

# A Multi-Pronged Strategy to Defeat Hamas

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**N**ow that the Israeli government has voted to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank, the key challenge is to stop those who oppose any peace agreement. Despite Friday's lethal bombing in Tel Aviv by Islamic Jihad, the chief among these groups remains Hamas, the Islamic rejectionist movement, which for four years has sponsored suicide bombers and is ideologically committed to Israel's destruction. Fighting Hamas with new Palestinian security forces is important and an obvious starting point, but that alone won't suffice. A political and financial strategy is also needed to neutralize them.

The new Palestinian Authority has in fact been taking early security steps to cope with militants. In firing commanders known as Yasser Arafat's cronies, the authority's president, Mahmoud Abbas, has shown that he knows the necessity of revamping the security structure. By framing the issue as one of public safety, Abbas banned gun possession by the general public. Notwithstanding the fallout from Friday's attack, there has been some success; Israel's departing chief of staff, Lieutenant General Moshe Yaalon, had observed that "the Palestinians are starting to dismantle the terror infrastructure," and are even arresting militants. Abbas has also sought to delegitimize the culture of violence, saying it is politically counterproductive to the aspirations of Palestinian statehood. Israel is encouraging this trend by forswearing the demolition of homes belonging to relatives of suicide bombers, ending targeted killing of Hamas operatives and announcing prisoner releases.

As Friday's attack showed, the cease-fire is fragile, and Abbas must understand that he needs to utilize it to keep Hamas in check. Beyond revamping the security services, the authority must vigorously move against Hamas and other militants. The United States is dispatching Lieutenant General William Ward to help restructure the security services and to revive Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation. Such cooperation is crucial in ensuring that Palestinian quality-of-life measures, like lifting West Bank checkpoints, can be taken without leading to increased Israeli fatalities; in providing a framework for dialogue enabling a coordinated disengagement from Gaza this summer; and in monitoring the cease-fire.

It is also important to compete with Hamas in the economic sphere, and participants at this week's international donors' conference in London should discuss ways to assist the Palestinian Authority. Hamas's power is increasingly reflecting the old maxim: All politics are local. Two weeks after Abbas won a majority in Gaza, Hamas swept municipal elections there. Hamas, like other Islamist groups in the Middle East, has a proven track record in

providing essential social services that the Palestinians were not able to obtain from the government.

To stymie Hamas's electoral successes, the international donors should ensure that the Palestinian Authority is financially capable of supporting those private- and public-sector groups that could provide key forms of social services in Gaza. Hamas has done well there by creating day care in mosques, supporting dozens of health clinics and supporting Islamist educational institutions. A reformed Palestinian Authority educational system, committed to teaching tolerance, would also merit international support.

Competing with Hamas means showing economic success, and Abbas needs to articulate how nonviolence is validated by economic benefits. Such steps are especially important as Hamas will claim that the Israeli exit is a result of its terror strategy. Conference participants also need to consider infrastructure projects in Gaza; help in that area could also be a task for the Gulf States, which have not fulfilled their commitments made at the Arab summit in Beirut in 2002 to provide emergency assistance to the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinians may be able to help themselves as well, given that the Palestine Investment Fund has recovered a billion dollars from the PLO's transactions during the Arafat era, when the organization put money in enterprises scattered around the world.

Competing with Hamas also needs to be done at the ballot box. If the mainstream Fatah party in Gaza wants to do better in the parliamentary elections than in January's municipal polls, it needs new candidates free from the taint of corruption.

Weakening support for Hamas requires a multi-pronged strategy. Opportunities should not be missed to seize this moment and weaken rejectionism.

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