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The Middle East: intractable conflict?: the transformation of Hamas?

Report

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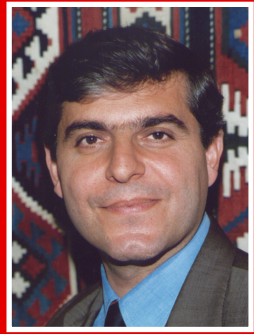
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The Transformation of Hamas?

Something is stirring within the Hamas body politik, a moderating trend that, if nourished and engaged, could transform Palestinian politics and the Arab-Israeli peace process. There are unmistakable signs that the religiously-based radical movement has subtly changed its uncompromising posture on Israel. Although low-key and restrained, those gradual shifts and nuances indicate that Hamas leaders are searching for a formula which addresses the concerns of Western powers yet avoids alienating their hard-line supporters.



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For example, in the last few months top Hamas officials have publicly stressed that they want to be part of the solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, not part of the problem. What is happening inside Hamas' mosques and social base shows a concerted effort on the part of its leadership to re-educate its rank and file about coexistence with the Jewish state and in so doing mentally prepare them for a permanent settlement in the future.

COEXISTENCE WITH THE JEWISH STATE

In Gazan mosques pro-Hamas clerics have reportedly begun to cite the example of Salah al-Din al-Ayubi, a famed Muslim military commander and statesman, who, after liberating Jerusalem from the Western Crusaders, allowed them to retain a coastal state of their own. The moral lesson of the story is that if Ayubi could tolerate the warring, blood-thirsty Crusaders, then today's Palestinians should be willing to live peacefully with a Jewish state in their midst.

The Ayubi story is important because it provides Hamas with religious legitimacy and allows it to justify and explain its change of direction to followers. As an Islamic-based movement,

Hamas' very *raison d'être* rests on religious legitimation, and its leaders understand that they neglect that at their peril. Western leaders and students of international politics therefore need to appreciate that Hamas can no more abandon its commitment to Islamism than the United States can abandon its commitment to liberal democracy. That does not however mean that Hamas is incapable of change or compromise, simply that its identity is strongly constituted by its religious legitimation.

Hamas' recent narrative marks a pronounced departure from the past. Previously, Hamas moderates called for *tahdi'a* (a minor truce) or *hudna* (a longer-term truce lasting as long as 50 years), which obviously implies some measure of recognition. Hamas moderates, in effect, justified their policy shift by using Islamic terms. In Islamic history, *hudnas* sometimes develop into permanent truces.

Now Hamas leaders appear to be going further by laying the ground for a shift in their position by educating their social base about the requirements of permanent peace – recognition of the Jewish state. Although the evolution of Hamas' stance on the peace process has been slow, gradual,

and qualified, in the last three years many of its leaders have repeatedly said they want a two-state solution. Khaled Meshaal, the top Hamas leader and head of its political bureau based in Syria and considered a hard-liner, acknowledged as much. "We are realists," he said, and recognized that there is "an entity called Israel."



Khaled Meshaal has signalled Hamas' willingness to moderate its attitude towards Israel.

Pressed by an Australian journalist on policy changes that Hamas might make to any new order, Meshaal asserted that the organization has already shifted on several key points: "Hamas already changed – we accepted the national accords for a Palestinian state based on 1967 borders, and we took part in the 2006 Palestinian elections."

Another senior Hamas leader, Ghazi Hamad,

was more specific than Meshaal, telling journalists in January that Hamas would be satisfied with ending Israeli control over the areas occupied in the 1967 Six-Day War — the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. In other words, the organization would not hold out for the liberation of the land that currently includes Israel.

Yet it would be wrong to regard Hamas' position as monolithic on this issue, since there are multiple clashing viewpoints and narratives within the movement. Over the years, I have interviewed more than a dozen Hamas leaders inside and outside the Palestinian territories. Although, on the whole, Hamas' public rhetoric calls for the liberation of all historic Palestine, not only the territories occupied in 1967, a healthier debate occurs within.

My recent conversations with Hamas' rank and file suggest that the militant organization has evolved considerably since the group unexpectedly won power in Gaza in free elections in 2006. Before that, Hamas was known for its suicide bombers, not its bureaucrats. But that had to change. "It is much more difficult to run a government than to oppose and resist Israeli occupation," a senior Hamas leader told me while on official business in Egypt in 2007. "If we do not provide the goods to our people, they'll disown us." Ironically, in spite of the West's refusal to regard their government as legitimate, the democratic demands for governance from within Gaza are themselves driving change within Hamas.

AGAINST ALL ODDS?

What is striking about Hamas' shift toward the peace process is that it has come at a trying time for the Islamist organization which, in the last two years, has faced critical challenges from Al Qaeda-like jihadist groups, a low-intensity civil war with rival Fatah, the ruling party of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and a deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza.

Last summer a militant group called Jund Ansar Allah, or the Warriors of God, one of a handful of radical Al Qaeda-inspired factions, declared the establishment of an Islamic

Caliphate in Gaza, in a flagrant rejection of Hamas' authority. Hamas security forces struck instantly and mercilessly at the Warriors, killing more than twenty members, including the group's leader, Abdel-Latif Mousa. In one stroke, the Hamas leadership sent a message to its foes and friends that it will not tolerate the existence of global jihadist groups like Al Qaeda: Hamas will not allow Al Qaeda-inspired factions to turn Gaza to a theatre to wage transnational jihad.

However, the challenge to Hamas' authority persists. Israel's brutal siege of Gaza, in place since 2007, along with the suffering and despair it has caused to its 1.4 million inhabitants, has driven hundreds of young Palestinians into the arms of small Salafist extremist factions that accuse Hamas of forfeiting the armed struggle and failing to implement Qur'anic or shariah law. Compared to these puritanical and nihilistic groups, Hamas (this might sound strange to Western ears) is well within the moderate mainstream of the broad spectrum of radical Islamist politics.

Operationally and ideologically, there are huge differences between Hamas and Al Qaeda and its various inspired factions, and

“there are huge differences between Hamas and Al Qaeda”

a lot of bad blood. Hamas is a broad-based religious-nationalist resistance whose focus and violence is limited to Palestine and Israel, while Al Qaeda is a small, transnational terrorist group that has carried out attacks worldwide. Osama bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's chiefs, have vehemently criticized Hamas for its willingness to play politics and negotiate with Israel. Hamas' leaders have responded that they know what is good for their people, and have made it crystal clear that they have no interest in transnational militancy. Their overriding goal is political rather than ideological: to empower their people and liberate the occupied Palestinian territories.

Thus Hamas, unlike Al Qaeda and other fringe factions, is not merely an armed militia but a viable social movement with an extensive social network and a large popular base that has been estimated at more than half a million supporters and sympathizers. Hamas

has also shown itself to be sensitive and responsive to Palestinian public opinion. A convincing argument could be made that the recent changes in Hamas' conduct may be attributed to the high levels of poverty, unemployment, and pain of Palestinians who live in a state of isolation in Gaza and the fear that things may spiral out of control.

A further example of its political and social priorities is Hamas' decision to engage with an Egyptian-brokered deal that sketches out a path to peace with rival Fatah, though no breakthrough is imminent.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Despite its wooden and reactionary rhetoric, Hamas is a rational actor, a conclusion reached by former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevy, who also served as Ariel Sharon's national security advisor and who is certainly not an Israeli peacenik. The Hamas leadership has undergone a transformation "right under our very noses" by recognizing that "its ideological goal is not attainable and will not be in the foreseeable future," Halevy wrote in Yedioth Ahronoth a few months ago. His verdict is that Hamas is now ready and willing to accept the establishment of

a Palestinian state within the temporary borders of 1967.

The US Army Strategic Studies Institute published a similar analysis just weeks before the launch of the 2008 Israeli offensive, concluding that Hamas was considering a shift of its position, and that "Israel's stance toward [Hamas] ... has been a major obstacle to substantive peacemaking."

Indeed, it can be argued that Hamas has moved closer to a vision of peace consistent with international consensus – the concept of two separate states in historic Palestine – than the current Israeli governing coalition. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vehemently opposes the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza, with its capital in East Jerusalem. Netanyahu's governing coalition is more right-wing and pro-settlement than he is.

Yet if Hamas is so eager to accept a two-state solution, why doesn't it simply announce that it recognizes Israel's existence and promise to negotiate a peace deal that allows the two countries to coexist? In interviews with Hamas officials, they stress that their

organization has made significant concessions to the Quartet's three conditions, though the Quartet has not lifted the punishing sanctions against Hamas nor has it pressed Israel to end its the siege of Gaza. Israel's siege of Gaza has caused a dire humanitarian crisis in the occupied territories, and since Hamas' leaders believe that accepting Israel's presence is the last card in their arsenal they are reluctant to bargain it away before the talks even start. Their diplomatic starting point will be to demand that Israel recognizes the nationalist rights of the Palestinian rights and withdraws from their occupied territories, but it will not be their final position.

A ROUTE FORWARD

There can be no viable, lasting peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians if Hamas is not consulted about peacemaking and if the Palestinians remain divided with two warring authorities in the West Bank and in Gaza. Hamas has the means and public support to undermine any agreement that does not address the legitimate rights and claims of the Palestinian people. Its rival, Fatah and the PA, lacks a popular mandate and the legitimacy needed to implement a resolution of the conflict. President Mahmoud Abbas has been politically weakened by a series of blunders of his own making, and with his moral authority compromised in the eyes of a sizable Palestinian constituency, Abbas is yesterday's man.



Hamas supporters demonstrate against the closure of the Rafah Border crossing.

Like it or not, Hamas is the most powerful organization in the occupied territories and it is deeply entrenched in Palestinian society. Neither Israel nor the Western powers can wish it away. The good news, if my reading is correct, is that Hamas has changed and met some of the conditions of the Quartet, and is making the domestic political preparations for further concessions.

If, instead of ignoring Hamas or, worse yet, seeking its overthrow, the United States and Europe engaged the Islamically-based organization, diplomatically and politically, and encouraged it to continue moderating its views, the West could test the extent of Hamas' evolution and find out if the organization is willing to accept a settlement based on the two-state solution. So far, the strategy of isolating and militarily confronting Hamas pursued by Israel and the Bush administration has not appeared to weaken the organization dramatically. If anything, what success this strategy has had in undermining Hamas has been counterproductive, since it has radicalized hundreds of young Palestinians who have joined extremist Al Qaeda-inspired factions and reinforced the culture of martyrdom and nihilism. All the while, the siege and isolation of Gaza has also left a trail of untold pain and suffering.

If it won't engage Hamas, the US and Europe will never know if it can evolve into an open, tolerant and peaceful social movement. The truth is that the jury is still out on whether Hamas, a religiously-oriented radical movement, can make that painful and ideologically costly transition. But the

argument that engaging Hamas legitimizes the Islamist organization does not carry much weight because Hamas derives its legitimacy from a popular mandate by the Palestinian people. To break this impasse, and prevent further gains by more extremist factions, Europe, particularly Great Britain, should support a unified Palestinian government that could negotiate peace with Israel. The forthcoming truce deal between Hamas and Fatah at the end of October is an opportunity that may be built on to repair and strengthen intra-Palestinian governing institutions that have been frayed as a result of intense rivalry in the last two years.

Since the Obama administration is currently unwilling to engage with Hamas, which remains designated a terrorist organization, Britain ought to take the lead in establishing an official connection with the Islamist movement. The British government has already dealt with Lebanon's Hizbollah, a similar-minded group to Hamas, and possesses the skills, experience and political weight to break the deadly embrace and help broker a viable peace settlement.

A version of this article appeared in *The Nation*.