

Between Hudna and Crackdown: Assessing the Record of Hamas Ceasefires

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Brief Analysis

In recent days, both Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat and prime minister Mahmoud Abbas have said they expect an agreement on a Hamas ceasefire (or hudna) to be announced soon. According to Abbas, Hamas—in Arabic, "the Islamic Resistance Movement"—"will commit to halting terrorism, both within the green line and in the territories." As longtime Palestinian minister Saeb Erekat explained, Abbas needs a ceasefire agreement to jumpstart negotiations for Palestinian statehood. Abbas, said Erekat, "will insist on this declaration [of a ceasefire] because that's the key . . . for him to go out and tell the Palestinians, 'Look, we've got the Israeli government to recognize the Palestinian state, [so] we need two years in a peaceful, meaningful peace process.'"

So far, no Hamas leaders have contradicted Abbas, though they have added conditions to any ceasefire, such as an Israeli agreement to end targeted killings and free prisoners. Even Hamas spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmad Yassin did not reject the idea of a hudna, though he cautioned that Hamas would never voluntarily give up its weapons. Indeed, if the past is any indication, a ceasefire agreement is likely; such ceasefires have been regular occurrences in PA-Hamas relations.

Ceasefire Redux

In all, ten ceasefires have been declared or offered by Hamas since 1993. In some cases, they followed periods of PA-Hamas confrontation; at other times, they came on the heels of intense pressure placed on the PA after particularly egregious acts of terrorism committed by Hamas or other groups. It is important to note that all ceasefire offers have been presented at a time when Hamas needed a moment to step back and regroup after an organizationally exhausting confrontation with a more powerful foe (either Israel or the PA).

In October 1994, after the murder of kidnapped Israel Defense Forces soldier Nachshon Wachsman, Hamas offered Israel a ceasefire, occasioned by the first PA effort to clamp down on Hamas military activity and reach its own ceasefire accord with the group. That accord broke down three weeks later, with bloody fighting between Hamas and the PA that eventually spilled over into renewed attacks on Israelis.

Animosity between Hamas and the PA continued into 1995. Israelis were targets as well, as the breakdown of the previous ceasefire led to a two-month period that left over fifty dead from terrorist attacks. Yassin declared "merciless war" against Arafat and stated that peace with Israel would be "a crime against Islam." In February, Israel began its own crackdown on Hamas. Within days, Hamas offered Israel a ten-year truce conditioned on Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Despite this offer, Hamas members wounded five and killed two in an attack on Jewish settlers two weeks later.

Meetings in Cairo in December 1995 saw the first formal attempts at PA-Hamas reconciliation. After a pugnacious start, Hamas made an about-face and announced its intention to halt attacks against Israel. According to Hamas spokesman Mahmoud al-Zahhar, the move was intended to give the PA "time to see how far it can get" in negotiations with Israel. Soon thereafter, Hamas also agreed to run in Palestinian elections.

The December 1995 ceasefire -- if it indeed existed—ended with the January 1996 killing of Yahya "the Engineer" Ayyash, which was the ostensible trigger for a string of suicide bombings in February and March that left fifty dead and more than two hundred injured. Following these attacks, Arafat, under intense Israeli pressure, arrested hundreds of Hamas militants. Hamas offered a new ceasefire proposal on March 1 calling for the release of prisoners in Israeli jails. Days later, a Hamas suicide bomber killed nineteen on a Jerusalem bus.

On June 20, a Hamas leaflet offered Israel another ceasefire, on condition that Israel end "Zionist terrorism against Hamas and the Qassam brigades." The truce, according to the leaflet, was designed to unite the Palestinian people and promote PA-Hamas reconciliation. Again, Hamas promised swift and violent reaction if spurned by Israel. Israel rejected the offer; soon thereafter, Palestinian gunmen killed three Israeli soldiers.

In October 1997, Israel's release of Yassin from prison (following the Khaled Mishal affair) occasioned the next Hamas ceasefire offer. On October 7, Yassin renewed the call for a ceasefire conditioned on Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and West Bank as well as the evacuation of all Jewish settlements. Despite this announcement, Hamas officials vowed to continue their fight against Israel, and terrorism continued unabated.

In November 1997, Hamas again issued its truce offer. A public statement by Hamas's military wing noted that attacks against Israeli civilians would end if Israel ended attacks on Palestinian civilians. Israeli arrests of militants suspected of perpetrating suicide bombings and other attacks continued throughout the month, and by month's end Yassin declared that "the killing will go on."

Eighteen months later, in May 1999, Yassin reissued his ceasefire offer, conditioned on Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders. This call was timed to coincide with the election of Ehud Barak as Israeli prime minister; the offer was rejected.

In June 2001, nine months into the Palestinian uprising, a suicide attack at the Dolphinarium disco in Tel Aviv brought intense international pressure on Palestinians to halt terrorism and violence. Although Yassin initially stated that Hamas would not honor Arafat's call for hudna, the organization was soon brought into line, with other Hamas officials agreeing to a temporary ceasefire. Yet, the agreement broke down days later when Hamas claimed responsibility for killing an Israeli soldier and mortars were fired on Israeli settlements. Terrorism continued throughout the summer, punctuated by a Hamas attack in August on a Jerusalem pizzeria that left fifteen dead and over ninety wounded.

On December 16, 2001, Hamas agreed to suspend its campaign of suicide bombings and mortar attacks against Israelis in the Gaza Strip and Israel proper but reserved the right to "resist occupation" in the West Bank. This ceasefire occurred amid fierce skirmishes stemming from PA attempts to arrest Hamas activists; hudna was agreed upon "for the sake of Palestinian unity." On January 4, 2002, Israel seized the Karine-A weapons smuggling ship destined for Gaza; five days later, Hamas ended the truce by ambushing and killing four Israeli soldiers.

Throughout each of these ceasefire episodes, Hamas leaders continued to support the goals of the original Hamas charter, that is, the creation, through religiously sanctioned violence, of an Islamic state in all of Palestine. Again, this suggests that Hamas ceasefires have served as "breathers," allowing the organization to consolidate its "gains"—be they against the PA or Israel—before undertaking another set of attacks.

Prime Minister Abbas has stated that a temporary ceasefire would be unacceptable and that he would insist on "absolute calm." Yet, this falls short of the Roadmap's call for "dismantlement of terrorist capabilities and infrastructure." Indeed, without PA efforts to dismantle the considerable military infrastructure built by Hamas, to deprive its leaders of broadcast and print media outlets, to shut down training and operational facilities, and to collect weapons, there is nothing to prevent any new ceasefire from going the way of previous ones. Moreover, similar efforts would need to be taken against other terrorist groups, whether Islamist (like Palestinian Islamic

Jihad) or nationalist (like Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades). When asked recently about the possibility of using force against Hamas or any other militant faction in order to ensure disarmament, Abbas stated, "We will never give civil war a chance, even if the agreement is breached."

This PeaceWatch was prepared by Washington Institute research assistant Shoshanah Haberman, drawing on a past article by Seth Wikas (PeaceWatch no. 357, January 3, 2002).

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