

PolicyWatch #1428

## Is Hamas Committed to the Ceasefire?

By Yoram Cohen  
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Last week, Israeli forces entered Gaza, destroyed an underground border tunnel, and battled Hamas fighters, leaving several militants dead. In response, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad fired around eighty rockets into southern Israel, including the Israeli city of Ashkelon. Despite this breach of the *tahdiya*, or ceasefire, both Hamas and Israeli leaders have stressed their desire to deescalate the situation. But considering Hamas's history of violence against Israel, the organization's commitment to the *tahdiya* is open to serious question.

### Background

On June 19, 2008, Israel and Hamas began observing an Egyptian-mediated ceasefire, which was intended to last six months with an option to extend. Hamas's support for this lull, however, is not a sign that it favors long-term peace with Israel. Rather, Hamas recognizes the painful results provoked by its continuing attacks on Israel. The organization is concerned that a large-scale incursion by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would prevent it from dealing with its complex set of challenges and also endanger its main achievement, the complete control of the Gaza Strip. The truce promotes Hamas's interests by buying time to advance the movement's short- and long-term goals.

### Hamas Goals

Hamas's primary long-term goal is the liberation of historic Palestine "from the sea to the river" and the foundation of an independent state based on *sharia*, or Islamic religious law. This would require the destruction of the state of Israel and control over Palestinian institutions, including the Palestinian Authority (PA), the Palestine Liberation Organization, and all of the Palestinian Diaspora groups. To this end, Hamas seeks a powerful modern army to continue its armed struggle against Israel, a goal that is aided by Israel's enemies, Iran, Syria, and Hizballah.

In the short term, Hamas faces a number of economic, political, and security challenges. Its primary economic interest is to end its dependence on Israel's infrastructure and economy by permanently opening crossings into the Gaza Strip, particularly the Rafah crossing into Egypt. This would increase investment in the Gaza economy, as well as the movement of goods. An economic improvement in the Strip would also reduce public criticism of the Hamas military activities that have led to severe Israeli reprisals.

Hamas's immediate security interest is the consolidation of its control over Gaza. This requires avoiding or eliminating both external and internal challenges to its sovereignty. It needs to protect its leaders from Israeli targeted attacks, and to halt IDF operations inside Gaza, which would damage Hamas's strength and potentially lead to its downfall. In an effort to deter future Israeli military action, Hamas is also upgrading its military capabilities so it can exact a heavy toll inside Israel should future fighting break out.

### Mixed Results for Hamas

In general, Hamas has observed the ceasefire; the number of attacks and rocket launches has decreased

significantly, and Hamas has prevented other Gaza militant organizations from striking Israel. Nonetheless, prior to last week's spasm of violence, Palestinian organizations in Gaza had violated the *tahdiya* more than forty times by launching rockets and mortar shells and by detonating improvised explosive devices against IDF patrols along the fence separating Israel from Gaza.

Although Hamas has not achieved its main economic goals -- an agreement on permanent border crossings and an improved economic situation in Gaza -- its leaders are relatively satisfied with current political developments. Hamas seeks legitimacy in the West and the Arab world, and after years of tattered relations with Jordan, Hamas representatives were recently invited to speak with the Jordanian government. In its Egyptian-sponsored dialogue with rival Fatah, Hamas continues to adopt a tough and uncompromising stance, but its assumptions about Fatah's weakness may soon end if Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas is able to extend his term -- and consequently Fatah's legitimacy -- until January 2010. In addition, negotiations for the release of Hamas prisoners are still ongoing (using kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit as leverage), and Hamas was able to conduct secret internal elections in August for the movement's institutions and to elect the senior members for the Shura Council, the policymaking body in Gaza.

Security developments offer even more optimism for Hamas leaders. IDF units have halted all operations inside Gaza, which bolsters Hamas's claim to sovereignty in the area. This halt also allows Hamas leaders and commanders to move freely without fear of a targeted Israeli strike. As expected, Hamas is using the lull to strengthen its military capabilities. The organization has smuggled explosives, antitank missiles, rifles, and high-tech equipment via the Egyptian border, enabling Hamas to complete its defensive plans as well as improve its use of Qassam rockets. Also, the lull has allowed Hamas to deal successfully with internal security challenges. Hamas fighters laid siege to rival clan strongholds, resulting in a high number of casualties, including women and children. Although its use of excessive force damaged its public image, Hamas achieved two important goals: a clear resolution as to who was in charge in Gaza and a warning to other Palestinian elements considering a challenge to Hamas's power.

Hamas's continuing source of frustration on the security front, however, is its vulnerability outside Gaza. The organization's military infrastructure is weak in the West Bank, and it has difficulty executing major attacks inside Israel. Israeli and PA arrests of Hamas activists, along with disruption of its social institutions, also frustrate Hamas ambitions.

## **Conclusion**

Although certain Hamas officials (particularly in the military wing) want to abandon the ceasefire altogether, most of its leaders will most likely continue to emphasize the truce's benefits and maintain the agreement for the near term, since it allows Hamas to make progress on other goals. Hamas leaders, however, will continue to encourage and assist the group's West Bank elements in executing large-scale attacks inside Israel. Hamas will also threaten or attack senior PA officials who act against the group's infrastructure in the West Bank, in an effort to curb this activity. Hamas may even permit "unidentified cells" in Gaza to engage in attacks that it considers "legitimate" during the lull. For instance, Hamas may use its underground tunnel network to kidnap Israeli soldiers or send operatives into Egypt to infiltrate Israel from the Sinai.

Hamas will also continue to discuss reconciliation with Fatah while maintaining a tough negotiating stance. The group will increase its criticism of Abbas in an effort to undermine his public legitimacy and to create public pressure for him to end his term as scheduled in January 2009. If successful, Hamas will insist that the president's duties and powers be transferred to a Hamas member of the Palestinian Legislative Council until new presidential elections are held. There is no evidence, however, that the PA will accept this demand.

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