

# Hamas Challenge to the PLO: Opportunities and Prospects

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Brief Analysis

Speaking at a January 28 "Gaza Victory" rally in Qatar, Hamas political bureau chief Khaled Mashal announced the start of a new campaign -- not against Israel but against the Fatah-led Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Declaring Hamas's intention to replace the PLO with a new body that would serve the Islamist group's agenda of "resistance," Mashal charged, "At this moment, the PLO is no longer a unifying point of reference, but has become impotent and a tool for deepening Palestinian divisions." Hamas's efforts to take over or replace the PLO represent a severe challenge to Palestinian moderates who have been weakened by stagnation in the peace process and the Israeli military action in Gaza. The outcome of this political struggle will shape the future of Palestinian politics and the prospects for peace.

## Background

A decade after its creation in 1964, the PLO was recognized as the Palestinians' sole legitimate representative at the Arab League's 1974 summit in Rabat. Since then, the PLO has served as the diplomatic face of the Palestinians, negotiating the Oslo Accords with Israel and creating the Palestinian Authority (PA) under its auspices. The PLO -- and not the PA -- handles negotiations with Israel and operates embassies and diplomatic missions around the world.

Although it includes a number of Palestinian political factions, the PLO has been dominated by Fatah since 1968. Hamas and its political forebears in the Muslim Brotherhood have never accepted the legitimacy of the PLO: after a failed attempt to join the PLO in 1991, Hamas waged an ongoing battle against the organization and its efforts to negotiate with Israel, primarily through perpetrating suicide attacks that undermined the peace process.

It was not until March 2005, shortly after Arafat's death and the election of Mahmoud Abbas as PA president, that Hamas and Fatah reached an agreement in Cairo that outlined a yearlong truce with Israel, the holding of legislative elections, the reform of the PLO, and the inclusion of Hamas; however, the PLO has not expanded to include Hamas, despite Hamas's continued demands in subsequent factional talks. For its part, Fatah has remained intransigent, particularly after losing the legislative election in 2006, because it fears giving up its privileged position as the official Palestinian representative.

## The Opportunity

In the aftermath of the fighting in Gaza, Hamas interprets both the domestic and regional conditions as ripe for a move against the PLO.

On the Palestinian domestic level, Hamas views Fatah as weakened and seeks to manipulate Fatah's divisions in order to advance its own aims. Abbas faces ongoing sharp criticism from his own Fatah party, including members of Fatah's Central Committee who have urged him to visit Damascus and reconcile with Hamas. The younger generation of Fatah, many of whom support Marwan Barghouti (who is serving five life sentences in an Israeli prison for attacks inside Israel), has interpreted Fatah's paralysis during the Gaza crisis as a further sign of the weakness of the movement's current leadership and have urged Abbas to form a new emergency leadership within Fatah. Complicating matters for Abbas, his Tunis-based rival in Fatah, Farouq Kaddoumi, who remained outside the PA in opposition to the Oslo process, has raised the prospect of joining Mashal in opposition to the PLO.

Regionally, Hamas interpreted the demonstrations throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds expressing sympathy for the Palestinians in Gaza as evidence of its popularity and the lack of support for the PLO. Hamas read its invitation to a prospective summit organized by Qatar, which although it failed to reach a quorum was attended by thirteen Arab leaders, as a sign that most Arab states are inclined to support its efforts to control the PLO. Despite favoring Abbas, even the Egypt-led moderate Arab camp appears to be publicly keeping an equal distance from Hamas and Fatah. This position appears to be a calibrated effort to minimize domestic dissent. For this reason, Amr Mousa, the secretary-general of the Arab League, announced that Gaza reconstruction aid would be channeled through an independent body rather than through Hamas or the PA.

#### The Plot

Hamas is acting on four fronts to increase the pressure on Fatah to cede control of the PLO:

Preventing reconciliation. Hamas has significantly raised the ante for agreeing to let reconciliation talks with Fatah proceed. Before the Gaza crisis, it simply demanded that Fatah release Hamas activists from PA jails. Now, Hamas demands that Abbas end security coordination with Israel, stop negotiations, and accept a political program based on "resistance."

Dividing Fatah. By announcing that he "accepts all the principles on which Fatah was founded," Mashal is making a concerted effort to appeal to Fatah activists who prefer "resistance" over negotiations, including members of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in Gaza who participated in the recent fighting with Israel and other Fatah members who joined pro-Hamas demonstrations. Hamas's media deliberately distinguishes between Abbas and his supporters and the rest of the Fatah movement, and praises Fatah elements who publicly disparage Abbas. But while Hamas may be wooing some members of Fatah, it is killing others, using the recent fighting to get rid of potential Fatah opponents in Gaza. The Palestinian Center for Human Rights in Gaza reported that "thirty-two Palestinians have been killed and tens injured and tortured by Palestinian hands during the fight and its aftermath." Ibrahim Abu Naja, a Fatah leader in Gaza, reported that "Eight of the killed at least are Fatah members and supporters."

Appealing to the Palestinian diaspora. For the past six years, Hamas has been engaged in a campaign to win the support of the Palestinian community outside the Palestinian territories by focusing its political platform on demanding the right of return for Palestinian refugees and questioning their representation in the PLO. For this purpose, Hamas gathers Palestinian nonprofit organizations and respected Palestinian personalities in a large conference every year. The 2008 assembly, held in Copenhagen, was attended by 5,000 Palestinians, most of whom live in Europe. Today, evidence suggests that the majority of Palestinians in the diaspora communities support Hamas, which has benefited from the almost total absence of PLO engagement with Palestinian diaspora communities since the Oslo agreement.

Reaching out to Arab and Muslim thinkers. During the war, al-Jazeera satellite television served as a podium for pan-

Arabists, Islamist thinkers, and public opinion leaders who oppose Abbas to shape Arab and Palestinian public opinion.

## The Prospects

Despite the political weakness of Fatah and Abbas and the increasing support for Hamas (reflected in recent polls conducted by al-Najah University and the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center), it is difficult to see a way that Hamas could gain control of the PLO without Fatah's surrender. Further, Fatah's allies in the PLO, such as the Palestinian Popular Front and the Palestinian Democratic Front, will not accept Hamas's leadership since they differ fundamentally with its political and social agendas. Forming a parallel body to the PLO would also entail risks for Hamas, primarily since such a move would motivate Fatah to resolve its internal problems and unite in opposition. After Hamas violently seized Gaza, Fatah's unity increased for the first time in years.

On a regional level, even the Arab states that clearly side with Hamas in its struggle against Abbas have no true interest in seeing Hamas assume full control of the PLO as long as it retains its rejectionist political program. Arab states, including Syria, recognize that there is no way to sell Hamas to the international community until Hamas accepts the principle of a two-state solution and is willing to negotiate with Israel on the basis of UN Security Council resolutions.

Despite the limited short-term prospects for Hamas control of the PLO, so long as Abbas and Fatah remain weak, the PLO will only become more fragile. U.S. efforts to back Abbas by reactivating the peace process, providing sustainable economic assistance to the PA, and mobilizing support among moderate Arab states are all essential to ensuring Fatah's continued control of the PLO. Abbas must also play his part by assuming an active leadership role in Fatah to revitalize the movement -- something he has been loath to undertake to date.

Mohammad Yaghi is a Lafer international fellow with The Washington Institute, focusing on Palestinian politics. ❖

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