

# **COMMENTARY**

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## **The Hamas-Fatah Reunion Agreement: Implications for Israel**

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**A**t this stage the Union agreement between the rival Palestinian factions, Hamas and Fatah, is of a declarative nature only. There is no certainty that it will be fully implemented in the foreseeable future. Since Hamas came to power in the Gaza Strip, there has been a highly violent confrontation between the two factions accompanied by continuous accusations of one side against the other. The campaign between the parties created a wide barrier of hostility between the two sides. It is hard to believe that the parties will be able to overcome the flow of this "bad blood" between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank so easily.

The willingness of Hamas to conclude an agreement of unity with Fatah reflects primarily concerns of Hamas that its power is gradually fading, and that it needs the "umbrella" of Fatah to ensure its future survival. In recent months, especially after the last confrontation with the IDF, Hamas realized that the impact of rocket threat that it possesses is rapidly declining. The impressive success of the Israeli "Iron Dome" air defence system around the Gaza Strip last month was a highly important factor in this regard. Hamas can estimate, and it certainly does, that in the future this system and others which may be implemented will end up being much more efficient. This might almost completely neutralize the rocket threat from Gaza. Without this threat wielding capability at hand Hamas would be less valuable to Iran. In addition it will be

much more vulnerable to Israel's strikes than previously, while its ability to retaliate would be very limited.

At the same time Hamas realizes that its ability to curb the activities of Israel against it by claiming that Israel's strikes cause the killing of many innocent casualties is highly decreasing. It seems that Israel now enjoys almost a complete "free hand" from the international community in its warfare against Hamas. Hamas can assess that the activities of Western powers in Libya and against Al Qaeda, and also the targeted killing of leading personalities, gives further legitimacy to Israel to act in the same way in the Gaza Strip. Under these circumstances, Hamas, headed by Ismail Haniyeh, seems to have come to the conclusion that it desperately needs this collaboration with Fatah headed by Abu Mazen. This union, even if symbolic in its nature, will give Hamas a sort of "insurance" against a massive Israeli action against it in the future.

Another factor affecting Hamas lies in the fact that Syria and Iran- the main benefactors of Hamas- are currently involved in a severe crisis. The regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria is struggling for its very survival. Even the continuous setting of the Hamas political bureau in Damascus is uncertain due to the severe turmoil within Syria. Iran on its part has failed to advance its nuclear program. Apparently its rivals, Israel and the United States, have succeeded in seriously disrupting its nuclear program. Iran has no real answer to this secret warfare launched against it.

Furthermore, rivals of Iran, especially in the Gulf have finally decided to adopt a vigorous stance against the Iranian expansionist drive within the Arab world. This was well reflected in Saudi Arabia's decision to send troops in support of the current regime in Bahrain. As of now they seem to have succeeded in preserving the present rule in Bahrain. These acts have placed in front of Iran a ground-breaking and evocative challenge.

If the Union between Hamas and Fatah became a reality, Israel would be faced with some critical political and security risks. However, at the same time it also carries with it some positive aspects for the State of Israel.

First of all, it proves again that Hamas, notwithstanding its radical and fanatic character is primarily a pragmatic organization that operates basically on the basis of rational considerations. For years there has been an ongoing debate in Israel regarding the question of whether one can deter radical terrorist organizations like Hamas. There were many who claimed that such an option of deterrence does not exist with regard to terror organizations that are ready to pay almost any price to fulfil their objectives.

Now, it turns out again that Hamas, as well as Hezbollah – notwithstanding their militant nature - basically work on the basis of cost-benefit considerations and this means that it is possible for them to be deterred.

Furthermore, the Reunion agreement reconfirms Israel's continuous argument that we live in a highly unpredictable area. What seems to be impossible today might be inevitable tomorrow. This might strengthen Netanyahu's claim that we (Israel) should advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process very cautiously and moderately, while taking into account different scenarios that perhaps now might seem highly unreasonable.

Finally, the fact that the Palestinian Authority and Egypt did not bother to consult or even inform the U.S. government regarding the impending agreement, reinforces Israel's claim that it is the only stable and trusted ally of the United States in the Middle East.

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