

# Too Confused to Surrender

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Israel faces a crisis with a Palestinian Authority that lacks a clear address. Who can be held accountable? The internal Hamas, which makes up the cabinet and the legislative council? Ismail Haniyeh, the prime minister, tells Mahmoud Abbas that he knows nothing and was blindsided by the attack at Kerem Shalom and the kidnapping. The external Hamas, which is led by Khaled Mashaal in Damascus? Even if he is calling the shots, he is in Syria and not so easy to get at.

How about Mahmoud Abbas? He is the president of the Palestinian Authority and has unequivocally condemned the Hamas-led attack, which if nothing else was an embarrassment to him as he negotiated with Haniyeh to produce internal peace among Palestinians. Abbas surely has the intention to act but continues to lack the capability.

Perhaps, the address should be outside of the Palestinian Authority. While Iran continues to push Hamas and others to carry out attacks against Israel, it is Syria that provides the headquarters and sanctuary to the external leadership of Hamas. Maybe Syria must come to see that it is in its interest to force Khaled Mashaal to order those who hold Cpl. Gilad Shalit to release him.

Surely, if Mashaal thought he would be forced to leave the comfort and safety of Damascus, he would think twice about the value of holding Shalit.

This is the context in which Israel must act—a context in which one Palestinian told me that “we don’t even have the capacity to surrender.” If the context were not difficult enough, Israel must balance the need to demonstrate that Hamas will pay a price that matters to it with the need to keep the international community on board. The longer the crisis goes on, the more Europeans and others will be uneasy about the price the Palestinian public in Gaza is paying.

To this point, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert appears to be juggling the various needs effectively. From Palestinians I am speaking with—admittedly part of Fatah—the arrests of Hamas governmental and elected officials has had a shock effect on at least the internal Hamas. It is reeling right now. Many around Abbas believe that it is possible that a new government without Hamas in it will emerge out of this crisis.

Perhaps, but the crisis has unfortunately not yet played out. How it ends will undoubtedly affect what comes next.

Will Hamas decide to cut its losses or will it decide to hold out, hoping that Israeli coercion and attacks that cause high civilian losses will cause such anger among Palestinians, the Arab world and the international community that it recoups what it has lost? One should never bet on Hamas doing the right thing.

On the contrary, its objectives and its leaders—even those who supposedly are “pragmatic”—seem capable only of lowest common denominator decisions opting for violence and confrontation. Should Hamas leaders decide that their survival depends on conceding now, they might choose a different course.

For the near term, that argues for keeping them off balance and under pressure. Israel certainly should continue to weaken Hamas’s infrastructure. At the same time, Abbas should be encouraged to assume his role of responsibility for the well-being of the Palestinian public, emphasizing that Hamas and its external patrons, like the Syrians, must stop treating the Palestinian people as pawns and making them suffer.

The international community led by the United States must orchestrate pressures on Bashar Assad in Syria to make it clear that Syria has something to lose if Shalit is not released unharmed. King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia has more leverage than anyone else in dealing with Assad and the Saudis need to play a role in trying to resolve this crisis.

For the longer term, there needs to be a strategy for altering the basic ground rules, and here Egypt and Jordan can play an important role. Collectively they need to work on Abbas to appoint an emergency government without Hamas or Fatah officials in it and to decide, finally, to create a professional security force that is led by a real commander who has his backing and blessing.

All the talk of restructuring never happened; a professional to run the force was never put in charge.

In current circumstances, Abbas—with Egyptian and Jordanian urging—might finally see that he has no choice but to act in this way. With international financing and backing, a new, professional security force could be constructed.

Even a force of 10,000 that acts professionally and is led by those who are committed to ensuring law and order would be sufficient—and the fact is that such a force could be constructed in time if Abbas acted decisively, picked the right leadership for it, entrusted them to fulfill this mandate and had the financing from the international community for it.

Interestingly, the Israeli defense establishment would also be supportive of such an initiative, seeing it as the only way to end chaos on the Palestinian side and to ensure that Hamas or al-Qaida don’t define the Palestinian future.

But one last element must also be put in place: In the aftermath of the crisis, a UN Security Council resolution should be adopted which declares that the Israeli occupation of Gaza is over and that all attacks and rocket fire out of Gaza against Israel must cease once and for all.

Israel left Gaza, and yet not for one day did the rocket fire into Israel cease. Without the Kassam rockets, there would not have been a train of events that produced the current crisis.

Even in terms of the Palestinian narrative, there is no conceivable justification for attacks out of Gaza once occupation had ended. If there is to be a more enduring basis for stability in Gaza when this crisis ends, the Security Council needs to adopt a resolution—much like it did after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon—that delegitimizes all such attacks. And, assuming there is a new emergency Palestinian government without Hamas, the international community must also urgently provide a package of economic assistance to help this new government deliver.

The writer, a senior diplomat in the first Bush and Clinton administrations, is counselor of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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