

Gaza Five Years On: Hamas Settles In

Executive Summary

The Book in a Nutshell

Since taking sole control of Gaza in the 2007 elections, Hamas has tightened its grip on power and built a soft authoritarian system of government. Gaza's long-term trajectory is worrisome, despite achieving some modest judicial and educational reforms. Its political system lacks any mechanisms of accountability; media and domestic NGOs are carefully controlled; and opposition parties' public activities are needlessly constrained. Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, together with fresh elections, is urgently needed to improve governance for ordinary Palestinians.

Key Themes

- A form of authoritarian politics is being entrenched in both Gaza and the West Bank that has provoked uprisings elsewhere in the region.
- Gaza may now have a functional if imperfect judicial structure and an improvised system that can draft modest amounts of legislation, but this system is unmistakably authoritarian—without any serious mechanism for democratic oversight or meaningful consultation with groups outside of Hamas.
- Hamas and the government of Gaza are virtually indistinguishable from each other. Political leaders, key public officials, and members of the police force are almost uniformly Hamas loyalists.
- A spate of unity agreements between Gaza and the West Bank—most recently a May 2012 accord—cannot obscure the reality that real steps toward reconciliation have not been taken.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Encourage reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas: The rift that emerged between Fatah and Hamas in 2007 has been the source of many of Gaza's difficulties, from political paralysis to access to international aid. Leaders of both movements should aggressively seek reconciliation in order to improve governance and the quality of life for ordinary Palestinians. Outsiders should drop their objections to reconciliation and instead insure that it take beneficial form.

Hold elections: As part of the reconciliation process, Fatah and Hamas should move swiftly toward new elections. Without elections, reconciliation would just mean power sharing and entrenching both parties still more deeply. But real elections would force both movements to pay careful attention to public opinion, articulate a strategic vision, appeal to those outside a core group of supporters, and introduce a needed dose of democratic accountability. After five years of wrangling between Gaza and the West Bank, finally offering Palestinians a voice in their own affairs may be the best way out of the impasse.

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A full-length version of this study is available on the web at: www.CarnegieEndowment.org/brown. For more information or to speak with one of our scholars, please do not hesitate to contact our government affairs manager, Scott Toussaint, at (202) 939-2307 or stoussaint@ceip.org.

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