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West Bank Violence and Gaza Rockets Could Spark Wider Conflict

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There is no guarantee that a peace deal will be reached within the current timeline, but a Palestinian return to armed struggle would be a far greater political, economic, and humanitarian disaster than any short-term frustration with the negotiations.

Peace processes are rarely peaceful processes, and the current U.S.-led effort to reach an Israeli-Palestinian "framework agreement" is no exception. As the tempo of negotiations between the main parties picks up speed, more radical actors have reemerged to violently oppose the process, from Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the Popular Resistance Committees, to Salafi jihadist groups, to Marxist factions such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Many observers have focused on the sharp increase in rockets fired at Israel from Gaza in the past few weeks and the prospect of another Gaza war. But that issue, while crucial, has drawn media attention away from two equally troubling trends: the increase in violence across the West Bank, and new signs that some officials from the Palestinian Authority and its leading party, Fatah, may be hedging their bets and preparing for wider violence if the peace process fails.

WEST BANK INSTABILITY

The growth of West Bank violence in recent months raises several concerns. First, while overall Israeli deaths from terrorist attacks declined from 2012 to 2013, none of the fatal 2012 attacks originated from the West Bank. But this flipped in 2013, with five of that year's six Israeli fatalities stemming from the West Bank. Second, Israeli and Palestinian sources agree that PA security forces have been weak in the face of recent unrest. Residents of West Bank refugee camps in particular are becoming increasingly hostile, and the PA has been pulling back as a result. The Israel Defense Forces have taken up some of the slack -- IDF arrests in the West Bank went up by a third from 2012 to 2013. Yet as

violent activity intensifies, successful attacks will become ever more likely.

A number of factors have contributed to the deteriorating security situation. The PA suffered a serious blow when Prime Minister Salam Fayyad resigned in April 2013, and the territories are in dire economic straits. Meanwhile, Hamas appears to be expanding its presence in the West Bank from its Gaza stronghold. A spate of recent reports have mentioned the presence of various group members in the West Bank, indicating an intent to take advantage of the PA's declining capabilities. In January, for example, newspaper reports noted that Israel had arrested sixteen men in Jerusalem over the previous several weeks on suspicion of running a Hamas headquarters in the city. A February story mentioned fifteen West Bank arrests in connection with fire bombings and rock attacks on Israeli vehicles. And last week, a Hamas operative in east Jerusalem was arrested on suspicion of cutting gas pipes in residential buildings as part of a one-man terrorist campaign.

Unsurprisingly, these developments have led some Fatah officials to hedge their bets by either looking the other way when certain incidents occur or publicly warning of greater violence to come. For instance, during a January service held in Jenin to memorialize a slain PIJ operative, a member of Hamas's military "wing," the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, showed up in full militant garb despite a PA ban on such displays. Far from being arrested, however, he was flanked by members of PIJ as well as Fatah's own military wing, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. That same month, Fatah Central Committee member Tawfiq al-Tirawi supported the resumption of armed resistance to Israel during an interview with Lebanese media. According to a *Times of Israel* account of his remarks, he declared, "We, all Palestinian factions, must return to the cycle of action...There must be something on the ground as well...The big explosion in Palestine is coming. All of Israel's actions have placed the Palestinian public under immense pressure. They have no choice but to explode in the face of occupation."

ESCALATION FROM GAZA

Palestinian leaders have blamed Israel for the escalation that began last week, during which an estimated eighty rockets were launched from Gaza within a three-day period. Yet even before that spate of launches, Gaza militants had reportedly fired twenty-eight rockets into southern Israel since the beginning of the year, twenty in the first three weeks of January alone -- compared to about forty in all of 2013. Of these, five were headed toward the city of Ashkelon and were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system. Several others were launched toward the January 13 funeral of former prime minister Ariel Sharon. In both cases -- one strike aimed at a major Israeli population center, another at a state funeral attended by foreign dignitaries -- Hamas risked massive retaliation had any of the rockets hit their intended targets, whether it launched them itself or permitted others to do so. The group also claimed to have test-fired an anti-aircraft missile in mid-January, though it missed its target and the incident went unreported by Israeli media.

Hamas has allowed the Gaza situation to escalate due to the increasing pressure it feels. Egypt's July 2013 ouster of the Morsi government, a key Hamas supporter, was a disaster for the group. Cairo's subsequent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood was also directed at Hamas, leading the Egyptian military to close most of the tunnels into Gaza. And last week, Cairo reportedly sidestepped Hamas and negotiated a truce directly with PIJ after the salvo of rocket strikes on Israel.

Unable to tax goods flowing through the tunnels from Egypt, and lacking any significant support from Iran, Hamas is also facing an acute financial crisis. According to some reports, the group's leadership recently passed a budget covering a mere 25 percent of expected expenditures in Gaza. Therefore, a major military confrontation with Israel is not in Hamas's interest at the moment -- its overarching objective of late has been to remain in power, not open a new conflict. Following Israel's retaliatory strikes in January, for example, Hamas military commanders reportedly wanted to strike back, but the group's political leaders limited their response to temporarily redeploying rocket-prevention forces away from the border in early February.

Even so, Hamas continues to lay the groundwork for a future battle with Israel. In addition to steady weapons production, radicalization efforts continue unabated, as highlighted by remarks that Hamas officials delivered to an audience of thousands attending a January 13 graduation ceremony for a "jihadi education" youth camp. "This generation, Allah willing, will vanquish Israel," Interior Minister Fathi Hamad predicted.

Meanwhile, the mounting pressure on Hamas has benefited smaller, more militant groups who are not constrained by the reins of power and receive financial incentives from Iran to continue bombarding Israel. Some factions reportedly receive thousands of dollars from Iran for each rocket launched at Israel. The latest salvos were launched not by Hamas, but by PIJ, while other groups such as the PFLP and Salafi jihadist factions have fired heavy mortars or short-range Qassam and Grad rockets. Moreover, evidence suggests that the Iranian weapons seized aboard the *Klos C* smuggling ship earlier this month were primarily intended for PIJ, not Hamas.

CONCLUSION

President Mahmoud Abbas's White House meeting with President Obama this week was intended to spark support for the peace process among Palestinians and a sense of urgency among all parties. There is no guarantee that a deal will be reached within the current timeline. Yet as frustrating as the current lack of progress is, a return to armed struggle -- by Fatah, Hamas, or others -- would be a disaster for Palestinians. Even apart from the diplomatic setback and potential loss of life, a wider armed struggle would destroy the Palestinian economy at a time when traditional donors are occupied by the more pressing disaster in Syria, the Ukraine crisis, and Iranian nuclear negotiations.

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