

Palestine Divided

I. OVERVIEW

The current reconciliation process between the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) is a continuation of their struggle through other means. The goals pursued by the two movements are domestic and regional legitimacy, together with consolidation of territorial control – not national unity. This is understandable. At this stage, both parties see greater cost than reward in a compromise that would entail loss of Gaza for one and an uncomfortable partnership coupled with an Islamist foothold in the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) for the other. Regionally, Syria – still under pressure from Washington and others in the Arab world – has little incentive today to press Hamas to compromise, while Egypt and Saudi Arabia are tilting more pointedly toward Fatah. It will take significant shifts in domestic, regional and international attitudes for this to change. Palestine's political-territorial division, now over a year old, is set to endure.

The irony is that the division between the West Bank and Gaza is hardening just as a growing number of international actors acknowledge that without Palestinian unity a genuine peace process, let alone a genuine peace, is unattainable. Changing the dynamics that have convinced both Fatah and Hamas that time is on their side and compromise against their interests will be daunting. At a minimum, it will require both a change in the regional landscape (through U.S. engagement with Syria and Iran) and a clear signal from the U.S. and European Union (EU) that, this time around, they would judge a Palestinian unity arrangement on its conduct rather than automatically torpedo it. Ultimately, the responsibility to put their affairs in order must fall on Palestinian shoulders. But the division of the national movement, which came about at least in part because of what outsiders did, will not be undone without outsiders' help.

At bottom, the two movements seek fundamentally different outcomes from the process. For Fatah, it is potentially a means of reversing Hamas's Gaza takeover; at a minimum a method to legitimise extension of Mahmoud Abbas's presidency; and, in the event of failure, a way to assign blame to the Islamist movement.

Hamas, by contrast, is looking to gain recognition and legitimacy, pry open the PLO and lessen pressure against the movement in the West Bank. Loath to concede control of Gaza, it is resolutely opposed to doing so without a guaranteed strategic quid pro quo.

The gap between the two movements has increased over time. What was possible two years or even one year ago has become far more difficult today. In January 2006 President Abbas evinced some flexibility. That quality is now in significantly shorter supply. Fatah's humiliating defeat in Gaza and Hamas's bloody tactics have hardened the president's and Fatah's stance; moreover, despite slower than hoped for progress in the West Bank and inconclusive political negotiations with Israel, the president and his colleagues believe their situation is improving. They are convinced that they are gaining politically in the West Bank; the newly trained and better equipped security forces are establishing order and waging a wholesale crackdown on Hamas; Israel has loosened some restrictions; and there are signs of economic growth. Abbas enjoys strong regional and international backing, and he hopes U.S. engagement will intensify with the incoming administration.

The cost-benefit analysis is clear: reconciliation could mean the end of Fatah's administrative and security monopoly in the West Bank and de facto hegemony over the PLO, while partnership with Hamas might jeopardise negotiations with Israel, international backing and financial support to the PA. In exchange for all this, the movement would gain little more than shared control over Gaza, where Ramallah's influence had shrunk even before the takeover.

For now, Hamas, too, sees time as its ally and reconciliation as a trap. Islamist leaders who, during the 2006 parliamentary elections, had wagered on the political process and sought integration into the Palestinian Authority (PA) are losing influence. Then, the movement's goals were the ability to govern and a measure of international recognition. With Gaza firmly in hand, Hamas's price for inclusion in the political system has risen. The Gaza model – withstanding the siege, maintaining core ideological principles and achieving a ceasefire with Israel – may not be all that Hamas desires, but it is as successful as it need be. Gazans are suffering from an acute economic and social crisis, but the Islamic

movement is internally secure, new elites more dependent on the movement are emerging, and basic government functions appear sustainable.

From the outset sceptical about Abbas's negotiations with Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, Hamas leaders are persuaded chances for a diplomatic breakthrough will be dealt an even greater setback if, as expected, Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu forms the next Israeli government. In the West Bank, they are persuaded that co-operation between Israeli and Palestinian security forces is viewed by a growing number of Palestinians as tantamount to collaboration with the occupier. Finally, as they see it, Abbas's domestic legitimacy will be crucially undermined when his presidential term expires on 9 January 2009. To a growing portion of Hamas's political leadership, together with the movement's increasingly influential military wing, reconciliation looks like a ploy designed to deprive them of control over Gaza without commensurate gain.

II. ATTEMPTS AT RECONCILIATION

A. THE ISSUES AT STAKE

In the wake of the June 2007 Gaza takeover by Hamas and formation of a new government in the West Bank led by Prime Minister Salam Fayyad,¹ the two movements quickly established their respective stances toward reconciliation. Ostensibly, both agreed on the issues necessitating resolution:

Formation of a new cabinet to govern both the West Bank and Gaza. Abbas expressed a preference for a technocratic government or a government of national consensus committed to PLO agreements and to which the two parties would appoint independent members. Because there would be no formal Hamas participation,

such a government, it is believed, would be neither boycotted nor sanctioned by the U.S. and Europe. Privately, Abbas's advisors suggested other models might be acceptable, including a "Lebanon solution", pursuant to which Hamas (like Hizbollah) would appoint a few ministers with whom the international community would not interact and who could abstain on or even oppose the government's program.²

In light of its triumph in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections, Hamas requested formation of a national unity government with substantial representation by members of the movement. It dismissed a technocratic government, saying "technocracy is not a Palestinian political idea. People want to know: is so-and-so a 'Fatah technocrat' or a 'Hamas technocrat'?"³ However, here too there have been signs of flexibility. Ismail Haniya, prime minister of the Gaza-based government, explained:

Reconciliation could lead to a national unity government or any government that enjoys a national consensus. The composition and the program are subject to discussion and agreement, and we have done that before, in 2006. It will take flexibility from both sides and we are ready.⁴

New presidential and parliamentary elections. From the outset, Fatah has taken the position that early legislative elections ought to be held to break the political impasse. PA officials in Ramallah argued that democracies regularly resolve deadlocks by going back to their people, and the absence of this provision in the Palestinian Basic Law should not pose an obstacle.⁵ In response, Hamas argued that there are no legal grounds for such a move. If Fatah insisted on early elections, they should be presidential ones: the PLC was elected after the president, and its mandate ends in January 2010, whereas Abbas's concludes in January 2009.⁶ Fatah's suggestion of simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections – to be held sometime between those two dates – similarly was rebuffed by Hamas, which took the position that an agreement on

¹The June 2007 Hamas takeover of Gaza marked the end of the national unity government established in the wake of the Saudi-brokered February 2007 Mecca Agreement. The Mecca Agreement provided for a government (to replace the Hamas government that had been in place since March 2006) that would "respect legitimate Arab and international resolutions and agreements signed by the PLO". It also committed the parties to "activate and reform the PLO", though this never occurred. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°62, *After Mecca: Engaging Hamas*, 28 February 2007. Following the takeover, President Abbas dismissed Prime Minister Ismail Haniya's government, appointing Fayyad in his stead. For additional background, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°73, *Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas*, 19 March 2008 and N°79, *Ruling Palestine II: The West Bank Model?*, 17 July 2008.

²Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, October 2008.

³Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Tulkarem, October 2008.

⁴Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, June 2008.

⁵Crisis Group interview, Rafiq al-Husseini, chief of staff to President Abbas, Ramallah, March 2008.

⁶Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Damascus, April 2008.

elections should be part of a comprehensive reconciliation package.⁷

As the crisis escalated, Hamas has insisted more pointedly that Abbas's term must end on 9 January 2009 pursuant to Article 36 of the amended (2005) Basic Law. At that point, and pending new elections, it contends that the president's powers and duties must revert to the PLC speaker (and Hamas member) Abd al-Aziz Dweik, pursuant to Article 37 of the Basic Law (2003).⁸ Abbas and his advisors argue instead that Article 111 of the 2005 election law provides for simultaneous legislative and presidential elections and thus his presidential term extends to January 2010.⁹ For the most part, such legal considerations have been marginal in the current political context. In the words of an Abbas adviser, "the January deadline is not a sword above our necks, since this is a political, not legal, issue".¹⁰ Still, worried about a legitimacy crisis after 9 January, Abbas and his aides have pressed for Arab and other countries to endorse an extension of the president's mandate.¹¹

Restructuring and professionalisation of security forces. Said Siyam, minister of interior in the Gaza-based government, summed up the challenge in ways Fatah officials would find hard to dispute:

We need to do a number of things: first, establish clear parameters for the operation of the security services; secondly, recruit individuals who are honest and qualified and competent regardless of their political affiliation; thirdly, define the jurisdiction and the mandates of the services; fourthly, design a mechanism to oversee the restructuring; and fifthly, impose sanctions for abuses and political interventions.¹²

⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, October 2008.

⁸ The West Bank-based Dweik currently is detained by Israel. Until mid-December, Hamas officials insisted that his Gaza-based deputy, Ahmad Bahar, would assume the role in his stead, but as of late, they appear to have changed their position and now tend against transferring the title to Bahar.

⁹ Many independent legal opinions consider Abbas's position to be tenuous insofar as it elevates the electoral law over the Basic Law, the de facto Palestinian constitution. For a collection of analyses, see www.palestinianbasiclaw.org.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, October 2008.

¹¹ According to both U.S. and Syrian sources, U.S. Secretary of State Rice asked her Syrian counterpart for Damascus's assistance in extending Abbas's mandate and limiting Hamas's objections. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. and Syrian officials, Washington, Damascus, November 2008.

¹² Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, June 2008.

The two sides agree that security forces ultimately should be structured along three branches – civil police, intelligence and external border protection – and that at least some of the routed Fatah forces will return to service in Gaza.¹³ Such general principles aside, Fatah and Hamas have starkly different visions of who ultimately will bear arms and how security reform should be carried out. Fatah stresses that all militias – including Hamas's military wing, the 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades – must be dismantled and that an "Arab or Egyptian force should be dispatched to Gaza, to be in charge of security until the restructuring of the new services is complete".¹⁴ Hamas officials insist that any restructuring must apply both to Gaza and the West Bank (thereby calling into question the U.S.-sponsored retraining of PA forces); that the Qassam Brigades are a resistance force that must remain intact; and that no foreign troops, Arab or otherwise, should be deployed. They agree only to the presence of observers or experts from Arab countries "to help with the restructuring".¹⁵

PLO reform. In 2005 the thirteen factions meeting in Cairo agreed to expand PLO membership to all Palestinian parties and movements. But that is as far as they went. Advisers to Abbas privately vowed that Hamas would never gain a foothold in the organisation, while the Islamists saw it as the ultimate prize, "the outer perimeter that protects the Palestinian cause; the guarantee that the PA and factions will neither deviate nor surrender".¹⁶ Fatah officials claimed that membership in the PLO entailed acceptance of its charter and prior

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, West Bank and Gaza security chiefs, March and June 2008. A Hamas security official suggested that immediately upon a reconciliation agreement, some former Fatah commanders and officers in Gaza could be integrated. Crisis Group interview, security chief, Gaza City, June 2008. All Gaza leaders agree, however, that integration does not mean return to the status quo ante: "Nobody is contemplating a return of the security services controlled by criminals that were operating in Gaza before June 2007. We are not going to go back to where we were. It will be impossible to restructure in the presence of the old security clique". Crisis Group interview, Said al-Siyam, Gaza interior minister, Gaza City, June 2008.

¹⁴ Mahmoud Abbas, Al-Arabiya television, 28 August 2008. Also Crisis Group interviews, PA security officials, Ramallah, March, June, October 2008.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leader, West Bank, June 2008; Qassam Brigades leader, Gaza City, August 2008. In objecting to the presence of foreign forces, a Hamas leader asked, "who would the forces protect in the event of a clash? Palestinian citizens or the occupation?" Crisis Group interview, Tulkarem, October 2008.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, June 2008.

agreements, something they knew Hamas could not accept. A senior PLO leader put it this way,

Hamas is not applying to join the PLO; it wants to take it over. Hamas leaders want the legitimacy that the PLO would confer upon them, without the PLO's content or leadership. They are asking to join an organization whose goals, policy and charter they oppose. Their solution to this apparent dilemma is to require the PLO to change in order to suit them. This is not joining – this is a hostile takeover! We will not let this happen. If Hamas wants to join, it has to buy an entry ticket, that is, to embrace the PLO charter and accept its decisions.¹⁷

For Hamas, opening up the PLO to the Islamist movements – itself and Islamic Jihad – should not be predicated on acceptance of its charter or commitments, since “it is up to the Palestinian people to decide which orientation they give to this program. No limits or constraints should or can be put on which program the people choose”.¹⁸

Further complicating reconciliation efforts were differing perspectives on the prerequisites for dialogue. When Abbas set out his position after the takeover, he insisted on a return to the status quo ante in Gaza, by which he meant restoration of security and presidential installations to their pre-takeover occupants, as well as a formal Hamas apology and accountability for those who engaged in violent acts. The Islamists, for their part, called for unconditional talks. On one thing both sides agreed: any agreement “must address the real issues”¹⁹ in detail rather than in the general terms of the 2005 Cairo Agreement or the 2007 Mecca Agreement.²⁰ Beyond that, discord over specific solutions masks competing aspirations to dominate the national movement.

B. RECONCILIATION, OR WAGING WAR BY OTHER MEANS

The flurry of internal and regional attempts to broker a deal has produced little other than additional recrimination and distrust. Initially, Fatah and Hamas representatives held informal contacts which, tolerated but not sanctioned by their respective leaderships, led no-

where.²¹ Civil society organisations and smaller political parties drafted their own initiatives,²² but as PLC member and former presidential candidate Mustafa Barghouti – the author of one such proposal – explained:

All of these initiatives are similar. The real question is whether there is political will on the part of Hamas and Fatah to end the internal split. The problem is not one of texts, ideas or solutions. It is whether the parties are reconciled to the idea that no Palestinian faction alone can lead the Palestinian liberation movement.²³

Good will aside, such efforts lacked several key requirements for success. These included the ability to provide financial incentives, exert political pressure and guarantee implementation. Echoing a view heard within Fatah as well, a Hamas leader said of such civil society efforts, “they are a waste of time. We don't need ideas about how to do it. What we need is a state with political leverage that can protect and back an agreement”.²⁴

States, too, tried to step in but to little avail, falling victim to intra-regional rivalry and, more so, an increasingly entrenched Palestinian divide. In one case after another, the rival Palestinian parties welcomed reconciliation attempts in a way that almost guaranteed their failure. The collapse of the Mecca Agreement put a damper on subsequent reconciliation attempts, particularly by their broker, Saudi Arabia.²⁵ Riyadh felt it had taken a risk by pushing for the deal in the face of U.S. displeasure, only to be betrayed by both sides. Deeply disappointed by the unreliability of the Palestinian parties,²⁶ the Saudi government refused to resurrect its initiative or otherwise intervene.²⁷ Nor did other traditional mediators such as Egypt at first take

²¹ Crisis Group interviews Hamas and Fatah leaders, Cairo, July and December 2007; Gaza City, June 2008; and Ramallah, March and June 2008. These channels explored options for, and clarified the requirements of, reconciliation but never achieved the status of a back channel.

²² These included the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Palestine Forum, the “Palestinian Initiative”, the “Private Sector Initiative”, the “Call for Palestine”, the “Central Council Initiative” and the “Popular Campaign for National Reconciliation”. See also “Eight factions and public figures propose a political initiative to regain unity”, *Al-Hayat*, 11 April 2008.

²³ Crisis Group interview, Mustafa Barghouti, Gaza City, November 2008.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, June 2008.

²⁵ See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°68, *After Gaza*, 2 August 2007; and *After Mecca*, op. cit.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Arab official, Cairo, January 2008.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Saudi official, December 2007.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, PLO leader, Ramallah, June 2008.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, June 2008.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Hamas and Fatah leaders, Cairo, February 2008; Ramallah, March 2008; and Gaza City, June 2008.

²⁰ See Crisis Group Report, *After Mecca*, op. cit.

up the task, fearing that reconciliation could jeopardise Israeli-Palestinian negotiations²⁸ and determined not to do anything that might strengthen Hamas and, by extension, their own domestic Islamist oppositions.

In March 2008, the president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Salih, offered to mediate. His initiative involved restoring the status quo ante in Gaza, resuming national dialogue, forming a national unity government and creating an Arab League commission to ensure implementation of these steps. Both parties accepted his invitation to talks, but each with its own spin. For Abbas, who opposed a unity government, the Yemeni initiative's key provision was its first: "to return to the situation reigning in Gaza prior to 13 June 2007". He took this as tantamount to reiterating his precondition. Hamas expressed willingness to discuss the initiative but did not endorse it in its entirety, choosing to interpret its terms as a menu of items for discussion rather than as clear-cut requirements for a deal.²⁹ The two delegations met in March 2008, reaching what became known as the Sanaa Declaration:

We, the representatives of Fatah and Hamas, agree to the Yemeni initiative as a framework to resume dialogue between the two movements to return the Palestinian situation to what it was before the Gaza incidents.

The declaration was signed by Azzam al-Ahmad, head of the Fatah delegation and parliamentary bloc with-

out Abbas's explicit authorisation. Uproar ensued in Ramallah. The statement implied that dialogue could begin prior to a return to the status quo ante and defined "return" to encompass the "Palestinian situation" as a whole. This could be taken to mean annulment of what had occurred in the West Bank as well, namely the set of measures taken by Fayyad.³⁰ Abbas's advisors immediately issued a clarification, in effect burying the Sanaa Declaration. The internal Fatah squabbling was broadcast live on Al Jazeera.

After Qatar successfully mediated an end to Lebanon's eighteen-month-old political crisis, many – including the Yemeni president as well as Hamas and Fatah representatives – called on Doha to try to mend the Palestinian rift.³¹ When Qatar expressed interest, Egypt, irritated by the growing diplomatic influence of the small Gulf state, pre-emptively announced its intention to host a Palestinian national dialogue.³² Three more months passed before that effort got underway.

In the meantime, as the one-year anniversary of the take-over loomed, Abbas launched his own initiative, calling on 4 June 2008 for national dialogue to "implement the Yemeni initiative" and "end the internal split".³³ Hinting at a measure of flexibility, he dropped mention of preconditions, saying instead the Yemeni initiative should serve as a basis for the talks. But although the president's advisers publicly portrayed the invitation as a gesture to help end the Gaza siege, their private commentary left little doubt it was not an expression of generosity. A Fatah leader in Ramallah explained:

We saw that our talk of "preconditions" was hurting us publicly because it made us look like we did not want reconciliation. We didn't want our own people, and Arabs more generally, to blame us for being obstructionist. So we dropped the talk about "apology" and "reversing the situation" and "evacuation

²⁸ Renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations were officially launched in Annapolis, Maryland in November 2007, with the goal of concluding a final status agreement by the end of 2008. See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°22, *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Annapolis and After*, 20 November 2007. "Abbas cannot be pressured into reconciliation with Hamas as long as his negotiations with Olmert continue. These negotiations will fail, because Israel is not prepared to make the necessary concessions. And we don't want Israel to use reconciliation between Abbas and Hamas as a pretext to exonerate itself from that failure". Crisis Group interview, senior Arab official, Cairo, March 2008.

²⁹ One of Abbas's advisers said he had accepted the invitation – despite opposing the concept of a national unity government – insofar as it appeared to establish as a precondition Hamas's relinquishing control over Gaza, which he doubted it would do. Crisis Group interview, February 2008. Hamas also reluctantly accepted the Yemeni initiative despite its call for a return to the status quo ante in Gaza and early elections, but only after making clear it saw these as items to be discussed rather than preconditions for negotiations. In the words of Sami Abu Zuhri, a Hamas spokesman, "we accept to discuss all the points stated in the Yemeni initiative openly on the dialogue table.... The Yemeni initiative did not talk about preconditions, but it listed items or points for dialogue, and we're willing to discuss them". Reuters, 18 March 2008.

³⁰ Azzam al-Ahmad explained that although he had been in frequent contact with Abbas over the course of the negotiations, he could not reach him when called upon to sign the final text. "Given that the declaration was within the boundaries of my mandate as discussed with Abbas, I went ahead and signed". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 17 April 2008. A presidential adviser disputed this account, contending that al-Ahmad exceeded his remit. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, June 2008.

³¹ See Reuters, 25 May 2008 and Associated Press, 13 July 2008; Crisis Group interviews, PA officials, Ramallah, June 2008.

³² Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official, Cairo, June 2008.

³³ Abbas speech, 4 June 2008.

of headquarters” and substituted the term “basis” of cooperation instead.³⁴

Another PA official further explained Abbas’s motive: “We will make Hamas a more generous offer than before, which it will still reject since it doesn’t want unity. This will allow us to blame it for the failure and take stronger measures against Hamas in the West Bank. We cannot simply sit and wait”.³⁵

The latest and at first blush most serious attempt came from Egypt, whose mediation efforts resumed following Abbas’s initiative. Publicly, Egypt’s goal was to prepare a paper that would be presented to all factions and endorsed by the Arab League; privately, officials made clear they believed Hamas would reject it and then be singled out as responsible for the breakdown.³⁶ From then on, Hamas – fearful that Cairo and Abbas were jointly seeking to corner it – pursued three simultaneous objectives: to improve the Egyptian document as much as possible;³⁷ ensure that the Islamists were not isolated in the Palestinian arena; and prevent a consensual Arab position fingering the Islamists.

As to the first, Hamas raised a series of objections and obtained only partial satisfaction.³⁸ As to the second, several other factions – including Islamic Jihad and members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – agreed with some Hamas objections and, more generally, its contention that the Egyptian document ought to be discussed among Palestinians rather than imposed from outside. And as for the third, Hamas felt confident that a number of Arab countries, including Qatar, Syria, Yemen, Sudan and Algeria, would object to any singling out of the Islamists.³⁹

On 8 November, Hamas announced it would boycott the Egyptian-hosted meeting at which the plan was to be approved. In doing so, the movement cited the PA’s campaign of arrests against Islamist militants in the West Bank, taking particular umbrage at Abbas’s claim that there were no political prisoners.⁴⁰ The complaint no doubt was genuine.⁴¹ The arrest campaign escalated markedly in the weeks leading up to the would-be 10 November meeting.⁴² A West Bank Islamist declared that dialogue under such conditions was impossible: “The PA is turning the most moderate wing of the

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, September 2008.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, PA official, Ramallah, June 2008. For its part, Hamas saw Abbas’s announcement as an admission that peace talks with Israel were foundering and that Fatah, therefore, needed to show interest in unity. A Hamas leader in Gaza said, “we don’t want to portray this opportunity for national reconciliation as a sign of Abbas’s failure or weakness after his bids were proved wrong. We could say ‘We told you so’, but we won’t. Abbas is bankrupt and has nothing to offer. But we will be responsible, and we will act to protect the unity of the Palestinian territory. However, if they make it too difficult, then we don’t have to reconcile with them”. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, 5 June 2008. Some Fatah officials echoed this sentiment: “Abbas is not bent on reconciliation, but he needs a national dialogue because he finally realised there will be no political settlement with Israel”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 6 June 2008.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, U.S. and Arab officials, New York, September-October 2008.

³⁷ The document provided for a government of national consensus that would lift the siege; security reform on the basis of “professional and patriotic principles”; simultaneous presidential and legislative elections; and the “development and revitalisation of the PLO”. The document also specified that resistance was legitimate “within the framework of national accord” and provided for the extension of the ceasefire after its expiration (19 December). Detailed solutions for each issue were to be worked out in committees after the document itself was endorsed by a joint factional meeting.

³⁸ Hamas was especially opposed to the document’s provision for simultaneous presidential and legislative elections. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, June 2008. Hamas also rejected inclusion of matters pertaining to the “conflict with the occupation” (that is, resistance and ceasefire) in the reconciliation document; insisted that changes on the ground take place simultaneously in the West Bank and Gaza; and maintained that all outstanding issues be treated as a single package, agreed upon in its entirety before final endorsement. “Memorandum about the Palestinian Dialogue that was supposed to take place in Cairo from 9 to 11 November 2008”, on file with Crisis Group.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Damascus, October 2008.

⁴⁰ Copy of speech obtained by Crisis Group. During a speech on the anniversary of Yasser Arafat’s death, Abbas said the PA only held “those accused of weapons possession and illegally raising money”. Hamas claims it was insulted by the implication that “we are all criminals”. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, November 2008. Hamas was particularly offended by the fact that on the day of Abbas’s speech, the PA arrested Rifat Nasif, a West Bank Hamas spokesman who recently had been released from an Israeli jail. Crisis Group interview, Hamas PLC representative, West Bank, November 2008.

⁴¹ On 14 November 2008, a group of human rights organisations placed advertisements in the Palestinian dailies *Al-Quds*, *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* and *Al-Ayyam*: “The national authority, the caretaker government and the dismissed government deny the existence of any political prisoners, but human rights organisations have information and documentation that confirm the untruth of these official declarations”.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, human rights activists, Ramallah, November 2008. For additional details about the campaign, see Section III.A.2 below.

Hamas [that is the West Bank] into the most extreme".⁴³ But the charge nonetheless had the feel of a convenient pretext designed to find a way out of the talks. In subsequent days, Hamas listed other complaints, including that Abbas was to be treated as a head of state rather than a participant in the talks and that West Bank Hamas members could not attend.⁴⁴ As further discussed below, Hamas's calculation was simple: it had less to lose by scuttling the talks than by facing pressure to accept unsatisfactory terms once seated at the table.

Abbas and his colleagues were quick to react. Seeking to defuse the looming 9 January legitimacy crisis, the PLO Central Council on 23 November elected Abbas "President of Palestine", a post that had remained vacant since Arafat's death.⁴⁵ He thereby reinforced his "presidential" credentials by having them depend not solely on the PA but rather flow from the supreme Palestinian body, the PLO. Nor did Egypt ignore the snub, arresting Hamas members and their families who passed through the Rafah crossing in the wake of the movement's refusal to attend the Cairo meeting.⁴⁶

On 26 November, the Arab League met and assessed the state of inter-Palestinian relations. The outcome offered a little bit for everyone, arguably more to Abbas. To the president's satisfaction, the ministers asked him to continue in his duties until simultaneous parliamentary and presidential elections could be held.⁴⁷ This was a direct rebuke to Hamas's challenge to Abbas's legitimacy, made all the more stinging by the fact that it was unanimously endorsed, including by Syria. A Syrian official said:

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, former cabinet minister, West Bank, November 2008.

⁴⁴ Israel refused to let Palestinian politicians in the West Bank from various factions join their respective delegations to Cairo, including members of Hamas, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Islamic Jihad.

⁴⁵ After the vote, Lebanon recognised the State of Palestine, which it did not when Yasser Arafat declared independence in 1988. Ramallah interprets this as an indication of its regional strength. Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, 29 November 2008.

⁴⁶ A Hamas official claimed that Egypt detained thirteen of the movement's leaders and family members, including the head of the Hamas bloc in the northern Gaza Strip and the brother of Mushir al-Masri, a Hamas legislator and spokesman, as well as a four-year-old girl. All were quickly released, except for three men, held for several weeks and, they claim, beaten and ill-treated. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, December 2008.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, 29 November 2008.

We believe it is important not to allow a vacuum to develop within the PA. We disagreed with Hamas in this respect. But we don't represent Hamas; rather, we seek to defend our conception of Palestinian interests. If Hamas leaders stopped to think, they would see their own interests in this; unfortunately they operate under pressure from the daily attacks they face.⁴⁸

At the same time, in a gesture to Hamas, the League refrained from blaming it for responsibility for the dialogue's failure.⁴⁹ The movement welcomed that, while dismissing the Arab League's endorsement of Abbas's continued tenure on the grounds that "they have no right to extend Abu Mazen, and no country or countries can extend him if that goes against the Basic Law".⁵⁰

After the failure of the Cairo talks, Abbas announced that if a national dialogue were not started by the end of 2008, he would call for simultaneous legislative and presidential elections in early 2009. After Hamas categorically rejected the idea, some advisers threatened to proceed with polls in the West Bank alone, in which case they almost certainly would be boycotted by Hamas.⁵¹ Defended by some within Fatah,⁵² the idea of West Bank-only elections was dismissed by others.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, December 2008.

⁴⁹ On this, the Syrian official said, "we reject the idea of a dialogue designed in such a way to blame Hamas for its failure". Ibid.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, 30 November 2008. He also complained that the Arab League recognised the PLO and PLC as legitimate but not the Gaza-based government.

⁵¹ Reuters, 24 November 2008. The Fatah election plan does not include municipalities and local councils. Instead, the PA plans to replace local government units in the West Bank controlled by Hamas, upon expiration of their elected terms, with PA-appointed committees. Crisis Group interview, PA official, Ramallah, December 2008.

⁵² On 24 November presidential adviser Nimr Hammad said, "if Hamas forcibly prevents them preparing for elections in Gaza, this is not going to stop the elections from being held. We will hold the elections in the West Bank, and Hamas would be responsible for preventing the elections in Gaza". Reuters, 24 November 2008. Hammad is not alone within Fatah. Others support the organisation of West Bank-only elections as a means of taking the so-called legitimacy card away from Hamas. One local leader said, "for the past three years, Hamas has been extorting Abbas and the Palestinian people by claiming legitimacy and vetoing elections as a way out of the impasse. Today the West Bank and Gaza are in an exceptional situation. Sometimes you need to use the *kayy* [a technique of traditional Arab medicine in which the flesh is cauterised with a hot iron rod] to stop this extortion. Every attempt to meet them halfway results in their raising

The point is to show our seriousness and gain popular support by demonstrating we are prepared to have elections. But you cannot conduct elections if Hamas is opposed. For that matter you cannot hold elections if Islamic Jihad is opposed: all it takes is a couple Molotov cocktails to sabotage them.⁵³

III. WHO'S AFRAID OF RECONCILIATION?

A. THE VIEW FROM THE PRESIDENCY

1. Improving the West Bank; talking peace with Israel; fortifying international legitimacy

Over the past year and a half, President Abbas's approach to reconciliation may have shifted in form, but not in substance. From the outset, his advisers were persuaded they should temporise and achieve success on various fronts – eg, negotiations with Israel, improving conditions in the West Bank and/or strengthening his international legitimacy – prior to engaging Hamas. As one of them put it, “Hamas will give nothing to Abbas under the current circumstances. The president needs to strengthen his position through tangible achievement in order to guarantee a fruitful dialogue”.⁵⁴ To negotiate in a position of inferiority “will only improve Hamas's standing both regionally and internationally”.⁵⁵ Therein lies in part the genesis of his position that talks needed to be preceded by restoration of Gaza's status quo ante. As time passed, the insistence on pre-conditions began to cost him public support. His demands were thus reframed as negotiating goals rather than prerequisites.

The strategy has met with mixed success. As seen, Abbas continues to enjoy strong regional and international backing; indeed, some Palestinians refer to external support as his principal currency. As one analyst quipped, “this is a government of international con-

the ceiling of demands”. He admitted that elections in the West Bank only, boycotted by an opposition many of whose members sit in jail, would enjoy neither consensus nor credibility. “But still they will undermine Hamas's claim to legitimacy and strengthen Abu Mazen's hand in future dialogue”. Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Nablus, 28 November 2008.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, 29 November 2008.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, March 2008.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, presidential advisers, Cairo, 16 January 2008.

sensus, not national consensus”.⁵⁶ Egypt remains his steadfast ally; after Hamas boycotted the Cairo talks, the foreign minister openly blamed the Islamists' “lack of enthusiasm for reconciliation”.⁵⁷ Saudi Arabia, which once sought to be viewed as a neutral mediator, has tilted in his favour.⁵⁸ As seen, even Syria, which plays host to Hamas's exiled leadership and has at best erratic relations with Fatah, joined the consensus position, at least on the narrow issue of Abbas's presidency.⁵⁹

PA officials express confidence that pressure on Hamas from Arab countries will produce results. A presidential adviser said, “if Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Qatar want something, it will happen”.⁶⁰ Among forms of pressure, Egypt can bar Hamas officials from exiting Gaza⁶¹ or further crack down on the tunnels

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Palestinian analyst, Ramallah, August 2008.

⁵⁷ Quoted in *Jordan Times*, 5 December 2008. The head of the Egyptian parliament's foreign relations committee went further, saying, “Egypt will not accept the establishment of an Islamic emirate along the eastern borders”. Quoted in *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 3 December 2008.

⁵⁸ The most recent and, from Hamas's standpoint, damaging example, occurred when Saudi Arabia coordinated with the PA rather than Hamas the granting of visas to Gazans hoping to undertake the *hajj* to Mecca. As a result, Saudi Arabia allocated slots to people chosen by the president's office rather than to Gazans who had registered six months earlier. Hamas barred exit to those selected by the presidency and, according to reports that Crisis Group could not independently confirm, beat some of the 150 pilgrims who attempted to make their way to the Rafah crossing in defiance of the government ban. Crisis Group interviews, tour operators and would-be pilgrims, Gaza City and Khan Yunis, December 2008. A senior Hamas official said, “Saudi Arabia and Abbas are exercising religious pressure on our movement. This will not be allowed”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza, 3 December 2008. Israeli officials commented that there had been a real change in Arab attitudes. “Hamas's regional isolation is, for the first time, having an effect. Saudi Arabia did not provide Hamas with its desired *hajj* visas”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, December 2008.

⁵⁹ Even as Syrian officials supported Abbas in this respect and criticised Hamas's Gaza takeover – “we openly disagreed with the coup d'état in Gaza, but it serves no purpose to brood about this forever”, Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, December 2008 – they questioned his election as “president of the State of Palestine”, asking “where is this state? Is this really the time to play such games?” Ibid. During the November 2008 Arab League summit, Foreign Minister Muallem rebuked Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who had described Hamas as part of the opposition: “How can you say that? They have the majority in parliament”. Ibid.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, 29 November 2008.

⁶¹ Just days before the 10 November meeting was to convene in Cairo, Egypt refused to let a delegation of Hamas parliamen-

between its territory and Gaza.⁶² Arab nations also can influence the domestic scene, for example by denying recognition to a Hamas-appointed president after Abbas's term expires on 9 January 2009.⁶³

In the West Bank, the PA has continued efforts to improve lives of ordinary Palestinians. The emphasis has been security. After years of chaos, order – and to an increasing but lesser extent law – is being restored. Nablus, Jenin and, most recently, Hebron have witnessed prolonged and organised surges of PA security forces facilitated by U.S.- and European-sponsored training programs; other cities have seen increases as well, albeit of a more temporary nature.⁶⁴ As a general matter, crime is in decline while, mainly as a result of PA-brokered amnesty understandings with Israel, Fatah-backed militias have been dismantled.⁶⁵ Intelligence collection has also markedly improved, thereby addressing a key shortcoming of the early stages of the security roll-out.⁶⁶ Palestinians of virtually all political tendencies

praise the improvements and, nearly universally, cite it as the PA's most significant achievement.⁶⁷

So far, the PA security campaign, while acknowledged and applauded by Israel, has not convinced it to significantly lift movement restrictions. Israel has taken some noteworthy steps, but on the whole impediments remain substantial. Unless the gestures are made permanent and until Palestinians have a clear vision of what changes will occur, there cannot be systemic amelioration.⁶⁸ According to an international aid official, "people need predictability and consistency in order to be able to plan".⁶⁹ As a result, while the West Bank likely will see economic growth in 2008 (4 to 5 per cent and lower unemployment),⁷⁰ and many experts assess that Fayyad has done as well as anyone could have under the circumstances,⁷¹ the improvement stems

tarians, including Deputy Speaker Ahmad Bahar, exit through Rafah. They had hoped to leave Gaza early to avoid the fate of Mushir al-Masri and Sami Abu Zuhri, who were supposed to form part of Hamas's delegation to the 8 October meeting but were turned back at the border. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, October 2008.

⁶²In the weeks following Hamas's refusal to attend the dialogue, Egypt closed 40 tunnels in what Hamas interpreted as a show of displeasure. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, November 2008.

⁶³"If Hamas declares Ahmad Bahar president and nobody recognises him, it will be an embarrassment. What Hamas thought was a source of strength will be exposed as weakness". Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, November 2008.

⁶⁴The PA has judged the situation in certain cities such as Tulkarem good enough that the planned introduction of specially trained personnel was cancelled. Crisis Group interview, security commander, Tulkarem, October 2008.

⁶⁵The functioning of these understandings has improved since Crisis Group's earlier reporting. See Crisis Group Report, *Ruling Palestine II*, op. cit. Pardons are more frequent and former militia members more prone to adhere to the understanding's terms. The probationary period for some militants on the amnesty list has decreased from three months to one. Crisis Group interview, senior PA security official, Ramallah, October 2008. Still, the program is not without its hitches. In early November 2008, a former member of the Fatah-affiliated Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades who had been on the list was killed by Israel in the Balata refugee camp near Nablus. Crisis Group interview, former policeman, Nablus, December 2008.

⁶⁶Crisis Group interview, Palestinian security official, Ramallah, October 2008.

⁶⁷That said, those sympathetic to the Islamist movement contend that law and order is discriminatorily applied and that crimes committed against them sometimes go unpunished. An Islamist who formerly had spoken positively about the PA's security effort said, "today, for Hamas, there is no security". Crisis Group interview, former minister, West Bank, November 2008. He gave several examples. "[Hamas leader] Muhammad Ghazal was kidnapped. Everyone knows who the kidnappers were, and the police do nothing. [Hamas PLC member] Hamid Bitawi's car was shot up, and the police didn't show up for an hour". Crisis Group interview, West Bank, October 2008.

⁶⁸A September report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs commented that Israeli efforts to facilitate movement in the West Bank "are positive and welcomed yet their impact is limited geographically". "Closure Update", 11 September 2008. Defence Minister Barak is said to have offered further improvements, including lifting of other checkpoints, in early December. *Haaretz*, 6 December 2008. During the December Eid al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice) holiday, Palestinian citizens of Israel and West Bankers were allowed into Nablus and some of the city's residents were allowed out without permits. This significantly improved the atmosphere, as evidenced by far more dynamic market activity. With the end of the holiday, many of the gestures came to a halt. If they were to be made permanent, Palestinians say it would significantly ameliorate socio-economic conditions. Crisis Group interview, Nablus municipal adviser, Nablus, December 2008.

⁶⁹Crisis Group interview, international aid official, Jerusalem, December 2008.

⁷⁰Crisis Group interview, Fayyad adviser, Jerusalem, December 2008; Crisis Group interviews, international financial experts, Washington, Jerusalem, December 2008. Some experts question the optimistic employment assessments. Crisis Group interview, international aid official, Jerusalem, December 2008.

⁷¹Crisis Group interview, international aid official, Washington, December 2008.

mainly from salary payments,⁷² not fundamental changes in the economic environment.

A Fayyad adviser said, “we cannot maintain our economic strategy without substantial improvement in movement and access”,⁷³ which today is constrained by more than 600 obstacles.⁷⁴ Positive indicators exist: booming construction in the Ramallah area,⁷⁵ increasing tourism, particularly to Bethlehem,⁷⁶ investment conferences in Bethlehem and Nablus together with a package of measures negotiated by the Quartet’s envoy, Tony Blair.⁷⁷ Still, to date even in Jenin – the showcase in which the PA launched its most concerted

security and economic effort – growth remains depressingly flat.⁷⁸

Predictions vary. An adviser to the PA prime minister judged that improvements would accelerate in 2009 owing to continued security progress, “the rising level of dismay in the world at the lack of Israeli responsiveness”, and anticipated political engagement by the Obama administration. Moreover, should Netanyahu form the next Israeli government, he ventured, he would slow down political negotiations but compensate by emphasising trade and economic progress.⁷⁹ On the other hand, reasons for worry abound. Despite a massive injection of money from foreign sources in 2008, the situation remains highly fragile; given the global financial meltdown, it is far from assured that similar sums will be forthcoming in 2009. Lower oil prices could affect Gulf remittances, just as a weaker Israeli economy could hurt trade with the PA.⁸⁰

For now, the PA is banking on both the people’s gratitude for security improvements and its understanding that the Authority is, at long last, taking matters into its own hands. A presidential adviser said, “people aren’t stupid. They know we are doing our homework, even if we can’t fix every problem. If the Hawara check-

⁷² Salary payments including arrears – funded by some \$1.8 billion in donor budgetary support – total approximately 10 per cent of Palestinian GDP. Crisis Group interview, international aid official, Jerusalem, December 2008. PA officials also cite other monetary measures, including a reduction in income taxes and doubling of the transportation allowance. Crisis Group interview, Fayyad adviser, Jerusalem, December 2008.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, December 2008. An international aid official agreed: “The unprecedented infusion of donor funds did not lead to unprecedented growth because movement and access restrictions – which have been loosened somewhat but not substantively changed – prevented the private sector from responding”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, December 2008.

⁷⁴ The number is estimated at approximately 630. See “Closure Update”, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ The economic situation in Ramallah has improved more than elsewhere, because of its status as the PA’s central city, the concentration of large businesses and the greater amount of donor money and non-governmental organisations. As a result, residents of other cities tend to look askance on Ramallah. In Jenin for instance, a television producer was harangued by an audience, who asked her “what she and everyone else in Ramallah had done for the Palestinian cause” in comparison with the “the martyrs that Jenin offered”. Crisis Group interview, television producer, Ramallah, November 2008.

⁷⁶ The Israeli government claimed tourism to Bethlehem increased by 87 per cent and also noted improvements in the West Bank’s agricultural and banking sectors, in addition to other positive indicators. “Positive Trend in Economic Indicators for the West Bank”, Israeli Ministry of Defence, November 2008. Hotel occupancy rates in Bethlehem reportedly rose dramatically over the last year, and the Christmas holiday is expected to see a large influx of tourists. Crisis Group interview, member of Quartet envoy Tony Blair’s team, December 2008.

⁷⁷ Blair announced the package on 13 May 2008, though in September the World Bank reported, “despite the progress to date, most items in the May 13th package remain incomplete”. “Palestinian Economic Prospects: Aid, Access and Reform”, World Bank, 22 September 2008. The Quartet consists of the U.S., the European Union, Russia and the UN, represented by the Secretary-General.

⁷⁸ “Business has not flourished, economic activity continues at a depressingly low level and business confidence remains low”. “Jenin Potential”, Portland Trust, November 2008. At a November forum broadcast on Watan TV, a range of local officials and civil society activists agreed that government intervention has failed. The most significant problems cited included economically-driven out-migration (25,000 residents left the city in recent years); the price of water; and unemployment affecting university graduates. One participant said, “the PA is doing helter-skelter relief projects, but nothing that helps with development”. DVD provided to Crisis Group. Confronted with these problems, the PA expanded its low cost (\$50,000-\$150,000) community development projects, locally conceived and managed in a decentralised manner to maximise community input. Although their economic impact is relatively marginal, their social and political value can be substantial. For instance, four new schools in Nablus reduced the number of double shifts for students; the renovation of a wing of Rafidiya Hospital in Nablus means that fewer patients need to travel to Cairo and Amman for treatment; and road building facilitates access for small businesses. Thus far the PA has completed 300 projects and is executing 500 more, with another 400 in the planning stage. Crisis Group interview, Fayyad adviser, Jerusalem, December 2008. Their success has encouraged donors to pledge funding for 2009. Crisis Group interviews, presidential adviser, Ramallah, 29 November 2008; international aid official, Jerusalem, December 2008.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, December 2008.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, international aid official, Jerusalem, December 2008.

point outside Nablus is not removed, people know that is because of Israel and not the PA. On the other hand, if there were security chaos inside Nablus, it would be clear it was our fault".⁸¹

The more serious problem involves negotiations with Israel. It is, in some measure, a paradox: talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders never have gone this far, yet scepticism among the Palestinian (and Israeli) publics rarely has been so high. According to credible reports, Olmert privately proposed to Abbas the equivalent of 100 per cent of the West Bank, with one-to-one land swaps (including equal sharing of the Latrun no-man's-land). Additionally, he reportedly agreed to divide Jerusalem along demographic lines so as to create two capitals, for now leaving the Old City and Holy Places under an unspecified special regime. He has shown little movement on refugees (purportedly backtracking from an earlier suggestion of 10,000 per year for an unspecified number of years). In the words of a former Israeli negotiator, "this is closer to the Palestinian position than anything previously suggested, more than the Clinton parameters and more than Taba".⁸²

Still, this was deemed insufficient by Abbas and, to the vast majority of Palestinians, the negotiations appear to have produced virtually nothing despite pledges of an accord by the end of 2008.⁸³ The increasingly likely prospect of a Likud victory in the February 2009 Israeli elections, with a government to be headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, further fuels Palestinian pessimism. To some extent, this is balanced by hope that the Obama administration will be more engaged, and sooner, than either of its two predecessors.

2. Going after Hamas and Gaza

Parallel to its efforts to convince Palestinians it is making progress in the West Bank and on the diplomatic front, the PA has cracked down hard on Hamas. Pressure on the Islamic movement has continued unabated since the Gaza takeover, its targeting advancing in stages from weapons, to institutions, to money.⁸⁴ The

campaign escalated in March 2008, then again, in dramatic fashion, in October, and continues to this day.⁸⁵

Human rights organisations have taken note. They estimate the number of political detainees in the West Bank at 300-400 and point to the fact that, since September, some security agencies bypass civilian courts completely and bring civilians before military courts.⁸⁶ Attorneys claim that when civilian courts intervene, their rulings often are ignored;⁸⁷ human rights organisations, too, are being marginalised, with the head of the Higher Military Council, Abd al-Aziz al-Wadi, prohibiting military judges and the military attorney general from speaking with them.⁸⁸ More seriously, human rights advocates accuse the PA of resorting to torture⁸⁹ and of doing so with the impunity and self-assurance that can only come with political backing.⁹⁰ Perhaps the strongest indication of political backing is that although senior PA officials were informed by human rights organisations of what was happening inside PA prisons in the run-up to the Cairo reconciliation talks, they nevertheless denied the existence of any political prisoners.⁹¹

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, West Bank, October and November, 2008; director of human rights organisation, Ramallah, 20 November 2008.

⁸⁶ On orders of the Palestinian Supreme Judicial Council, a judge inspected PA detention facilities in September and reported that all prisoners held by Preventive Security and General Intelligence were subject to military court proceedings. "Monthly Report Number 1", Judicial Authority, Media and Public Relations Department, October 2008. Attorneys state that military detention periods have been extended up to six months. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, December 2008.

⁸⁷ In October, the Palestinian Supreme Court ordered the release of a civilian who had been brought before a military court. When he and his lawyer reached the gate of the Preventive Security compound, he was re-arrested on what he was told was a "different security-related charge". Crisis Group interview, human rights attorney, Ramallah, December 2008.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, director of human rights organisation, Ramallah, December 2008.

⁸⁹ The most common form of torture, human rights workers says, is *shebeh*, the practice of suspending a prisoner from wrists bound behind his back. Crisis Group interviews, human rights workers, Ramallah, November 2008. See also "With Abbas's clampdown, reports of torture grow", Reuters, 4 December 2008.

⁹⁰ In response to a thick dossier documenting a torture case submitted to the PA's Preventive Security agency, a human rights organisation received a terse reply: "The procedures followed basic principles and the law.... We refuse to accept this style of address ... and the assignation of legal responsibility to our agency". Copy of letter provided to Crisis Group.

⁹¹ The director of a human rights organisation claims to have spoken several times with senior PA officials in the lead-up to Abbas's November speech. Crisis Group telephone inter-

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, 29 November 2008.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, November 2008.

⁸³ Olmert reportedly still hopes to conclude some agreement, perhaps on basic parameters for a deal, before he leaves office. But, in the words of an Israeli official, "he is the only person on this earth who has that goal". Crisis Group interview, December 2008.

⁸⁴ According to some reports, West Bankers have been detained for receiving money from Gaza. Crisis Group interview, independent Islamist, West Bank, September 2008.

Political detentions are only one component of the campaign that intensified in October. The vetting of civil employees by security services has increased; the PA fired some 400 teachers considered sympathetic to Hamas in that month.⁹² Moreover, promotions and judicial appointments reportedly require a positive “security recommendation”, as does in some cases obtaining government contracts.⁹³ While those whose political loyalty is deemed suspect are refused employment, those already in the civil service can be marginalised from positions of authority.⁹⁴ A human rights attorney who half a year ago dismissed the contention that the PA was a police state as an “exaggeration”,⁹⁵ today nuanced his appreciation: “The government is pursuing a policy of political cleansing. If you do not sup-

port the government politically, there is no place for you in government service”.⁹⁶ Outside the civil service, the government has stepped up activity, increasing surveillance in mosques and replacing entire boards of non-governmental associations with appointed committees.⁹⁷

When criticised for their actions, PA security personnel say they are taking no chances. “We learned the lesson of Gaza, and it is unthinkable that we would let the same thing happen here”.⁹⁸ Security forces have expanded their street presence, adding guards to public places, stopping more cars and increasing arrests of suspected Islamist militants.⁹⁹ The Authority cites concern that Hamas might launch a campaign of violence to mark the end of Abbas’s term; privately, however, most PA security chiefs are sceptical of the Islamists’ military capabilities in the West Bank, which they describe as seriously eroded. As they see it, Hamas could perhaps shake the public’s sense of security – by, for instance, using explosive devices or attacking public institutions and personnel – but not launch a sustained campaign, let alone take over the West Bank.¹⁰⁰

Training of West Bank police in non-lethal methods of riot and demonstration control is under way,¹⁰¹ but

view, December 2008. In early September 2008, independent committees on political detainees – composed of lawyers, politicians and civil society representatives – formed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. According to a West Bank committee member, the group met with Abbas and the interior minister, both of whom promised full cooperation. However, security agencies refused to give the committee access to the roughly 200 detainees and facilities the group requested to visit; Ziad Hab al-Rih, head of Preventive Security, claimed that all detainees were criminal and not political prisoners, despite the fact that all had been charged before military, not civilian, courts. A meeting with the prime minister’s office was similarly unfruitful, as its representatives insisted that the definition of a “political prisoner” required further study. The group met again with both Abbas and the interior minister to register its complaints and press for access, which again was promised but never allowed. After about 40 days, the committee disbanded because the PA refused to cooperate. In Gaza, the committee received better cooperation. The government met the group, recognised the 88 names submitted as political prisoners and released twelve as a gesture of good will. However, when the PA proved recalcitrant, it, too, curtailed its cooperation. Crisis Group interviews, West Bank and Gaza Strip committee members, Ramallah and Gaza City, December 2008.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, former PA minister and human rights workers, Ramallah, November and December 2008.

⁹³ After a competitive examination for judgeships, Preventive Security summoned a number of the highest-ranked candidates. As a result, two names were dropped from the list, and when the candidates inquired why, they were told that they had received a negative security evaluation. Two candidates for promotion to the director general level in PA ministries told a similar story, as have private companies that applied for government tenders. Crisis Group interviews, human rights workers, Ramallah, December 2008.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, human rights worker, Ramallah, December 2008.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, June 2008. He was commenting on the statement by Mamduh al-Aker, then head of the PA’s human rights watchdog body, that both the West Bank and Gaza had become “a sort of a security state, a police state”. Reuters, 27 May 2008.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, human rights attorney, Ramallah, December 2008.

⁹⁷ The PA earlier replaced the boards of the charity (*zakat*) committees around the West Bank. This move had legal justification in that the committees are quasi-official bodies subject to the authority of a PA ministry. Since October, the PA has replaced the entire governing board of at least three non-governmental organisations; while it has closed some 250 institutions since June 2007, in certain cases – especially when they provide services such as education – doing so risks provoking a popular backlash, and changing the board is a more attractive option. Crisis Group interview, human rights workers, Ramallah, December 2008; Crisis Group telephone interview, Independent Commission for Human Rights, December 2008.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Palestinian security official, Ramallah, 9 October 2008.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian security officials, October 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian security officials, West Bank, September and October 2008. The comparison to the pre-takeover situation in Gaza is particularly questionable. In Gaza, Hamas had well-developed militias and greater popular support; Israel had destroyed most of the PA security installations; salaries were not being paid to PA security forces owing to the international boycott; the streets were lawless; tunnels were a channel for a ready supply of weapons to the Islamists; and the unilateral disengagement had created chaos in the security sector.

¹⁰¹ The largest such program, the EU Police Mission in the Palestinian Territories (EUPOL COPPS), has trained over

at the same time the rhetoric of security commanders has heated up perceptibly. Leading security figures have taken to referring to Hamas in front of Israeli counterparts as a “common enemy”¹⁰² and speak in crudely violent terms of how they plan to treat it. Asked if he expects Hamas action in the West Bank, a senior officer replied:

Don’t ask what Hamas will do, ask what we will do in response. If Hamas does anything against us, we won’t leave a single one of them from Jenin to Hebron.¹⁰³

In the words of another, “if they shoot at us, we will not show them any mercy. One incident means we go after them all. If anything happens in Hebron, they will pay a price all over the West Bank. If they hide behind their women and children, no problem: we will go through them to get the men”.¹⁰⁴

The PA’s motivation aside, its sustained efforts and harsh tactics convinced many sceptics – Israeli defence officials among them – of a newfound determination to take on Hamas. Some Israeli officials were effusive in their praise, saying the performance of PA security commanders “far exceeded our expectations. They are motivated and professional, and they say to us clearly: you are not our enemy. Hamas is”.¹⁰⁵ One such official went so far as to claim that “Abu Mazen has taken the courageous decision to wipe out Hamas”.¹⁰⁶ As they see it, the Islamist movement has been thrown off balance by PA efforts and taken aback by the Authority’s determination. As evidence, they cite two facts: that, amid recent blatant settler provocation in the West Bank, Hamas has not yet responded, “even though this was the perfect opportunity for them to trigger a grave

religious confrontation”, and that, as one of its pre-conditions for resuming reconciliation talks, it now insists on an end to the crackdown.¹⁰⁷

The flip side is that the PA’s aggressive approach has begun to alienate quite a few Palestinians. A PA official – embarrassed by his own government’s actions – said the split had deteriorated into a “gang war”.¹⁰⁸ In Hebron, a shopkeeper pointed to a PA checkpoint, noting, “this is not about law and order. It’s a political campaign against Hamas”. In Nablus, a transportation worker said, “the occupation runs in two shifts: the PA by day, Israel by night”.¹⁰⁹ Even some within Fatah express anxiety about the close PA/Israeli co-operation in fighting Hamas. Hurling what must be considered one of the gravest of insults, he said, “if Fatah continues on this path, we will wind up like the South Lebanon Army”.¹¹⁰

Some in Ramallah, including senior Fatah leaders close to the president, also advocate increasing pressure on Gaza. Among the options is declaring it a “rebellious region”, as a result of which PA salaries and funding to institutions would be cut.¹¹¹ With Ramallah spending about 400 million Israeli shekels (NIS, about \$101

1,000 personnel in public order techniques. A mission member said that in the end, police are judged first and foremost on how they handle public disturbances and that while there are numerous reasons to hope demonstrations do not turn violent, political image is among them. Crisis Group telephone interview, EUPOL COPPS, December 2008.

¹⁰² *Yediot Ahronot*, 19 September 2008. An international security official commented that referring to Hamas in this way is “very strong. A common threat is one thing, a common enemy is another”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 2008.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Palestinian security official, Ramallah, November 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Palestinian official Ramallah, October 2008. Echoing these views, a third added: “We will shoot, not arrest. Using unjustified force will show that we mean business. Escalation will be met with escalation”. Crisis Group interview, Palestinian security official, Ramallah, November 2008.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Israeli defence officials, December 2008.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 12 November 2008.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, December 2008.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, PA official, Ramallah, September 2008.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Ramallah, September 2008, Hebron, 22 November 2008; Nablus, 27 November 2008.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, October 2008. The South Lebanon Army was closely allied with Israel. Widely regarded as collaborators by other Lebanese, most of its soldiers fled when Israel withdrew from south Lebanon in 2000.

¹¹¹ Immediately after the takeover, only security personnel and those who considered themselves subject to Hamas pressure were asked to stay home (while continuing to be paid); those identified as Hamas sympathisers had their salaries stopped. Over time, as Hamas took over the government bureaucracy, more and more PA employees were pushed out or chose to stay away from their desks; Ramallah-backed strikes in the education and health sectors pulled still more PA employees out of the workforce. Today, only employees of the Palestine Monetary Authority regularly report to work, though Ramallah sometimes requests that other employees carry out specific tasks. Crisis Group interviews, PA employees, Gaza City, August–November 2008. Given the fundamentally changed nature of government bureaucracy, some PA and Fatah officials say, the PA should continue “to support its people” in Gaza but not by way of official institutions. Crisis Group interview, PA official, Ramallah, October 2008. For additional background, see Crisis Group Report, *Ruling Palestine I*, op. cit., and Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°24, *Round Two in Gaza*, 11 September 2008.

million) monthly on Gaza,¹¹² one adviser said, “we must stop funding this coup against ourselves. If Hamas refuses to compromise, it should be forced to take full responsibility for daily affairs”.¹¹³

In some measure, Israel already sought to produce a similar outcome by barring the entry of shekels into Gaza, thereby making virtually impossible the payment of PA salaries.¹¹⁴ An Israeli official said, “Gaza remains largely a shekel economy, and this decision could spark a real economic collapse. This could turn the population squarely against Hamas and trigger large demonstrations – the question being whether Hamas can divert anger toward Israel and the PA”.¹¹⁵ A Fatah leader in Gaza interpreted what to him seemed like a muted PA response to the crisis as a “message to their supporters that Ramallah is carrying the load in Gaza. The tunnels bring in the goods, but nobody can buy them without PA salaries”.¹¹⁶

At the same time, PA economic officials and their international counterparts worried that the Israeli tactic could backfire. Said one, “Israel wrongly associates cash in Gaza with cash in Hamas’s hands. In fact, the opposite is true: if Israel continues to prevent currency from entering, Gaza will move from a legal to an illegal banking system from which Hamas will benefit”.¹¹⁷ Perhaps as a result, and reportedly under pressure from the IMF and Tony Blair, Israel ultimately allowed the entry of some 100 million NIS (about \$25 million); thousands of Palestinians lined up at the banks to be paid.¹¹⁸

So far, President Abbas appears very reluctant to take more dramatic steps and opposed to inflicting collective punishment against Gazans.¹¹⁹ His goal – to fortify his

legitimacy as the nation’s head – would be undercut by such an approach. Another adviser, whose views appear closer to the president’s on this, argued, “we shouldn’t punish our own people because they have been occupied by Hamas”.¹²⁰

To this argument must be added the more practical concern that wholly interrupting the flow of support would further weaken Fatah’s presence in Gaza. Unsurprisingly, what remains of the movement in Gaza strongly objects to any such move: “We have a complete absence of leadership in Gaza, but the base is still strong. If Abu Mazen declares Gaza a rebellious region and stops salaries, Fatah will lose that base. There will be enormous anger, and people will desert him. Some other country will step in to pay the salaries and that will be the end of him”.¹²¹

Even more damaging from this perspective would be a massive Israeli military operation. This, says a source close to the president, would be “disastrous. Even if he condemns it, it will look like Abu Mazen supports it. Our people there will pay the price, while Hamas will get food and supplies for its own people through the tunnels”.¹²²

3. Whither Fatah?

Hamas’s 2006 electoral victory starkly illustrated the crisis within Fatah that had been brewing for some time. As part of his effort to bolster his legitimacy, buttress Fatah’s position and beat back Hamas’s challenge, Abbas pledged to rejuvenate the movement, hoping it could speak in a united voice on behalf of his agenda. As a first step, he vowed to hold the movement’s long-delayed Sixth General Congress.¹²³ But rebuilding

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, PA economic official, Jerusalem, December 2008. The number includes salaries, pensions, social allowances and fuel and electricity subsidies.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, October 2008.

¹¹⁴ With Israel refusing the entry of shekels into the strip, total reserves of that currency fell to about 47 million (\$12 million). Since approximately 250 million shekels (\$65 million) are necessary to pay the PA’s monthly wages in the strip, Gaza’s 77,000 civil servants did not receive their December payment on time. Reuters, 4 December 2008.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, December 2008.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, December 2008.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, international economic expert, Jerusalem, December 2008. Even worse, some officials fear, lack of shekels could spark the use of U.S. dollars, thereby deepening the split with the West Bank. Ibid; also, Crisis Group interview, PA financial official, September 2008.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Gaza residents, 12-13 December 2008.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, 29 November 2008.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, 29 November 2008.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Gaza City, November 2008. A minister in the Gaza-based government indicated that Hamas is banking on precisely that reticence. “Ramallah won’t cut salaries because it doesn’t serve their interests. If it did, they would have done it already. They’ll be hurting their own people, make them angry, and push them toward Hamas”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, August 2008.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, November 2008. A minority support an internationally-backed PA military operation. A security chief said, “in Kuwait, 33 armies came together to implement international law, and that is all we are asking for here. All we need is a small piece of the border city of Rafah to launch an invasion”. Crisis Group interview, security chief, West Bank, October 2008.

¹²³ Fatah’s General Congress, which is supposed to be held every five years, is the movement’s highest decision-making body, which decides the movement’s leadership and political program. The last General Congress was held in 1989.

Fatah is no easy task. Bereft of a recognised political program or legitimate leadership, fragmented and adrift, in the midst of various squabbles, it has been diagnosed by many – including within the movement itself – as terminally ill. One leader asserted: “Fatah is finished. It cannot revive itself”.¹²⁴ To which another added: “ Hamas knows we are disintegrating, and they’re just waiting for it to happen. We have a leadership we can’t replace and a base that we can’t satisfy”.¹²⁵

Not everyone shares this pessimism. Indeed, in conversations with Crisis Group, some within the rank and file were surprisingly upbeat. The media is so accustomed to seeing splits, regional Fatah leaders say, that it has come to ignore positive developments. Haitham Halabi, the newly elected Fatah general secretary for the Nablus region, denied that the movement remains in a state of crisis: “Three years ago, after the PLC election, it was. Now we have taken the initiative. We are moving toward democracy within the movement and regaining the people’s trust”.¹²⁶ Poll numbers, if they are to be believed, show a rise in popularity.¹²⁷

To renew the movement and prepare for the General Congress, Fatah initiated a bottom-up electoral process, beginning with local branches, from which representatives were elected to the regional level, which in turn will send representatives to the General Congress.¹²⁸ With a newly elected regional leadership, the Hebron general secretary says, “Fatah is becoming the new Hamas. We are speaking with one voice, whereas

in Hamas you are starting to see divisions”.¹²⁹ The optimists acknowledge that hurdles remain but believe that the entrenched leadership that has long sought to prevent change – those represented in particular on the Central Committee – is on the decline. In light of West Bank elections, according to a regional leader, “there is real movement on the ground, and the foot-draggers will not be able to resist for much longer”;¹³⁰ for now, they also feel they enjoy Abbas’s support. Once seen as an obstacle to reform, says a regional leader, “he is moving toward us”.¹³¹

If the pessimism ought to be tempered, so too should the optimism. To date, virtually nothing about the Congress has been decided, including when and where it will be held, its political program, the number of representatives, and how they will be chosen.¹³² Disagreements on preparatory steps and technical issues mask infighting among factions seeking to obtain favourable rules.¹³³ Personal rivalries continue to wrack the movement, and there are numerous accounts of splinter groups and fragmentation.¹³⁴ An independent political observer in Nablus concluded, simply: “Fatah is a mess”.¹³⁵

B. THE VIEW FROM HAMAS

1. Banking on time

Hamas has been no more anxious than the president to reach a swift agreement unless its core objectives are met, calculating it can get more for less if reconciliation is delayed. An agreement now presents several disadvantages. With slumping poll numbers, due at least in part to its inability to govern effectively and harsh tactics in Gaza, early elections might not work

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Nablus, September 2008.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2008.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Nablus, November 2008.

¹²⁷ According to November 2008 poll by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre, Fatah would beat Hamas 37 per cent to 20 per cent in legislative elections. www.jmcc.org/publicpoll/results/2008/66-english.pdf. Fatah leaders also point to university elections as indicators of their success, but these can be misleading. At Al-Najah University in Nablus, Fatah prevailed in student elections, but Islamic Bloc leaders – sympathetic to but not necessarily affiliated with Hamas – reportedly had been arrested beforehand, and the Islamists boycotted the poll; only a fraction of all students are said to have voted. Crisis Group interviews, municipal official, Nablus, December 2008; Al-Najah University professor, Nablus, November 2008. According to several accounts, some students wearing green scarves or who refused to vote were detained by the security services. Crisis Group interviews, Al-Najah students, Nablus, November 2008.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Fatah regional leaders, West Bank, June, October and November 2008. Elected representatives will constitute only a portion of the Congress’ makeup; setting the standards for selecting the remainder, and determining their portion of the total, have been among the most contentious issues.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kifah al-Uwaywi, Fatah general secretary of the Hebron region, Hebron, 22 November 2008.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, November 2008.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, Haitham Halabi, Fatah general secretary for the Nablus region, 26 November 2008.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, October 2008.

¹³³ “If Abu Mazen insists on doing it his way, why would I feel bound by the decisions?” Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, October 2008.

¹³⁴ In the Nablus regional elections, duelling electoral lists pitted city residents, the surrounding countryside and refugee camps against one other; accusations of fraudulent branch elections in the villages led other Fatah members to boycott regional elections for general secretary and refuse to recognise the results. Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Nablus, December 2008. There are examples of personal or factional rivalry in other localities as well. Crisis Group interview, Fatah leaders, Nablus, Jenin and Ramallah, November 2008.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Nablus, December 2008.

to its benefit.¹³⁶ As the movement sees Arab proposals for security reorganisation, the emphasis is almost entirely on Gaza; it thus questions whether reform would extend to the West Bank, which has seen the deployment of security personnel trained under U.S. sponsorship.

Indeed, PA officials and security chiefs remain resolutely opposed to integrating Hamas into West Bank security services,¹³⁷ and the ongoing crackdown has done little to persuade them otherwise; even should the PA change its mind, Hamas members will hesitate to join for fear of Israeli arrest. In other words, even in the event of an accord with Fatah, Hamas's freedom of operation in the West Bank might expand only marginally.¹³⁸ Nor does it trust that Fatah will allow it to join the PLO – ultimately the principal prize¹³⁹ – in any meaningful way. In short, reconciliation risks meaning losing monopoly control over Gaza in exchange for illusory concessions.

On the other hand, Hamas officials trust that trends will move in their direction. Twin pressure in Gaza (where Egypt has been taking a harder line on the tunnels, though so far with limited effect)¹⁴⁰ and the

West Bank (where the PA has been cracking down) is acknowledged, but the movement believes it can sustain itself and the situation be improved. On 9 January 2009, they argue, Abbas's presidential term will end, further puncturing his legitimacy. According to Hamas, the PLO already is inoperative – “a dead body in need of renovation”¹⁴¹ – and therefore illegitimate:¹⁴² its three main bodies (the Central Council, Executive Committee and Palestinian National Council) have not met as mandated, their memberships are unclear, and none has selected new members within the past decade.¹⁴³ Under this view, Hamas is prepared to challenge even Abbas's legitimacy as PLO chairman.¹⁴⁴

Unlike as recently as six months ago, Hamas leaders now openly speculate about the post-Abbas era when, they claim, relations with Fatah can improve.¹⁴⁵ Says one, “reconciliation is vital, though maybe with Abu Mazen's successor”.¹⁴⁶ The president's threat to organise elections leaves them unperturbed. A Gaza leader asked, “what elections? When Abbas puts the opposition in prison? He will have no consensus behind him, no majority vote, and undemocratic elections”.¹⁴⁷

Hamas's reading of Fatah's future is equally negative, as it sees the rival movement losing steam and sense of purpose;¹⁴⁸ it also feels that, as PA/Israeli security cooperation deepens, the Authority more and more will be seen as collaborating with the occupier. Not surprisingly, Hamas leaders differ with Fatah – and Israeli – officials about their capacity. A leader in Tulkarem asserts the movement could still turn out mass demonstrations, initiate a military “rebuilding” process within hours and, within days, appoint new commanders and leaders to replace those who have been detained.¹⁴⁹ Another observer, a political independent with close family members in Hamas, claimed that the Islamic

¹³⁶ In what appeared to be widely shared sentiments, an independent municipal official with family ties to both Hamas and Fatah strongly criticised both. Regarding Hamas, he said, “dislike of Fatah does not mean people love Hamas. What they did in Gaza was brutal, and what they have done since then – the way they have handled their opposition there – was brutal too. When you look at the Nablus municipality [considered Hamas-run, although municipal councillors deny any connection], they don't know how to run things. Maybe they know how to run a charity, but not a city and certainly not the PA. But given the lack of alternative presented by Fatah, Hamas could still win the next elections”. Crisis Group interview, Nablus, December 2008.

¹³⁷ Several West Bank security chiefs told Crisis Group they would recommend against integrating anyone thought sympathetic to Hamas into their forces: “Trust has been destroyed and cannot be recreated by signing a piece of paper. Even if we reach a reconciliation agreement, I would advise waiting years before integrating anyone thought sympathetic to Hamas”. Crisis Group interview, Palestinian security official, West Bank, September 2008. Hamas and Qassam Brigades leaders, while willing to consider the reactivation of Fatah personnel, have demanded the replacement of PA security chiefs they deem particularly aggressive. Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Gaza City, June 2008.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Tulkarem, October 2008.

¹³⁹ A senior Hamas leader made clear that “the PLO is more important than the PA. Even if we lose elections for the latter at some point, that is not as significant as getting the PLO”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza, November 2008.

¹⁴⁰ The flow of goods through the tunnels has been constrained somewhat since Hamas refused to go to Cairo, but a Fatah

leader in Gaza complained that Egypt is not cracking down hard enough. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, December 2008.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas official, Gaza City, November 2008.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Damascus and Gaza City, October and November 2008.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group telephone interview, Palestinian political analyst, December 2008.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Damascus, November 2008.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, Damascus, September–November 2008.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza, October 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza, 25 November 2008.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Tulkarem, October 2008.

movement remains active in West Bank villages, where it has been less affected by the PA's crackdown.¹⁵⁰

That said, all West Bank Hamas leaders with whom Crisis Group spoke vehemently denied the movement planned to make use of these capacities. A Hamas PLC member said, "we've been restraining ourselves even in the face of an enormously brutal campaign against us. Why would we go on the attack now? Hamas's project is not to destroy but rather to build".¹⁵¹ A Hamas leader said, "if we wait, the West Bank will fall into our hands, and both Fatah and the PA will wither away".¹⁵² Likewise, Hamas takes solace in the sort of joke heard in Nablus:

First the Palestinian leadership made trouble in Jordan, and it got kicked out. Then it made trouble in Lebanon, and it got kicked out. Then it made trouble in Gaza and got kicked out. So it's no secret what's going to happen in the West Bank.¹⁵³

Hamas's assuredness is further boosted by faith that talks between Abbas and the Israeli prime minister will lead nowhere;¹⁵⁴ confident of this under Olmert, they would be all the more so if his successor were Netanyahu.

Hamas also apparently believes that an increasing number of international actors gradually will resign themselves to its durability and – however cautiously – engage it. Though disappointed and even angry at the outcome of the Arab League meeting, the Islamists downplay its significance. In their view, Syria, Qatar, Yemen, Sudan and Algeria will continue to resist efforts to ascribe blame.¹⁵⁵ The careful hope even extends to the U.S.; while understanding that Obama's election will not produce a rapid shift in attitudes toward the movement, they speculate that the new administration

little by little will pursue a more pragmatic, practical course.¹⁵⁶

In Gaza, meanwhile, their situation is bearable. As reported earlier by Crisis Group, security appears under control, PA salaries have been paid by Ramallah (supplemented by a \$15-20 million monthly Gaza government budget);¹⁵⁷ new economic elites, more dependent on the movement, are forming, and tunnels continue to function.¹⁵⁸ Aware that Gazans are suffering and dissatisfied, Hamas leaders blame the outside world and take credit for what has been accomplished despite the siege. In their words, "yes, people want more, but they know that nobody is giving us a chance. Besides, Fatah had ten years and gave nothing".¹⁵⁹

Even in the face of an unprecedented banking crisis owing to a currency shortage, angry customers cursed President Abbas and dismissed Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniya in equal measure.¹⁶⁰ A PA financial official complained that Israel's policy increased the Hamas government's revenue, since with the banks closed, the only place to obtain cash is from money changers, who, he claimed, cooperate with Hamas.¹⁶¹ In an apparent sign of confidence, in November Hamas welcomed back Ahmad Hillis, a prominent Fatah leader and head of one of Gaza's most powerful clans, who had fled Gaza under Hamas fire in August. The massive turnout at the 14 December rally celebrating Hamas's 21st anniversary further boosted the movement's morale.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Nablus, December 2008.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, West Bank, November 2008.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, 6 June 2008. That said, some officials warn that provocation will not remain unanswered: "When you push a cat in to a corner, it attacks. The PA pushed us underground in Gaza in 1996, and we only got stronger. The same thing will happen in the West Bank". Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, November 2008.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Al-Najah University professor, Nablus, November 2008.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Damascus, November 2008.

¹⁵⁵ Some Hamas leaders believe Jordan might also move further. "They came to us", says a leader, referring to the talks between Hamas and Jordanian intelligence officials in August 2008. "They see it in their national interest not to alienate us, given that Abbas is looking so weak in the West Bank". Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, November 2008.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, November 2008.

¹⁵⁷ Gaza markets grind to a virtual standstill when PA salaries are not paid – as was the case in December 2008, owing to the severe currency shortage.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Ruling Palestine I*, and Crisis Group Briefing, *Round Two in Gaza*, both op. cit.; also Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, November 2008.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza, 25 November 2008.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, December 2008.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, PA official, September 2008. When the problem first appeared in September, some PA officials expressed concern that Hamas could bring in dollars through the tunnels, thereby leading to the "dollarisation" of Gaza's economy and a deepening of the split with the West Bank. Crisis Group interview, adviser to Prime Minister Fayyad, Ramallah, September 2008.

¹⁶² A Crisis Group staff member estimated attendance at more than 200,000, Hamas officials at 350,000 and Israeli television even higher. Attendees included Palestinians from all walks of life, particularly the poor, who praised the Islamic movement's continuing ability to meet their social needs despite the ongoing siege. Crisis Group interviews, rally attendees, Gaza City, 14 December 2008.

Also as previously reported by Crisis Group, Gaza's authorities have maintained control through more repressive means. After claiming to have released all political prisoners in advance of the Cairo dialogue, Hamas resumed arrests after the talks collapsed. The government detained 30 Fatah members who were planning to commemorate the anniversary of Yasser Arafat's death on 11 November; it also reportedly harassed those wearing Arafat's trademark black-and-white chequered *kafiya* [headdress] on that day.¹⁶³ Human rights observers assessed that in early December Hamas authorities were holding 58 political prisoners, with another 50 "under investigation".¹⁶⁴ Heavy-handed tactics in other areas have continued as well; the government insisted on changes to the Fatah-controlled Al-Aqsa University Council¹⁶⁵ and within the university's administration, while violently intervening to stop student protests.¹⁶⁶

The other decisive factor regarding the situation in Gaza involves the on-again, off-again ceasefire with Israel. After mostly holding for about four and a half months, it experienced its most serious breach on 4 November, after Israeli forces pushed into Gaza to destroy a cross-border tunnel that, Israel claimed, posed an imminent threat to its soldiers.¹⁶⁷ The ceasefire is due to expire on 19 December and, so far, negotiations to extend it mediated by Egypt have not succeeded. Sounding pessimistic about prospects for a renewal, a Hamas official said:

We accepted the truce six months ago to alleviate the pain of our people. But once we got to imple-

mentation, Israel only did what served its interests. Israel has committed 150 violations against us of which we informed Egypt. It also has not lived up to its commitments regarding the inflow of goods, such as gas, fuel, cement and so forth. At this point, I think most factions oppose an extension since Israel is not holding up its end of the bargain.¹⁶⁸

Still, despite a sense among some Hamas militants that the ceasefire has been a net loss,¹⁶⁹ most observers believe both sides have an interest in extending it: Hamas because it wants to consolidate its power, Israel because it has no good response to continued violence.¹⁷⁰ In the meantime each will flex its muscles, seeking to demonstrate its ability to inflict hardship and intent not to appear overly eager for a truce.¹⁷¹ Hamas also would like to ensure that an extension includes a real opening of Gaza's crossings with Israel.¹⁷² Its leaders believe that Israel does not presently have the appetite for a large-scale ground operation, which could entail heavy loss of life.¹⁷³ That said, what one senior

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Fatah members, Gaza City, November 2008.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, human rights worker, Gaza City, December 2008.

¹⁶⁵ University council members are supposed to serve a one-year term, but the council has been reappointed each year for the past three. All fifteen members are Fatah. On 4 November, the university president, Ali Abu Zuhri, extended their term for another year. The Gaza education ministry refused, insisting that the university coordinate appointments with it, since Al-Aqsa is a public institution. Fearing the government might close the university, Zuhri formed a new council composed of nine Fatah and six Hamas members. The education ministry rejected the compromise and demanded the appointment of ministry-approved individuals as vice presidents for academic and administrative affairs. Crisis Group interview, Al-Aqsa University professor, Gaza City, November 2008.

¹⁶⁶ On 25 November, police entered the campus and broke up a demonstration, injuring students. *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Hamas officials do not deny that they were building a tunnel; however, they claim that Israel missed its target and, further, that "we have the right to build our power and prepare for what might come next". Crisis Group interview, Hamas spokesman, Gaza, 6 December 2008.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Gaza, 6 December 2008. Head of the Hamas politburo Khalid Mishal echoed these sentiments in his interview with Al-Quds television on 14 December, when he said that he did not expect the ceasefire to be renewed. Leaders in Damascus made clear that any renewed ceasefire would need to include guarantees concerning the lifting of the siege. With Egypt still mediating between Hamas and Egypt, the fate of the ceasefire is still undetermined. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, Gaza City, Damascus, December 2008. Hamas is not the only party to allege ceasefire violations. Israel claims that there have been many from Gaza.

¹⁶⁹ Some Qassam Brigades members opposed the truce from the outset. Several among them appeared elated by the 4 November 2008 Israeli raid on a Gaza tunnel, as it enabled them to resume fighting. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, November 2008.

¹⁷⁰ An Israeli official assessed that "the forces interested in renewing the ceasefire on both sides are stronger than those opposing it". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, December 2008.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Israeli and Palestinian analysts, December 2008.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, December 2008.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, November 2008. He was referring to both the human and financial burden, pointing to a 24 November 2008 *Haaretz* article that estimated a Gaza invasion would cost 17 million shekels [\$4.3 million] per day. In general, Israeli defence officials agree that a Gaza invasion would involve heavy risks for uncertain gains and an even more uncertain day after. Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, December 2008. That said, some warn against excessive Hamas confidence. "An Israeli invasion will not be easy, but if it were to come, Hamas will be destroyed, and I don't think they have a realistic appreciation of the balance of power". Crisis Group interview, Israeli

Israeli security official dubbed the tit-for-tat “ping-pong game” across the Gaza border¹⁷⁴ easily could spin out of control.

All this explains the large consensus within the movement that time is on its side. Acknowledging difficulties but predicting that steadfastness will pay off, a senior leader in Gaza said, “you are in a tunnel 500 metres long. You reach the halfway point, and you are exhausted. You are given two options: push ahead to the end or go back. But you don’t only have two options, you have a third as well: be patient, rest and gather your strength, then continue”.¹⁷⁵ One of his colleagues added:

We do not need to reconcile with Fatah now. In fact, we are very comfortable on the ground; we are getting rid of corruption. In a few months, Abu Mazen will be the former president. We are politically strong in the West Bank. We have received heavy blows from both Fayyad and Olmert and are under pressure there. But Ramallah’s government has failed to protect the people, liberate the land or allow the people to defend themselves. For those reasons, our support base there remains solid.¹⁷⁶

Though not expected, Hamas’s decision to shun the Cairo talks was thus not a true surprise. Originally planning to attend, it felt it could bottle up discussions at the committee level were the proceedings not to its liking. But Abbas (through his arrest campaign), Egypt (by refusing more extensive changes to its proposal) and Israel (by refusing to let West Bankers join the delegation) spared Hamas the trouble. In the aftermath, Hamas leaders have provided multiple reasons for their decision, which can be read as many conditions for resumed talks. They demanded the release of all detainees from the movement and Islamic Jihad in the West Bank; the participation of West Bank members in any reconciliation talks; and equity in treatment between Fatah and Hamas in the meeting.¹⁷⁷ Hamas leaders also ruled out dialogue with Fatah so long as there is security cooperation between the PA and

Israel, since under such circumstances, Hamas would continue to be targeted.¹⁷⁸

In what could be interpreted as a sign that the movement is expecting a prolonged status quo and entrenched West Bank/Gaza division, Mahmoud al-Zahar, a senior Hamas leader in Gaza, made what struck many as an unprecedented claim that Hamas could “establish a state on any inch of liberated land without recognising or renouncing any [other] inch or without recognising the Zionist entity’s sovereignty over any inch”.¹⁷⁹ Clarifying the much-discussed comment, a senior Hamas leader said, “we can set up a state on less than the 1967 borders. But when the circumstances change, we will take more. The West Bank is separated from Gaza now just as the lands of 1948 [Israel] are”.¹⁸⁰

Throughout this period, there have been persistent reports of divisions within the movement. The current situation undoubtedly has created palpable tensions. Since the June 2007 takeover in particular, interests have diverged: for those in Gaza, the priority is to hold on to power and control; for those in the West Bank, it is to limit the PA’s crackdown; and for those in Damascus, it is to develop and implement a broader agenda leading to greater influence in the national movement as a whole. Hamas leaders privately acknowledge the movement’s internal difficulties and obstacles to consensual decision and even criticise specific decisions and leaders.¹⁸¹ West Bank leaders, for instance, have expressed scepticism that arresting Fatah members in Gaza deters their arrest in the West Bank¹⁸² and ignored heated calls from Gaza to resist PA arrests and weapons confiscation.¹⁸³

But, as often has been the case, such divisions can be exaggerated and misinterpreted. For example, a report

security expert, Tel Aviv, November 2008. An Israeli security expert points out that Israel has alternatives to a full invasion, including stepping up its rolling incursions. Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, November 2005.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, November 2008.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, November 2008.

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, 5 June 2008.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leaders, Gaza City, November and December 2008.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, November 2008.

¹⁷⁹ *Al-Ayyam*, 28 November 2008.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Gaza, 6 December 2008. It is not clear whether this indicates a significant shift for the Islamic movement. Some officials argued that al-Zahar’s statement was nothing more than a reiteration of the movement’s long-standing willingness to conclude a truce with Israel if, inter alia, it withdraws to the 1967 lines. Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Gaza, 6 December 2008.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, Gaza, West Bank, Damascus, September–December 2008.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, West Bank, October 2008.

¹⁸³ Hamas legislator and spokesman Mushir al-Masri proclaimed at a rally on 7 November 2008 that if PA security forces persisted in confiscating weapons, Hamas would not sit idly by but rather “will exact a price”; senior parliamentarian Khalil al-Haya also instructed Hamas cadres to resist arrest. *Jerusalem Post*, 15 November 2008.

in the Israeli press referred to a confidential document “reveal[ing] a deep divide between the organisation’s leadership abroad and in the West Bank versus Gaza”.¹⁸⁴ According to the document, the Gaza leadership’s unwillingness to give up control over the strip accounted for the collapse of the Cairo talks and led to tensions with the external and West Bank camps.¹⁸⁵ A Hamas leader categorically dismissed the report, calling attention to its faulty understanding of the movement’s decision-making process and deriding it as a “ridiculous fabrication to justify more pressure on Gaza. Even if it were true, do they think we would be so stupid as to write that down?”¹⁸⁶

Moreover, contradictory assessments have emerged. According to some, the Gaza leadership – highly dependent on Egypt for economic and other reasons – was least inclined to alienate Cairo, while West Bank officials were most opposed to unity talks at a time when their members remained behind PA bars.¹⁸⁷ Others – in particular the Egyptians – blamed Syria for pressuring the Damascus-based leadership of Hamas not to attend.¹⁸⁸ Acknowledging that communication and decision-making have become “more complex than before”,¹⁸⁹ Hamas leaders insist that officials from all three areas – Damascus, Gaza and the West Bank – be allowed to participate in any future talks.

IV. CONCLUSION

National unity, to which both Fatah and Hamas profess to aspire, is not on today’s agenda. The two movements are focused on consolidating their positions and convinced events can work in their respective favour. Strikingly, this trend is occurring even as more and

more external actors implicitly acknowledge the incompatibility of Palestinian disunity with a sustained and serious Israeli-Palestinian peace process.¹⁹⁰ In a recently issued joint report, two of the most respected US think tanks, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution, wrote: “An effective diplomatic initiative aimed at a lasting peace cannot be attained so long as the Palestinians are organisationally divided”.¹⁹¹ They concluded that “so long as the Palestinians are divided, a final-status agreement is highly unlikely to be reached, and if it is reached, it is unlikely to be successfully marketed and implemented”.¹⁹²

Yet, in the time it has taken for the realisation to begin to take hold, the possibility of unity has become far more elusive. International ostracism of the unity government, the collapse of the Mecca Agreement, and the Gaza takeover fundamentally altered the picture and significantly complicated an already difficult situation. Mistrust between the two sides has grown. Both Fatah and Hamas see time as their ally; neither views compromise as serving its interest; and harder-line constituencies within both movements are gaining the upper hand. Combined, this hardly is a recipe for flexibility.

The situation might yet change. After the February 2009 elections, the PA is likely to face an Israeli government far less predisposed to political concessions than the one with which Abbas could not reach agree-

¹⁸⁴ *Haaretz*, 25 November 2008.

¹⁸⁵ According to *Haaretz*, the secret document from the Damascus leadership said that the Gaza leadership “is not ready for dialogue, and there are impossible conditions being made, and the split [the Hamas takeover of Gaza] has become serious and is not perceived as undesirable”. Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza, 25 November 2008.

¹⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, Hamas officials, Damascus, November 2008.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian and U.S. officials, Washington, December 2008. The Egyptians and Syrians have traded barbs since the November Arab League meeting, where Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said that “the [Egyptian] mediator should maintain an equal distance from all [Palestinian] factions”, to which Cairo replied that “it is Syria that should adopt an impartial position”. Agence France-Presse, 4 December 2008.

¹⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Damascus, November 2008.

¹⁹⁰ On the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian people, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon said, “I also reiterate my profound concern at the ever-deepening Palestinian divide. I call on Hamas and, indeed, all Palestinian factions to work urgently to reunify the Gaza Strip and the West Bank within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority. This should be done in a manner that allows the peace process to move forward”. In its September 2008 statement, even the Quartet spoke positively of the need to restor[e] Palestinian unity based on the PLO commitments”. UN officials stressed that this was not the preferred U.S. language and that it was meant as a – subtle – signal to Hamas. Crisis Group interview, UN official, New York, September 2008.

¹⁹¹ Steven Cook and Shibley Telhami, “Addressing the Arab-Israeli Conflict”, in *Restoring the Balance*, The Saban Center at Brookings and the Council on Foreign Relations (2008), p. 133; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°49, *Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration*, 18 January 2006.

¹⁹² “Addressing the Arab-Israeli Conflict”, op. cit., p. 153. The Arab Peace Initiative, issued initially at the Arab League 2002 summit in Beirut and endorsed again at the 2007 Arab League summit in Riyadh, offers Israel normal relations in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines, the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and a “just” and “agreed upon” solution to the Palestinian refugee problem.

ment this year. Should that occur and the prospect of a final status accord fade, pressure on the president and his colleagues to engage in a genuine reconciliation effort will grow. At the same time, the new U.S. administration is likely to pursue diplomatic engagement with Iran and Syria and join in Israeli-Syrian negotiations; under such circumstances, Damascus might judge that reducing inter-Palestinian tensions and ending Gaza's isolation would serve its interests. Indeed, the discrepancy between direct Israeli-Syrian negotiations on the one hand and a besieged Gaza engaged in violent conflict with Israel on the other could complicate the situation for the Syrian leadership.¹⁹³ A new U.S. approach to Damascus and Tehran could alter Hamas's calculations and the balance of power within the movement, there too in favour of reconciliation.

A third ingredient would be crucial, though its realisation is unsure. It would be for the U.S. and others in the international community to signal clearly that this time they would not oppose a Fatah-Hamas partnership; would judge the government not by its composition but by its conduct; and – without Washington having to engage directly with Hamas – would assess the Islamist movement on a more pragmatic basis. Echoing a view presented by Crisis Group, the Council on Foreign Relations and Brookings study argued that “the United States should be willing to drop its insistence that Hamas accept the Quartet's criteria – recognition of Israel, renunciation of armed struggle, and adherence to previous Israel-Palestinian Authority agreements”, so long as the movement respects a ceasefire and accepts the Arab Peace Initiative.¹⁹⁴

Alternatively, also as suggested by Crisis Group, the movement might adhere to a ceasefire, recognise Abbas's authority to negotiate an agreement with Israel and commit to abiding by the outcome of a popular referendum on any ensuing accord. The bottom line is that the kind of unity that seemed possible two years ago has become an appreciably more complicated endeavour, and it will now take a far more radical shift in the international and regional landscape to achieve it.

Until such fundamental changes occur, Hamas will continue to solidify its posture in Gaza, and its rivals will deepen control over the West Bank and seek to improve its security and economic conditions. The president, the PA and Fatah on one hand, and Hamas on the other, believe time is on their side. Both cannot be right, and the two may turn out to be wrong. The former are taking a significant risk by wagering that

conditions in the West Bank will improve, and negotiations will progress. Hamas cannot guarantee that its staying power in Gaza will translate into further gains, especially in light of harsh treatment of its members in the West Bank. And both could see their popularity erode as they continue to subordinate the national interest to factional priorities.

Ramallah/Gaza/Brussels, 17 December 2008

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, December 2008.

¹⁹⁴ “Addressing the Arab-Israeli Conflict”, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

APPENDIX A

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by the former European Commissioner for External Relations Christopher Patten and former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

Crisis Group's international headquarters are in Brussels, with major advocacy offices in Washington DC (where it is based as a legal entity) and New York, a smaller one in London and liaison presences in Moscow and Beijing. The organisation currently operates eleven regional offices (in Bishkek, Bogotá, Cairo, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Pristina, Seoul and Tbilisi) and has local field representation in seventeen additional locations (Abuja, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Colombo, Damascus, Dili, Dushanbe, Jerusalem, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, Ouagadougou, Port-au-Prince, Pretoria, Sarajevo and Tehran). Crisis Group currently covers some 60 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo,

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