

West Bank Hardball:

Fatah's Offensive Against Hamas

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

After several political and military setbacks, Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have waged an effective campaign against Hamas's political, economic, and military position in the West Bank. And as long as Israeli security forces remain in the West Bank, a Hamas seizure of power there is effectively impossible. Although this is an important positive development, Hamas is an adaptive opponent that should not be counted out in the long-term power struggle in the Palestinian territories.

Two Different Worlds

Gaza and the West Bank represent two very different political environments. In Gaza, Hamas is virtually unchallenged. The organization derives its strength from a three-decade effort to build political, social, economic, and military power bases, the fecklessness of Fatah, and Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Gaza is Hamas's home and the birthplace of much of the organization's past and present leadership. Hamas has built an extensive and highly effective outreach program in the Strip, and most of its military forces are located there. The strength of Hamas's position in Gaza was demonstrated in the 2005 local council elections, in which it won two-thirds of the seats, and in its easy elimination of Fatah as a political force in Gaza in June 2007. With no Israeli military presence and the current ceasefire reducing Israel's military pressure, Hamas enjoys a relatively unthreatened environment.

The situation in the West Bank is quite different. Election defeats, the loss of Gaza, and Hamas's continuing political pressure, including calls for PA president Mahmoud Abbas to step down in January 2009, have shaken Fatah and the PA. Fatah, however, enjoys some advantages in the West Bank, including control of key government institutions, relatively strong security forces, and the critical presence and assistance of the Israeli military. Fatah and the PA are exercising their political, military, and economic power to curb Hamas influence in the West Bank, and are working on multiple fronts to increase their advantage.

The Political Front

Internally, the PA seeks to weaken Hamas's political organization by detaining its leaders and members, and disrupting its operations. During the first half of 2008, some 200 Hamas activists were reportedly apprehended, and as of November 2008, Hamas stated that the PA was holding over 600. This past week, Abbas announced that the PA

would appoint members of local councils who have expiring terms. Hamas reacted by protesting the move, seeing it as a further attack on its power base in the West Bank.

The Security Front

In the security arena, the PA is using its improved security force to attack Hamas's military structure. PA security forces have increased their presence in West Bank cities, arrested members of Hamas's military force -- the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades -- seized weapons, and uprooted military infrastructure, including two underground facilities and a training site. With this expansion of security force capabilities, the PA has become a more credible and effective military force, something it lacks in Gaza. Israel has permitted the deployment of PA security forces in the West Bank, assisted its actions through the provision of intelligence, and acted directly against Hamas leaders and cells. Perhaps most important, the continuing presence of the Israeli army in the West Bank blocks any possible repeat of the 2007 Gaza coup.

The Economic Front

Hamas's ability to fund political, social, and military activities has been critical to its success in the West Bank and Gaza. But Hamas's financial apparatus has been under attack for some time, with the United States, UK, and Israel closing down charities that act as front groups and terminating banking services. For its part, the PA has begun closing businesses associated with Hamas, dismantling Hamas-controlled charitable organizations, and monitoring financial transactions by local banks. These actions impinge on Hamas's ability to operate effectively as an organization, to continue its terrorist activities, and to maintain popular support. These efforts, however, have not broken Hamas's financial capability. (See [PolicyWatch #1436](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2969) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2969>), "Financial Setbacks for Hamas.")

The PA is also benefiting from the improved economic situation in the West Bank, in contrast to the deepening economic problems in Gaza. In the struggle for Palestinian hearts and minds, the PA can at least appeal to the stomach.

Upside Gains

The PA's multidimensional offensive, combined with Israeli cooperation and military presence, has reduced Hamas's political prospects in the West Bank and suppressed the threat of a Hamas seizure of power. While Hamas's control of Gaza remains a serious political and diplomatic problem for many, including the United States, the PA's gains in the West Bank curb any further geographic expansion of Hamas control and provide a prospect for the eventual weakening -- if not breaking -- of Hamas's hold on Gaza. It remains to be seen, however, if Fatah and the PA have the leadership and organizational base to take advantage of the situation.

Downside Risks

Although the position of Fatah and the PA in the West Bank is improving, the situation entails risks. Fatah's popular support may not grow in conjunction with its more effective use of political and other forms of power, and Hamas could possibly react forcefully to the PA's pressure, including the use of violence. Hamas retains the ability to act violently against the PA and to use the West Bank as a launchpad for terrorist attacks within Israel to embarrass and undermine the PA.

Hamas is better led and has greater organizational skills than Fatah. Above all, it is politically, militarily, and economically adaptive at the tactical and operational levels, while maintaining strategic consistency. Hamas is also capable of taking the long view, since it is a model for a "long war" organization. As such, Hamas is unlikely to give up its struggle with the PA, even as it pursues tactical and operational accommodations to relieve short-term difficulties.

Implications

The expansion of the PA's West Bank capacity is critical to solving Hamas's control of Gaza and to any progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The PA, with all its faults and problems, is the only political alternative to Hamas. Fatah and the PA must act to realize their potential through internal reform and the delivery of services to the Palestinian people. The PA must be seen as a real alternative that is worth supporting. The PA's external supporters must maintain pressure on Hamas in both the West Bank and Gaza and, considering Hamas's adaptive ability to survive, restrict its maneuvering room. Just as Hamas is prepared for a "long war," its opponents should be persistent and pervasive in countering Hamas.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq and the Levant. ❖

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