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Hamas: new enemies and frenemies politics

In a move that surprised many, Daesh released a video at the end of June, challenging the Palestinian organization Hamas, accused of being insufficiently stringent about religious enforcement, and weak and corrupted in its fight for the Palestinian cause. Daesh even threatened to overtake Hamas and turn the Gaza Strip into another of their Middle East fiefdoms: a threat that took substance on the last day of June when Daesh took for 24 hours the strategic Sinai city of Sheikh Zuweid, not far from the Rafah crossing.

The video statement is thought to be part and parcel of a context of conflict between the two groups, being Hamas engaged into cracking down on jihadis in Gaza who oppose any sign of truce with Israel and reconciliation with the US-backed rival Palestinian faction Fatah. Since the end of last summer's 50-days Gaza War indeed, a number of militant Salafists – totalling a few hundred at most, and most of them originally members of Hamas – have been pushing for continuing the fight against Israel. Their campaign culminated with firing rockets at the border with Israel earlier in June. This has in turn drawn air strikes in response, including against targets associated with Gaza's ruling faction, Hamas.

And it is the Salafists' successful attempts to draw a military response from Israel that has escalated the Gazan problem in recent weeks from a local rivalry to something more dangerous. Hamas, initially tolerating these more radical elements inside its ranks, started a heavy-handed crack down on them. In turn radical militants started aggregating into smaller armed groups, who seem to be getting closer and closer to Daesh positions and, as a result, were dragged into an unprecedented confrontation with Lebanese Hezbollah as well.

As a matter of fact, a number of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon – most notably, Ain al-Hilweh - have experienced heightened security tensions for months, with the Lebanese government alleging that the camps have become safe havens for Palestinian armed factions with ties to Daesh – such as Asbat al-Ansar, the Islamic Moujahid Movement, Shabab al-Muslim and Fatah al-Islam – that constitute a threat the security of Lebanon as well as they perpetrated attacks against Hezbollah.

Consequently, in an attempt to prevent a deterioration of its key relations with the Lebanese faction, Hamas intensified contacts with Lebanese officials seeking ways to ease tensions between the army and the armed groups. The sensitive political and sectarian situation in Lebanon has pushed Hamas to put distance between itself and all Lebanese parties equally, in an effort to prevent being identified with one of the conflicting groups. However, there is no guarantee that Hamas will be successful in its efforts given that the organization is deeply involved with several internal and external parties with conflicting interests in Lebanon.

With such a boiling situation in its surroundings, it came as a relief the news that on June 6 Egypt's appeals court has overturned a ruling that listed the Palestinian militant group as a terrorist organisation. The support of al Sisi's, enjoying a relatively good working relation with Israel as well as with the strongest players in the region may become strategic for Hamas to balance against such an unfavourable situation in the Levant. At the same time it is yet another telling signal that Hamas' alignment in the region might come out of the Syrian conflict completely transformed, with inevitable consequences both on its internal identity and its positioning within the international community.