

## **One Month Later: Hamas Won the Battle and May Eventually Win the War**

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A month after its takeover of Gaza, it seems Hamas has begun to translate its military achievements into political dividends, while Fatah is wallowing in the mud and becoming even less relevant.

Although Hamas' victory in Gaza was decisive, leaving the movement with no serious rivals in the area, the victory also held the potential to eventually work against it: First, following the collapse of the Rafah agreement, Hamas had to ensure the continued operation of the border crossings in order to provide for the basic needs of the population; Second, the Arab League's negative reaction to the coup, and the Egyptian pull out of its diplomatic delegation from Gaza, seemed to have isolated Hamas; Third, Hamas' actions gave Abbas the pretext, and allegedly the legitimacy, to dissociate itself from Hamas and to move forward with Israel via the political path.

Most significantly, it was the cautious 'satisfaction' expressed in Jerusalem and Washington regarding the split between a Hamas-led Gaza and a Fatah-led West Bank, that created the impression that Hamas' coup was in fact a hasty move. Israel and the U.S. seemed to have found the formula that would force Hamas to face the burden of responsibility towards the population in Gaza, while making the Fatah government a political partner.

However, a month later, it seems that Hamas had the political wisdom to overcome its drawbacks: Hamas has been successful in consolidating its control over Gaza, in gaining back popular support, preventing the hermetic closure of the Israel-Gaza border and in conducting a dialogue with Arab and international actors. The return of the Egyptian diplomatic delegation to Gaza is considered a major political achievement for Hamas. Moreover, the release of Alan Johnston added an amount of prestige to Hamas in the international arena.

Fatah, on the other hand, has not shown the capacity to deliver in the West Bank. The movement has not recovered from its defeat and has been unsuccessful in unifying its political and military ranks. Some of Abbas' presidential decrees, by which he has been trying to impose his rule in the West Bank, have simply been ignored, even by Fatah members. The most prominent example of this was displayed by the disregard of the Fatah factions to Abbas' decree calling to dissolve them all. Moreover, following this decree, some members of Fatah's Al Aqsa Brigades, decided to leave the Palestinian Authority's security forces and called Abbas to sack PM Fayyad. Finally, by formulating an unrealistic set of preconditions for dialogue with Hamas, including a demand to restore the status quo ante in Gaza and accept Salam Fayyad's government, Fatah is slowly rendering itself irrelevant.

Israel's frustration from Hamas' build-up emanates mostly from its failure to influence the Palestinian internal balance of powers. Israel is entangled in a 'bear-hug paradox', i.e. Israel's obvious gestures towards moderate Fatah elements weaken those elements politically, while confrontation with Hamas or other extremist elements may even strengthen their status.

Therefore, Israel's desire to strengthen Abbas should be conducted wisely. For example, Abbas should not receive free gifts. Gestures like the release of Fatah prisoners should be carried out only in return for Palestinian concessions following negotiations, so as not to be considered suspicious. Moreover, Israel should seek to transfer powers and authorities to the PA. Only when the West Bank is truly ruled by a genuine Palestinian self governing authority, will there be a chance for the creation of a Palestinian partner.

The true victory of Hamas is that it leaves Israel with no political alternatives vis-à-vis Gaza. Despite its concern of arms smuggling, Israel knows that the only political alternative to the Hamas regime in Gaza is al-Qaida. Therefore if Israel wishes to stay relevant, it will have to recognize Hamas as the true address in Gaza.