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Hamas: Charting a New Strategic Course of Action

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Unlike in the past, the latest escalation of violence between Hamas and Israel is not another tactical and limited round. It is instead part of a new strategic direction taken by Hamas in an effort to capitalize on the circumstances created by the July 2 murder of a Palestinian youth, apparently by Jewish extremists, in Jerusalem. In so doing, Hamas intends to create a meaningful change in its difficult geopolitical, economic, and intra-Palestinian position. Consequently, it seems that the Israeli offer – “quiet will be answered by quiet” – expressed a misunderstanding of Hamas’s aims, and of the change underway in the “internal grammar” of the rules of the game that have characterized previous rounds of Israel-Hamas conflict. Hamas does not desire quiet at the moment because, in the absence of any other option, it views the Israeli escalation – whether in the immediate term, in “Operation Protective Edge,” or beyond – as an opportunity to break its diplomatic and economic isolation.

Israel’s “Operation Pillar of Defense” in November 2012 constituted a high point for Hamas. Despite the Israeli attacks, Hamas succeeded in preserving its control in the Gaza Strip, while demonstrating its operational abilities; this enhanced its popularity in the West Bank as well. The Emir of Qatar granted Hamas 400 million dollars, while Hamas was the beneficiary of a friendly president in Egypt that belonged to Hamas’s parent movement, the Muslim Brotherhood. Taking place against the backdrop of the Syrian Civil War, the diplomatic and financial backing that Hamas received enabled it to abandon the “Axis of Resistance” (Iran, Syria, Hizballah, and the Islamic Jihad), including some of the economic and military support that it had received from Iran until that point. But approximately half a year after Pillar of Defense, Hamas found itself in the most difficult crisis of its history. Egypt’s President Morsi was ousted, Hamas was declared a terror movement in Egypt, and the Egyptian army destroyed the majority of smuggling tunnels that

provided an economic lifeline to the Gaza Strip, and especially to Hamas's tax revenues. In June, not long after the reconciliation deal, the Qatari money ran out; Hamas was left without the ability to finance critical infrastructure, such as electricity, or to pay the salaries of its 40,000 employees. These circumstances represented the primary motivation, on Hamas's part, to seek the reconciliation agreement with the Palestinian Authority (PA), which it signed in late April from a position of extreme disadvantage. Indeed, it accepted most of the PA's demands. In exchange, Hamas expected that the PA, first and foremost, would alleviate its financial predicament and pay Hamas workers' salaries.

Against this background, it appears that the abduction and murder of three Israeli teenagers who were students at a religious seminary (yeshiva) in the West Bank on June 12 was an unwanted event for Hamas's leadership. The history of Hamas is filled with examples in which local organizations, such as the Silwan group that murdered an Israeli policeman in 1992, carried out operations in Hamas's name, without prior coordination. In most of these cases, Hamas adopted such operations as its own because they fit within its concept of struggle and its underground character, which didn't require a broad range of political considerations. Yet today, Hamas governs Gaza; it calculates its costs and benefits differently and thus cannot behave as it did previously. However, although Hamas did not claim responsibility for the abduction of the three youths, it found itself almost immediately paying the price for it. PA President Mahmud Abbas, for his part, viewed the abductions as a development that threatened to destroy the gains that he had reaped in the international arena. First and foremost among these was the emerging consensus in international opinion that the failure of the American-brokered peace negotiations was Israel's fault. His forthright and unconditional public condemnation of the abductions led to an immediate *de facto* end to the unity agreement. The salaries that were promised to Hamas personnel remain in the coffers of the PA and the PA security apparatus has resumed operating against Hamas in the West Bank.

These developments left the Hamas leadership without a clear strategy in the immediate aftermath of the abductions. As a result, it spoke with contradictory voices. On the one hand, spokesmen such as Sami Abu Zohari denied Hamas's involvement in the kidnappings. On the other, senior members, such as Khalid Mash'al, Isma'il Haniyeh, Fauzi Barhum, and Mushir al-Masri, praised the abductors, distorted uncomfortable facts such as the young age of the victims (Mash'al referred to them as "soldiers;" Haniyeh called them "settlers"), and made threats against Israel in the event that it would undertake operations against Hamas. As part of this "doublespeak," Mash'al noted that the armed wing of Hamas was not subservient to

the political wing, and thus left the door open for Hamas to assume responsibility for the operation.

However, as the PA's seriousness about terminating the unity agreement became clearer, a hawkish and unified strategy began to coalesce within Hamas, towards both the PA and Israel. On the eleventh day following the abduction of the three teens, Hamas Prime Minister Haniyeh announced that the "Third Intifada" had already begun in the West Bank. A statement like that demonstrates the depths of polarization and crisis in the Palestinian political arena, because it stands in sharp contrast to the PA's firm opposition to a new intifada, and confirms its suspicions that Hamas is moving to subvert stability and undermine security in the West Bank. The PA has been aware of such attempts for some time, and over the course of about seven months has not been content with simply strengthening its security apparatus, but also has strengthened its grip on the street. To that end, the PA has also called into service its informal apparatus, first and foremost – the *Tanzim* organization of Fatah. Hamas spokesmen confirmed this polarization: a member of the political bureau, Musa Abu Marzuq, argued on July 2 that Abbas effectively had given up the Gaza Strip, and that if it was offered to him, he wouldn't want it. On July 7, Hamas personnel were reported to be firing on Fatah loyalists in the Strip.

While intra-Palestinian polarization deepened, the riots that broke out in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Shu'afat and in Arab communities within Israel, following the murder of the Palestinian youth, were viewed as an opportunity by Hamas. Hamas hoped to use the riots as a means to advance its ambition of creating a more active popular resistance in the West Bank, calculating that a more active Palestinian "street" in the West Bank and Israel would redirect Palestinian animus towards Israel and the PA and away from Hamas's financial challenges and political isolation. Further, Hamas has also attempted to pour more "fuel on the fire" by firing rockets on Israeli civilians.

This appears to be the principal reason why the Israeli and Egyptian attempts to bring about a cease-fire have been unsuccessful. Israeli analysts sometimes attribute this to the alleged independence of the military wing of Hamas, "which does whatever it feels like," without consideration for the authority of the political wing. It seems that these estimations are exaggerated. The autonomy of the military wing has suffered a blow, following the Israeli strike on its commander, Ahmed Ja'bari in November 2012. Ja'bari's direct ties to Khalid Mash'al, and the Iranian financial pipeline that he controlled, enabled such independence. But following the chill in relations with Iran over the last two years, as well as Ja'bari's death – it is not certain that this is the situation today. Furthermore, the political leadership's declarations do not reveal internal divisions, but rather the opposite – they are

extremely militant, and have been so from the moment that it became clear that the unity with the Palestinian Authority had crumbled. Hamas, despite all its difficulties, still demonstrates control over what happens in the Gaza Strip, as reflected in the gradual and controlled escalation of its military operations until the outbreak of Operation Protective Edge.

This reality, until the start of the Israeli military operation, reflected Hamas's desire to take advantage of the continuing turmoil. Evidence to this end was seen last weekend (July 4-5), when Hamas spokesmen began to demand that, in exchange for a cease-fire, Israel would stop not only its targeted assassinations, but also remove the blockade on the Gaza Strip. On July 7, Hamas added an additional demand: Israel must set free those prisoners released as part of the October 2011 Shalit deal and then rearrested over the last month, while Egypt must open the Rafah crossing. But Hamas is fully aware that the chances that Israel or Egypt will acquiesce to a demand like this are extremely low. As a result, Hamas has opened itself to a potential military confrontation with its eyes wide open. One of the most salient pieces of evidence to this effect was revealed by an Israeli operation on July 7 against a tunnel system which was to be used, allegedly, to execute a strategic attack against Israel. If this is indeed the case, it reflects a change in Hamas's strategic direction.

Hamas estimates that Operation Protective Edge and other operations of its kind will not threaten its control over the Strip. This is because Hamas believes the Israelis are concerned about the possibility of suffering casualties in ground operations, and that Israel lacks a preferred alternative to Hamas in light of the threat posed by the other radical Islamist groups active in the Gaza Strip. An Israeli operation, and especially one with an inconclusive outcome, represents an opportunity for Hamas to improve its position. Paradoxically, therefore, an Israeli operation is less threatening than the possibility of internal collapse. Even if the current round of violence does not provide immediate relief, Hamas will likely provoke an additional flare-up in the future to prevent such collapse. By launching Operation Protective Edge, Israel should be aware of the trap that Hamas has set for it: This is not another round of violence intended to serve merely tactical aims. Instead, it is a strategic and planned step aimed at dragging Israel into a situation from which it may not know how to extricate itself.

Israel will benefit, therefore, if it first manages to curb the street riots in areas within its control and prevent their spread in the West Bank. Beyond this, developments require Israel to think strategically. Such strategic thought does not terminate with the restoration of so-called "deterrence." Israel must overcome this cognitive barrier and move to form a comprehensive policy for both the Gaza Strip

and Hamas. Whether the latter will be preserved as the “devil we know,” or not, it is clear that any exchange will require Israel to coordinate extensively with regional actors, such as the Palestinian Authority and Egypt, who will each seek to exact a political price.

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