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## Hamas, Abu Mazen and the Ceasefire

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The Hamas-Israeli ceasefire agreement in Gaza (*tahdi'a*; lit. “calming”), together with the decision by Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) to renew the “national dialogue” with Hamas, inaugurated a new and promising phase in Hamas’s efforts to establish itself as the legitimate governing party in the Palestinian territories. For Hamas, these developments hold out hope for a lifting of the international boycott against it and the restoration of a semblance of national unity, which was shattered by Hamas’s violent seizure of full power in Gaza one year ago. Moreover, they may enable Hamas to begin fulfilling its commitment to rebuild Gaza’s shattered social and economic infrastructure. Progress on these fronts will in turn strengthen Hamas in its demands to play a significant role in a reorganized Palestine Liberation Organization, to which it does not currently belong. A Hamas-influenced PLO would likely then implement a change in basic national positions, particularly with regard to official Palestinian policy regarding the conflict with Israel.

Although Hamas desired a ceasefire in order to prevent a large-scale Israeli military operation in Gaza, it did not enter into it from a position of weakness. The agreement, which was acceded to by all Palestinian factions, including Fatah, was achieved after Israel withdrew its demand for the prior return of its captive soldier, while Hamas stood firm in its demand for a quid pro quo, namely, the large-scale release of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons. In essence, Hamas was given the go-ahead from the PA and the smaller factions to work for the lifting of the economic siege of the Gaza Strip, the opening of the crossing points to Israel and Egypt, and the release of prisoners. The Hamas leadership believes that achieving these gains, which would be heartily welcomed by the Palestinian public, will enable the ceasefire to be lengthened indefinitely, and perhaps even extended to the

West Bank.

Another reason for Hamas's self-confidence was its successful parrying of Abu Mazen's insistence on the removal of Hamas's hegemony in Gaza as a condition to renewing the dialogue with it. In dropping this demand, Abu Mazen was apparently motivated by concern over the continued crumbling of Palestinian social and political structures and the widening chasm between the West Bank and Gaza. Hence, his priority during his final months of office (Presidential elections are officially scheduled for January 2009) has become the restoration of unity, before Palestinian society disintegrates entirely.

Abu Mazen's actions were also driven by his reading of the balance of power between Hamas and Fatah, his own political standing, and Hamas's strengthened status in the region. At the May 2008 meeting of Fatah's "Revolutionary Council", Abu Mazen encountered strong resistance and a distinct lack of support from Fatah's "old guard", which felt that it had been distanced from the decision-making process. Council members demanded that Abu Mazen remove Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, establish a new government that would include all PLO factions, reevaluate the peace process with Israel and engage in a dialogue with Hamas. In addition, Abu Mazen is well aware of Fatah's perilous organizational state and low public standing, which calls into question its very ability to survive. And finally, the absence of progress in the peace process has led the Palestinian public to conclude that Abu Mazen and Fatah have lost their way, and are unable to act in ways which would serve the interests of the Palestinian people and even prevent developments such as Israel's continued settlement expansion in the West Bank. Hence, with Hamas and Israel making progress towards a ceasefire, Abu Mazen chose not to remain aloof.

At present, Hamas and Fatah are on the verge of a national dialogue, which will include the other factions as well. The process is likely to be lengthy, accompanied by internal frictions. The parties will need to address three main issues: the establishment of a unity government, control over the various security apparatuses, particularly the special military and police forces established by Hamas, and the reform of the PLO. Differences over the basic guidelines of a national unity government and the division of portfolios, particularly over the interior ministry and the security services will have to be settled. To be sure, the parties may well eventually agree to establish a government of technocrats and conclude a power-sharing arrangement regarding the security forces. However, there will be greater difficulty regarding Hamas's demand to revamp the PLO in a way which would enable Hamas to achieve a leading position in the organization.

Hence, alongside the fragility of the ceasefire and the diminishing likelihood of Abu Mazen being able to achieve a permanent status agreement with Israel by the end of 2008 and have it approved by referendum, the expected difficulties in the intra-Palestinian dialogue will render it difficult to hold the January 2009 general elections on schedule. In the absence of political progress, and the unlikelihood of a change in American policy no matter who wins the US presidential election, Abu Mazen and the PA government may well conclude at some point that they have reached the end of the road.

The Hamas leadership is currently operating from a position of strength and a deep belief in the correctness of its policies. The widespread social and economic distress in Gaza and the continuing military confrontation with Israel over the last two years were not translated into large-scale public protest against Hamas. The majority of the Gaza population did not hold Hamas primarily responsible for the difficult situation in which they found themselves. Rather, the chief culprits, in their view, were Israel and the international community, which had imposed an economic blockade in order to force Hamas to accept their demands and alter the basic principles of their creed. Moreover, Palestinian public opinion credits Hamas with a number of achievements. They admire its steadfastness, recognize its success in becoming the governing party responsible for the Gaza district, support the new ceasefire agreement, and expect an imminent lifting of the siege and the release of prisoners. Hamas's strengthened position contrasts sharply in the public's eyes with Abu Mazen's and Fatah's abysmal failure to achieve their goals in the international arena.

Hamas aspires to be the broadest-based political movement in the Palestinian arena, one which represents Palestinian-Islamic nationalism. Its leadership views the ceasefire and the resumption of the national dialogue as means to widen its influence from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank. Hence, Hamas is on the verge of registering further substantive achievements, and Palestinian history appears to have come to the end of an era, after 40 years of Fatah's domination of national leadership under the PLO umbrella.

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