

Family Politics and the New Gaza Crisis

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Yet more haunting images of blindfolded, stripped down Palestinian men being contemptuously dragged by soldiers in uniform from one place to another. Yet more footage of bloodied men lying on hospital beds describing their ordeals to television reporters who have heard this story all too often. Yet more news of Palestinian infighting, tit-for-tat arrests, obscene language and embarrassing behaviour from those who have elected themselves — or were elected — to represent the Palestinian people.

Once again, the important story that ought to matter the most — that of a continually imposing and violent Israeli occupation — is lost in favour of Palestinian-infused distractions, deliberate or not.

In Gaza, the story of the Israeli siege, which represents one of today's most catastrophic man-made disasters, is relegated in favour of renewed infighting between Hamas and Fatah, whether directly or by proxy. As always, the Gaza story is largely told with biased and presumptive undertones: to indict one party as terrorist and extremist and to hail another as a champion of liberty and a defender of democracy. Such nonsensical conclusions cannot be further from the truth as in the latest clashes between Palestinian police under the command of the deposed Hamas government and militants from the Helis family, concentrated mostly in Gaza City.

The Hamas-Helis clash of early August was immediately probed by news media and Palestinian officials themselves as an extension of ongoing Hamas-Fatah violence, which led in the summer of 2007 to a complete Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip. The logic was simple: the Helis clan is largely loyal to Fatah, thus Hamas's violent storming of their neighbourhood 2 August was an attack on rival Fatah. Hamas, on the other hand, explained its crackdown on Helis militants as part of its hunt for those responsible for the murder of five of its members and a civilian in a massive blast that rocked Gaza beach 25 July.

Naturally, Hamas pointed the finger at militants affiliated with Fatah in Gaza — even though it refrained from directly accusing its rival Fatah — and at Israeli intelligence collaborators amongst Palestinians. Fatah denied any responsibility in the bombing, which was clearly orchestrated to destabilise the Gaza Strip. Gaza, despite the debilitating siege, has been enjoying relative security as a result of Hamas's firm control and a moderately successful truce, agreed on by both Israel and Hamas, with the consent of all Palestinian factions.

The truce with Israel, accompanied by hesitant but constant calls made internationally to "engage" Hamas, positive remarks about dialogue made by PA President Mahmoud Abbas, and recent efforts in Jordan to bring the ostracised movement back to mainstream Arab politics, have all helped lay the groundwork for an inescapable conclusion: that Hamas is not

a fleeting phenomena, and that isolation and repression have proved an ingredient of strength to the Islamic movement in Gaza and elsewhere.

Just then, the Gaza blast went off. The nature of the beach bombing is a clear indication that it was not a random act of revenge. The high-profiled targets, the intensity of the blast, its precision and its timing all suggest an elaborate operation aimed at a conclusive political consequence. Some Arabic news reports, including Aljazeera.net, stated that the bombing was a suicide attack. If true, then the employment of such a tactic — which had thus far targeted Israeli occupation soldiers, paramilitary settlers and civilians — would reflect the state of urgency and desperation of the attackers. In other words, the bombing needed to achieve its political aim even if it compels such an extreme upgrade in tactics. And if the goal was to destabilise Gaza, further discredit the Hamas government, derail the possibility of reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, and invite security chaos in the somewhat stable Strip, then the bombing was a considerable success.

Indeed, Hamas's subsequent criminal investigation led it to the Helis compound in Gaza. Demanding that the agreement between Hamas and Gaza's large clans be honoured, Hamas demanded the handing over of several Helis militants accused of perpetrating and carrying out the beach attack. The details of what followed remain blurry and narrated based on political affiliations. Helis clan members and Fatah officials say that Hamas attacked the compound with rockets and indiscriminate gunfire. Hamas contends that the militants fired at its officers first, compelling a gun battle that led to the death of 11 people, including on both sides, and the wounding of 90 more. To capitalise on another handy opportunity, Israel promised to deliver Fatah-Helles clan members, who fled Gaza to Israel, to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, in the West Bank, as it later did. According to one Israeli official, the move was part of Israel's commitment to fight Islamic extremism.

In reality, however, the beach bombing of 25 July was designed to provoke a violent Hamas reaction, which was preceded and followed by mass arrests of Hamas and Fatah members in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and has ultimately aborted planned Egyptian mediation between the two main Palestinian factions, thus weakening an already fractured Palestinian political front.

More, the fact that Abbas had met with representatives of the Helis clan in the West Bank, as if they represent a political organisation, was a dangerous validation of clan militancy that has grown in Palestine after the Oslo Accords of 1993 due to the security vacuum and decided corruption that have afflicted the Palestinian police for years. Clan militants became a necessary phenomenon to protect each family's interests, and had replaced the underground United National Front, which managed Palestinian affairs, despite of the Israeli occupation, which has done its utmost to break down Palestinian society and create an inherent sense of insecurity.

The bombing of 25 July, the violence of 2 August, and the political repercussions they have generated have proved immensely harmful to Palestinian national interests and spoiled the prospects of political reconciliation, thus national unity, which in my opinion, was the very intent of the violence in the first place.

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