

Encouraging a Tougher PA Response to the Hamas Challenge

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's July 22–24 visit to the Israeli-Palestinian scene came amid critical domestic challenges to the Palestinian leadership against the backdrop of imminent Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank, scheduled to begin August 15. In an unprecedented step, Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas recently demonstrated the will to enforce his policy of nonviolence on Hamas and curb the group's efforts to become an alternative armed authority. Given his precarious vacillation between appeasement and enforcement, the international community should encourage Abbas to continue down the latter path and provide him with practical support toward that end.

Mounting Wave of Terror Develops into Intra-Palestinian Clashes

Two weeks ago, for the first time since assuming power, Abbas made a meaningful effort to enforce his authority on Hamas, albeit a belated and inconsistent one. The ceasefire arrangement he had secured with the militant groups in March was beginning to crumble under the upsurge of terrorist attacks, mostly by Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas (the former hoped to cash in on the image of Israeli withdrawal under fire, and the latter did not want to lag behind). The violence culminated in a July 12 PIJ suicide attack in the Israeli town of Netanya and a subsequent barrage of Hamas and PIJ rocket fire from Gaza, killing six Israelis. Squeezed between Palestinian terrorism and mounting domestic pressures (e.g., a recent standoff with tens of thousands of Israelis opposed to disengagement), the Israeli government escalated its counterterrorism operations and threatened to invade Gaza.

For Abbas, these events drove home the realization that his policy of co-optation and appeasement toward Hamas and PIJ was being exploited to undermine both the Israeli disengagement and his own authority. Accordingly, he ordered his security chiefs in Gaza to halt any further rocket attacks. On July 14, PA forces tried to forcibly stop a group of Hamas activists in northern Gaza from firing rockets into Israel. The incident evolved into a series of armed clashes in Gaza between Hamas and PA security forces, later joined by Fatah forces, leaving several dead and dozens of wounded. On July 20, in the wake of Egyptian mediation, the parties declared an end to the infighting and a return to the ceasefire status quo. Since then, terrorist attacks have subsided but not ceased (two Israelis were killed in a shooting attack in Gaza, and a suicide bomber was captured on his way to Tel Aviv).

Political Power Struggle

The deeper roots of this round of clashes—the most severe between the PA and Hamas since 1996—lie in the major political power struggle that has been developing since Abbas assumed power. When Yasser Arafat departed the scene, Hamas calculated that the time was ripe to become a political party and demand a share in power. This calculation was based on several factors: the PA's inherent weakness after years of corrupt leadership and violence; Abbas's weak starting point; the lack of a clear political horizon for Israeli-Palestinian relations beyond disengagement; and Hamas's own popularity, based on its network of social services and its foremost role in the armed confrontation with Israel leading up to the Gaza pull-out.

In line with this strategic thinking came the decision to participate in parliamentary elections and reach a series of understandings with Abbas. In the Cairo agreement finalized in March under Egyptian auspices, Hamas traded security for political power; it agreed to preserve a temporary ceasefire (called *tahdiya*, or “cooling down”) with Israel without relinquishing its arms or its right to use them in the future. In return, it extricated from Abbas a favorable electoral system, an election date prior to the Israeli disengagement, the incorporation of Islamist movements into the Palestine Liberation Organization (the Palestinian source of authority on core final-status issues), and an extreme joint declaration on the “right of return” for refugees to their homes.

By pushing for parliamentary elections to be held before the Israeli withdrawal, Hamas hoped that its expected electoral success (projected at more than 30 percent of the vote in most opinion polls) would force Abbas to share decisionmaking authority regarding post-disengagement Gaza. Yet, calculating that his prospects would be better after disengagement, Abbas shuffled the cards by postponing the elections for a few months and rejecting Hamas's demand to form a joint committee to oversee the Gaza pull-out. Instead, he invited Hamas to join his government. The group rejected the invitation, evading any governmental responsibility.

By violating the ceasefire, Hamas signaled that it will not feel bound by the terms of the Cairo understanding if Abbas does not live up to his share of the bargain. By reacting forcibly, Abbas signaled that he will not accept a tradeoff in which his power is eroded and a two-pronged authority established. This was well reflected in his stern July 16 speech on Palestinian television, in which he noted that some have misinterpreted his patient behavior as weakness. He emphasized that he would not tolerate attempts to violate the ceasefire, stating, “No one has authority on our land except for the Palestinian National Authority, and there is no law other than the law accepted by our elected council, and no weapon is legal in the streets of our cities, villages, and refugee camps except for the weapons of our security forces.” Palestinian civil affairs minister Muhammad Dahlan went so far as to publicly accuse Hamas of trying to take over the PA.

Having flexed their muscles, both parties now prefer to revert to the status quo, realizing that neither is strong enough to impose itself and that the public is currently against an all-out confrontation, whether internal or against Israel. Like the Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire, however, this stalemate may also turn out to be merely temporary.

The International Role

The above developments illustrate the inherent danger of allowing a significant terrorist group into the domestic political system while permitting it to retain the option of armed action. If not checked, Hamas may use the upcoming Israeli pull-out and Palestinian parliamentary elections to exacerbate this danger. Abbas seems to have discovered the shortcomings of his co-optation policy and may have crossed a mental Rubicon of sorts by demonstrating his willingness to confront groups like Hamas when they challenge him. At the same time, he does not believe that he possesses the political and security tools needed to wholeheartedly pursue a new policy of confrontation.

Accordingly, the international community should help strengthen Abbas's willingness and capacity to continue

down the path of enforcing his policies, with a special emphasis on security. The United States would be well advised to increase the pace of Palestinian security reform so as to produce a core force loyal to Abbas and effective in combating terrorism and lawlessness. A capable force would provide Abbas with both the muscle and self-confidence to curb Hamas and other militant groups. There are already sufficient personnel and weapons to field such a force—what is now required are political will, organizational skills, and resources.

The G8 recently allocated substantial economic aid to the PA (\$9 billion over the next three years). In light of this windfall, the international community, in conjunction with the PA, should emphasize to the Palestinian public the concrete quality-of-life improvements (e.g. jobs, construction, infrastructure) that lie ahead following the Israeli disengagement and pending a terror-free environment. This could help turn Palestinian sentiment firmly against violence, boosting Abbas in the upcoming elections and giving him enhanced domestic legitimacy to crack down on Hamas if it attempts to destabilize the situation and challenge his authority.

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog (Israel Defense Forces) is a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute. Formerly the senior military aide to the minister of defense, he was also an Israeli peace negotiator. ❖

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