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Welcome to 'Fortress Gaza,' Home of the Newly Radicalized Hamas

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The Atlantic (Opinion)

September 24, 2012 - 11:00pm

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/09/welcome-to-fortress-gaz...> [1]

September 26, 2012

Article Author(s): Zvika Krieger

Media Outlet: The Atlantic

Article Type: Opinion

Date: September 25, 2012

Source Link(s): <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/09/welcome-to-fortress-gaz...> [1]

Top officials in Hamas have confirmed this week that the group's leader, Khaled Mishaal, has decided to resign his post. Hamas official Salah al-Bardawil tried to dismiss any suspicions of internal discord: "He has decided to retire to make room for the younger members." But Mishaal's decision belies significant shifts within the organization.

Mishaal has been the most visible and powerful advocate within Hamas for the group's reconciliation with Fatah, their political rivals who currently control the Palestinian Authority (and the West Bank). His strategic argument is that Hamas should use democratic elections to increase its power -- hopefully spreading their control to the West Bank and eventually taking over the Palestine Liberation Organization. As Mishaal told me when I interviewed him in 2007, "Not only Hamas but all the Palestinian people want to obtain their legitimate rights. If the peaceful road is able to do so, that is OK, and we prefer that. ... Resistance is not the end goal."

Convening elections, however, would require joining in a governing coalition with Fatah -- and thus sacrificing Hamas's control over Gaza. Mishaal sees that as a worthwhile sacrifice, particularly in light of the Arab Spring and broader trends in the region. He also sees a good opportunity to ally the Palestinian movement with other Muslim Brotherhood groups ascending to power across the region through the ballot box (rather than the Hamas's traditional tactic of armed resistance).

Mishaal's new strategy has been met by ardent resistance from other factions within Hamas, particularly those based in Gaza, who are loathe to surrender their hard-fought control over the territory (not to mention giving up their political posts and patronage networks). "They speak a lot about Fortress Gaza, the Citadel of Gaza," veteran Israeli journalist and Hamas

expert Ehud Yaari told me today. "For them, protecting it has to be the basis of any future move." Yaari quotes Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh's assertion that "the shortest route to al-Aqsa Mosque [in Jerusalem]" runs through Gaza.

Hamas is already behaving as if Gaza is its own liberated state, particularly with the opening of its border to Egypt. Official Mahmoud Zahhar declared this week that "Gaza is free of occupation," boasting to the Palestinian Ma'an News Agency that economic conditions there are better than in the West Bank and that "contiguity with the outside world is easier as visitors from all over the world visited the coastal enclave." (Israeli settler leader Dani Dayan made a similar analysis in our conversation this summer, saying that Gaza is already as an independent state today, "whether [the Palestinians] call it a state or not" -- and if they did decide to declare independence there, "I don't think Israel will make any problems about that.")

While these Gaza-based leaders do wish to spread their control to the West Bank, they are patient -- a hallmark strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region. They believe that the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority will implode of its own accord, and they will be ready to pick up the pieces. As Zahhar said this week, "The resistance program [of Hamas], which was originally replaced by the [Palestinian Authority], is ready."

The first indication that Mishaal's influence -- and his ideas -- were waning in the organization came after the reconciliation agreement he negotiated with Fatah in Doha earlier this year. The Gaza-based leadership bluntly vetoed the deal, refusing to hold elections in Gaza or even allow Abbas to visit.

More definitively, the group's recent internal elections, which have been held in secret over the past few months and continue today, in many ways served as a referendum between these two perspectives. And the verdict was clear: "He hasn't had one single guy elected who can be considered a supporter of him or his new doctrine," Yaari confirmed to me today.

According to Yaari, whose recent paper on the topic provides indispensable insights into the opaque process, the victory of sworn Mishaal rival Imad al-Alami, who is a former Hamas military chief, as well as numerous commanders in Hamas's Qassam Brigades, was a clear blow to Mishaal and his preference for political reconciliation and democratic aspirations.

Mishaal's decision this week not to stand for reelection for chief of Hamas's political bureau is thus his final admission of defeat. He has no intention of being a powerless figurehead or a fig leaf for an increasingly radicalized group. But Hamas may not let him go so quickly. Practically, he has many contacts and a network of supporters in other countries, and is a crucial fundraiser for the group.

But on a deeper level, the group is tremendously sensitive about its image. "They are very keen to maintain a facade of eternal unity and everlasting love," Yaari says, "a movement where everyone is united in love of Islam and the Prophet Mohamed." Hamas, much like other Muslim Brotherhood organizations, puts a premium on consensus and patience.

Acknowledging these rifts -- and the increasing dominance of its militant wing -- might also imperil Hamas's efforts to cozy up to the new Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt, which long-ago eschewed violence and is involved in its own efforts to distance itself from radicals.

Though the group claims it holds its elections in secret for security reasons, it also

conveniently serves to hide internal tensions. Yaari believes that is likely why the group continues to protract its election process, which was initiated at the beginning of the year. Definitely marking an end to voting would require them to admit rifts within the organization and reorganize their leadership ranks according to the results. Similarly, accepting Mishaal's resignation would shatter Hamas's well-crafted facade.

So what are the implications of Hamas being forced to recognize the shifting power centers in its leadership, and adjust its positions and behavior accordingly? From an Israeli perspective, the most disconcerting outcome may be an escalation of Hamas's efforts to upgrade its military capabilities -- not only in the Gaza Strip, which has been continuing apace, but possibly extended to the West Bank and Sinai Peninsula as well.

It is also probably a final death-knell to Hamas's on-again, off-again reconciliation efforts with Fatah. As the Carnegie Endowment's Nathan Brown argued when the latest reconciliation agreement was announced, including Hamas in the Palestinian government would not only make it "difficult to carry on serious, conflict-ending diplomacy" but would also be "a formula for paralysis" if the Palestinians stuck to their commitment to make every decision by consensus. On the other hand, having a broadly-representative Palestinian government "is a necessary condition for any viable diplomacy in the future."

Ultimately, whether or not it allies with Fatah, Hamas has become an undeniable player on the Palestinian political landscape. Mishaal has done everyone a favor by publicly exposing the new dynamics at play within the group. They may try to save face by convincing him to stay in some ceremonial position, but he is unlikely to retain any power in the group -- leaving no one to block its increasing radicalization

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