

Hamas Opts for the Hezbollah Model

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Brief Analysis

Hamas seems intent on using Hezbollah's "bullets plus ballots" approach to gain a military and political foothold in the West Bank, the PA, and the PLO.

On June 2, Hamas and Fatah formed a unity government in the Palestinian Authority after many months of reconciliation talks, with Hamas nominally dissolving its government in the Gaza Strip. The move represents the fruit of a long internal debate within the group's higher echelons regarding its future course. Rather than adhering to the seven-year-old strategy of prioritizing exclusive control of "Fortress Gaza" with no serious effort to heal the rift with Fatah in the West Bank, Hamas leaders have now changed tack toward a different program: transplanting the Hezbollah model from Lebanon to Palestine.

For Hamas, this means integrating into the general political system while retaining independent, well-equipped armed forces and striving to maintain control of Gaza through its existing grip on local bureaucracy, its wide network of social institutions, and, of course, its 20,000 well-trained military cadres and security personnel. The group has recruited no less than 50,000 employees to the public sector since its June 2007 military takeover of the territory. At the same time, Hamas seems determined to exploit the reconciliation agreement as a means of resuscitating its political organization and clandestine terrorist activities in the West Bank. Outgoing Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh described the new formula best, declaring this week, "We leave the government but stay in power...We give up the chair but not the role we play."

INTERNAL DEBATE

The shift in Hamas strategy -- from emphasizing a monopoly of power in Gaza to reaching a deal that allows some PA presence there, and from harsh criticism of PA president Mahmoud Abbas to cautious cooperation with him -- has been the result of agonizing soul searching among the group's leaders. This internal questioning was spurred by several recent setbacks: the loss of a friendly Muslim Brotherhood regime in neighboring Egypt, the cessation of weapons smuggling through the Sinai Peninsula, the decline of financial subsidies from Iran and Qatar, and the growing resentment of Gaza inhabitants due to rising unemployment, economic hardship, and constant repression.

Amid these bleak circumstances, Hamas leaders held a number of meetings in recent weeks with Iranian officials in Tehran and Hezbollah leaders in Beirut. There, the group's representatives were advised to adopt a more ambitious plan than merely defending Gaza, namely, by contesting Fatah in its own West Bank territory instead. Hezbollah's modus operandi in Lebanon -- which can be summed up as "add ballots to your bullets" -- was pushed as a model to be emulated. Subsequently, Tehran praised the initial reconciliation pact between Hamas and Fatah; on April 26, an Iranian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman stated, "The Islamic Republic of Iran welcomes solidarity among Palestinian groups against the Zionist regime [of Israel], as well as any kind of national reconciliation that results in Palestinian unity." The statement was one of several signals that Iran had approved the deal in advance.

MILITARY INDEPENDENCE

Similar to Hezbollah's longstanding stance in Lebanon, statements by numerous Hamas leaders over the past few days make clear that the group's military branch -- the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades -- will not be disarmed or come under any PA supervision and will continue to grow as a powerful "resistance." The same applies to its intelligence and security apparatus. Just as Hezbollah maintains armed forces far superior to the Lebanese army and various secret services, so does Hamas intend to expand its independent military units, which are already far larger and better equipped than the PA's National Security Forces.

For example, Gaza workshops will continue production of M-75 missiles -- which are capable of reaching Tel Aviv and Jerusalem -- even though Abbas has previously accepted the principle of a demilitarized Palestinian state. Hamas also has no intention of disbanding its intelligence organs, which will allow it to preserve de facto control of Gaza in much the same manner that Hezbollah forces control southern Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Beqa Valley. Although some PA units will be introduced into Gaza, their main role will be to man the border terminals with Egypt and Israel; they are unlikely to change the overall situation on the ground.

POLITICAL INFILTRATION

If Hamas opts to fully implement the Hezbollah model, it will also seek to integrate itself as fast as possible into all PA institutions in the hope of taking over some of them. Currently, Hamas leaders have accepted that they will not have any ministers in the reshuffled semi-technocratic cabinet of PA prime minister Rami Hamdallah. Yet the group's real focus is on the elections promised by Abbas six months down the road, and on the establishment of a newly agreed "Leadership Body" in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which will include top figures from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad for the first time ever.

Similar to Hezbollah, Hamas aspires to operate as a political party. It is eager to take part in presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections in the hope of securing a majority or at least a plurality of the vote and thus forming a government or becoming a coalition partner. For now, Hamas leaders are skeptical that they can win the presidency or a Legislative Council majority, mainly because Abbas unilaterally modified the elections law to suit Fatah candidates better than the previous law, which was in force when Hamas won the 2006 elections. At the same time, they have indicated their ambition to take over important ministerial portfolios -- as Hezbollah did in Lebanon -- and influence parliamentary motions.

The reconciliation agreement has already produced important gains for the group. The PA has quietly removed the ban on Hamas political activities in the West Bank, and the movement has resumed public rallies, campaign meetings, and distribution of literature. This revival of open Hamas activities is affecting the PA's security organs: despite their standing orders to foil terrorist activity, many mid-level officers and their subordinates are no longer certain if and when to intervene in Hamas gatherings. For example, Hamas-sponsored Quran reading sessions have often been a cover for recruitment into underground terrorist cells.

The group's resurgence in the West Bank is especially noted in the refugee camps outside the main cities. PA security forces rarely risk entering these camps, leaving room for local youths to organize into lightly armed militias capable of challenging the PA. Hamas will obviously be more tempted to link to these groups, convert them to its doctrine, and supply them with financing and, when possible, better arms.

THE PLO AND ISRAEL

No less important to Hamas is the coveted goal of capturing the PLO, "the sole representative of the Palestinian people" and the entity in charge of negotiating with Israel. If Hamas leader Khaled Mashal were to one day succeed Abbas at the PLO's helm, he would have to decide whether to back away from the Oslo Accords, among other things.

Thus far, senior Hamas officials have not referred to this potential dilemma in public, mainly because there are still numerous obstacles to the group joining the PLO, let alone taking it over. For now, it is noteworthy that Hamas did not protest too loudly when Abbas asserted that the new unity government will recognize Israel and support the two-state solution, despite the group's insistence that no political platform was agreed on as part of the unity deal.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of a Hezbollah model in the Palestinian Authority is a major threat to any prospect of resuming serious negotiations with Israel. If the current electoral and transitional timetable holds, by this time next year Hamas could have not only an intact military force and terrorist agenda in Gaza, but also a solid foothold in the West Bank and at least a say in -- if not veto power over -- PA and PLO decisions. In that case, a new system would take shape in the Palestinian territories in which an armed-to-the-teeth political party gradually overshadows the central government and begins to take over numerous institutions. Western countries quick to endorse the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation should be aware of what is really happening here: instead of the PA regaining its "southern provinces" in Gaza, it is in fact Hamas reentering the "northern provinces" in the West Bank.

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow with The Washington Institute and a Middle East commentator for Israel's Channel Two television. ❖

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