

It's Decision Time for Palestinians

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The raid into Israel conducted early on June 25 by Hamas's military command demonstrated without a doubt that the responsibilities of governance have not moderated the terrorist group. Although Hamas now has a nationally elected political leadership, its government clearly does not call the shots, or rockets, when it comes to attacking Israel.

The pragmatic elements of Hamas seek calm internally and with Israel in order to build legitimacy in elected office. Toward that end, they initialed an agreement with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on a process for national unity. Their more extremist brothers, headquartered in Damascus with direct command over both a Gaza-based popular army and a terror arm, the Izzadin al-Qassam Brigades, continue to obfuscate initiatives that would produce anything less than the destruction of Israel and the creation of an Islamic state of Palestine. They ordered the brazen attack into Israel, knowing full well the inevitability of a harsh Israeli response. The confluence of their provocative actions and a domestic political agreement that could force it to concede some of its core beliefs exposes a potential rift in Hamas.

However, describing these events as part of an ongoing rivalry between so-called military and political wings mischaracterizes the nature of the organization. Hamas will remain a unified movement headed by its extremist leadership, some of whom currently hold key government posts, unless its pragmatists face a clear public choice that threatens to expose their inability to improve Palestinian lives.

The timing of the dramatic attack that killed two Israeli soldiers and led to the capture of a 19-year-old corporal could not have been more deliberate. Hamas's elected prime minister, Ismail Haniyeh, had been attempting to reconcile with Abbas in a series of negotiations that were supposed to have concluded later that same day. Those talks aimed to reach consensus after Abbas had threatened to hold a referendum on a national accord drafted by a group of Palestinian prisoners. For the most extreme elements of Hamas, the document's reference to accepting a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders (i.e., the West Bank and Gaza), suggesting even a hint of recognition of Israel, was too high a price to pay for national unity. They also rejected the document's stipulation that resistance be concentrated in the occupied territories, seeking instead to imitate Hezbollah's example in southern Lebanon and use Gaza as a staging ground for further attacks (including kidnappings) against Israel.

The Izzadin al-Qassam Brigades thus joined their allies in the Popular Resistance Committees to carry out the June

25 raid not just in an effort to attack Israel but in order to scuttle the impending agreement between Abbas and Haniyeh. Despite the deployment of thousands of Israeli troops on the border of Gaza, the negotiations succeeded three days later. However, the consensus adopted by Abbas and Hamas rests on vague understandings over a fundamental question: Does Hamas accept a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders as part of a two-state solution with Israel or as a steppingstone to Israel's destruction? Allowing Hamas's leadership to sidestep this question enables it to escape the critical decision that may spark a rupture in the organization.

There is no doubt that Hamas wants to forestall such a moment of truth so early in its governing tenure and avoid a stark choice between politics and violence. So long as other terrorist groups perpetrated attacks in Israel, Hamas could continue to have it both ways by applauding terror while operating from the corridors of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and Ramallah. But now that its military command has ended the tahadiya, or period of calm, with a highly visible operation for which it quickly claimed responsibility, Hamas can no longer hide behind its electoral victory or its allies in terror. Already, many of its elected leaders have been arrested by Israel, and others are hiding in fear of assassination. They cannot be happy after spending the last weeks traveling throughout the Islamic world on diplomatic and fundraising ventures.

Frustrated as they may be, though, Hamas's pragmatic leadership is unlikely to confront its militant comrades and their masters in Damascus and use elected office to adopt positions that can serve as a basis for renewing a peace process with Israel. Nor is it likely that there will be any kind of split within the movement without ongoing pressure for change—not from Israel or the United States but from Palestinians themselves. Until Hamas feels threatened that it will lose the support of the Palestinian street, its pragmatists will have no incentive to confront or part from their extremist counterparts.

Abbas and his political allies would thus be wise to seize on the unity agreement, clarify its contents, and develop a concrete governing plan that will end the current crisis with Israel over the kidnapped soldier and relieve the political and economic isolation of the Palestinian Authority. Since the factional agreement falls far short of the international community's demands that the Palestinian government recognize Israel, accept past diplomatic agreements, and renounce terror, Abbas should build on the prisoners' document by publicly presenting a program that addresses in practical terms how he will respond to these very real issues. Forcing Hamas to react to such a plan will reveal whether its leaders are acting on behalf of Palestinian interests or the ideology of its external leaders. The only chance to drive a wedge between Hamas's pragmatists and extremists is to force the organization's elected leaders to choose between a path that offers tangible hope to Palestinians or one that will only lead to further isolation and despair.

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