



## TAHDIYA: CALM BEFORE THE PALESTINIAN STORM?

by Tally Aharony

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which has been a top foreign policy priority for U.S. administrations since 1948, is about to be shaken up. On December 19, the so-called *tahdiya*, or calm, is set to expire. With both sides clamoring to reach a consensus on the potential utility, if any, of renewing the ceasefire, a host of other impending events loom on the horizon that will greatly affect the conflict; namely, the end of Mahmud Abbas's term as president on January 1, the Obama administration's taking office on January 20, and the commencement of Israeli general elections on February 10. With additional members being appointed to President-elect Obama's foreign policy team daily, the group will need to hit the ground running in order to digest and then react to outcomes of these fast approaching dates. Their implications are both critical and far-reaching.

The Egyptian-brokered informal ceasefire began on June 19 and was set to last for a period of six months. The terms of the exceedingly unofficial agreement dealt with some of the vital issues plaguing the Palestinians, including reestablishing the influx of supplies to Gaza and granting access to the Rafah border crossings. For Israel, the calm meant some respite for the southern communities that were bearing the brunt of the hostilities. However, one of the most disturbing aspects of the calm is that it has allowed Hamas time to regroup, to plan its takeover of the Palestinian premiership, and perhaps most alarmingly, to arm itself for the next wave of violence against Israel and anyone else who stands in its way.

The exact nuance of the term *tahdiya* has been articulated time and again in the Arab and Western media over the past months, and has even been spelled out by Hamas' leadership. The Movement perceives the temporary cessation of violence as being a period of calm. They place much less weight on this type of agreement than the other term often used recently, *hudna*, which implies a truce between Islamic and non-Islamic entities similar to the seventh-century Treaty of Hudaibiyya. According to Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, *tahdiya* is merely "a tactic in conflict management." Mashal has made a point to reassure Hamas supporters that this period of calm was a means to achieve its goals and should be understood as a tactic in its arsenal of resistance. Mashal has argued that "at the negotiating table, since Israel holds all, or most, of the cards, Israel will not give us anything. It [Israel] is not naïve, and will not give anything out of generosity. But in the face of resistance, in the battlefield, Israel will be forced to do so." Citing other instances in which Israel had retreated as an apparent result of Islamic resistance, including Southern Lebanon and Gaza, Mashal concludes that only "the balance of power on the ground forces Israel to do so."<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, neither side seems to have been happy with how the *tahdiya* played out. For its part, Israel's leadership has been vocal about its view that the calm has not served Israel's interests. What's more, citing what it views as egregious violations of the agreement, Israel has reported 109 rockets and 97 mortar shells being fired at Israel just since November.<sup>2</sup> Following a closed-door meeting regarding the situation in Gaza on December 9 between outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, the Israeli media began reporting a slew of comments vowing that Israel would not only defend itself against ongoing attacks but hit back hard.

Hamas argues that Israel has not held up its end of the bargain, citing the scant trickle of supplies into Gaza, the unchanged status of Rafah, as well as incidents of Israeli retaliation such as the IDF operation in November, which destroyed a tunnel near the border and killed Hamas operatives in the process.

<sup>1</sup> "Interview with Head of the Political Bureau of the Hamas Movement, Khaled Mashal: *Tahdiya* with Israel," *Al-Jazeera Channel*, April 26, 2008, <http://aljazeera.net>.

<sup>2</sup> "News of Terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center (IICC)*, December 2-9, 2008, [www.terrorism-info.org.il](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il).

Even the Arab media and Palestinian terrorist groups are wondering what Israel has gained during the last six months of purported calm. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad website published an article on December 10 arguing that, similar to the Palestinian resistance movements, Israel has spent the time “strengthening its fortification in the south” so as to “launch an attack on the Gaza Strip.”<sup>3</sup> The group has issued statements adamantly refusing to extend the *tahdiya* because of “recent Israeli aggression,” and because “the Palestinian interests have not been realized, as well as the needs of the citizens.”<sup>4</sup> The group echoed this same sentiment in its December 9 meeting with Hamas in Gaza. Alternatively, Hamas leader Khalil al-Hayya, opting for an uncharacteristically diplomatic line, said that the extension of the *tahdiya* is “subject to a comprehensive assessment of the Palestinian factions.”<sup>5</sup> It is possible that Hamas’ comments reflect its obligations vis-à-vis Egypt within the framework of the floundering national reconciliation talks; obligations that the PIJ simply does not have.

Notwithstanding that there was never much of a lull in the violence to begin with, the approach of the *tahdiya* expiration date is shifting the strategic scheming of the Palestinians and the Israelis into high gear. It is improbable that outgoing President Abbas will be able to affect what unfolds in any way, considering that Hamas has already made it clear that it will no longer accept him as a legitimate leader as of January 2009. The likely outcome is that in Hamas’ anticipated power grab, tensions will again flair up between Hamas and Fatah, undoing what minimal progress the Egyptians made and once again paralyzing the Palestinian national project. This will by no means amount to a drop in violence aimed against Israel, and so will increase the likelihood of both an American diplomatic response and an Israeli military response. However, both the U.S. and Israel are in the midst of their respective changings of the guard, which at the very least stalls any definitive action from either of the two until this process is complete. Likewise, the degree of response from the Israeli side depends heavily on which of its candidates wins out and their subsequent ability to keep the government from collapsing long enough to make a decisive and practical response.

The question remains whether any of the possible outcomes of the impending timeline includes a revived peace process scenario. Both the Palestinians and the Israelis would need to elect leaders that were legitimate spokespersons for their respective peoples and could therefore deliver on promises and compromises made at the negotiating table. Obviously, on the Palestinian side, there is still the sticky issue of Hamas’ avowed non-recognition of Israel, even in the unlikely scenario of national reconciliation.

Al-Jazeera touched on this matter in its April interview with Mashal, arguing, “You say frankly: We are ready for a Palestinian state on the land occupied in 1967, within a certain settlement, but we will not recognize Israel. To tell you the truth, it is difficult to accept such an equation. Israel is unlikely to give it to you.” Mashal responded by saying that while some Palestinians and Arabs adhered to “the equation of recognizing Israel in advance” and “discussed normalization of relations, coexistence, etc. . . what was the result?”<sup>6</sup> These statements are, in essence, a balancing act between the group’s still unwavering stance of non-recognition and deliberately vague language about potential recognition as a long-run bargaining chip. In the meantime, there are still unfulfilled aspects of the *tahdiya* to argue over, specifically, prisoner exchanges that would swap hundreds of Palestinian convicts for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who Hamas has held captive since June 2006. The likelihood of this negotiation coming to fruition diminishes every day.

And how should the United States proceed regarding the possible evolution or further degradation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? President-elect Barack Obama has made it clear that this issue will be a high priority, and many analysts are speculating about the possibility that he will name a Middle East Envoy as part of his cabinet. While designating such a position would demonstrate both seriousness of purpose and a commitment to the issue, the incoming administration may want to hold off on issuing any major policy statements until it sees how the chips fall. The United States cannot act as arbiter or broker of peace when there are no participants at the table. However, if the Administration is not afforded the luxury of time to formulate a measured policy because a major brawl has broken out between the Israelis and the Palestinians, then it is imperative for it to make its voice heard loud and clear. Many believe that time is running out for a possible peace agreement and perhaps even for a two-state solution. In the event of an escalation in Gaza, the new Administration should be prepared to shape the violence so that, when the fighting ends, both the formation of a Palestinian unity government and a further advance toward a two-state solution are facilitated.

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<sup>3</sup> “Olmert and Livni and Barak Met Today to Discuss the Future of the *Tahdiya* with Gaza Strip,” *Qudsway: The Official Website of the Islamic Jihad in Palestine*, December 10, 2008, [www.qudsway.com](http://www.qudsway.com).

<sup>4</sup> “‘Jihad’ Rejects Extending the *Tahdiya* with Israel in Gaza,” *Dar Al-Hayat*, December 3, 2008, [www.daralhayat.com](http://www.daralhayat.com).

<sup>5</sup> “Hamas and Islamic Jihad Meet to Discuss the Future of the *Tahdiya* with Israel,” *Moheet: Arabic News Site*, December 10, 2008, [www.moheet.com](http://www.moheet.com).

<sup>6</sup> “Interview with Head of the Political Bureau of the Hamas Movement.”