

HAMAS: BETWEEN ISRAEL AND FATAH

Ephraim Lavie

Palestinian Authority President Abu Mazen's decision to call for early presidential and legislative elections appears to be his final means for pressuring Hamas into modifying its positions and enabling the creation of a national unity government. However, the Hamas leadership's determined opposition to the holding of early elections, reinforced by a coalition of rejectionist Palestinian organizations headed by veteran Fatah leader Farouk Qaddumi, indicates its self-confidence in the face of a looming confrontation with Fatah.

Hamas's electoral triumph in January 2006 pushed Fatah, the organization which led the Palestinian national movement for almost 40 years, into the opposition. To be sure, the international isolation of the Hamas government has prevented it from implementing its promised reforms and reconstruction projects. At the same time, its victory created a major shift in the Palestinian public's consciousness and the international community's as well. Hamas is now viewed as representing the Palestinian people, while the PLO is seen as subordinated to the PA's institutions, and Fatah displays no signs of recovery.

The first year of Hamas government was characterized by societal breakdown, increased casualties, and greater economic hardship and property damage, all resulting from the continuing military confrontation with Israel. The ongoing physical separation between the

West Bank and Gaza has severely weakened the economic, social and political links between them, creating a situation increasingly reminiscent of the pre-1967 era. In both areas, society continues to turn inward. More than ever, the extended family is now the primary focus of loyalty and identification. The absence of functioning mechanisms of law enforcement and justice has compelled many Palestinians to employ the services of traditional institutions, such as tribal courts.

On the internal political front, Abu Mazen failed in his attempt to establish an effective power base, while the Hamas leadership succeeded in imposing its authority only over Gaza, through its newly established 10,000 man security apparatus, the "Special Force" (*al-quwa al-hassa*). Hamas, however, was unable to rebuild or restore the orderly functioning of governing institutions which had collapsed during *intifadat al-aqsa*. Hence, the PA was now an empty vessel: its services to the public were limited, and completely dependent on foreign assistance. However, the majority of the Palestinian public holds Israel and the international community responsible for this sorry state of affairs, not Hamas.

Moreover, the widespread Fatah-led strikes in the public sector are perceived as political in nature, and thus unjustified. Support for Hamas has been further reinforced by a trend towards greater religiosity, while Fatah is viewed as a



corrupt organization incapable of reform. Meanwhile, Israel's military actions have strengthened the "jihad" atmosphere and desire for revenge among the Palestinian public. Still, the public also desired a breather in the escalating confrontation: since the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in June, 400 Palestinians have been killed, half of them civilians.

The decision last month by Hamas to temporarily halt the firing of Qassam rockets into Israel was not made from a position of weakness. It was arrived at only after Israel withdrew its demand for the prior release of Shalit, while Hamas continued to maintain its demand for the massive release of Palestinian prisoners. In effect, the movement's external leadership agreed to support Prime Minister Isma`il Haniyeh's efforts to lift the political and economic siege on the PA and achieve the release of prisoners in exchange for Shalit, notwithstanding the opposition of Hamas's `Izz al-Din al-Qassam brigades to halting the rocket attacks. Haniyeh believed that lifting the siege and freeing the prisoners would be greeted favorably by the Palestinian public, and enable the fashioning of a more permanent Palestinian-Israeli ceasefire. This in turn would stabilize his government and allow the rebuilding of the PA's shattered social, economic and political infrastructures.

The Hamas leadership found itself at a crossroads, wavering between two possible paths. Haniyeh, who lives in Gaza and is thus especially sensitive to the suffering there, sought to implement a pragmatic policy. To be sure, he was not prepared to recognize or make peace with Israel. However, he was prepared to maintain a prolonged stable ceasefire and accept Israeli unilateral withdrawals in the West Bank. By contrast, Damascus-based Khalid Mash`al, advocated a three-pronged short-term approach: 1) reinforcing Hamas's status as a legitimate governing party; 2) continuing the armed popular struggle, while being prepared for short-term, tactical cease-fires; and 3) agreeing to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West

Bank and Gaza along the June 4, 1967 lines as long as it doesn't entail recognition of Israel. Mash`al believed that such a policy could succeed if it was applied patiently, during which time Israel would be worn down and the international community would grow accustomed to the Hamas government, one which combined the right of resistance to occupation and a willingness to countenance political agreements that fell short of peace. Mash`al also believed that the more the public suffered from the confrontation with Israel and the international boycott, the more it would support Hamas.

In imposing his policy on Haniyeh, Mash`al also ignored Fatah's warnings that it had given Israel the legitimate right to determine its borders unilaterally, and that it endangered Palestinian national identity. But he remained unbowed, and even encouraged by recent developments: cracks in the economic blockade have appeared, as funds have been transferred from Arab and EU states for humanitarian and salary needs; the international community is willing to recognize a Palestinian unity government in which Hamas participates; and the EU is perceived as being ready to soften its conditions for speaking with Hamas.

Haniyeh was aware that Mash`al would be able to impose his policy as long as the Palestinian public perceived no available alternative. Hence, he desired to mobilize public opinion behind a path that would strengthen his authority and that of Hamas, following the removal of the blockade and a prisoner exchange. For that he needed an extended and stable ceasefire. However, disagreement with Abu Mazen over the proposed guidelines of a unity government and over control of the interior ministry and the security forces, as well as the increasing instances of violence between Fatah and Hamas, put paid to the prospects of forming such a government. Abu Mazen's latest call for elections has now raised Hamas-Fatah tensions to the boiling point.