

Surging Violence: Hamas Attempts to Reshape the West Bank's Political Landscape

by [Nasser Khmour \(/experts/nasser-khmour\)](#)

Apr 5, 2023

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/tsad-alnf-hmas-thawl-aadt-tshkyl-almshhd-alsyasy-fy-aldft-alghrbyt\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Nasser Khmour \(/experts/nasser-khmour\)](#)

Nasser Khmour is a political analyst based in Basel, Switzerland, focusing on Palestinian-Israeli dynamics and the Gulf region. Nasser works as a researcher with The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).



Brief Analysis

With an opportunity to subtly expand its influence in the West Bank, Hamas is less likely to risk an all-out war with Israel from Gaza as they did in 2021.

In a recent televised statement, Marwan Issa—the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas—hinted (<https://www.newarab.com/news/head-al-qassam-bridges-warns-regional-earthquake>) toward a potential escalation from the Gaza Strip in response to Israel's actions in the West Bank. Issa declared that prioritizing the West Bank and Jerusalem's resistance does not mean that "Gaza will remain silent" and warned that altering the status quo at al-Aqsa Mosque would set off an "earthquake" in the entire region.

Made at the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, this bold assertion demonstrates the possibility of a renewed threat from the Gaza strip reminiscent of the May 2021 conflict, where in response to Israel's actions in East Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Mosque, Hamas launched surprise missile attacks at Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, triggering an 11-day war.

Yet the current situation appears rather unique as the violence and tactics of Hamas evolve in the West Bank. In its ongoing conflict with Israel, Hamas appears to increasingly favor a subtle yet effective approach, escalating violence in the West Bank gradually to both challenge Israel and undermine the Palestinian Authority (PA). This tactic appears far more attractive than launching an all-out war via the Gaza front, whose costs might outweigh the potential benefits.

Current Dynamics

Over the past sixteen years, Hamas' influence in the West Bank has been unstable at best after the Islamic group's takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007 caused internal Palestinian conflict. Since 2007, the PA has put significant pressure on Hamas' presence in the West Bank—cracking down on activists, drying up financial resources, shutting down charities, and disrupting Hamas's control over mosques. In early 2022, a surge of deadly Palestinian attacks

sparked an Israeli military campaign called “Break the Wave,” which commenced on March 31, 2022. Through the campaign, Israel conducted near-daily raids to apprehend Palestinian gunmen and confiscate weapons.

Since these efforts, however, the West Bank has seen the rise of new armed groups and an escalation of settler violence. The recent uptick in militancy and the current deadlock in the Palestinian-Israeli political dialogue now offers Hamas an opportunity to reorganize within the West Bank. And while the PA grapples with diminishing control in areas of the West Bank—including Nablus and Jenin—Israel's chaotic domestic scene has only raised tensions. Moreover, Netanyahu's extreme right-wing cabinet, characterized by its unprecedented support for settlers, makes the already-strained situation worse. As a result, the West Bank has become a battleground for frequent clashes and Palestinian casualties almost every week.

Amid this heightened security situation, Hamas has identified a golden chance to revitalize its military activities against Israel and the settlers while also engaging in a struggle for power with the PA to weaken Ramallah's authority further. In a recent speech

(<https://shehabnews.com/post/112732/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%88-%D9%87%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B8%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%88%D9%87%D8%B0%D9%87-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A9>), the Chief of Hamas's Political Bureau Ismail

Haniyeh described the West Bank as a "strategic battleground" while implying that a new phase of conflict with Israel was on the horizon, despite Israel's security coordination with the PA.

A New Battlefield

Hamas' efforts to reclaim its former clout in the West Bank rely on three critical factors. Firstly, should Israel's aggressive settlement actions persist in the West Bank, the Palestinian perspective will gradually shift toward a public armed uprising. This environment aligns with Hamas' strategies as bolstering its resistance credentials and popular legitimacy, which are deeply rooted in the principles of fighting against Israeli occupation and striving for Palestinian liberation.

West Bank Palestinians already seem to be growing more confident that armed resistance is the sole path to challenge the advancement of settlements, especially in light of ongoing stalemates in the post-Oslo Accords era. A recent opinion poll (<https://pcpsr.org/en/node/926>) by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research released in December 2022 suggests a growing popular dissatisfaction with the PA's approach, alongside an increase in calls for armed uprisings. Moreover, the poll demonstrates that the support for the once-popular two-state solution has dwindled as settlement expansion continues and political solutions wane. This marks a historic shift in public opinion not seen since the end of the Second Intifada in 2005, providing fertile ground for Hamas to grow its influence and activities within the West Bank.

Secondly, Hamas activities are on the rise in the West Bank. While its presence was not the spark for recent armed confrontations in the area, Hamas has skillfully capitalized on the current situation to amplify its influence. A prime example is Hamas' media and financial support for the Lions' Den—an armed group that emerged in Nablus in late 2022 that has since gained widespread Palestinian popularity. In addition to Hamas members establishing themselves in these newly-formed organizations, there has been a notable increase in the activity of its military wing,

the al-Qassam Brigades, particularly in the Jenin area. The al-Qassam Brigades have also begun to appear publicly alongside other more influential armed factions in the northern West Bank, such as Fatah's al-Aqsa Brigades and members of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

As a result, Hamas has recently displayed effectiveness in shaping events across the West Bank. A striking illustration is the instance of a Hamas gunman carrying out a shooting attack on the same day of the Aqaba summit—a multilateral conference aimed at calming the heightened security tensions and rising armed violence in the West Bank. The attack resulted in the killing of two Israeli settlers and eventually led to the settler rampage in Huwara, including clashes with Palestinians and arson attacks that significantly damaged Palestinian property. Instead of the Aqaba Summit softening the conflict, Hamas' actions managed to exacerbate internal struggles.

Finally, Hamas' growth in the West Bank relies heavily on the existence of an extreme right-wing Israeli government that endorses settlements and dismisses any political partnership with Ramallah's regime. These government attitudes undermine and humiliate the already fragile PA, which does not yet have a successor for the 87-year-old President Mahmoud Abbas and faces declining financial resources. With diminished PA security control in areas like the northern West Bank and popular sentiment increasingly hostile to the Israeli administration, Hamas has an opening to invest more resources into sparking conflict in the West Bank while avoiding gambling on a war with Israel from Gaza.

Neither War nor Calm

Although Hamas will strive to maintain its foothold in Gaza, enhancing its military capabilities and gearing up for another major clash with Israel, this battle is unlikely to be imminent. Initiating a conflict could potentially jeopardize Hamas' objectives in the West Bank, an unpalatable risk given the current political and social opportunities in front of them.

Facing off directly against Israel could lead to a tense ceasefire where Hamas finds itself making undesirable political concessions in the West Bank that benefit the PA and Israel and counteracting its own gradual progress in the West Bank and relative control back home in the Gaza Strip. Since the May 2021 war, Qatar has stepped up to provide significant financial assistance to Gaza. Meanwhile, Israel has even allowed around 20,000 Palestinians from Gaza to work in their territories, a major increase from the 7,000 previously allowed and offering these individuals a higher income than what is available to most Gaza residents. Hamas also sees an opportunity to boost Gaza's economy by developing a natural gas field off the Gaza coast. Indirect talks led by Egypt and involving Israel, the PA, and Hamas are underway to reach a compromise between all parties on this project. This influx of cash is essential for Hamas to maintain internal stability in Gaza, especially as the unemployment rate has reached 50 percent.

Besides Hamas' own internal interests in the Gaza Strip, the current circumstances in Gaza, Israel, and the West Bank simply don't match up with the circumstances leading up to the May 2021 war. Then, Hamas felt provoked into confrontation by the PA's decision to delay April 2021 legislative elections—a move that Hamas viewed as an intentional effort to undermine Hamas' control. As a result of the 11-day war and with violence now widespread in the West Bank, Hamas perceives a crisis of legitimacy for the PA and doesn't feel backed into a corner as they did before.

Still, complete calm in the Gaza Strip is not entirely possible for Hamas. While avoiding direct conflict with Israel is in their interest, the Gaza Strip may still experience unrest in response to developments in the West Bank. In such a scenario, Hamas may permit smaller factions to launch rockets into Israeli territory near the border as a tactical response. Meanwhile, Hamas appears willing to accept the consequences of Israeli retaliation via airstrikes on its military facilities whenever rockets are fired toward Israel. The possibility of demonstrations along the Gaza border is not out of the question either, especially given recent events. On February 24, riot clashes broke out near the border in response to the deaths of eleven Palestinians during a military operation in Nablus city.

The cost of preserving a fine line between calm and violence is proving to be lower for Hamas than the cost of engaging in full-blown warfare. This tactic permits Hamas to claim a reputation of resistance, while also controlling the unpredictable behavior of groups like the Islamic Jihad. This “neither war nor calm” tactic could be a relatively efficient way for Hamas to achieve its immediate objectives in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip regions.

In the end, it appears that the evolving security environment in the West Bank has the potential to alter the political dynamics dramatically. Hamas perceives the West Bank as a crucial battleground against Israel and a place for a geopolitical contest with the weakened PA. Simultaneously, Hamas is not hesitant to generate instability with Israel in the Gaza Strip as long as it doesn't escalate into an open conflict. Nevertheless, if certain circumstances arise—such as the necessity to defend its accomplishments in Gaza or exceptional developments in the West Bank—an open confrontation with Israel might become inevitable as Hamas strives to uphold its strategic objectives. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Back to the Basics of Shared Values in the US-Israel Relationship](#)

April 2023



Dennis Ross

(/policy-analysis/back-basics-shared-values-us-israel-relationship)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran-Israel Clashes in Syria Could Spill Into the Gulf](#)

Apr 4, 2023



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-israel-clashes-syria-could-spill-gulf)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

The Rise and Fall of Kurdish Power in Iraq

Spring 2023



Bilal Wahab

(/policy-analysis/rise-and-fall-kurdish-power-iraq)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Middle East (/policy-analysis/middle-east)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)