

Hamas in Crisis: Isolation and Internal Strife

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Brief Analysis

A serial loss of regional allies, serious financial difficulties, internal squabbling, and inability to build up its military capabilities have all weakened Hamas, leaving it vulnerable to potential unrest in Gaza.

As Hamas voices raise predictable objections to the just-announced resumption of Israeli-Palestinian talks, the group is in the throes of one of its most testing crises ever. Over the past year, all of its major pillars of support have eroded to one degree or another, while internally, the movement is split by acute policy differences. Concerned that their grip on power in Gaza may be at risk in the foreseeable future, many in the group's top echelon are pushing for immediate measures to mobilize local public opinion as a means of confronting potential challenges, and to repair fraying relations with Iran and other allies.

REVERSAL IN EGYPT

The latest and most painful loss for Hamas came next door in Egypt, where President Muhammad Morsi was ousted and the group's parent movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, was defeated in the struggle for power. Hamas viewed the Brotherhood's rise in Egypt as a great asset, enjoying close relations with its leaders in Cairo and forging a de facto alliance with the group.

For example, top Brotherhood figure Khairat al-Shater -- a millionaire now imprisoned by the military -- made significant financial donations to the Gaza government, while Morsi allowed Hamas to open offices in Cairo and permitted several of its leaders (e.g., Mousa Abu Marzouk) to establish residency there. Egypt also opened its Rafah border terminal in a much more generous manner than ever before. More broadly, Hamas saw the Brotherhood-led Egypt as a guarantor of its hold on Gaza, a deterrent against Israel, an ally against the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and a potential new sponsor in its bid to join the regional rise of political Islam.

Egypt's June 30 revolution brought a quick reversal, however. The new authorities in Cairo now treat Hamas as a hostile adversary, accusing it of undermining Egypt's stability and fomenting rapid security deterioration in the

Sinai Peninsula. The Egyptian military has practically sealed the border with Gaza, limiting the Rafah crossing to intermittent, minimal capacity and effectively closing the hundreds of smuggling tunnels through which Hamas acquired many of Gaza's necessary goods (e.g., cars, cement, fuel). And for the first time since Hamas took control of the strip, Egyptian helicopters are gathering intelligence over Gaza's southern sector after receiving a quiet nod from Israel.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian media has adopted a fiery anti-Hamas tone, even spreading stories about the group collaborating with the Brotherhood to attack soldiers in the Sinai. For its part, Hamas claims that PA president Mahmoud Abbas ordered his intelligence officials to smear the group by providing Egypt with false documents. To prove its case, Hamas presented purportedly intercepted memos from the PA's Preventive Security service. Such tensions may grow if Morsi is belatedly indicted for arranging the 2011 Wadi Natrun prison break, in which armed Hamas operatives allegedly raided the facility and helped him and other detainees escape, killing several Egyptian security personnel in the process.

OTHER REGIONAL RIFTS

The loss of Egypt followed other important setbacks for the group, largely caused by the position it has taken on Syria's civil war. By siding with the uprising against the Assad regime, Hamas was forced to evacuate its large headquarters in Damascus, and Syria severed all ties with the group.

Next came a rift with Hezbollah, after Hamas leaders joined the wave of Sunni criticism over the Shiite militia's intervention in Syria this spring. Some Hamas commanders in charge of military cooperation between the two organizations were ordered to leave Hezbollah's stronghold in Beirut, and all bilateral military arrangements -- including weapons supplies, training, intelligence exchange, and so forth -- are currently suspended. Thus far, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has rejected all Hamas requests to meet with him about the impasse, though some delegates have been permitted to speak with his lieutenants at the Iranian embassy in Beirut.

Even more devastating for Hamas is its strained relationship with Tehran, which for years served as the group's primary financial sponsor and main provider of long-range missiles (including advanced training by the regime's elite Qods Force personnel in Iran and Syria). Furious with Hamas's decision to join the anti-Shiite rhetoric of Muslim Brotherhood spiritual guide Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Tehran has substantially reduced its monthly subsidy to the Gaza government. And even if the Egyptian military had not clamped down on the border tunnels, weapons smuggling into Gaza would still have stopped because of Iran's determination to punish Hamas. In any case, no new supplies are reaching Hamas's military wing (the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades) for the time being.

Other providers of assistance to Hamas are beginning to close their pocketbooks as well. Two key donors -- Turkey and Qatar -- have failed to comply fully with their past pledges. Ankara has switched its attention to the Syrian crisis, while Qatar has just undergone a leadership change, spurring Doha to reassess its role as the Brotherhood's banker and reduce its contributions to Hamas. Similarly, private donors from other Persian Gulf states -- especially the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait -- are now under pressure to stop funding Hamas as their governments wage a wider campaign to curb the Brotherhood's influence.

INTERNAL DIVISIONS

The serial loss of allies and aid has produced a severe split within the Hamas leadership. Khaled Mashal, who was chosen to continue as head of the Executive Committee (formerly the Political Bureau) in April, insists that Hamas had to adjust itself to the policies of the Brotherhood's "International Organization," the movement's worldwide top body. Yet other leaders disagree, causing Mashal to lose most of his authority.

For example, in contrast to Mashal's Egypt focus, Gaza prime minister Ismail Haniyeh has emphasized the need to defend Hamas control over the strip. Although he accepted the position of deputy Executive Committee chief after

failing to win the top Hamas post in April, he no longer heeds orders from Mashal.

Other leaders have urged speedy reconciliation with Iran, emphasizing that Hamas cannot afford to divorce itself from the "resistance axis". The most adamant proponent of this view is Imad al-Alami, the group's former permanent envoy in Tehran and head of the "Intifada Committee," now returned from Damascus to Gaza. He is supported by military figures such as Muhammad Deif and Marwan Issa, and by politicians such as Mahmoud al-Zahar. In contrast, Mashal received heavy criticism for attending a much-publicized May sermon in Qatar in which Qaradawi railed against Iran and its partners. His response was that he did not have prior knowledge of what Qaradawi would say.

In recent weeks, Hamas has sent delegations to Beirut and Tehran in order to reach new understandings with Iran and Hezbollah. Although both parties replied that they will keep their doors open to Hamas, they also noted that they cannot normalize relations until the group modifies its position on Syria's war and Iranian/Hezbollah involvement there.

Internally, recent Hamas leadership meetings in Doha and Istanbul have failed to produce compromise between rival factions. The discussions have also shown that power is quickly shifting from veteran leaders to the Hamas members released from Israeli jails last year in exchange for hostage Gilad Shalit. Yahia al-Sanwar is becoming the ultimate arbiter in the group's internal affairs, while Saleh al-Aruri, based in Turkey, has taken sole control of the movement's activities in the West Bank. (Although the Turks are allowing Aruri and his staff to pursue the rebuilding of Hamas infrastructure in the West Bank, there is no evidence that they are turning a blind eye to terrorist operations planned from Turkish soil.)

CONCLUSION

Hamas's current weakness -- amply demonstrated by its serious financial difficulties, internal squabbling, growing isolation, and inability to implement a military buildup program -- means that the group's leadership could face growing challenges in Gaza as economic conditions worsen. For the first time in years, opportunities might present themselves to encourage Gazans to publicly protest Hamas's authoritarian regime and harsh Islamist measures. Local resentment toward the group has been building for a long time, leading the government to expand its internal security apparatus.

Although encouraging active popular opposition to Hamas would not be easy, it is not in the realm of fantasy. For example, it could be one of the topics discussed in upcoming Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. One important question is the shape and scope of the PA's financial aid to Gaza -- namely, whether it helps Hamas maintain its \$890 million annual budget, or whether it can be restructured to assist anti-Hamas forces in the strip, who are now deprived of any meaningful aid.

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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