

Hamas at Sea: Blockade-Busting Backfires

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Brief Analysis

One month after the Turkish flotilla incident, the Israeli-Palestinian peace camp has so far managed to thwart the opposing agenda of Hamas and its supporters. This article surveys the incident's political and practical consequences, revealing the grounds for such an unexpected and -- for the parties in the Middle East peace process - - fortunate finding.

No New International Recognition of Hamas

The initial aftermath of the May 31 flotilla interception witnessed a few abortive signals that Hamas might gain greater global acceptance. One Russian statement suggested negotiations with Hamas, disregarding the longstanding Quartet conditions to which Moscow is a party. A few former U.S. diplomats made similar appeals, and some Hamas spokesmen responded by seeming to welcome such dialogue. These tentative overtures proved fruitless, however.

According to one U.S. official, various Hamas leaders appeared willing to play the political game, but not enough to make a difference. As Hamas representative Ahmed Bahr told Egyptian daily al-Masry al-Youm on June 20, the group wants a deal "that gives Palestinians their dignity back, which rules out the Quartet conditions and those stipulated by the U.S." Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan put it (perhaps unintentionally) well in a June 28 interview, claiming that he had personally convinced Hamas to adjust its rejectionist posture "to a certain extent" -- in other words, not far enough.

As a result, Hamas has no more international legitimacy today than it did before the flotilla episode. Symptomatic of this is the statement issued by the G-8 countries, including Russia, in closing their Canadian summit this past weekend. The section on the peace process makes no mention of Hamas at all. Instead, it reaffirms the goal of Israel and a Palestinian state "living side by side in peace and security," welcomes Israel's decision to investigate the flotilla incident and adopt "a new policy" toward Gaza, balances "the needs of Gaza's population" with "the legitimate security concerns of Israel," and urges "the strengthening of Palestinian Authority institutions" -- all at the expense, at least implicitly, of Hamas. And on Monday, speaking in Jerusalem, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov noted that Moscow would continue to "engage" with Hamas but did not call for the group's inclusion in any other

diplomatic discussions.

Egypt Maintains Political and Practical Containment

Cairo remains very uncomfortable with Hamas on its border, yet ineffective so far in supporting any alternative arrangement. Its desultory attempt to dilute Hamas power in Gaza by mediating a new unity agreement with Fatah has failed. For a brief moment after the flotilla incident, Turkey seemed poised to assume the mediator's role, this time with a pro-Hamas tilt. Within a couple weeks, however, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority (PA) were able to deflect this impulse, partly by mobilizing an informal Arab consensus against it.

Ironically, the capstone of this containment effort was Arab League secretary-general Amr Mousa's unprecedented June 13 visit to Hamas-ruled Gaza. While there, he repeatedly called on Hamas to sign the Egyptian reconciliation plan it had rejected last October. Yet, as Egypt's Foreign Ministry spokesman explained on June 26, Hamas leaders "insist on rejecting the Egyptian paper, because they do not want the legitimate Palestinian Authority to return to Gaza."

Over the past few days, the exchange of public insults between Cairo and Hamas has grown ever more shrill and categorical. On June 28, the semi-official Egyptian daily al-Akhbar called Hamas a "suspicious secessionist movement," sarcastically thanking it for enabling Cairo to escape the "quagmire" of Palestinian unity negotiations.

On the ground, security and political factors make Egypt loath to open its border with Gaza more than a crack. Remarkably, on the very same day of the flotilla incident, Palestinians killed an Egyptian soldier in a shootout over the new underground steel wall Cairo is constructing to block smuggling tunnels. Work on the barrier continues intermittently today. Moreover, Egyptian officials have surely noted recent developments in Israel, where three cabinet ministers have called for even greater disengagement from the process of supplying Gaza with water, fuel, electricity, and other imports. Any further Egyptian opening risks playing into that gambit, forcing Cairo to assume more responsibility for Gaza while potentially strengthening Hamas and exposing Egypt to its influence.

Consequently, the renewed opening of Rafah, Gaza's lone border crossing with Egypt, is more rhetorical than real. On June 29, for example, Egypt prevented a Jordanian aid convoy from entering the territory -- the latest in a years-long line of such measures. And the Egyptian establishment publicly blames Hamas intransigence for this predicament. As leading commentator Abdel Moneim Said Aly wrote in al-Ahram last week, "Contrary to common accusations leveled at Egypt, Hamas is second after Israel in upholding the siege on Gaza."

Effects of Easing the Embargo

Publicly and privately, Israeli and U.S. officials have offered mixed assessments of how adjustments to the embargo would affect Hamas. One U.S. observer noted that if reconstruction proceeds, around 40,000 more Gazan children would attend schools run by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) rather than Hamas. New UNRWA commissioner Filippo Grandi hinted at the difference this might make -- without mentioning Hamas, he called UNRWA "a vehicle" for promoting "the fundamental values...of tolerance for diversity, peaceful coexistence, non-violence, respect for human rights and human dignity of everyone without distinction."

Another Western diplomat asserted privately that the blockade had unwittingly "helped Hamas but not Gazans"; in his view, easing the embargo would probably help reverse that situation. Even so, he cautioned, Hamas was already trying to bring new nongovernmental projects under its supervision. On June 28, the UNRWA director for Gaza condemned a "cowardly and despicable" attack by Islamist extremists on one of his organization's summer camps. Looking ahead, then, the key is not so much the quantity of additional resources provided to Gaza, but control over their local distribution.

Fatah-Hamas Rivalry Intensifies

Two things are clear regarding the post-flotilla twist in the internal Palestinian dispute: it is not just a media war, and neither side is about to give up. Both Hamas and Fatah continue to lob heated charges of betrayal. On June 24, senior Hamas official Mahmoud al-Zahar declared that there is "no need to launch rockets from Gaza as these must be launched from the West Bank -- but [PA president Mahmoud Abbas] won't let this happen." The same day, Fatah's Nabil Shaath bluntly claimed that "Hamas was responsible for the current deadlock."

As for public approval ratings, Hamas registered no gains in the one published Palestinian poll taken since the flotilla incident (June 10-13), while Fatah still led 45 percent to 25 percent, the same spread as in March. This leaves a large remainder of "undecided" Palestinians, however, and Fatah showed little confidence in its popular appeal when it canceled local elections scheduled for this summer.

On the ground, the PA continues to arrest and harass Hamas operatives in the West Bank. Hamas has done the same to Fatah operatives, in addition to raiding a Gaza bank branch to confiscate funds from an account frozen by the PA. The two sides are also embroiled in a payment dispute that has shut down Gaza's only power plant. "It's a Palestinian problem," said the UNRWA's Gaza director, "made by Palestinians, and causing Palestinian suffering."

In this climate, any talk of Palestinian reconciliation takes a back seat to recriminations. The front page of al-Hayat al-Jadidah, the semi-official PA daily, reinforces this fact. Over the past two days, stories about unity discussions have been strictly at an unofficial level; the one official comment was from a Fatah Central Committee member blaming Hamas for spoiling Egypt's mediation efforts.

Conclusion

For once, a Hamas website has it exactly right: on June 24, the Palestinian Information Center predicted that "there will be no radical political changes after the attack on the Freedom Flotilla." Indeed, continued patience and steadfastness on the part of the United States, Egypt, PA, Israel, and others can help the people of Gaza without enriching, entrenching, or emboldening their Hamas rulers. This is hardly a sufficient condition for real progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace, but it is a necessary condition.

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