

Ramallah Trumps Gaza on the Crisis in Cairo

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Brief Analysis

The Muslim Brotherhood's ouster in Egypt is a gain for Abbas and a loss for Hamas, improving the odds of talks with Israel but not of bridging the deep Palestinian divide.

A glance at today's local Palestinian headlines tells a tale of three cities: official polarization between Ramallah and Gaza regarding the latest dramatic events in Cairo. In Ramallah, the Palestinian Authority daily *al-Hayat al-Jadidah* leads with "President Abbas Receives the Egyptian Ambassador, and Salutes the Arab Leadership at the Start of Ramadan" and "Hamas Responds to Egypt's Situation with Concern and Fear." In stark contrast, Gaza's official Hamas television network al-Aqsa headlines "Morsi's Supporters Call for a 'Million Martyrs March'" and "Wounded Egypt and America's Bloody Roadmap."

These diametrically opposed headlines clearly reflect the changing relations that successive Egyptian governments have entailed for the PA and Hamas. The divergence is amplified by numerous triumphal declarations from some senior Fatah officials -- and by a deafening silence from most of their counterparts in Hamas. The Egyptian military's ouster of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood no doubt represents a significant gain for Abbas, who once enjoyed close ties with former president Hosni Mubarak. Conversely, it represents a significant loss for Hamas, the Egyptian Brotherhood's ideological sister organization.

Yet these public postures overstate the extent of the shift. Even under Mubarak, Abbas was unwilling or unable to make a serious attempt at undermining Hamas rule in Gaza or accept a serious peace offer from Israel. And even under Morsi, Hamas was unable to challenge the PA in the West Bank or attack Israel at will. Moreover, each of the rival Palestinian governments is so entrenched in its own territorial fiefdom and political positions that a real strategic change is unlikely to result from Egypt's upheaval. Hamas will probably bide its time rather than change its stripes, and the PA will almost certainly remain risk-averse rather than bold in responding to recent developments.

Compared to its inflammatory media coverage and commentary over the past week, Hamas's official statements about Egypt have been extremely temperate, largely confined to condemning any bloodshed there. Tellingly, Deputy

Foreign Minister Ghazi Hamad struck a conciliatory note toward Cairo today: "Egypt is a political heavyweight, and its support for the Palestinian people is much needed. Egypt has always stood by us in times of war and peace, and we are keen to maintain such a relationship in the future."

In contrast, Egypt's semiofficial media have suddenly turned very hard on Hamas. The flagship *al-Ahram* daily, now under new management, explicitly accused the group on July 8 of sabotaging Egypt's security in Sinai. On a practical level, Egypt's military is now reportedly intensifying its efforts to clamp down (quite literally) on smuggling tunnels to Gaza, even as it temporarily closed the one legal border crossing at Rafah. Other reports suggest worse repercussions for Hamas: the group's calls to Cairo now go unanswered, and some of its officials or adherents may be under arrest there.

Nevertheless, Egypt's internal divisions and self-absorption will almost certainly prevent an all-out political assault on the Hamas bastion in Gaza. Today's Egyptian announcement that Rafah will soon reopen proves the point. And as the immediate conflict subsides, Hamas may well use subtle threats of turning more sharply toward Iran -- apparently a subject of much debate within the group -- as leverage to restore a working relationship with the new Egyptian authorities.

At the opposite Palestinian pole, Abbas lost no time in congratulating Egypt's army and its new interim president, Judge Adly Mansour, for bringing hope that the Egyptian people would "live in freedom, dignity, and stability." Concerning the Hamas role in this drama, senior Abbas advisor Yasser Abed Rabbo publicly accused the Gaza government of "helping terrorists and jihadist gangs in Sinai against the Egyptian army." Some lower-level Fatah officials, such as Jamal Nazzal, went further, urging Gazans to rise up in revolution against their Hamas rulers. Abed Rabbo offered a more peaceful prospect: "We hope that the historic transition in Egypt will lead Hamas to approve real democratic elections." But the odds of this actually occurring, as he must know from long experience, are almost zero. More likely, and more important, is that Egypt's transition will give Abbas the cover he seeks to resume some form of peace talks with Israel -- regardless of Hamas.

Accordingly, the United States should avoid falling into the familiar trap of trying to exploit the latest regional crisis to "heal Palestinian divisions." Instead, Washington should work with all of its old and new Arab allies to isolate Hamas as much as possible, and to build up the PA both economically and politically. In particular, as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates now race to replace Qatar as Egypt's biggest aid donor, Washington should remind them of their long-overdue pledges to the PA as well.

David Pollock is the Kaufman fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Fikra Forum, the bilingual Arabic/English blog on democracy and reform in the region. ❖

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