

PolicyWatch #1247 : Special Forum Report

## Hamas and the Second Six Day War: Implications, Challenges, and Opportunities

Featuring [Robert Satloff](#)

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*On June 18, 2007, Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute, addressed the Institute's special Policy Forum, along with Ghaith al-Omari, Robert Malley, and David Makovsky. The following are Dr. Satloff's remarks as prepared for delivery. Video of all speakers' remarks is available using the video link at right, or by visiting this [special event page](#).*

Hamas's victory over Fatah in six days of fighting -- a second Six Day War -- serves as a clarifying moment for the Middle East, a pivotal event that is characterized not only by dark clouds but also by potential silver linings.

### Historical Context

Hamas's success caps a forty-year evolution of the Palestinian role in the larger Arab-Israeli conflict. In 1967, Israel's military victories rocked the armies and regimes of neighboring Arab states, energizing the previously marginal Palestinian nationalist movement and, especially, Fatah. That term, "Fatah," is a reverse Arabic acronym for "Harakat Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini," the Palestinian National Liberation Movement.

For all its terrorist activities against Israel and its assassination of other Palestinians who deviated from the party line, Fatah always had -- for Palestinians -- a positive objective: the liberation of Palestine. Before 1967, this could only refer to Israel. Since then, the critical question -- whose answer is still not fully clear -- is whether liberation still applies to Israel or to territories Israel occupied in 1967. Either way, Fatah was always flexible and even indifferent as to the means: diplomacy, terror, or war? Phased, step-by-step, or comprehensive? Secular or Islamic? Democratic, consensual, or fascistic? The means always meant less to Fatah than the goal.

Ten years later, in 1977, Anwar Sadat took Egypt out of the Arab war against Israel and, along the way, rejected Menachem Begin's offer of Gaza. That ended, at least until now, the prospect of resurrecting the prescription envisioned in UN Security Council 242 by which the combatants of 1967 would be the parties to the resolution of the conflict.

Another ten years later, in 1987, Hamas was born. Hamas is Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyaa, the Islamic Resistance Movement. The name tells the story -- Hamas is not about Palestine and not about liberation. In other words, it is not about ends, it is about means -- resistance through the prism of Islam. It is, at its core, a negative, nihilist movement. The key question for Hamas is not "which Palestine" does it want to liberate; it is "against whom is it resisting"?

Originally, the answer was Israel, and whenever the potential of Hamas-Fatah clashes would emerge, Hamas spokesmen would always decry the prospect of *fitna* (internal dissension *cum* civil war) as anathema to an Islamic political movement. In retrospect, that was -- to borrow a Shiite term -- *taqiya*, dissimulation. It is now

apparent that for Hamas, fitna -- resistance targeted against other Palestinians -- is quite legitimate. And so, forty years after 1967, the most pivotal development in the Arab-Israeli arena is a civil war within the party that was not even a player in the 1967 conflict.

## **Responsibility**

Answering the question "Who lost Gaza?" will produce seas of ink and piles of newsprint. There is much blame to go around.

Principal responsibility lies with the Palestinian people and their historic leaders. We need to remember that the same Palestinians who reportedly tell pollsters they support a two-state solution with Israel gave their vote to the party that opposes any peace with Israel in January 2006. We need to remember that Palestinian president and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas, who has repeatedly said he rejects violence and endorses the two-state solution, legitimized Hamas's rejectionist alternative by entering into a power-sharing agreement with the group in the February 2007 Mecca accord. And we all saw that PLO security forces, which at one point numbered more than 50,000, disintegrated in the face of a much smaller but more zealous, committed, and motivated adversary. In short, Hamas knew what it wanted; Fatah did not.

Israel cannot escape blame either. No one compelled Israel to disengage from Gaza or to do so in such a way as to rob that initiative of strategic value. On the one hand, Israel failed to arrange for an orderly, cooperative transition that could have strengthened Abbas and empowered him as a potential partner. On the other hand, Israel failed to follow through on all political, economic, and security aspects of disengagement, denying itself the consequent diplomatic benefits and leaving itself responsible for Gaza's survival even as the territory's residents launch missiles against Israeli civilians. And perhaps most catastrophic of all, no one compelled Israel to permit a party committed to its destruction to participate in legislative elections in territory that it occupies.

For Arab states -- whose definition of courage is to endorse a vague offer of eventual peace with Israel that is fifteen years out of date, and then do virtually nothing to implement it -- the Hamas victory should awaken them to the danger within. How did Hamas acquire the weapons it used to defeat Fatah? Through Arab land (Egypt). How did Hamas acquire the funds it used to pay its foot soldiers? Through Arab donors (and Iranians, too). How did Hamas acquire the legitimacy to lay claim to leadership of the Palestinian people? Through Arab diplomacy (the Mecca accord). Perhaps the prospect of the first-ever military victory of radical Islamists over a Sunni government in the heart of Arab lands will shock Arab leaders into action.

(On this point, however, I am not optimistic -- Arab leaders are more likely to respond to the Hamas military victory the way they did to the Khomeini revolution in Iran. In that case, Arab states' defense mechanism was to invest virtually every marginal dollar in internal security to protect against the viral spread of radicalism rather than take real measures to improve governance in their countries. In this situation, Arab countries are likely to take stiff measures to prevent the virus of Hamas-style Islamism from crossing their borders -- which is legitimate -- without taking any serious steps to strengthen Palestinians on the front lines against Hamas or trying to undermine Hamas itself. Of all Arab countries, the Jordanians are most likely to see in the Hamas victory a rationale for a more assertive posture in the West Bank, though still short of what some may hope for in terms of a "Jordanian option.")

And for the United States, the loss of Gaza caps a five-year experiment in "virtual diplomacy." In his June 2002 Rose Garden address, President Bush delivered one of his finest speeches, offering a new vision of U.S. engagement in the Middle East peace process. He outlined a bargain: Washington would lead the international effort to advance a two-state solution, but it would only do so once the Palestinians transformed their own leadership into a partner worthy of the effort, a leadership untainted by terror.

Five years later, after doing little to help bring about that new leadership except to insist on the holding of an election that catapulted Hamas to power, the administration now has a government in Gaza -- if you can call it

that -- that is terrorist through and through. I urge the president not to give a speech next week reminding the world of his 2002 commitments, which would only prompt listeners to ask how we got from there to here; it will not be a signal moment in American diplomatic history.

There are some in the administration who are saying "I told you so" -- claiming that the Palestinians needed a political horizon to have something to fight for, that if only we had articulated a detailed vision of the eventual Palestinian future and sketched clearly the borders of the Palestinian state and the defined pathway that would reach it, then Fatah fighters would have had the ideological fire in their bellies. Advocates of this point of view, I am afraid to say, are operating under a delusion. As a forty-eight-year-old Fatah military officer was quoted as saying after his arrest and subsequent release in Gaza last week: "We decided to surrender because we didn't feel that our commanders and leaders were behind us. Many of our commanders had fled to Ramallah and Cairo, where they were issuing orders to us from air-conditioned hotel rooms."

In essence, Fatah lost because the rot was too deep, and the equivocating answer that Fatah was offering the Palestinian people -- sometimes working hand-in-hand with Hamas, sometimes opposing Hamas -- was murky, muddy, and muddled. This was not, at the core, an American problem and was not fixable by American solutions. It was a case of Fatah itself being of two minds about the path forward.

### **Options and Opportunities**

The consolidation of political and military control in Gaza by a radical Islamic movement committed to Israel's destruction is a new situation; now is the time for options. My own view is that we have witnessed a terrible setback, but not one without silver linings.

The first silver lining is the benefit of clarity. Gaza is fully under the control of an enemy regime. There is no fig leaf of PLO, PA, or Fatah to blur the reality.

The second silver lining concerns one of the most serious flaws in the original Oslo Accords: Israel's formal decision to consider the West Bank and Gaza "single territory unit." These were, of course, territories that Israel occupied from two different countries, territories with no contiguity between them, territories with very different historical roots as well as populations with very different economies and socioeconomic characteristics. While one could imagine linkage between them being a possible outcome of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Israeli recognition of their indivisibility from the outset of the Oslo process was an unrequited concession of the most profound proportions. The de facto situation is that this situation has now ended.

The third silver lining is that the Gaza victory gives Israel the opportunity for clear choices:

\* The military reoccupation of Gaza, as a way to destroy the "enemy regime" now in control there. Israelis across the political spectrum, including opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu, oppose such major ground operations in Gaza. Given the very real potential for a summer confrontation on Israel's northern front, there is little appetite in Israel for going back into Gaza at the moment.

\* Military reoccupation of limited pieces of Gaza territory, either a strip in the north to serve as a buffer against Qassam rockets, a strip in the south to prevent smuggling, or both. While these ideas have some rationale, they are -- at most -- stopgap measures that do not fundamentally alter the strategic equation.

\* Complete disengagement. My own view is that the United States should urge Israel to complete the process of disengagement that it began in 2005. Israel, one should recall, removed its soldiers and civilian communities from Gaza but retained legal, economic, and security responsibility. The problem, therefore, was that Israel paid the cost of disengagement but never received the benefits. In the eyes of the world, only Israel remained an occupying power after it ended its occupation. Israel is alone in the world as being the only country responsible for providing food, water, and electricity to a political entity that daily lobbs missiles against its citizens. This is madness.

Israel should consider completing its disengagement from Gaza, which would include the following: severing the custom's union; announcing that Israel will, after a certain defined period, cease to serve as the entry point for all goods, people, and services into Gaza; and terminating the "Philadelphia Road" security agreement which has only become a trap for Israeli security. Effectively, this would leave Egypt as Gaza's outlet to the world, with food, water, electricity, and other humanitarian goods flowing over the Gaza-Egypt border.

When I offer this suggestion, the usual reply is "but Egypt doesn't want this responsibility." My answer is this: Since when did Egypt get a veto on Israel's sovereign decision to end an occupation for whose end the international community has pleaded for forty years? Unless Israel takes such a step, Hamas will continue to have its cake and eat it, taking advantage of Israeli humanitarianism while lobbing missiles at Israel.

Am I sure that Hamas will continue to lob missiles at Israel? Hamas will certainly have its own internal debate. There will be some in Hamas who say that the group should consolidate its gains, try to pick up the pieces of the PLO, and offer Abu Mazen a deal -- long-term internal *hudna* for full parity with Fatah inside PLO institutions and the PA's security force (or maybe for even more demanding terms). Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh may make this argument, and Khaled Mashal, who seemed surprised by the speed of Hamas's military victory, may even make it as well.

But I believe that argument will not win the day. The masked men of Rafah, Khan Yunis, and Gaza City will have none of it. They will insist on launching as many Qassam rockets as possible, hoping to hit a school or clinic in Sderot, or, if they are really lucky, a major industrial site in Ashkelon. They want the Israelis to enter Gaza in full force, where they believe the street fighting in the refugee camps will make Israel's 2002 Operation Defensive Shield look like a picnic. In my view, Israel would be better served by ending its direct connection with Gaza and formally considering it as a belligerent adversary under de facto control of an enemy government. This would give Israel more leverage to deal with the Hamas threat than the current state of "disengaged occupation."

\* A fourth silver lining concerns the West Bank. Now is the moment to capitalize on the sobering effect of this new situation. Abbas, the man who prevaricated so long that he did not order his soldiers to fire back until day five of this second Six Day War, has taken some surprisingly bold and positive steps since the loss of Gaza, including outlawing Hamas militias. In his wisest move, he did not appoint a new government of old Fatah hacks; instead, he named a cabinet, under Salam Fayad, comprised primarily of competent independents -- indeed, it might finally constitute a Palestinian government untainted by terrorism. It deserves speedy and substantive support.

That support should not come in the form of a new grand political vision. That is because we should not believe the simplistic logic that says the West Bank is totally controlled by Fatah while Gaza is totally supportive of Hamas; indeed, there is quite a lot of Hamas support in the West Bank, too. But Hamas has not succeeded in penetrating nearly as far in the West Bank -- why? While there are many factors, the critical variable is the active presence of the Israeli army, as many West Bankers are very willing to recognize. Ironically, the political horizon that some in the administration would like to talk about would raise premature hopes about the removal of precisely that factor that is the most important barrier to the spread of Hamas in the West Bank today.

This is not to say that there is no room for diplomacy; there is. But it should be practical diplomacy. It is diplomacy that takes advantage of the sobering effect of the Hamas coup to build on the mutual interests of the West Bankers, Israelis, Jordanians, Arabs, and Westerners to create a different situation, one in which there finally emerges in the West Bank a functioning, transparent, accountable government that provides services to its people, a government that may, one day, trigger the other half of President Bush's 2002 bargain. Washington's strategy should be to finally act, with the resources and commitment of our government, to implement the president's five-year-old vision regarding Palestinian governance.

Will Palestinian leaders accept a de facto separation between the West Bank and Gaza and the effective

containment of the Hamas regime in the latter region? It is important to remember that Abbas would not be the first Palestinian leader to accept such a separation. After all, it was Yasser Arafat himself who negotiated the "Gaza and Jericho first" accord, which brought the Palestinian Authority to Gaza, with only the fig leaf of Jericho to give him the ability to say that he had not forsaken the bulk of the West Bank. If Arafat could agree to the practical separation between Gaza and the West Bank in a deal he himself negotiated, then few will begrudge Abu Mazen from recognizing the power of *force majeure* to impose that reality on him.

## **Conclusion**

We need to recognize that there are no simple, neat, clever solutions to help us emerge from this new phase in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The most we can hope for is that we and our partners act more soberly in the face of these new challenges than we have in the recent past. We need to accept the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be with us for a long time. We have just witnessed this conflict mutating, as it has done so often over the past century. Our task is to manage it, limit it, and mitigate its negative repercussions, and build for the day when a resolution becomes possible.

There is some hope that the transformation of Gaza into "the Islamic Republic of Palestine" and the bracing impact that this will have throughout the Arab-Israeli arena has the potential to smash this jaw-breaking problem into what may be bite-sized, digestible, and ultimately more resolvable pieces. But we need to temper any sense of opportunity with a hefty dose of realism. A path forward, if one exists, will be neither smooth nor speedy.

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