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Israel goes after both Hamas leaderships- Christian Science Monitor

In Gaza offensive, Israel arrests 64 Hamas officials.

By Ilene R. Prusher Nicholas Blanford June 30, 2006

JERUSALEM AND BEIRUT, LEBANON — If Hamas militants are holding an Israeli soldier in Gaza, why are Israeli jets buzzing the home of Syria's president 180 miles away?

The answer lies in the two poles of political power within Hamas — and the role played by the Islamic militants' Damascus-based leader, Khaled Meshaal.

Israel's message to Hamas and to regional supporters in countries such as Syria is that it will not accept Hamas's claim that political figures — in Gaza or abroad — act separately from the military wing. Mr. Meshaal has vowed that Hamas would continue to fight Israel, despite more moderate statements coming from Palestinian leaders elected in January.

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"It is a mirage to think that internal and external leadership of Hamas fundamentally represent some cataclysmic rift," says Hamas expert Magnus Ranstorp, an analyst at the Swedish National Defense College.

"Yes, there are differences, but the movement is much larger than individual representatives. They play the inside-outside card very carefully, and they divorced the military wing from the rest, so they could say [militant activities] 'are outside our control.' But the inside-outside leadership is much closer than what [it] appears," he says.

Hamas was founded in 1987 — around the same time as the outbreak of the first intifada. In 1993, it decided to split into two wings, one military and secretive, and one political — the public face of Hamas. That division, as well as the divisions between Hamas "inside" (the occupied territories) and Hamas outside (in cities such as Damascus) have served the organization well, says Mr. Ranstorp.

Mr. Meshaal has lived in Damascus since 2001 following a short stint in Qatar after he was expelled from Jordan in 1999, along with three other Hamas officials. Unlike his colleagues in the Palestinian territories, Meshaal is able to travel the region, holding talks with key Arab leaders such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

With international attention focused on the Hamas government of Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, analysts say that Meshaal will want to prevent Hamas from being pressured into making concessions to appease Israel and the West, while staking out his own claim to be the movement's

dominant powerbroker. Meshaal heads the political bureau of Hamas and is thought to be the top leader of a movement that eschews a hierarchical structure. Instead, decisions are supposed to be made on the Islamic Shura system of decree by consensus among a ruling council.

Some Palestinians have themselves called attention to the obvious differences of opinion that exist within Hamas. In this comparison, the "inside" leadership has been considered to be more pragmatic – they and their local supporters will feel the brunt of travel closures or Israel's retaliatory measures.

The "outsiders" are viewed as more hard-line and ideological, since the blowback of any attack on Israel is unlikely to be felt by them in any direct way. In kind, local reports have suggested that the "inside" political leadership represented by Mr. Haniyeh was not apprised of the upcoming attack on Kerem Shalom, which may have been planned primarily by the "outside" leadership – something that has become a kind of codeword for senior Hamas leader Meshaal in Damascus.

Ranstorp also believes that Sunday's kidnapping of Cpl. Gilad Shalit, which was the catalyst for the heightened hostilities, looks like it was learned from a Hizbullah handbook. "Hamas has coordination with Hizbullah, and that is very important. Hizbullah is an auxiliary force of Hamas, and it provides tactical inspiration.

"I'm not suggesting that Hizbullah is behind this kidnapping, but what I'm seeing is the ideal of kidnapping a soldier and using him to highlight the prisoner issue, and that's a very classic Hizbullah repertoire."

Israel arrests 64 Hamas officials

Late Wednesday night and early Thursday morning, Israel's approach to its offensive in Gaza veered in an unexpected direction when it arrested 64 Hamas officials, including cabinet ministers and members of the elected parliament.

The arrests, which involved pulling many away from a hotel in Ramallah at gunpoint, is a loud message that Israel was not willing to distinguish between the political and military Hamas.

An additional 23 Palestinians were arrested Thursday afternoon, according to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) website.

In Gaza, Hamas lawmaker Mushir al-Masri decried the massive sweep – collecting up to a third of the Palestinian cabinet – as a declaration of war.

Hisham Ahmed, an expert on the Hamas movement and a political scientist at Bir Zeit University near the West Bank city of Ramallah, says the arrests and the overall Israeli military operation have largely served to close the gaps in what has been a deeply divided Palestinian public.

In recent weeks, Fatah and Hamas-affiliated militants have engaged in gun battles and attacks on government buildings in a struggle for supremacy in the Palestinian Authority (PA).

"The arrests of the parliament members just deepens unity, and it strengthens the resolve of Hamas and public support for Hamas more than ever before," says Dr. Ahmed. "With the assault on Gaza, the differences have evaporated now and all of the internal disputes have been put outside."

Meshaal in Damascus

From Syria, Meshaal has also shown willingness to talk to American officials, even though Washington brands Hamas a terrorist organization. In February, shortly after Hamas triumphed in the Palestinian elections, the former university professor met with a delegation of retired US diplomats in his office in Damascus and expressed an eagerness to begin a dialogue with the US.

Still, there appears to be little chance of talks commencing between Meshaal and the Bush administration anytime soon, given the strengthening relationship between Hamas and Iran. In recent months, both Iran and Syria have drawn closer, forming an anti-Western alliance that includes the external branch of Hamas and Lebanon's Hizbullah organization.

Meshaal was among a host of militant anti-Israel activists and politicians to meet with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during his state visit to Damascus in January. Meshaal also held talks with former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in April. His public rhetoric has been in keeping with Hamas's traditional militant image. At a pro-Palestinian event in Qatar in April, Meshaal called on "the people in surrounding Arab countries, the Muslim world, and everyone who wants to support us to send weapons, money and men."

While the lack of clarity over Hamas's leadership has aggravated tensions within the movement, some analysts argue that the rivalry is a healthy sign of the political process at play.

"These are the moves of a political movement that is trying to gauge and respond to their constituency," says Rami Khouri, a Jordanian columnist based in Beirut. "What is happening should not be misinterpreted as a power struggle or two groups operating without consulting with each other. Clearly there is a difference in opinions, but this is very logical and natural."

Corporal Shalit's fate

While the fate of Corporal Shalit, the kidnapped soldier, remains unknown, Israeli and Egyptian officials suggested there was still hope for a deal to ensure his safe return.

Reuters reported Thursday that Israeli aircraft fired a missile at a vehicle carrying a senior Islamic Jihad militant in Gaza City, slightly wounding him, while masked gunmen blew a 13-foot wide hole in the border wall between Gaza and Egypt. Also Thursday, Israel said that it was freezing military operations in northern Gaza.

In the West Bank, Eliahu Asheri, the 18-year-old Jewish settler who went missing earlier in the week was found dead in Ramallah Thursday. Mr. Asheri was kidnapped and later shot by the Popular Resistance Committee, the group said Thursday. It is made up of militants from both secular and Islamic groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

A few thousand people, according to Israel Radio, came to Asheri's funeral in Jerusalem. In a charged eulogy, settler leader Bentzi Lieberman blamed Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. "The government forgot who the real enemy is," Mr. Lieberman said. "Despite this, they want to put us through another disengagement, because what we went through in Gaza was not enough. Our prime minister has not managed to protect our children."

