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Palestinian Civil War: Results and Implications

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The civil war in the Gaza Strip is over. Fatah strongholds fell one after the other, like a house of cards. Hamas units met no serious resistance. The decision to go for a crushing victory at this moment in time was made by the armed wing of Hamas within the Strip, and not the leadership in Damascus. The outcome created a fissure of historical proportions in the Palestinian national movement and a separation of governmental authority between Gaza and the West Bank.

Four months ago, Hamas fighters were prepared for a military confrontation with Fatah in order to compel it to recognize its governing authority, rendered legitimate through democratic elections. Their plans were foiled by the joint action of Abu Mazen and Khalid Mash`al, who feared a dangerous deterioration towards civil war and a loss of power. Their efforts resulted in the formation of a unity government which removed the immediate threat and preserved the two sides' respective political positions.

The Damascus-based Mash`al was forced to accept the loss of Hamas' domination of the Palestinian government, agreeing to transfer the Treasury and Foreign Ministries to individuals acceptable to the West. He even acceded to a softening of Hamas' positions on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: Hamas accepted the international legitimacy conferred on the Oslo process and the Arab legitimacy expressed in the Arab peace plan, and recognized the authority of Abu Mazen, as the Chairman of the PLO, to renew political negotiations with Israel. On the other hand, the path of compromise required Mash`al to forcefully defend Hamas' ideological principles, particularly the Palestinian refugees' right of return, as formulated in the Basic Principles of the unity government. Mash`al intended to achieve a Hamas takeover of the PLO, so that it would once again represent all of the Palestinian people, including those in the Diaspora.

It was in this fashion that Mash`al attempted to reconcile the tension between the needs of the hour, which included a commitment to a continuing ceasefire and a preparedness to accept a political settlement with Israel, and Hamas' goal of returning the Diaspora and the refugees to the center of the official Palestinian agenda, thus

correcting the results of the Oslo process. However, Mash`al's concessions, made without receiving guarantees of a quid pro quo, exposed him to criticism from Hamas political militants in the Gaza Strip, among them Mahmud al-Zahar and Sa`id Siam, as well as from the movement's military wing, who ignored the exigencies of governing that guided Mash`al's actions. Nor were they moved by the fact that Mash`al's practical approach had begun to create the impression in the international community that Hamas was a legitimate political movement, prepared for a political settlement on the basis of two states.

For Hamas' military wing, it was more important that Abu Mazen and the unity government had failed to keep their promises over the last months. They viewed this as proof that the considerations which had guided the Damascus-based leadership had been mistaken: Abu Mazen had failed in his efforts to persuade the Quartet states to recognize the unity government and rescind their boycott of it; the struggles over control of the various Palestinian security forces continued; and no prisoner-release agreement was reached with Israel. As a result, the Hamas military wing, backed by a militant portion of the local political leadership, signaled to Abu Mazen, Mash`al, Israel and the international community, via the firings of Qassam rockets into Israel and an attempt to kidnap Israeli soldiers on Israeli Independence Day, that it was capable of ending the ceasefire with Israel and returning the situation to square one.

Recognition by the local leadership's militant wing that a decisive clash with Fatah was well-nigh inevitable, together with the pressure applied by the military wing to resume the armed struggle, determined the timing of the decision to crush Fatah in the Gaza Strip. With the balance of forces in Hamas' favor, a clear victory was assured. Fatah also suffered from a lack of leadership in the Strip, low morale among its cadres, and Abu Mazen's failure to move decisively to rescue his movement.

The civil war is an expression of the loss of control of Khalid Mash`al and Abu Mazen. The behavior of the two sides in the conflict appears to be motivated in no small measure by the logic of revenge, manifested by mutual killings and clashes between clans and local gangs. Fatah activists desire to retaliate against Hamas in the West Bank, where they hold an advantage, and have already begun to do so. The heads of the security apparatuses there are identified with Fatah, and are preparing accordingly.

The local Hamas leadership proved its supremacy over the Damascus-based leadership. Its actions resulted in an emerging new reality: a steadily widening separation of governmental authority between the Gaza Strip, now under its full control, and the West Bank, where Fatah is likely to impose its own rule. The humanitarian situation in Gaza is likely to deteriorate, owing to the continuation of intra-Palestinian clashes and the disruption of activities at the crossing points between Gaza and Israel (and Egypt), preventing the flow of people and goods. Increasingly, the mood among the population in Gaza is that their current situation is worse than it was under Israeli occupation. By contrast, the West Bank is likely to be more stable. In this new situation, Israel should calculate its actions so as to present the Palestinian population with an alternative of dialogue on security and political issues. Doing so is likely to win regional and international approval and thus make it easier for Israel to undertake military actions in the Gaza Strip that will eventually be necessary.