

The Agony of Hamas

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The movement is facing its most serious rift ever, severely divided on its future course and the identity of its post-Syria sponsors.

Hamas's no-longer-undisputed leader Khaled Mashaal is now in deep trouble. He's having difficulty finding a new home after leaving Damascus, and during his travels across the Arab world, he's meeting with growing opposition to his policies from within his own movement.

This is the most serious rift ever within Hamas's ranks. It has already turned into a bitter public controversy between Mashaal and his few loyalist lieutenants, versus his own Deputy Head of the Political Bureau, Dr. Musa Abu-Marzuq, and the top leaders in Gaza.

A major effort is currently underway to resolve the crisis quietly and present a semblance of renewed unity amongst Hamas's top echelon. Too late! By now it has become obvious that Hamas is severely divided on its future course as well as on the identity of its post-Syria sponsors.

A few months into the uprising against Bashar Assad, Mashaal reached the conclusion that Hamas could no longer afford to appear as supporting and benefiting from the Syrian regime, which is butchering its own people. He understood that Hamas -- the Palestinian wing of the Moslem Brotherhood -- should not position itself against its colleagues in the Syrian Moslem Brotherhood, who are struggling to wrest control of the revolt -- a revolt that has won the public blessing of the Brotherhood's Qatari-based spiritual guide Sheikh Yussef al-Qardawi and all other branches of the movement.

One by one, Hamas leaders sneaked out of Damascus -- first sending away their families and then packing up the political and military offices. Assad refrained from any open criticism of Hamas's departure in return for Mashaal's promise to keep praising Syria's role in assisting the "resistance," while expressing only vague sympathy for the "aspirations of the people."

Different leaders of Hamas have found new homes for themselves: Abu-Marzuq in Cairo; Muhammad Nazzal in

Amman; Imad al-Alami (the military supremo) went back to Gaza. But no country -- except far-away Qatar -- has so far agreed to accommodate the Hamas headquarters and allow it to operate out of its territory. Egypt, Jordan and even Sudan said no to Mashaal's request.

Abandoning their secure base in Damascus without being able to obtain an alternative safe haven, the "External Leadership" of Hamas is fast losing ground in its ongoing rivalry with the "Internal Leadership" centered in the Gaza Strip. Mashaal is no longer in sole control of the movement's purse strings, since contributions from Tehran were reduced. He no longer enjoys the recognition of Syria, Iran and Hezbollah in his supremacy within Hamas.

In short, Mashaal, whose claim to be number one was always contested by some in Gaza, reached a point where he felt that he should make an unprecedented public offer not to run again this summer for chairmanship of the Political Bureau. Soon enough it became quite evident that many of the Gaza leaders -- and also Abu-Marzuq -- were not going to beg him to stay.

That has left Mashaal in a bind: He has committed himself to retire from the top position, yet he has no intention of doing that. He still expects to be "convinced" by his colleagues to remain in his seat.

And so, earlier this month, Mashaal resorted to a sudden dramatic exercise: On February 6 in Doha he signed -- under the auspices (and financial incentives) of the Emir of Qatar -- an agreement with the Palestinian Authority's Mahmoud Abbas to form a "temporary" technocrats' Unity Government, with Abu Mazen himself as prime minister. They also agreed to postpone general elections without fixing a specific date.

This was a bombshell. Mashaal has agreed, at least implicitly, to make a major concession: to dismantle Hamas's own government in Gaza, which has ruled the Strip for the last five years, and to allow the PA administration (and security services?) to resume control over the different ministries. He seemed to be sacrificing Hamas's autonomous enclave in the hope that, at an unspecified date, Hamas might win in the ballot boxes.

Furthermore, Mashaal made a few statements recommending "popular struggle" -- which is the code for unarmed confrontation -- against Israel. This was perceived as meaning he was willing to suspend use of bullets and rockets, contrary to Hamas's traditional devotion to the concept of "armed resistance." He also expressed acceptance of a Palestinian state within 1967 boundaries, although he stressed that there would be no peace or recognition of The Zionist Entity, and the goal will remain the destruction of Israel. To many in Hamas, Mashaal sounded as if he was diverting to a dangerous course in an effort to adjust to the Arab Spring, handing their Fatah rivals an easy victory.

A chorus of protests by the Gaza leaders -- not to mention by the West Bankers -- immediately erupted. Mashaal was accused of acting behind the back of the Hamas institutions and deviating from the adopted policies. Dr. Mahmoud al-Zahar, an old foe of Mashaal's, took the lead in public, but many joined him during the closed doors sessions of Hamas meetings in Khartoum and then in Cairo. The plan to appoint Abbas as prime minister was described as "unconstitutional."

Ismail Haniyeh, the prime minister of the Hamas government in Gaza, embarked on a tour of several Arab countries, avoiding any hint of support for the Doha Agreement. Then he ignored warnings by the Gulf states and the Moslem Brotherhood and paid a widely publicized visit to Iran, kissing and hugging Supreme Leader Khamenei and asking for direct financial assistance to Gaza. On his return to Cairo, incidentally, the crowd at al-Azhar mosque Friday prayer cheered him by shouting "Down with Iran, Down with Hezbollah!"

And so, right now, the ever-negotiated reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah is again bogged down. Abbas insists on the implementation of the deal cut with Mashaal. The majority of Hamas leaders demand "amendments" to the Doha Agreement. Maintaining exclusive security control over the Strip is definitely a Hamas condition now, as is a demand for veto power over the appointment of all ministers.

The two parties keep conferring in Cairo but so far cannot agree on an Abbas visit to Gaza. The internal debate within Hamas has been brought to the surface.

The movement has lost the pretense of cohesion. The battle over command and direction is on.

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer international fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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