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Hamas's Coup and the Challenges Ahead for Fatah

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Hamas's victory in Gaza last week was a military coup of Fatah's security forces -- not a Palestinian civil war involving the majority of each faction's supporters. Fatah's armed forces collapsed in the face of a long-planned, well-executed campaign targeting the headquarters and leadership of the faction's security organizations. The coup and the grisly violence that accompanied it reveal much about Hamas's politics and long-term objectives as a movement.

The triumph occurred largely due to the weakness of Fatah's leadership, which failed to mobilize the faction's superior numbers to stave off the assaults or organize any kind of counteroffensive. When formulating policy responses to the Hamas victory, the United States and its partners must recognize that no level of support for Fatah will enable the organization to defeat Hamas in the political arena if it does not undertake long-overdue reforms, including the overhaul of its inept leadership. The new emergency government headed by economist Salam Fayad is technocratic rather than political, so reforming Fatah will not be among its many missions. Such reform will instead have to be pursued in parallel with whatever steps are taken to bolster the new cabinet.

Fatah's Leadership Void

Fighting against a larger force, Hamas recognized that Fatah's primary vulnerability stemmed from rivalries among its leaders and their serial inability to take decisive action. Using a divide-and-conquer strategy, Hamas targeted the most threatening members of Fatah's Gaza leadership and their families while apparently cutting deals with Fatah figures keen to cooperate with Hamas. In essence, Hamas won the battle for Gaza by driving Fatah's most significant figureheads into exile in Ramallah a month before taking control of the streets.

In mid-May, for example, Hamas forces entered the home of Rashid Abu Shbak and killed several of his bodyguards. Shbak is a longtime deputy and enforcer of Fatah strongman Muhammad Dahlan and former director-general of the interior ministry. Although he had already fled to Ramallah when the attack occurred, the signal to him and Dahlan (recovering from medical treatment in Cairo at the time) was clear: they would be targeted for assassination if they returned to Gaza. Similarly, Hamas surrounded and shelled the homes of Preventive Security director Samir Mashrawi and Fatah spokesman Maher Mukdad, in addition to burning the homes of two Fatah representatives on the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Even as it carried out these attacks, Hamas publicly explained that its grievances were not with Fatah as a whole, but specifically with Fatah's Preventive Security Organization, presidential guard, and general intelligence personnel, all of which it labeled collaborators with Israel. This distinction paid off when Ahmed Hilis, a long-time Fatah rival of Dahlan's in Gaza, declared on al-Jazeera that Fatah and Hamas were not fighting each other. Instead, he claimed, groups within each movement were responsible for the violence. Previously, Hilis had organized an April conference for thousands of his supporters during which he criticized the motivations of "some groups" within Fatah and announced his opposition to joining the clashes with Hamas. His faction thus avoided being targeted by Hamas during the Gaza takeover.

Hilis represents an important perspective among those Fatah leaders who continue to favor cooperation with Hamas over confrontation. Other such leaders include Dahlan rival Jibril Rajoub, whose brother is a Hamas legislator, and Marwan Barghouti, who helped orchestrate the February 2007 Mecca accord and subsequent unity government from prison and has remained quiet in the face of Hamas's victory.

Those Fatah leaders who had been driven from Gaza before Hamas's takeover, along with their allies in the West Bank, responded to the assault with silence and paralysis. Just one day before Hamas overran his compound in Gaza and defaced his office, even President Mahmoud Abbas declared in a press conference with the Dutch foreign minister that he did "not blame one party" for the fighting. Both Abbas -- commander-in-chief of the Palestinian armed forces -- and other top Fatah security officials abandoned their roles as leaders while Hamas was surrounding their troops. Numerous press reports from Gaza have quoted local Fatah commanders and soldiers pleading for orders, some admitting that they could not reach their superiors for instructions because of turned-off cell phones. And even when Abbas finally acted to dissolve the government and declare a state of emergency, he chose an aide to read his decree rather than addressing the public directly.

It is impossible to say whether Fatah could have staved off total defeat had Abbas or his deputies taken a more vocal and active leadership role once Hamas made clear its intentions. But there is no doubt that the leadership void left Fatah without a chance. Abbas, for his part, did not issue any meaningful instructions to the police -- who were not engaged in most of the fighting -- to defend the other security organizations. Nor did he provide orders to the thousands of Fatah members in Gaza or demand that the leaders hiding in Ramallah return and rally their troops. Without such decisive moves, Fatah ensured its own collapse.

Hamas Motives

The extent of the planning required for Hamas's systematic operations last week indicate that the group was preparing for such an assault even before it became clear that the Mecca accord would not succeed. For example, exploding the tunnel under the Preventive Security headquarters in Khan Yunis alone took weeks of preparation.

It appears that Hamas initiated the ultimate round of fighting to achieve three related objectives, articulated by political bureau head Khaled Mashal in a June 15 press conference in Damascus: (1) force Abbas to implement the terms of the Mecca accord, which stipulated that Hamas be integrated into the security forces and, more significantly, into the official organs of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); (2) preemptively defeat Fatah's forces in Gaza before they could be strengthened from the outside -- a source of increasing concern for Hamas after the presidential guard began to receive training and supplies from the United States; and (3) reestablish internal security within Gaza.

Whether or not it was a realistic calculation, Hamas appears to have operated under the assumption that Fatah's defeat would force Abbas and his allies to concede Hamas's major points of contestation during unity discussions. Hamas has already reached out to Arab states to endorse its position on integrating the security services and restructuring the PLO. A June 16 meeting of Arab foreign ministers signaled that the Arab League would scrupulously avoid any kind of partisan role, however, instead offering to form a fact-finding committee to investigate the violence in Gaza.

Mashal's conciliatory press conference on June 15 emphasized that Hamas does not seek total control of the Palestinian Authority (PA), but rather a true unity government according to its interpretation of the Mecca accord. The group has rejected the legitimacy of the emergency government headed by Fayad, insisting that the West Bank and Gaza be governed together. To indicate its good faith, Hamas issued a public pardon to all Fatah security forces in Gaza and released several of Fatah's remaining leaders captured during the violence.

The question for Hamas, however, is whether it acted too quickly and presumptuously. The group is now accountable to the people of Gaza and must figure out a way to feed the 1.4 million residents whose main

source of assistance was suspended during the violence. As conditions rapidly worsen, blaming the West, Israel, or Abbas will not satisfy the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians whose means of subsistence and political identity as part of a future Palestinian state are now in question.

The Fatah Response

Not surprisingly, Fatah forces retaliated against Hamas leaders and institutions in the West Bank, arresting activists, closing educational and cultural centers, and evicting elected officials from their offices. In Nablus, Fatah replaced the elected Hamas municipal council with its own newly appointed members and dismissed Hamas appointments to PA ministries. Such actions were taken out of both revenge and a genuine fear that Hamas may have a military apparatus capable of transferring the Gaza violence to the West Bank.

In all these cases, Fatah acted in the same extralegal manner Abbas did when he declared a state of emergency and appointed a new government of technocrats that, in practice, can operate only in the West Bank. Although Abbas may have felt he had no choice but to appoint the emergency government and invalidate the previously amended Basic Law, he must now take a series of steps to prove he is acting legitimately and out of a sense of responsibility to the Palestinian public. Fatah has one last chance to cling to authority in the West Bank; if it fails in the coming months, it risks losing control of the PLO and, consequently, its leadership of the Palestinians.

In addition to marshaling the expected economic assistance from the West to improve living conditions in the West Bank, Abbas must initiate an internal process of serious reforms to restore Fatah's credibility. Donor assistance or U.S. promises of what lies on the "political horizon" may help Fatah in the short term, but they cannot substitute for the badly needed reforms the faction must undergo if it is to regain legitimacy in the eyes of the populace. This means that the paralyzing rivalries among its leadership must be suspended; internal elections must take place (serious preparation for a party conference -- which has not taken place in eighteen years -- would be a good start); and grassroots activists and professionals must begin to take advantage of renewed international assistance by providing medical care, food, and educational services to their constituents. Fatah must also rein in its own militants and restore some measure of credibility to a long-broken judicial system.

Only if Fatah can work simultaneously on the political, security, and social levels will it prove itself capable of restoring its lost credibility and competing with Hamas politically. Without significant efforts on all these fronts, financial and diplomatic gestures toward Abbas are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the 1990s, when donor assistance only cultivated corruption and the problems that plague Fatah today.

There should be no illusions that such reform will be easy. Yet there is a dedicated group of young leaders within Fatah who are committed to the principles of internal democracy and hungry for the opportunity to restore legitimacy to a movement still governed by an older generation that was never connected to the Palestinian populace. Hopefully, the defeat in Gaza will shock Fatah into recognizing that it must adapt in order to overcome Hamas. The younger generation of Fatah leaders will need assistance from the West, however. Western diplomats would be wise to meet with these leaders directly and support their activities instead of relying on Abbas's office to perform the task of reform that it has avoided for the past two-and-a-half years.

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