



PERSPECTIVES

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A Failure at State-Building, Hamas Sticks to Military Buildup in Gaza

by Yaakov Lappin

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Hamas has built up its military wing at the expense of ordinary Gazans, for whom it has completely failed to provide reliable civilian services. Its insistence on focusing exclusively on its military capability keeps tensions high with Israel and renders reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority a near-impossibility.

Tensions between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip remain high following a period during which Gazan terror factions fired large numbers of projectiles at southern Israeli regions, drawing return Israeli airstrikes. Mass arson attacks targeting Israeli farms and villages, orchestrated by Hamas, have not yet stopped, and an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire is shaky at best.

The very issues that caused Hamas to escalate tensions in the first place – Gaza’s isolation and faltering economy, and Hamas’s desire to change both – remain in place, meaning conflict could flare up again very swiftly.

Ultimately, these events appear to be symptoms of a larger failure by Hamas to turn Gaza into a viable, civilian state-like entity, due to its fixation on armed conflict with Israel. It has built up its military wing at the expense of the needs of ordinary Gazans.

“Since it has completely failed in civilian state-building in Gaza, its only instrument to exercise any influence is its military build-up,” says Professor Benny Miller, an expert on international relations and conflict management from the University of Haifa. “Hamas will continue to build up its military wing because this is its only instrument to have any effect on key processes in the region and to exercise pressure on Israel, and continue its armed struggle, even if [this occurs] between extended ceasefires.”

In addition, Miller argues, having a significant armed force in Gaza is Hamas's means of staying "relevant at all in the eyes of Egypt and the Palestinian Authority."

Yet Hamas's refusal to compromise on its armed wing is exactly what is causing the Palestinian Authority to isolate Gaza, to reduce funds to the enclave to a bare minimum, and to view Hamas as a dangerous enemy.

This is why efforts at reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority have so far been doomed to fail. Egypt too has not changed its basic suspicion of Hamas. Israel, though keen to improve Gaza's economy, remains highly threatened by Hamas's activities. As a result, Gaza remains isolated, and the countdown to an economic collapse continues.

"The Hamas leadership in Gaza is in an ongoing crisis situation that is getting more severe," says Professor Boaz Ganor, founder and executive director of Israel's International Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya.

While Gaza is not experiencing a humanitarian crisis, its levels of unemployment, economic distress, and problems with health care and welfare are worsening, Ganor warns. "The Hamas leadership is incapable of providing basic services to the population – electricity, water, and more."

A substantial portion of Gazans who lost their homes due to the 2014 conflict between Hamas and Israel have not yet received permanent new housing.

These developments are causing real fractures in Palestinian society, particularly in Gaza, observes Ganor.

Added to this is Hamas's all-time low status in the international arena. Qatar, a traditional Hamas supporter, now faces accusations by Arab states that it is supporting radical Islamist terrorists.

"Gulf states and Saudi Arabia ceased their support of Hamas long ago," says Ganor. "The Egyptian government sees Hamas as an ally of the opposition that threatens it – the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt. It even forced Hamas to change the organization's covenant and leave out the sentence that establishes it as a Muslim Brotherhood movement in Palestine."

Today, he says, Hamas is left only with non-Arab supporters – Turkey and Iran – whose assistance to Hamas actually complicates its relationships with Arab states.

In the meantime, Israel is successfully destroying Hamas's cross-border attack tunnels "one after the other, and all of Hamas's efforts to dictate new "rules of the game to Israel have failed to bear fruit," states Ganor.

In this situation, Hamas's leaders have placed their hopes on Egypt and other Arab states to broker a new ceasefire agreement with Israel and ease the security blockade on Gaza, at least from the Egyptian side. Hamas also hopes Egypt can enable a breakthrough reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority.

In light of this complex state of affairs, neither Hamas nor Israel has any interest in a serious security escalation.

Nevertheless, Ganor cautions that if Hamas sees its attempts to court the Egyptians, the Saudis, and the PA end in failure, the group could resort to escalation as a desperate last measure. "Until then, it seems they will try to limit the fire and restrain rebellious elements in the Strip," says Ganor.

For its part, Israel would also like to avoid any major escalation, "let alone go to full-blown war," according to Miller.

At the same time, he says, a failure by Hamas to decrease its arson attacks would lead to increased domestic political pressure on Israel for the government to resort to force, "even if the professionals in the military will oppose it."

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