

PolicyWatch #1285

## Hamas's Authoritarian Regime in Gaza

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During the first eighteen months following its January 2006 electoral victories, Hamas took an incremental approach toward official integration into the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Since its takeover of Gaza in June 2007, however, Hamas has changed tactics and imposed an independent, authoritarian regime.

After an initial period of calm, there are increasing signs of public discontent over the faction's nascent rule. Yet, Hamas has a near monopoly on the means of force -- its disciplined and well-organized security forces have managed to control Fatah-led disturbances. The group will continue to consolidate its rule in Gaza unless PA officials in the West Bank initiate a clear strategy aimed at the long-term restoration of authority there. Without such an effort, Hamas will further undermine the legitimacy of President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayad, limiting their mandate to negotiate on behalf of all Palestinians at the planned international peace conference this fall.

### Hamas's Political Agenda

Since the Gaza takeover, Abbas has maintained that he will not negotiate with Hamas until the territory is restored to its pre-June status and a public apology is issued for the violence Hamas has perpetrated. For his part, Fayad insists that Hamas disband its militias before it can become a full participant in the PA. Frustrated by this stance, Hamas has attempted to delegitimize the two leaders in several ways.

First, the group declared that his appointment of the Fayad government, his change of the electoral law to an entirely proportional system, and his call for early elections are all illegal actions taken without approval from the Palestinian Legislative Council -- a body that Hamas dominates. Second, Hamas refuted Abbas's right to negotiate with Israel in an effort to undermine any diplomatic progress in the coming months. Finally, Hamas claimed to have seized documents from Abbas's security forces that allegedly prove Fatah's corruption and collaboration with Western intelligence agencies. These efforts to challenge Abbas in public have been accompanied by a Hamas ground offensive in Gaza to eliminate opposition and ensure political hegemony.

### Taking Control

Hamas has conducted a sustained campaign aimed at capturing and intimidating Fatah activists since the June takeover. The group has arrested and tortured dozens of Fatah leaders and assaulted Ashraf Juma, a Fatah member in the legislature, in his office on July 24. These initial violations of civil liberties appear to have sparked further dissent against Hamas rule.

Over the past several weeks, Hamas has prevented or broken up peaceful Fatah demonstrations in Khan Younis, Beit Hanun, and Gaza City. On August 31, Friday prayers were conducted in the center of Gaza City in protest of Hamas's use of mosques as political platforms. Shortly afterward, Hamas violently dispersed a peaceful march of PLO supporters. Despite a September 4 ban on further public prayer gatherings, several thousand PLO supporters challenged the prohibition just three days later. Hamas security forces broke up that

gathering as well, beating protesters, severely wounding sixty people, and arresting dozens of activists, including several top PLO officials. As a result of the crackdown, the PLO called for a general strike that many Palestinians have supported.

Journalists have also been victims of these repressive activities. According to the al-Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza, Hamas has prohibited journalists from recording human rights violations, confiscated and destroyed cameras, and invaded offices. Hamas has also prevented the official Palestinian television network from using its offices or covering events in Gaza. And on at least one occasion, the group has prevented distribution of the main Palestinian newspapers.

### **An Agenda for Competition**

Abbas has focused his recent activities on securing control of the West Bank and revoking decisions he made during the unity government period. Under his and Fayad's leadership, the PA has arrested Hamas members in the West Bank, blocked their organizational activities, dismissed Hamas members from PA institutions, and banned more than one hundred nongovernmental organizations and charities in an effort to combat Hamas's charitable network. Although some of these policies may prove effective in weakening Hamas in the immediate future, the current strategy lacks a long-term vision. Concentrated actions in the following three areas would help Abbas and Fatah counter Hamas's appeal and dominance in Gaza:

*Politics.* Abbas must challenge Hamas politically and highlight the fundamental differences that led to the breakdown in unity negotiations. He must state clearly that dialogue with Hamas is possible but is contingent on the group's acceptance of a two-state solution to the conflict with Israel, the Arab League's 2002 peace initiative, and past PLO agreements with Israel. This strategy would shift the debate from the factional rivalry in Gaza to the divergent policies and visions for the future of Palestinian statehood advocated by Fatah and Hamas. Moreover, Arab states would be encouraged to end their advocacy of another unity agreement without Hamas concessions on behalf of peace with Israel.

*Economic Relief.* Although Hamas's control of Gaza places significant restrictions on what officials can do from Ramallah, Abbas and Fayad must appear relevant to Gazans. They should use their public profiles and diplomatic influence to help ensure the delivery of basic needs such as electricity, medicine, food, and water. Given their absence from the public debate on Gaza's humanitarian plight, Abbas and Fayad have been accused of conspiring against Palestinians rather than advocating on their behalf. If the PA remains invisible on humanitarian and economic issues, it will only further drive Gazans into the hands of Hamas. For this reason, the upcoming international conference must produce immediate donor support for the PA, including humanitarian relief for Gaza.

*Reform.* For Fatah to challenge Hamas in Gaza, the movement needs active and legitimate leaders who are responsive to the population and removed from the corrupt, failed legacy of Muhammad Dahlan. Fatah will only be restored in Gaza as part of a broader initiative to revitalize the movement as an effective and representative political party. Until Abbas recognizes that such reform is a top priority, Palestinian moderates will not gain sufficient political backing to challenge Hamas in future elections.

### **Conclusion**

A Gaza agenda alone is no substitute for the actions Abbas must take in order to preserve and enhance the PA's authority in the West Bank: enforcing the rule of law, fighting corruption, and reforming Fatah in order to overcome Hamas in any future election. Progress on these fronts will not only strengthen Palestinian moderates domestically, but also legitimize their efforts at the international conference this fall. Palestinians will reject the summit as an exercise in empty promises if they do not begin to see tangible improvements in their daily lives. Therefore, if the Bush administration seeks to advance the peace process, it must focus on helping Abbas and Fayad implement a competitive agenda that will raise their political standing.

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