

What Can We Do?

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IN THEIR oath of loyalty, members of Hamas declare that death in the cause of God is their supreme desire. But as the bombs of Israel's Operation *Cast Lead*, aimed at smashing Hamas, kill and maim growing numbers of Palestinians, many of them civilians unaffiliated to the Islamist group, its glorification of martyrdom is ringing sadly hollow. All faith-inspired groups struggle to square the purity of dogmatism with dirtier realities. In the two decades since its founding as a local branch of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas has mostly shied away from choosing between the two. For years it could pose comfortably in opposition to Fatah, the secular party that long dominated Palestinian politics, and accuse it of abandoning national ideals in the false hope of securing peace with Israel.

Hamas, by contrast, stuck to denying that it would ever recognise the Jewish state, give up the Palestinians' title to all their ancestral land or relinquish their right to return from exile. Still, quietly and pragmatically, it did engage in indirect dealings with the enemy, agreeing to the odd ceasefire or prisoner exchange. For the longer term, its leaders hinted they would accept an extended truce with an Israel confined to its pre-1967 borders, an offer that maintained ideological purity but safely precluded any taint of welcome from Israel's security-minded governments.

Hamas won legislative elections in 2006 not because most Palestinians shared its dogma but largely because after a decade of peace-processing and five years of bloody *intifada* (uprising), they despaired of Fatah's corruption and its hopes of coaxing Israel to an honourable settlement. (Hamas's suicide bombings did much to kill the hope on both sides.) But then, following Hamas's takeover of Gaza from Fatah in 2007, the challenge of ruling the territory under an Israeli siege, strengthened by diplomatic isolation and the ire of Fatah's supporters, confronted the Islamists with a starker choice between ideology and pragmatism.

Should the group accede to international demands that it accept Israel, renounce violence, adhere to the Palestinians' previous peace deals, and so win a reprieve for Gaza's hapless people? Or should Hamas hope that Palestinian suffering would prick the world's conscience, rally a billion-plus fellow Muslims to their side, and so eventually force Israel to back down and, perhaps better yet, inspire Palestinians in the West Bank to overthrow Fatah? Hamas's hardliners demanded rocket strikes to torment Israel, kept up a barrage of accusations against Fatah, and engineered last winter's dramatic breach of Gaza's border with Egypt to advertise Gaza's misery. Cooler heads counselled calm, sought to mend fences with Fatah, and said that Hamas should work with countries such as Egypt, not try to embarrass their leaders.

Last summer, the pragmatists seemed to make headway. Exhausting negotiations via Egypt finally fixed a six-month truce with Israel, after months of tit-for-tat attacks amid an ever-tightening Israeli blockade. Equally tricky Egyptian-sponsored talks had inched

towards a power-sharing deal between Hamas and Fatah, too, presaging an end to two years of vicious partisanship. But all this began to unravel in the autumn. Increasing Israeli trade restrictions and Israel's refusal to free any of its thousands of Hamas prisoners dimmed the distant light in Gaza's tunnel. Meanwhile Fatah, in its stronghold on the West Bank, clamped down on Hamas, with dozens of arrests and the dismissal of some 400 Hamas-affiliated teachers. The last straw came in November when Israel killed six gunmen it said were digging tunnels to launch a raid on Israel, spurring Hamas to respond with a barrage of rockets.

By the end of the official truce on December 19th, Hamas's harder-liners again held sway. The ceasefire with Israel, they could argue, had brought no gains for Gaza. Fatah, they said, had sold out to its Western donors and sought nothing but Hamas's destruction. Egypt, the supposed mediator, was in fact complicit in Israel's siege. Better, it was argued, for Hamas to brazen things out. Moreover, it had proved its ability to rule Gaza, enforcing better law and order (though with an iron fist) than Fatah ever had. America's elections augured potentially positive changes in the superpower's strategy, while allies such as Iran, Syria and Hizbullah were busy raising the propaganda ante over Gaza's suffering, pressing pro-Western Arabs to soften their stand against the Islamists. The launching of rockets resumed, triggering Israel's long-planned, devastating response.

So far, the bloodshed in Gaza has not much changed the equation. Hamas has lost massively in terms of physical assets but gained hugely in sympathy. Yet the group has been brutally shoved towards a long-postponed decision. The surge of impotent rage in Gaza over Israel's violence will momentarily boost Hamas's standing, but Gazans may then ask what brought them to this awful pass. The Islamists may win some meagre concessions when the dust settles and the blood is washed away: perhaps a loosening of Israel's siege, an opening of Egypt's border, a torrent of aid from appalled fellow Muslims, and maybe a modicum of international recognition. But unless the current furious street protests spark a region-wide revolution that scares the wits out of Israel and its friends, Hamas will still face the same painful old choice of how to come to terms with an immensely more powerful and equally determined enemy.