



PERSPECTIVES

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Hamas: A Case of Strategic Suicide

Hillel Frisch

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Hamas movement has adopted a strategy that is leading to collective suicide on its part. It has miscalculated its strength and its support just about every step of the way. Hamas has erred in ending the six-month ceasefire with Israel; in grossly offending and threatening Egypt; and in its reading of Israeli politics.

When a small isolated movement that controls a small strip takes on the world you know that it is in trouble. Being rational means making your goals commensurate to your capabilities and striking after creating the best conditions to turn them into reality. Hamas, however, has grossly miscalculated in its reading of the situation.

Distancing Egypt

Offending and threatening consistently for over the past two years the Egyptian state, long the lifeline of Palestinian politics, was its most egregious mistake. Palestinian policy makers always have known that they must keep their politics aligned with Egypt.

The Hamas threat to Egypt began with the violent breaching of Egypt's Rafah border in January 2008 to allow thousands of Gazans into northern Sinai. For the Egyptian state, which had demanded and succeeded in getting back the last inch of territory from Israel at Tabah, this was an unforgivable breach of its territorial integrity. Egypt was bound to get even with a movement that exposed its albeit temporary weakness.

Then, Hamas publicly questioned Egypt's credentials and honesty in acting as a broker both between Israel and the movement and in facilitating the talks between Fatah and Hamas. Its refusal to show up for the latest round of inter-Palestinian talks enraged the Egyptian leadership.

Even more offensive and threatening to Egypt and to most Arab states as well, was to display in so bold a fashion Hamas' Muslim Brotherhood credentials. The Muslim Brotherhood oath was the major banner gracing the speakers' podium on the movement's 22nd anniversary it celebrated in mid-December.

For Egypt and most Arab states, this display reminded them of almost everything they detested about the movement – that it was a movement that emerged from the grass roots, the first radical Sunni movement to control a piece of territory in the Arab world and a member in the major opposition movement to governments throughout the Arab world.

If any doubt ever existed that these states wanted Hamas pummeled if not destroyed, they dissipated after this display. Even humanitarian aid would only be grudgingly given once Israel struck.

Misjudging Israel

Misjudging Israel politics was also a major shortcoming. Hamas should have realized that Israel's ruling triumvirate were eager to meet the Hamas challenge at the movement's expense; Olmert, to improve his very problematic legacy as head of state; Livni, to better her chances at challenging Netanyahu in the coming general elections; and most of all, Barak, to stave off leading his Labor party into electoral and political insignificance.

Like Arafat and indeed all Palestinian leaders and movements previously, Hamas has miscalculated Israeli resolve and capabilities by giving too much credence to the writings of a defeatist minority of the Israeli elite (coming mostly from the overrated *Haaretz* daily), and too little heed to the essential glue that unites Israel's Jewish citizens and its resolve to take casualties to meet existential threats like those posed by Hamas.

The same can be said of believing that the propaganda Hamas itself spawns to encourage its fighters to collective suicide represents reflects the real balance of forces and resolve between the two contenders.

Making fatal strategic mistakes in the annals of Palestinian politics is of course nothing new. Arafat's decision to take on Israel after Camp David eight years ago spelled disaster even before he made it worse when he lied to United State President Bush about his connections to Iran exposed with the seizure of the boat "Karin A". Arafat effectively lost Judea and Samaria for the Palestinians in the wake of Israel's offensive launched in March 2002.

Similarly, Hamas' folly in Gaza might lead to the loss of Gaza to the Palestinian cause if not in this round then in the next. The wider the area of Israel Hamas threatens with its largely ineffective missiles, the more resolved will Israel's leaders and politicians become to destroy Hamas.

Now it knows that it can not count even on the help of fellow Palestinians in Judea and Samaria, let alone the Arab and Islamic masses. Hamas might have the will but so did Arafat. Both lacked

the way. By uniting its formidable enemies, Hamas is engaging in strategic suicide. Unfortunately it is also digging the graves of many civilians in Gaza – the inevitable casualties of violent conflict.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a senior research associate at Bar-Ilan University's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies and an expert on the Palestinians.