

The Growing Anarchy in the Palestinian Territories

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Brief Analysis

During the early morning hours of May 7, militants from Hamas and Fatah engaged in a bloody clash near Khan Yunis in Gaza that left three fighters dead. Reporting on this incident -- one of the deadliest intra-Palestinian confrontations in recent history -- indicates that Hamas activists responded to the assassination of one of their members by launching a shoulder-fired missile at a truck belonging to the Fatah-dominated Preventive Security Service and killing two of its passengers. Despite calls for a truce by representatives from all Palestinian factions, ten people were wounded the following day when the home of Fatah leader Samir Mashharawi was attacked, allegedly in response to multiple kidnappings of Hamas members.

The escalating violence in the Palestinian territories represents a growing trend toward anarchy and civil unrest since the election of Hamas in late January. Should Hamas prove incapable of easing the financial crisis or improving law and order -- a fundamental component of its campaign -- the very survival of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a relevant body may be threatened.

Fatah's Confrontational Strategy

After its humiliating defeat in the January 25 legislative elections, Fatah leaders attempted to obstruct the new Hamas-led government's ability to function, stripping it of authorities Fatah enjoyed over the previous decade. Before turning over their ministries, many Fatah ministers promoted their followers and filled vacancies with other Fatah supporters, putting Hamas in a position where it would have to accept these changes or invite an outright confrontation with the civil service. In its last session, the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) transferred many executive authorities away from the ministries to the president's office.

For his part, PA president Mahmoud Abbas issued a decree to transfer authority over the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation and the Palestinian News Agency (Wafa) away from the information minister and into his office. Abbas has also assumed responsibility for border crossings, removing a key revenue-generating arm of the Hamas-led Interior Ministry. Abbas, who is commander-in-chief of Palestinian security, has further attempted to circumvent the Authority of Said Seyam, the Hamas interior minister, by assigning loyal commanders to report directly to the president's office. Most prominently, he appointed Fatah strongman and longtime Hamas adversary Rashid Abu Shbak as head of internal security. These moves add to the fuzzy chain of command in a security architecture already suffering from ambiguous relationships among too many chiefs.

To increase internal pressure on Hamas, Fatah has declared that the Hamas government is responsible for the

international isolation of the PA and the deteriorating economic situation, and has encouraged public employees to hold sit-ins and protests over delays in the delivery of salaries. Most of the 165,000 public sector employees who have not been paid since early March have Fatah loyalties and could be the source of greater civil unrest should they remain unpaid. Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades have also been responsible for increasing attacks against Israel, attempting to undermine Hamas's resistance credentials. Fatah's obstructionist actions in recent weeks suggest its leadership believes the Hamas government may collapse, and Fatah can regain power more quickly by expediting Hamas's failure than undertaking internal reform.

Hamas Under Pressure

Hamas has responded to growing international isolation and domestic challenges to its authority by pursuing a two-track strategy: deflecting responsibility for the failings of the PA away from its policies by blaming Israel, the United States, and Fatah; and retaining its core identity by publicly threatening the dissolution of the PA and creating an extralegal military force responsible not to the government but to Hamas's leadership.

Hamas has attempted to avoid criticism that its political program and intransigence on the peace process has caused international isolation by blaming internal and external conspiracies and accusing Israel and the United States of organizing an economic siege against all Palestinians as punishment for exercising the democratic process.

According to Hamas, the United States and Israel have prevented the transfer of money raised by Hamas from Arab and Muslim countries by threatening banks.

Just as Fatah is trying to mobilize public employees against the government, Hamas is using mosques to accuse Fatah of undermining the national agenda and to urge unpaid civil servants to demonstrate against Israel and the United States. PA prime minister Ismail Haniyeh condemned Abbas and Fatah during an April 14 sermon at a mosque in Jabalya for stripping his powers. "They want this government to be responsible for the salaries of civil servants only without any authority on security and crossings," he declared. Muhammad Nazal, a member of Hamas's political bureau, accused Abbas of encouraging the international community to isolate the Hamas government. Hamas's Syria-based leader, Khaled Mashal, condemned Fatah as "traitors" in an April 21 rally in Damascus, where he also said Abbas "robs us of our powers as well as of our people's rights."

Hamas is also pursuing contingency plans in case there is a more complete breakdown of law and order and the government proves incapable of enforcing its authority. Mashal said in April, "If the Authority is unable to support the resistance, then to hell with the Authority -- we don't need it." Seyam declared, "If this government fails due to internal pressures supported by outside forces, then we will turn the tables on all of them." Beyond the rhetoric of resistance and confrontation, Hamas has begun forming a three-thousand strong special forces militia designed to operate outside of existing security forces. To align the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) with the new force and consolidate its ties with Hamas, Seyam appointed Jamal Abu Samhadana, head of the PRC, to a senior position in the Interior Ministry. Since it was founded by Fatah in 2001, the PRC has developed closer ties to Hamas, which supplies it with weapons and funding. In September 2005, the PRC claimed responsibility for killing Moussa Arafat, the former head of Palestinian Intelligence, in a brutal assassination that served as a warning to others against opposing Hamas and its interests.

Hamas's influence over the traditional Palestinian security apparatus remains difficult to measure. Hamas will have an easier time gaining the allegiance of the more numerous police and national security forces by paying their salaries than coopting the smaller, Fatah-oriented Preventive Security Service, intelligence services, and the presidential guard. The creation of a new militia suggests that Hamas prefers to retain an independent armed capability it can rely on in case of a breakdown in the PA or a decision to return to more direct attacks against Israel.

Conclusion

The international isolation of Hamas has increased the polarization of Palestinian society, exacerbated the rivalry between Fatah and Hamas, and heightened tensions in an already tenuous security environment that could deteriorate further into more pronounced civil strife. Fatah members, who comprise the majority of public sector employees, have suffered the most as a result of the financial crisis, while Hamas supporters benefit from a social service network that continues to function. It remains to be seen whether the Palestinian population will ultimately blame Hamas or the international community for the deteriorating situation

Hamas insists that it will not bow to international pressure and change its identity, nor will it agree to share power with Fatah anytime soon. If Hamas believes it cannot govern in the current climate, it will not back away quietly. Though several possible scenarios exist for Hamas's response to failure, one likely outcome is that it will renounce the PA, attempt to dissolve it, and launch an offensive against Israel -- all of which could contribute to the emergence of a Somalia-like anarchic environment dominated by local gangs. Non-Hamas elements will have a strong incentive to seek to stabilize the situation and preserve the PA. However, should such a complete breakdown of authority occur, it would provide fertile ground for al-Qaeda to penetrate the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Already, the so-called al-Quds Islamic Army, sympathetic to al-Qaeda, issued its first statement on May 9 promising "more suicide bombings against all Muslim enemies." Any party seeking the rapid failure of Hamas should also work to prevent anarchy from emerging in its wake.

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