

GAZA

How much support does Hamas really have?

There is no question that Hamas is in charge in Gaza. After its coup in June 2007, there were isolated incidents of inter-factional violence over the latter half of 2007. Hamas forcibly dispersed public demonstrations organized by Fateh and expressions of support for the caretaker government in Ramallah became taboo.

The breaching of the Rafah border crossing in late January 2008, the Israeli military incursions that followed in February, and the stagnation of the Annapolis process all contributed to the rise in support for Hamas. Polling conducted in March of 2008 showed the popularity ratings of Hamas growing and approaching those of Fateh in both the West Bank and Gaza, with more respondents naming the administration of Ismail Haniyeh as the legitimate government than that of Salam Fayyad. At the same time, Haniyeh's popularity had reached its highest point since Hamas's electoral victories in 2006, and a presidential election between him and Abbas would have been a dead heat.

In Gaza, Fateh's foothold has been almost completely eroded. Though there are ostensibly still a few operatives working in the territory, they have extremely limited funds with which to run any sort of initiatives. The Preventive Security Forces led by Mohammad Dahlan were routed in the Hamas takeover, a chain of events that was slightly surprising given the number and strength of Fateh fighters that were in the Strip at the time, and the group is no longer functional there.⁴

How likely is reconciliation between Hamas and Fateh?

The early summer of 2008 saw the possibility of reconciliation between the two main Palestinian factions grow stronger than it had been since the devastating events of June 2007. The Yemeni initiative that brought the two sides together in March 2008 may not have delivered a lasting resolution, but it laid the groundwork for future agreements. By early June - a full year after Hamas took over in Gaza - President Abbas was publicly inviting all factions to participate in comprehensive talks, and he did so without putting forth any conditions. As his hope for an agreement between himself and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert fades, and as Palestinians increasingly lose faith in his ability to bring about change, President Abbas has become galvanized in his efforts to avoid a complete collapse of the Palestinian political structure.

Another meeting between Hamas and Fateh officials took place in Senegal in June 2008 and was mediated by Senegalese President Aboulaye Wade, who also serves as the Chairman of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal subsequently stated that the group was ready for a national Palestinian dialogue for reconciliation, and Abbas asserted that such a dialogue is the only thing that would lead to improvement in Gaza. Arab leaders - especially those in Riyadh and Cairo - have welcomed the initiative and come with offers to host future talks. The Arab world could become increasingly involved in Gazan affairs, as there have even been mentions of an "Arab administration" assuming control of the Strip.

With the end of his term on the horizon, Abbas has pledged support for early presidential and legislative elections if substantial progress is made towards reconciliation between Hamas and Fateh. Yet many questions still remain, as uncertainty hangs over the motives of Abbas, the willingness of Hamas to cede Gaza, and the outcomes of any future elections.

What are the prospects for ending the siege in Gaza?

While Hamas has repeatedly offered to agree with Israel on a break in the fighting, the Israelis have been content to ignore the 4 Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No. 27, 13-15 March 2008.

proposals and wait for Hamas to become more flexible in its demands. While it is true that Hamas is a resistance movement, the group's roots in Islam provide it with a model for pursuing peace rather than war. Working towards a tahdiya - a "calming down" rather than a final truce - may be the only option Hamas has due to the internal Palestinian struggles and their desire to avoid legitimizing the Israeli occupation. However, Israel's policies of labeling Hamas a terrorist organization, condemning all of Gaza because of the Hamas presence, declaring the Strip a "hostile entity", and refusing to take an official stance on Hamas's offers of peace have severely damaged the prospects of a lasting truce.

It seems that any progress towards at least a temporary end to the violence in Gaza is quickly followed by comments or events that make a truce seem almost impossible. In June of 2008, Hamas relayed a letter from the kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit to his family as a sign of goodwill to the Israelis. At the same time, Egyptian leaders were working to find some sort of common ground between Israel and Hamas that would allow for a ceasefire. Yet Israeli officials were still discussing the possibility of a full-scale military invasion of Gaza, showing once again that the state of Israel neither believes in nor wants a diplomatic solution when it comes to Gaza. Yet even in this seemingly impossible climate, Egyptian officials managed to broker a tentative ceasefire between Hamas and Israel in early June 2008. The deal included a temporary stoppage of attacks from both sides, an Israeli promise of very limited relaxation of border controls in order to allow more supplies to enter Gaza, and the possible return of Gilad Shalit. Still, the agreement was extremely short term, and the merits of its implementation remain to be seen.

Both the Israelis and the Palestinians have internal political obstacles that must be overcome before they will have the strength to sign a truce. Much like Ariel Sharon had to build up his influence and credibility within Israel before he could push his "Disengagement Plan", so too must the current Palestinian and Israeli leaderships consolidate their power before either side can come to the negotiating table with anything tangible to offer.

Where is Gaza heading?

The rift that has developed between the two preeminent parties in the Palestinian political spectrum has been a disaster for the people they govern in the West Bank and Gaza. Now more than ever the two territories are separate entities, and they are drifting farther apart each day. It has reached the point that Palestinians have taken to calling the split Wakseh, which means 'humiliation' or 'ruin' in Arabic. In the end, all of the parties involved must realize that they must strive for the same thing: a united and democratic Palestinian state.

The international response to the Hamas takeover was to isolate Gaza, a move leaders in the West hoped would drive Hamas into collapse or at least force them to ease their harsh rhetoric. When President Abbas swore in a new caretaker government on 17 June 2007 and declared the Hamas authority in Gaza illegal, Israel and the international community endorsed those moves and began to reinstate financial and technical assistance. In actuality, quarantining Hamas and propping up the new "emergency" PA led by Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad has not broken the Hamas regime in Gaza, and yet it seems the US, Israel, and the Quartet are still willing to gamble on ignoring Hamas and the influence they could wield over the peace process.



A Hamas gunman outside Fateh's Gaza headquarters