

Hamas Ceasefire Proposal:

Peace or Pause?

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Brief Analysis

Has the radical Palestinian Islamist organization Hamas adopted a new, more moderate view on peace with Israel? In recent months, elite news organizations—from the Economist to National Public Radio—have highlighted interviews by Hamas leaders such as founder Shaykh Ahmed Yassin suggesting a willingness on the part of the organization to negotiate a "long-term truce" with Israel. On December 1, 2003, Yassin declared that Hamas was "ready to reach or to go with this enemy [Israel] into a long-term . . . truce. But the enemy . . . must pull out from all the Palestinian territories and . . . remove all shapes and kinds of occupation."

Given that as a movement, Hamas embodies fundamental hostility to the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine, and that the organization has claimed responsibility for dozens of suicide bomb attacks (attempted and successful) both inside and outside the Green Line, these media outlets take heart from what appears to be a newfound pragmatism in the organization's approach. Such a policy, some journalists note, would help Hamas push aside Yasir Arafat's Palestinian Authority and emerge as the principal Palestinian interlocutor in negotiations with Israel.

In reality, however, Hamas truce offers are not new. Hamas has, in fact, proposed a ceasefire with Israel no fewer than eleven times since 1993. In most cases, these offers have served to deflect massive Israeli retaliation against the group's leadership in response to a Hamas terrorist act. On at least three occasions, Hamas proposals have included tacit acceptance of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, rather than "from the river to the sea," i.e., accepting Israel within its Green Line borders. The following is a summary of these three "long-term truce" offers.

Following the breakdown of a truce between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority in November 1994, clashes erupted in the Gaza Strip and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. At the same time, Palestinians heightened attacks against Israel, which left over fifty dead. In a prison interview with the Arabic newspaper al-Hayat, Yassin endorsed attacks on Israel, banned peace with the Jewish state as a violation of Islamic law, and defined all of historic Palestine as "the property of Muslims until the day of judgment." Nevertheless, he said, Hamas would be amenable to a truce with Israel lasting no longer than ten years, provided Israel withdraw completely from Gaza, the West Bank, and east Jerusalem. Subsequent Hamas terrorist attacks buried any discussion of the offer.

On October 6, 1997, the Khaled Mashal affair led to Shaykh Yassin's release, following eight years of imprisonment. Met by jubilant crowds, the shaykh repeated his ten-year truce proposal, again conditioned on total Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, Gaza, and east Jerusalem; Israel would also be required to halt "attacks against [Palestinian] civilians." While rejecting its terms, Israeli officials greeted Yassin's offer with cautious optimism. Soon thereafter, however, Yassin told a Swedish newspaper that he believed Israel should be "wiped off the map," and a Hamas leaflet foreshadowed further terrorism, threatening that Israel would "pay the price in pain, regret and blood" if it rejected an additional demand to release Hamas prisoners. In early December 1997, Palestinian police arrested a Hamas operative carrying 100 kilograms of explosives destined for a terrorist attack.

In May 1999, shortly before Ehud Barak's election as prime minister, Yassin made perhaps his boldest ceasefire

proposal, telling the Egyptian al-Ahram newspaper, "We have to be realistic. We are talking about a homeland that was stolen a long time ago in 1948 and again in 1967. My generation today is telling the Israelis, 'Let's solve this problem now, on the basis of the 1967 borders. Let's end this conflict by declaring a temporary ceasefire. Let's leave the bigger issue for future generations to decide.' The Palestinians will decide in the future about the nature of relations with Israel, but it must be a democratic decision." Although it stopped short of endorsing a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the statement was noteworthy in that it did not, in principle, reject negotiations with Israel. Yassin later clarified his proposal in an interview with the Jordanian newspaper al-Arab al-Yawm. He stated that the offer did not include recognition of "the Hebrew state," and he described specific Hamas conditions, which included prisoner releases. The offer, rejected by Israel, did little to stem Hamas terrorism, which continued unabated.

Hamas has always accompanied its truce offers with aggressive threats and unstinting violence. The offers themselves cannot be characterized as supporting peace or accepting the legitimacy of Israel, but rather as endorsing a pause in conflict. Indeed, Hamas has been quite clear in defining ceasefires as timeouts in its grander objective of creating an Islamic state in all of Palestine.

Hamas's most recent ceasefire proposal fits this pattern. On January 26, in the wake of Yassin's December 2003 statement, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, perhaps the group's second most influential spokesman, told reporters that Hamas accepts "a [Palestinian] state in the West Bank, including Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip," proposing "a ten-year truce in return for [Israeli] withdrawal and the establishment of a state." He added, however, that Hamas's motivation for proposing the truce was that it would be "difficult to liberate all the land [including Israel] at this stage, so we accept a phased liberation."

Other Hamas spokesmen were quick to qualify the ceasefire proposal. Osama Hamdan, a Hamas representative in Lebanon, told al-Jazeera on January 26 that Rantisi's offer "is an old, not a new, Hamas stand," adding that "at present, a truce is not worthwhile to the Palestinian people." He argued that the group's principal goal remained "continuing and escalating [the] resistance." Gazan Hamas leader Mahmud al-Zahhar went further, stating that Hamas expects "that many, many operations will be run against the Israelis, whether military or civilian."

Conclusion

Rantisi's statement came on the heels of a January 11 suicide bombing at the Erez crossing in Gaza, for which Hamas claimed responsibility, and a January 22 suicide bombing on a Jerusalem bus, claimed by the Fatah-linked al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Following the attacks, Israel stepped up its "targeted killings" of Hamas leaders. That the group reiterated its truce proposal at a time of relative weakness is not surprising. What is remarkable is that so many news organizations portrayed the development as new. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that Hamas has compromised its view on the illegitimacy of Israel and the utility of terrorism to achieve its ultimate objectives. If pragmatism is defined as opportunism employed to regroup and rearm, then Hamas is indeed a pragmatic organization. But there is nothing new or moderate about this position.

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