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Palestinian Politics and the Annapolis Meeting

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The huge turnout of an estimated 250,000 Fatah supporters at a November 12 Gaza rally commemorating the third anniversary of Yasser Arafat's death reflects not only the worsening economic conditions since Hamas's June takeover, but also the factional rivalry over who is authorized to negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians at the upcoming Annapolis peace meeting. Since it is unable to provide services to Palestinians in Gaza, Hamas is using the meeting to delegitimize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), threaten the delicate security situation in the West Bank, and solidify its own domination of Gaza. Meanwhile, Fatah seeks to restore its influence in Gaza, challenge Hamas's claims of authority, and protect its control of the West Bank.

Renewed Tensions in Gaza

Motivated by the dire situation in Gaza and nostalgia for a better life, politically unaffiliated men and women of all ages joined Fatah's activists in the November 12 rally. They were eager to send a clear message to Hamas that its control of Gaza must end. Fearing escalating protests, Hamas gunmen fired on the crowd, killing at least eight and injuring dozens.

Much of the tension that Hamas has faced is due to its failure to lift the economic siege of Gaza, which has bankrupted the private sector and left an additional 80,000 people without work. The price of goods continues to rise, and border crossings remain closed even to students, the sick, and Mecca pilgrims. The Ramallah-based government headed by Salam Fayad has retained some influence in Gaza and managed to dampen the economic crisis by paying the salaries of PA officials in Gaza. A recent poll conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre indicated that 43 percent of Palestinians believe Fayad's government has performed better than the Hamas government, while 25 percent think the opposite. Hamas's only achievement -- restoring a measure of order and internal security in Gaza -- has been due more to its monopoly on arms than the allegiance of the population.

These poll results and the large turnout at the November 12 rally should not be viewed as an indication that Fatah has overcome its internal problems. Rather, it is a sign that the population is increasingly eager to be rid of the Hamas government. Fatah's weakness was shown when its officials in Gaza spent hours disputing who would address the rally before settling on Ahmed Hilis, the group's de facto leader in Gaza since Muhammad Dahlan's departure. Hilis did not mention Annapolis or President Mahmoud Abbas in his speech, but he did criticize Hamas for its coup and declared "Gaza will remain for Fatah."

The Ongoing Question of Legitimacy

As tensions in Gaza mount, Hamas is using the Annapolis initiative to challenge Abbas's right to negotiate on behalf of Palestinians. According to Hamas, the PLO -- whose chairman (Abbas) is legally responsible for political negotiations -- is a dead body. In fact, the PLO's national council has not met in nine years, its executive committee members are not elected, and it does not represent the distribution of political power among Palestinians. Hamas has issued a number of public rebukes about the illegality of any agreements reached at Annapolis and has also taken concrete measures aimed at undercutting Abbas, the Fayad

government, and the PLO.

On November 7, Hamas held a Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) session by reaching a quorum with the authorization of its thirty-five imprisoned members. Hamas legislators asserted that Abbas's decrees since June 2007 are void, including his appointment of Fayad to head the Palestinian Authority (PA). They threatened to dismiss Fayad from the PLC and declared that it never gave Abbas the mandate to negotiate with Israel.

In addition to this challenge, Hamas plans to hold a conference in Damascus that will coincide with the Annapolis conference in an attempt to demonstrate that the majority of Palestinian factions oppose negotiations with Israel. Hamas has invited all Palestinian factions to participate, and many Arab parliamentarians and journalists have already accepted, including some Fatah members who live abroad. Consequently, there is deep concern within Fatah that this Hamas-led conference will lay the foundation for establishing a new Palestinian representative body that will try to supplant the PLO. If Syria attends the Annapolis meeting, however, it will significantly weaken the impact of a parallel Hamas-led effort in Damascus, if not cancel it altogether.

Fatah has attempted to counter these measures by calling the November 7 PLC session unconstitutional, and it is preparing a number of legal changes that will increase Abbas's authority and flexibility in dealing with the deadlocked legislature. These amendments will permit the president to dissolve the PLC, call for new elections or a public referendum, and create a presidential deputy. Fatah has also sent senior representatives to Damascus to try to prevent the Hamas conference. None of these measures will likely resolve the ongoing crisis of legitimacy that began after Hamas's 2006 election victory. Instead, they indicate that the Hamas/Fatah dispute will increase in intensity as confrontations in Gaza mount and international diplomatic efforts progress. Hamas's June takeover of the territory and Fatah's increasingly harsh rhetoric regarding the coup indicate that the prospects of a renewed unity government deal along the lines of the February Mecca accord are extremely low.

Destabilizing the West Bank

The West Bank is another arena for potential Fatah-Hamas rivalry. In the past month, a number of Hamas leaders issued public threats regarding a possible repeat of the Gaza takeover in the West Bank. Several factors undermine the seriousness of these threats, however. For example, as a result of Israel's continued military presence in the West Bank and PA crackdowns on Hamas's military capabilities, the group does not have nearly the force it was able to marshal in Gaza. At the same time, pragmatists within Hamas, such as former prime minister Ismail Haniyeh and his aides, have been marginalized in recent months, and the head of its military wing, Muhammad Deif, declared that Hamas "is ready for offense." Although an overt Hamas uprising in the West Bank remains implausible, the group is most likely preparing for operations against Israeli targets, top PA officials, and security personnel to coincide with the Annapolis meeting, with the objective of destabilizing the West Bank.

The PA has undertaken some important efforts recently to counter this threat, arresting Hamas activists and associated criminal elements in the territory and negotiating amnesty agreements with elements of the al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigades in exchange for movement restrictions and disarmament. Discouraging signs remain, however: Abbas travels in an armored car within his own compound, and police in Nablus are still struggling to end the anarchy there.

Conclusion

The push for diplomatic progress at Annapolis has already exacerbated the confrontation between Fatah and Hamas. As the meeting approaches and final-status negotiations begin, Palestinian violence may increase and possibly erupt in the West Bank. Moreover, diplomatic prospects have raised the stakes of the debate over who has the political legitimacy to negotiate with Israel. Regardless of what transpires in Annapolis, the PA views implementing the Quartet Roadmap's phase-one security requirements as essential to demonstrating its

credibility and authority.

Because of the ongoing Hamas challenge and the prospect for further escalation, efforts to strengthen the PA's capabilities and improve daily life will become even more critical in the coming weeks. For this reason, the December international donors meeting in France, which will be hosted by French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner and special Middle East envoy Tony Blair, should prepare immediate projects to help bolster Abbas and Fayad and not simply launch a process that delays any forthcoming funds until several months in the future.

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