



How Hamas Seized The Political Moment

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Predictably, the latest violence in the Middle East has spawned a slew of theories about the reasons for renewed hostilities between Israel and Gaza. Conventional wisdom has settled on the notion that the conflict was driven by fresh Israeli-Palestinian frictions over things like denial of access to parts of Jerusalem, as well as controversial Israeli court decisions relating to property ownership by Israeli Arabs. Largely overlooked, however, is the fact that Hamas' decision to launch a new rocket war against the Jewish state also had a great deal to do with a more local factor: internal Palestinian politics.

Here, it's useful to remember that the fighting followed closely on the heels of the Palestinian Authority's decision to call off planned leadership elections. Back in January, PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas – seeking to regain political relevance in the wake of last year's Abraham Accords and responding to mixed signals from the new Biden administration – announced that elections at both the legislative and presidential levels would take place this May.

It quickly became apparent, however, that such a step could end up having ruinous political consequences, for Abbas himself most of all. After years of misrule, approval for Abbas and his Fatah faction were dismal; a March 2019 poll by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, a Palestinian survey group, found trust in Abbas hovered at less than 12%. (In an April 2021 poll by the same firm, it was marginally better: 14.5%) The grievances against Abbas and his cronies range from allegations of rampant corruption to, more recently, poor handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Whatever the reasons, this dissatisfaction created the conditions for an extremely volatile political environment. Another recent survey, this one by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, estimated that Fatah would still secure the highest level of support (43% of likely voters) in the planned May elections. But, it noted, Fatah's ranking would be followed closely by that of Hamas (at 30%). And with nearly a fifth (18%) of probable Palestinian voters classified as "undecided," the likelihood of an electoral upset was high.

This volatility is precisely the reason why Abbas ultimately decided, in late April, to postpone the election indefinitely. That choice made strategic sense for the aging autocrat, but it left Hamas without a greater voice in Palestinian politics – something that it had been on track to obtain. It's no wonder that the movement railed against the decision, terming it a "coup" by Abbas to deny the will of the Palestinian people.

Without this electoral opportunity, Hamas was eager to prove its *bona fides* to ordinary Palestinians. And when domestic unrest erupted in Israel earlier this month, the group saw a clear opening. The resulting eleven-day conflict, during which Hamas fired more than four thousand rockets on Israeli civilian population centers, saw the Islamist movement strike an absolutist ideological tone.

"Over is the time Hamas spent discussing recognizing Israel. Now Hamas will discuss when we will wipe out Israel," the group's political leader, Yahya Sinwar, said in comments carried by the Hamas-linked news agency Shehab. "No one in the universe can disarm us. On the contrary, we will continue to have the power to protect our citizens."

That represented a notable reversal. Back in 2018, Sinwar, then in his first term as Hamas' political head, indicated that the group was prepared for a truce with Israel, and opined that another war in Gaza was "definitely not in our interest." Now, however, it seems to have been – because Hamas' leadership calculated that, through hostilities, they could capture the high ground, not against Israel (which remains far superior militarily) but against their local rivals in Fatah. Hamas, in other words, saw the conflict as a clear bid for the "hearts and minds" of Palestinians in the West Bank, as well as for the sympathies of Israel's Arab population.

Only time will tell whether this strategy was successful. Now that the current round of fighting has concluded (a ceasefire went into effect on May 21st), a modicum of calm has returned to the long-running Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. But it is already clear that, within the Palestinian Territories, Hamas' adventurism has had a profound effect on the group's image and standing. What that might mean, for Palestinian governance and for the larger direction of Palestinian politics, will become clear in the weeks and months ahead.