

The emergence of Hamas as a regional political actor

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Theme

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the election of Mohammed Morsi as President of Egypt and the end of Israel's Pillar of Defence military operation in the Gaza Strip, Hamas has steadily been moving towards a more political stance.

Summary

The latest opinion polls of the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research show how the popularity of Hamas leaders such as Khaled Meshal and Ismael Haniyeh is now greater than that of the Palestinian Authority's President Mahmoud Abbas and of his Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. The visit of Hamas's Politburo chief Khaled Meshal to the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority's permission to Hamas to hold several rallies in the West Bank on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of its foundation are a reflection of the Islamic movement's rise in stature. Meanwhile, its permission to Fatah to hold a massive 44th anniversary rally in Gaza city and its backing of Fatah's request for observer status for the PLO at the United Nations General Assembly are contributing to a new climate in the search for national reconciliation between the two movements. Furthermore, the change in Hamas's regional alliances, its growing relationship with Egypt, Qatar and Turkey and its weakening ties to the 'axis of resistance' made up of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah are fostering its transformation into a more responsible political player.

Analysis

The Islamic Resistance Movement (*Harakat al Muqawama al Islamiyya*), better known by its Arabic acronym *Hamas*, was established in the Occupied Territories at the beginning of the first Intifada (1987-91). After only a few years it developed into the area's most influential Islamist movement and the main rival to the nationalist and secular Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). The movement's origins are to be found in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (*al Ikhwan al Muslimun*), established in Cairo in 1928 with the aim of subverting foreign domination in Egypt and bringing society back to Islam.

Hamas's transformation from reformist movement to militant organisation came about when it started to engage in political activity and participated in demonstrations against Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip. Only a few years after its foundation it created a military branch –the *Izz ad din Al Qassam* Brigades– that attacked Israeli military and civilian targets alike, earning it the attention of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF).

Throughout the first Intifada, Hamas made a great deal of progress and by the time Israel and the PLO signed the Declaration of Principles in September 1993 and launched the Peace Process, the movement had become Fatah's main rival. Islamist opposition to the Oslo Agreements and the boycott of the 1996 elections made Hamas the main target of the new coordination in security between the IDF and the Palestinian Security Forces (PSF) loyal to the new Palestinian Authority (PA). The assassination of its leading clandestine operative – 'The Engineer' – in January 1996 sparked a wave of suicide attacks against Israeli civilians, with several dozen being killed and hundreds injured. The suicide bomb campaign led the IDF and the PSF to their highest level of security cooperation, neutralising much of Hamas's military capabilities.

The failure of the Camp David negotiations in July 2000 and the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000 took the pressure off Hamas, which joined all other Palestinian radical factions and even some elements within the PSF in launching attacks against Israeli soldiers, settlers and civilians. At this time, Hamas launched its most lethal suicide attacks and as a result was included in the EU's list of terrorist organisations.

The dynamics of the second Intifada led to the IDF's capture of Hamas's main leaders in the West Bank and the assassination of those in the Gaza Strip, making the organisation change its tactics and halt its suicide attacks. However, the prime reason for the strategic shift in Hamas was the implementation of the former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Disengagement Plan, by which Israel withdrew from all its settlements and dismantled all its military bases in the Gaza Strip in late 2005. While the Islamist movement had boycotted the Presidential elections of January 2005, it decided to participate in the January 2006 legislative elections, gaining a completely unexpected majority of 74 seats out of 132 members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).

Deterioration of Intra Palestinian Relations and the Hamas Putsch of June 2007

Hamas's parliamentary majority was a vote not so much in favour of the Islamist movement's programme but rather against the incompetence and rampant corruption of Fatah's leadership. Moreover, the Sharon government's decision not to coordinate Israel's disengagement with the PA left the mainstream Fatah in an awkward position due to its inability to portray the move to the Palestinian population as an achievement of its negotiation policy.

The participation of Hamas in the institutions created by the Oslo framework –not only in the PLC but also in several PA Ministries– also contributed to its gradual move towards moderation. However, increasing tension in a geographically divided Parliament whose plenary sessions were held by VTC between Ramallah and Gaza and a government based on an unholy alliance led to a series of governance crises and the outbreak of a short but intense civil war.

It is not yet clear to what extent Hamas believed that several bodies within the PSF (especially the Presidential Guard and the Preventive Security Service) were preparing a massive assault against the *Izz ad din al Qassam* and *al Quds* brigades, in a Palestinian style 'night of the long knives' in the summer of 2007. The pre-emptive strike launched by Hamas not only prevented this hypothetical scenario but also led to the expulsion

from Gaza of PSF leaders and members sympathetic to Fatah.

From June 2007 onwards Hamas came to dominate politics and society in the tiny but crowded Gaza Strip enclave. Its leaders realised that if they had to provide public services, welfare, safety and security to 1.5 million inhabitants they could no longer remain just a resistance organisation. Two additional factors in the governance equation, in addition to the territorial and political divide, show that Hamas can act responsibly when it wants to, and should eventually be taken into account by Israel for their negotiating potential. First, the ability to uphold the six month truce that was agreed through Egyptian intermediaries on 19 June 2008. The number of rockets fired from the Strip against southern Israel reached their lowest levels ever until a military incursion on 4 November led to an Islamist retaliation and triggered Operation Cast Lead. Secondly, the action undertaken against Salafist and al Qaeda affiliated elements that had infiltrated the Strip, with the arrest of members of *Yesh Al Islam* and even the killing of *Yund Ansar Allah's* leader Sheikh Abdel Latif Moussa and more than 20 of his followers in 2009 after he criticised Hamas for not enforcing Sharia law and demanded the creation of an 'Islamic Emirate of Gaza'.

Causes and Consequences of Operation Cast Lead

The sharp rise in the number of Qassam and Grad rocket attacks against kibbutzim and cities in southern Israel during November and December 2008 led the then Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, to launch a large scale military operation named Cast Lead, with the object of restoring deterrence. After three weeks of intensive bombing in addition to ground incursions into strategic enclaves within the Strip, Palestinian casualties totalled 1,300 dead and more than 5,000 injured. On the Israeli side there were only 13 casualties, a ratio of 1 Israeli to 100 Palestinians, triggering the condemnation of the international community for an excessive use of military force, as stated in the Goldstone Report.

Following the operation, Gazans began looking to Hamas as a resolute and self sacrificing organisation that was doing all it could to safeguard Palestinian rights, confront military aggression and resist Israeli demands, even at the expense of its leaders' lives (its Minister of the Interior, Said Siam, was specifically targeted for assassination a few days before the operation ended) and of the destruction of its institutions and headquarters. Despite the heavy blows suffered, Palestinians took pride in Hamas's military achievements, indirectly undermining the PLO's legitimacy.

This first Gaza war damaged the little credibility PA President Mahmoud Abbas had among Gazans because he failed to show either heroism or commitment. Although he could have threatened to dissolve the PA, Abbas sided with Arab governments opposed to Hamas. He defended Hosni Mubarak and then took part in the Sharm el Sheikh summit that created the basis for the cease fire and demanded a halt to weapons smuggling. Abbas also ordered the PSF to suffocate any angry demonstrations in the West Bank and prevented confrontations with IDF soldiers at military roadblocks. Denunciations of Abbas's decisions became widespread among Palestinians.

Moreover, Israel's blockade of the Strip failed in another aspect: it did not weaken Hamas, which managed to crush or outflank its political rivals, and, to the contrary, made it even stronger. So the siege imposed after June 2007 and tightened after operation Cast Lead did not undermine Hamas' power, but it did perhaps force it to become more realistic. At present, Hamas has an unquestioned –and, in the eyes of most Gazans, largely legitimate– monopoly on the use of force in the Gaza Strip, and its social support has grown at the expense of Fatah. The siege has also increased the importance of its social services, which compete with those provided by the international community through the specialised UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA).

Palestinian National Reconciliation within the New Context of the Arab Spring

Hamas had never faced such major challenges and opportunities as those presented by the Arab Spring, especially after the ousting of the traditional patron of both the PA and the PLO, the Egyptian *Rais* Hosni Mubarak, and the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood. It abandoned its headquarters in Damascus –at much cost to ties with its largest State supporter, Iran– while improving relations with such US allies as Egypt, Qatar and Turkey. As regards the Syrian civil war it has tried to navigate between two waters. On the one hand, it has kept its distance from the Assad regime (with no public events supporting Assad being allowed in the Strip), while on the other, it has taken care not to upset Iran's leaders, who had become its main providers of weapons and rocket technology in implementation of the Islamic Republic's policy of asymmetric warfare.

With the new sponsorship of the Western oriented Egypt, Qatar and Turkey, intra Palestinian national reconciliation became a strategic priority. The Mecca (February 2007) and Sana'a (March 2008) agreements –shelved by both Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip– were dusted down and brought back into play. A new agreement was signed in Cairo in May 2011 calling for the establishment of a technocratic government and presidential and legislative elections to be held within six months. The agreement was not implemented in practice, but it did bring about a new understanding. In February 2012 the PA President Abbas and Hamas's Political Bureau chief Khaled Meshal signed a follow up agreement, showing a new political will to end the geographical and political divisions between what had become known as Fatahstan and Hamastan.

Causes and Consequences of Operation Pillar of Defence

The aftermath of operation Cast Lead led to what could be described as a gentlemen's agreement between the Israeli government and Hamas to avoid mutual aggression and escalation, as both sides were interested in maintaining the peace for a time. Another variable in the equation was that Hamas still retained the IDF soldier Gilad Shalit in captivity. He had been kidnapped in June 2006 in a relatively sophisticated operation against the Kerem Shalom military outpost and was a bargaining chip in the hands of Hamas.

Benjamin Netanyahu's return to office in February 2009 did not really change Israel's approach to Hamas. After Ehud Olmert, the more hawkish Netanyahu surprised everyone by managing to negotiate an exchange of prisoners. More importantly, he achieved this goal –that had previously been pursued by the Olmert Government– in October 2011 after the Egyptian *Rais* Hosni Mubarak had been deposed but while the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was still in power, as if anticipating what would occur in the Egyptian legislative elections of December 2011: the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated Party Freedom and Justice and the subsequent election of Mohamed Morsi as President.

The release of 1,000 Palestinian prisoners was a political price that Netanyahu could afford to pay before his voters and, especially, Israeli society at large, which supported the deal. Thus, the Israeli Prime Minister's popularity rose, but Hamas was also very much strengthened. It is not yet very clear what the exchange's ultimate objective was, but some Israeli analysts believe Netanyahu not only wanted to curry favour with the electorate –Shalit's liberation had been a long standing social demand– but also to weaken Abbas's position following the latter's appearance in the UN General Assembly in September 2011 to argue in favour of replacing the PLO's status of observer with a declaration of statehood (although he returned empty handed).

Nevertheless, once rocket attacks again became more frequent in early November 2012, the Netanyahu government calculated that killing the commander of Hamas's military wing, Ahmed Jabari, and launching an assault against all the underground launching pads and weapons stockpiles would restore deterrence, reverting to a post Cast Lead situation of relative calm just a few weeks before the elections to be held on 22 January 2013. Jabari's assassination and the bombing of many of Hamas's underground silos and weapon dumps forced its leaders to launch a massive counter attack, firing almost 1,500 rockets of different types and ranges of which only 81 reached their targets, killing six Israelis and injuring 240. Although the result was limited in quantitative terms, for the *Izz ad din al Qassam* Brigades and the other militias their main success was not the material damage inflicted but the psychological effect as for the first time ever they were able to reach Tel Aviv and the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Even in the absence of its deceased commander in chief, Hamas's military wing was able to perform like a well trained and organised army. Following the example set by Hizbullah in Southern Lebanon after Israel's unilateral withdrawal in May 2000, Hamas developed a network of underground tunnels and launching mechanisms. Moreover, instead of risking their lives driving around with the rockets mounted on pick up trucks as previously, Hamas activists moved through the tunnels activating their rockets by remote control, minimising the chance of being targeted by the IDF's drones, which kept constant surveillance throughout the Gaza Strip.

Despite the much heavier Palestinian casualties –166 dead and over 1,000 injured– Hamas claimed victory after the war, arguing that not only had it been able to reach Israel's main cities but had also defended the Gaza Strip's territorial integrity (the Israeli government mobilised up to 75,000 reservists for an eventual ground offensive which was ruled out on account of mounting diplomatic pressure and the risk of escalation in

the wake of elections). This generated a counterproductive effect on the Palestinians, who thought that Hamas could achieve more through its armed struggle in the Gaza Strip than the PA could through negotiations in the West Bank. Such a perception was reinforced by the visit of Hamas's Politburo chief to the Gaza Strip, something never before authorised, either by the former Egyptian *Rais* Hosni Mubarak or by any Israeli government. Khaled Meshal kissed the ground at Rafah and toured the Strip along with Prime Minister Haniyeh, exuding victory and unity. He emphasised the need to enhance the process of national reconciliation, seeking unity not only within Hamas but between all Palestinian political factions. His words echoed in the West Bank also, with the population out on the streets protesting against the Israeli military operation and the PA's inaction.

Hamas's New Regional Standing and Emergence as a Political Actor

The movement faces a historical opportunity to change its political destiny and to reverse its diplomatic isolation. Hamas has been moving away from the so called 'axis of resistance' and closer to its new supporters: Egypt, Qatar and Turkey. There have been recent press reports concerning an alleged message from Meshal to King Abdullah II of Jordan regarding the possibility of Hamas declaring its recognition of the 1967 borders, which would indirectly imply the recognition of Israel's existence. Although Meshal subsequently issued a denial, this is one of the three preconditions required by the Quartet for the Middle East (UN, US, EU and Russia): renouncing violence, recognising Israel and accepting all past agreements between the PLO and Israel.

Within this new geopolitical context, Hamas has become far more prone to responding to Egyptian pressure. A reaffirmed partnership of the Obama Administration with the Morsi government in such an undertaking could be critical to turn the currently fragile cease fire into a long term truce. Thus, if Egypt wishes to have an effective role it will have to open the crossings –Rafah for exports from Gaza and Kerem Shalom for imports, applying the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA)– in order to normalise Gaza's economic and social situation.

It will also have to find the way to halt the smuggling of rockets and weaponry along the Philadelphi Corridor (the 16 km border between the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula). For its part, Hamas must make a definite move away from being a resistance movement and become a political party. The Muslim Brotherhood might be a good example for Hamas to follow, as without a political transformation no cease fire with Israel will hold for long and the IDF might be forced to carry out an even larger scale military operation, more in the style of Cast Lead than of Pillar of Defence.

With regard to Israel, Netanyahu's strategy after gaining his second mandate in 2009 and establishing a stable coalition with his ultranationalist partner Avigdor Lieberman was to topple the Hamas government. But as soon as he took office he realised that the associated costs in terms of civilian casualties and international condemnation were unacceptable, not to mention dragging the IDF into a new occupation. Moreover, President Netanyahu understood the advantages of keeping Hamas in power, maintaining the Palestinians' geographical and political fragmentation, and considered Hamas a lesser evil which might contain the proliferation in the Gaza Strip of more extremist al Qaeda affiliates and Salafist groups.

Such an approach only offers a temporary palliative solution to a broader and deeper political problem. A post 2006 assessment clearly shows that Israel's policy of non recognition neither weakened Hamas nor compelled it to relinquish its armed struggle in the long term. Similarly, isolating Hamas did not undermine support for its government, but instead punished the civilian population of Gaza. Even though the Israeli government insists that it will not speak to Hamas, this fiction is maintained largely to discourage other international actors from treating Hamas as a legitimate interlocutor. But as we have seen, both Olmert and Netanyahu spoke to it through Egyptian intermediaries, either to stop rocket attacks or to secure Shalit's release. Similarly, Hamas also insists that it will never negotiate with Israel, but it has also done so when it was necessary or convenient.

Conclusions

Hamas can clearly not be expected to change overnight. But there is still reason to hope that can do so incrementally. In this respect, Hamas should start by committing itself not only to maintaining the current ceasefire but also force all other militias to respect it, as it has successfully done since the accord was reached last 21 November. This new period of calm should be used by the moderate wing within the leadership –represented by Meshal– to gradually move closer to the Quartet's conditions. Perhaps, instead of being preconditions to negotiations –in the same way Netanyahu does not want to accept a new settlement freeze in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as a prerequisite to negotiating with the PA– they should become benchmarks to be achieved through indirect negotiations.

Acknowledging that the Oslo Process has reached a dead end in its current form and that Hamas is an unavoidable political player should be viewed as the recognition of hard political realities. With both the region and Hamas at a strategic crossroads, in exchange for the Islamist movement's commitment to a genuine truce in Gaza, to contributing to stabilise the Sinai Peninsula, to giving Abbas a mandate to negotiate with Israel and to agreeing to abide by the results of presidential and legislative elections, the new Netanyahu government –whatever the coalition he assembles after his Likud Beitenu came first in the 22 January elections– should make it that it can do business with a Palestinian unity government whose platform and actions are in harmony with these principles.

Such a deal would reduce Hamas's ties with Iran and push it even further away from the 'axis of resistance', which is one of Israel's main strategic objectives in its effort to isolate the Islamic Republic and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah. If Netanyahu goes ahead with launching a surgical strike against Iran's nuclear programme –as he has systematically threatened to do if the new bilateral track with the US and the multilateral P5+1 negotiations fail to bear fruit– while he has initiated serious indirect contacts with Hamas, he could avoid having to counter a rocket offensive from the south as he will in all likelihood have to face from north (unless the IDF launches a pre-emptive strike against Hezbollah as well).

In a nutshell, Hamas is here to stay. If the new Israeli government refuses to deal with this reality, it will only make the situation worse. Palestinian moderates such as Abbas and his Prime Minister Salam Fayyad will become weaker, while Hamas and the more extreme organisations in the Gaza Strip will grow stronger. If Obama wants to kick start the Middle East Peace Process during his forthcoming visit to the region in March, he should deal with the challenge posed by Hamas instead of avoiding it. Otherwise, the recurrent apathy of the international community will lead to the end of the Oslo Process and open up the possibility of a more devastating war in the Gaza Strip, with Israel in occupation again.