then it was probably intentional. For Hamas, the political track of reconciliation has not produced the desired results. Leaving aside the issue of Gaza and the PA-led reconstruction mechanism, the group's overall hope for a "relationship of partners," as Mohammed Totah put it, has not materialized. The reconciliation deal called for the reconvening of the Palestinian Legislative Council, where Hamas holds a majority -- which has not happened. The ceasefire agreement which ended the summer war called for a second round of indirect talks between Hamas and Israel to be held in Cairo in November -- a move the Egyptian government suspended indefinitely due to instability in the Sinai (which Cairo blames on Gaza-based militants assisted by Hamas).

The only tangible gain Hamas can be said to have exacted is a partial salary payment to its civilian (non-security) public employees, and even this was done on an ad hoc basis via Qatari assistance and armored Brinks trucks physically moving cash from Jordan, through Israel, and into Gaza. The senior UN official in Jerusalem, who helped facilitate the October payment, told me that he had no intention of repeating such an elaborate procedure in the future -- "this was a one-time event," he stated flatly.

Perhaps even more surprising is that Israel, of all the parties involved, has shown the greatest degree of flexibility towards a Gaza Strip still ruled by Hamas. In addition to acquiescing to the salary payments, Israel has begun easing restrictions on construction materials and other goods entering the territory, and on certain products (fish, cucumbers) and people exiting. Israel has given its consent to an elaborate UN-led inspection mechanism for reconstruction, which as mentioned has not yet begun in earnest due to the lack of a PA presence on the ground. "I can't say that it's because of Israel that there has been no movement [on reconstruction] at present," the senior UN official said, a sentiment shared by several other foreign diplomats I spoke to in Jerusalem.

In the wake of fifty days of rocket fire from Gaza, Israel clearly appreciates the need for stability in -- and quiet from -- the coastal enclave, hence the significant shift in policy on its part. The only question is how to bring this about given the lack of will from the PA. If the situation continues on its current course, one veteran Israeli intelligence

officer specializing on the Palestinians told me, then "the next war is only a question of when, not if. Hamas," she added, "was deterred at the moment, but if they have nothing to lose, then..." She trailed off.

Hamas officials themselves use the same threatening language, about not having anything to lose, about there being "options we can think about," as Totah told me, if the other actors party to the postwar framework did not relent. And what of Hamas's obligations and concessions?

Sheikh Mahmoud Musleh, a senior Hamas leader in the West Bank who I spoke to, had no illusions about the purpose of the new squeeze around his group. "What they are seeking is the end of Hamas military power in the Gaza Strip," he observed. "This is the main impediment [to reconciliation]." When I inquired whether his group would consider laying down their arms, for the greater welfare of the Gazan people, the answer was definitive: "This is impossible."

And so the standoff between Hamas and Fatah continues, conducted (aside from the odd bombing or arrest) for the most part rhetorically among the Palestinian people. The very public blame game over who is now responsible for Gaza is a risky venture, and a cynical one, by both sides. Yet both sides seem to fear the other potential options more. "Ultimately, the people will blame both [parties], and it will hurt both Hamas and Fatah," the Hamas mediator told me in a rare moment of self-awareness. "And it will hurt Israel because there will be another escalation."

In this respect Hamas's options are, in theory, limited. Last time Palestinian reconciliation wasn't going well, this past June, Hamas responded by kidnapping and murdering the three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank, and by escalating into a wider war with Israel in Gaza. Hamas has already fired the latter bullet (literally), but that doesn't mean it won't try to again deflect attention from its own shortcomings via military action. An "explosion" of some kind, mere months after the end of the last war, is now expected.

As I left my meeting with Sheikh Musleh last month, the television in the Hamas offices in Ramallah was relaying images from that morning's brutal terrorist attack on a Jerusalem synagogue, which claimed the lives of five Israelis. Although not a Hamas operation, the sheikh was in an effusive mood. "I told you there would be an Intifada," he remarked to an old acquaintance, grinning widely. I recalled what he had said moments before, when I pressed him on what tangible options were available to his besieged organization if reconciliation collapsed. "The solution," he replied calmly, "is our solution: resistance."

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