

The Impact of the Gaza Conflict on Palestinian Politics

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Brief Analysis

The extent to which Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza will impact the relationship between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) depends on several factors, including the outcome and duration of the conflict, the number of civilian casualties, and the involvement of Arab states. So far, the struggle has widened the already significant gulf between Hamas and the PA headed by President Mahmoud Abbas. Developments in Gaza therefore have the potential to reshape Palestinian politics, which have been paralyzed since Hamas's seizure of Gaza in June 2007.

Since the first day of Israeli attacks on Gaza, Hamas has accused Abbas of being complicit in the conflict and encouraging Israel to oust its regime from Gaza. The group cited several signs that the PA in the West Bank is awaiting a Hamas defeat in order to reinstall its authority in Gaza. Among the indicators Hamas cited are Abbas's initial refusal to hold an urgent Arab summit to discuss the situation in Gaza; his announcement from Cairo that Hamas's rocket fire on Israeli towns was the main cause of the hostilities; and the appeal of the secretary-general of his office, Tayeb Abdul Rahim, for the citizens of Gaza to be "patient until the legitimacy returns." Hamas even accused Nimir Hamad, Abbas's political adviser, of calling Israeli defense official Amos Gilad and advising him "to target Hamas operators and installations only." Moreover, Hamas accused Abbas of forming an "emergency cell" headed by Abdul Rahim to gather information about the hideouts of Hamas leaders in Gaza and inform Israel about them.

To date, Hamas has not acted militarily against the PA in the West Bank, but the accusations of PA coordination with Israel lay the basis for such actions.

Hamas's Objectives

Modeling itself after Hizballah, Hamas anticipates that if it can withstand the Israeli assault it will emerge more powerful politically. Survival or stalemate could lead to a unity agreement with Fatah on Hamas's terms with the support of Arab countries. Hamas will therefore continue to attack Abbas to undermine his support among Palestinians and the broader Arab world and to contest his legitimacy as president. Regardless of whether the conflict continues for another ten days, Hamas's opposition to Abbas will only increase, since his term as president officially expires on January 9, 2009 -- an inconvenient reality that could spark an additional Palestinian political crisis, particularly if the results of the fighting are inconclusive.

To defy Abbas, Hamas has called for a third intifada in the West Bank, "a peaceful one against the authority and a

military one against Israel," according to Khaled Mashal, the Damascus-based head of Hamas's political bureau. Furthermore, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) refused to attend a factional meeting that Abbas called on December 29 to discuss the situation in Gaza. Hamas conditioned its attendance on the release of almost six hundred of its prisoners in PA jails, the end of PA security coordination with Israel, and the elimination of restrictions on Hamas political activity in the West Bank.

Hamas also seeks to drive a wedge into an already divided Fatah. It has urged Fatah radicals to join the battle against Israel, insisting that its problems with Fatah are limited to Abbas and his authority, not the general movement. Although the effects of these efforts have yet to fully materialize, some members of Fatah are clearly sympathetic to Hamas and any confrontation with Israel. Some Fatah groups are participating in demonstrations along with Hamas members in the West Bank, and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (an armed offshoot of Fatah that the U.S. State Department designated as a terrorist group in 2002) claimed responsibility for the stabbing of an Israeli in Qalqilya.

Confusion in Ramallah

Despite initially holding Hamas responsible for the hostilities in Gaza, the PA soon retreated to a defensive position as Arab satellite networks broadcast images of casualties in Gaza and mass demonstrations spread throughout the Arab world. Abbas subsequently called for unity talks without preconditions and requested an urgent meeting with Hamas and PIJ leaders in the West Bank to coordinate political steps to "stop the aggression," keeping the invitation open after both factions refused it. Abbas also agreed to an urgent Arab summit after he had initially opposed such a step while in Egypt during the first day of the conflict. Abbas's indecisiveness is characteristic of his leadership style, but it also clearly reflects a sense that Palestinian public opinion is leaning more toward Hamas in the crisis.

Still, the PA views the conflict as an opportunity to oust Hamas and return its authority to Gaza. The PA made it clear that it will prevent demonstrations that may lead to confrontations with Israeli soldiers at checkpoints or that may undermine its authority in the West Bank. The PA has already confronted demonstrators in Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Hebron, and has continued its campaign of arresting Hamas activists in the West Bank.

The Abbas camp believes it can survive and even benefit from the current crisis if Israel deals Hamas a serious blow. Reports from the West Bank suggest that Abbas has ordered his advisors to prepare a plan to redeploy PA forces in Gaza if Israel topples the Hamas regime. Further, Abbas's supporters in Gaza have issued a statement calling for citizens to be helpful to and tolerant of Hamas supporters "when the legitimate government returns."

Implications

Depending on its outcome, the conflict in Gaza has the potential to benefit either Hamas or the PA in their ongoing power struggle. If Israel fails to end Hamas's regime in Gaza and accepts a ceasefire under terms favorable to Hamas, such as permanently lifting the siege on Gaza or opening the Rafah border with Egypt, Hamas will claim victory and secure its primacy in Palestinian politics. Under such circumstances, pressure from the Palestinian public and from Arab states may force Abbas to comply with a unity agreement that will benefit Hamas.

However, if Israel clearly defeats Hamas, Abbas will win. He will claim that he attempted to avoid the confrontation, but Hamas's stubbornness, insensitivity to Palestinian interests, and work on behalf of regional powers provoked Israel's actions. Abbas will be able to present himself to the people of Gaza as the savior who will rebuild what Hamas has destroyed with its adventurous and destructive policies.

The timeframe of the conflict is critical for both the PA and Hamas. The longer the conflict endures, the more Abbas will lose credibility among Palestinians. He is already being subjected to criticism from his own party for doing little to stop the fighting, and Palestinian intellectuals have called for him to resign as a means of influencing the United States to intervene and force Israel to stop its attacks. Further, the continuation of the conflict will make it harder for the PA to maintain its campaign against Hamas in the West Bank since it will want to avoid being portrayed as

collaborating with Israel. Hamas may also succeed in organizing large demonstrations in the West Bank that overwhelm PA security forces, gaining even greater public sympathy.

From a regional perspective, as the confrontation continues, Hamas will likely gain even more unprecedented backing from Arab and Muslim countries. This has been the first occasion that Arab and Muslim populations have directed support to an Islamic Palestinian organization rather than the secular Palestine Liberation Organization. This reality has further emboldened Hamas, which believes that its allies in the Muslim Brotherhood will be able to influence the behavior of Arab governments toward the conflict, particularly in Amman and Cairo. Hamas thus sees the conflict with Israel not just as a means of weakening the PA, but as an opportunity to alter the position of moderate Arab countries toward Hamas.

The outcome of the conflict in Gaza will shape the future of the Palestinian politics. A clear defeat of Hamas would strengthen the PA's internal position for the first time since losing Gaza in 2007. However, an unclear outcome that restores the status quo or ends in a relative stalemate would allow Hamas to claim victory and would most likely lead to a renewed effort at a unity government.

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