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# **The Strategic Implications of the Palestinian Crisis**

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## **The Strategic Implications of the Palestinian Crisis**

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The conflict between Hamas and Fatah (and in reality the Palestinian Authority) seems to have effectively divided Gaza and the West Bank into two separate bodies where any political compromise will be hollow and at best cloak a somewhat less overt level of struggle. Arafat's divide and rule tactics, Israel's shattering of the Palestinian security forces, the failure of the peace process at every level, Islamist extremism, and Israeli walls and settlements have all helped to create a divide that is far more polarized than even the most pessimistic Israeli and Palestinian government officials expected even a few short weeks ago.

Hamas turned out to be far better organized and far more effective than was expected, and clearly had planned at least many elements of the campaign in Gaza. The Palestinian security forces, on the other hand, were even weaker, more divided, more corrupt, and more unpopular. It is still unclear why Fatah was so ineffective and so badly prepared, and why intelligence on Hamas's planning and capabilities was so bad. Even in May, some US advisors and Israeli officials were still counting on the training of the Presidential Guard and Hamas's "weakness" to force Hamas to compromise. At least some IDF officers were saying that Israel could, in a dire emergency, intervene in support of the Palestinian Authority.

In practice, Hamas seems to have caught Abbas and his security team without warning, with several key officials out of the areas, and with the others totally unprepared. These included Muhammed Dahlan, Abbas's security advisor; Rashid Abu Shbak, the former head of Preventive Security; Youssef Issa, the current head of Preventive Security, and figures like Samih al-Madhoun.

There are indications that the younger members of Fatah's security forces turned on their leaders or simply stood aside – seeing the older "Tunisians in Gaza as corrupt, brutal, and ineffective." Both the impact of the fighting with the IDF since 2000 and the starving of the Palestinian Authority of money to "hurt" Hamas, in the end helped Hamas. In fact, starving the Palestinians to hurt Hamas did even more to expose the corruption, brutality, and incompetence of far too many Palestinian Authority leaders, officials, and security forces.

In practice, Israel and the US had no time in which to react, even if they wanted to. Neither did moderate Arab powers like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The most Abbas could do was try to consolidate power in the West Bank where Hamas, the PIJ, and other radical elements have no real power base – as yet.

It seems unlikely that the end result will make progress in the peace process much worse than it would have been in any case – at least in the near term. There was little hope before the new fight. Neither the government of Israel nor the Palestinian factions were ready to be the peace partner of the other. The most that renewed US and other efforts could have done was lay the ground work for future progress, define a “road map” with substantive content, and ameliorate some problems. The current state of affairs may undercut such efforts but they had little prospect of near-term success in any case.

Gaza will almost certainly become a “third” front in Israel’s active struggles with its neighbors – along with Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Hamas takeover in Gaza will present new security problems for Israel in isolating the Gaza Strip and providing security along its perimeter, and will possibly pin down more IDF and security forces along the border between Gaza and Egypt. It also, however, will reduce Israeli internal and outside pressures that sought to persuade Israel to relax its security restrictions on Gaza, deal with Hamas, and seek a comprehensive peace settlement. In fact, the end result may be to simplify Israel’s security problems by creating a total wall or separation in the south, easing its ability to use money and utilities like water and power as leverage, and conduct targeted attacks in Gaza. A low-level asymmetric struggle will result, with fewer operational constraints on the IDF and on hostile Israeli action.

Israel will face hard choices as to whether to invade or contain. Some Israeli officials initially responded by saying that Israel would not take military action. An article in the London Sunday Times claims, however, that Israel does have plans for such an invasion. The Sunday Times claims that Israel’s defense minister, Ehud Barak, plans to attack Gaza “within weeks” to remove the Hamas regime, using some 20,000 troops to destroy the core of Hamas’s military capability “in days” if Hamas conducts rocket attacks against Israel or carries out new suicide bombings. It claims Barak has “already demanded detailed plans to deploy two armored divisions and an infantry division, accompanied by assault drones and F-16 jets, against Hamas.” It should be noted, however, that the Sunday Times has a long track record of reporting war plans that either did not materialize or never existed, but even tabloids sometimes get the story right.

Egypt already faces new difficulties in securing the Philadelphia corridor and Sinai border in the face of a hostile Palestinian “government” in Gaza – at least some sympathy for Hamas among Egyptian soldiers and junior officers. Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia will all face more serious problems in dealing with Iranian, Al Qa’ida, and Syrian support, arms smuggling, and money transfers. The world is also likely to face more security problems in dealing with radical and embittered elements of the Palestinian diaspora.

Hamas will face major economic problems and could face invasion. World Bank and other studies made it extraordinarily doubtful that Gaza could ever develop and sustain a viable economy even during the period before the Israeli-Palestinian War began in 2000. Years of war and population growth have made things far worse. So has the cut off of substantial amounts of aid and revenues since Hamas’s political victory. Hamas at best is

likely to get enough money to create a hollow welfare state in Gaza, with no prospects for economic growth or dealing with the Gaza's high rate of population growth. Hamas faces probable trade restrictions, limits of port development of any kind, and reprisals in terms of power and water cuts for violence that spills over into Israel.

As for the West Bank, it will benefit from the fact that the US has already lifted aid restrictions, and it is likely to get major new aid to boost the Palestinian Authority and create a stronger opposition to Hamas. The key question will be whether Abbas can create something approaching an effective government, security structure, and economy in the West Bank; or whether the initial Fatah victory there will be wasted by corruption, ineffectiveness, repression, and a lack of resources.

PA Chairman Abu Mazen did sign a decree on June 15th approving the appointment of the new government and that allowed it to take office without the approval of parliament. His new Prime Minister, Dr. Salam Fayad – a widely respected economist – has formed an emergency government with 10 ministers who do not belong to Hamas or to Fatah. It at least claims to be a “national” government, and includes six ministers from the West Bank and four ministers from the Gaza Strip. If this is a prelude to effective governance, it could be a serious step forward. However, if the Palestinian Authority reverts to form, it may lose the West Bank.

Furthermore, if the Palestinian Authority should fail in the West Bank, the security consequences for both Israel and Jordan would be far worse. A radicalized Palestinian entity with no hope in peace, no real ties to moderate Arab governments, and no economic options would have little to lose in waging any kind of asymmetric struggle it could conceive of.

One potential longer-term impact of the Hamas-Fatah fighting is that the new geographic division of the Palestinian movement may gradually become one more Middle Eastern “fact on the ground.” If it does, Gazan moderates are likely to leave in any way they can, along with surviving Fatah loyalists. West Bank radicals, and those from the Palestinian diaspora are likely to move to Gaza or infiltrate in. Throw in infiltration from Iran, Al Qa’ida, etc. and any form of economic aid or development for Gaza becomes even more problematic.

A West Bank mini “state,” however, is scarcely likely to offer the Palestinians real hope. A weak West Bank will have even more problems in dealing with Israel over issues like the settlements, the “wall,” and Jerusalem. It can only be economically viable if tied closely to Israel with links to Jordan, but such ties require a level of security that may be impossible for the Palestinian Authority to create, particularly given Hamas and PIJ infiltration into the West Bank, and their ability to conduct spoiler operations from the West Bank against Israel (or Jordan).

More broadly, the “right of return” for Palestinians never made much sense given the internal population growth in Gaza and the West Bank and demographic pressure on their economies. The outside world now faces the problem of distinguishing between “Gazan”

and “West Bank” Palestinians, making it even harder for the diaspora and for Palestinians seeking to emigrate and find work.