



PERSPECTIVES

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Hamas: Striking the Right Balance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Hamas, the terrorist organization that rules the Gaza Strip, is under pressure from three sides: less electricity, lower salaries, and reduced economic aid. It might be tempting for Israel to take advantage of these pressures to compel Hamas to rein in its military expenditures – but the less Hamas feels it has to lose, the more combustible Gaza becomes.

The first and most important element currently putting pressure on Hamas is the loss of Qatar. Under pressure from its Arab Gulf neighbors, Qatar has expelled several Hamas leaders and is leaving open the possibility that the organization's entire leadership will eventually need to leave the country. If Qatar ceases to provide economic aid to the Gaza Strip due to this pressure, residents of Gaza and Hamas will have lost what has been their primary source of help in recent years.

The second source of pressure is the recent decisions of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. First, the PA will reduce or has already significantly reduced salaries to people it considers its enemies in Gaza, and these cuts will have a considerable impact on the economic situation.

Abbas has also decided not to pay for a large portion of the electricity Gaza consumes, leading to the Israeli cabinet's decision on Sunday to reduce the amount of electricity Israel transfers to Gaza. As a result, the people of Gaza will be left without electricity for much of the time.

There is no alternative to Israeli electricity, because the Egyptians, too, are denying Gaza more electricity. As to who will supply the salaries, there is no alternative there either. No one will fill the void left by the PA on this matter

and it does not appear that anyone will step into Qatar's shoes if it has to discontinue its economic support.

All these factors will lead to immense pressure on the Gaza Strip in general and on Hamas, which is responsible for Gaza, in particular.

This is a classic example of a situation in which Israel has no "good decision" to make.

On the one hand, Israel has a great interest in pressuring Hamas to sacrifice its military investments.

On the other hand, the worse the situation in Gaza becomes, and the less Hamas has to lose, the greater the risk of a violent outburst from inside Gaza. This outburst will be aimed at Israel, not Hamas.

What is the right balance between pressure on Hamas and the building of hope for the citizens of Gaza? The answer to this question is entirely unclear. How can pressure be applied without causing an eruption? To do so is an art, and it is difficult to provide good advice.

It is exceedingly clear, however, that once the three prongs of pressure – less electricity, lower salaries, and reduced economic aid – affect life in a tangible manner, the Gaza Strip will become far more combustible. This has to be taken into account.

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