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## Hamas' moderation and settler extremism? Changing currents in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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By Tareq Baconi. Two major currents are surfacing within the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Years in the making, they have recently become significantly more visible.

The first is the rise of right wing Jewish extremism, sometimes referred to as the '[Jewish Hizbollah](#)' or the 'Israeli radicals'. Constituting mostly members of the Israeli settler community who have long been in conflict with Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, this current has increasingly been clashing with Arabs as well as with Israeli military, political and civil society. Recent examples of such clashes have included the desecration of mosques and spying on IDF movements in order to execute attacks on IDF patrols.

The second current is the apparent 'moderation' of Hamas. Following its reconciliation deal with Fatah last year, there has been much speculation on Hamas' recent gestures, including comments by the movement's leader, Khaled Meshal, about joining the PLO and [turning away from armed violence](#). Despite divisions within the movement suggesting that this is not a unanimous shift, numerous signs of 'moderation' exist.

The currents appear to be moving in different directions, and they have obvious differences between them, yet many similarities can nonetheless be drawn. Both trends harbor ideological extremists who use a range of violent tactics to achieve political goals. Over its lifetime, Hamas' use of violent resistance transitioned from being a simple tool aimed at liberation, to a more sophisticated political tool used to influence negotiations and create an alternative political option to that offered by the Oslo track.

'Price tag' attacks carried out by Jewish settlers have a psychology which is very similar to Hamas' own psychology of violent resistance: hurt innocent victims to force policy change. Perpetrators of 'price tag' attacks view Palestinians and Israeli security forces as obstacles, which stand in the way of their settlement enterprise. Right wing extremists carry out attacks to derail possible settlement building cessation, dismantling of illegal outposts or the continuation of negotiations along the two-state track.

The range of goals pursued through this violence suggests a second similarity between the two currents: neither is monolithic but rather each falls on a spectrum of 'extremism'. Stated purposes of right wing Jewish attacks have ranged from adherence to the pursuit of a Greater Israel where Palestinian and Israeli Arabs are transferred out, to the creation of a bi-national single state. Various degrees of extremism and political consciousness also exist in Hamas. Its patriarchal leader Sheikh Yassin is widely recognised as having led the movement down a track of greater political participation in clear contrast to some of the movement's hardliners who adopt a more aggressive tune calling for liberation of 'every inch of historic Palestine'.

Other similarities exist. Both currents have managed to carve for themselves a niche within their respective communities, and have come to be seen as a 'state within a state'. More than that, Hamas is in fact the latest elected government of the Palestinian people. The 'radical Jewish settlers' are sometimes referred to as a fifth column within Israeli society despite still being a significant minority. Long a fixture of Israeli policies to create "facts on the grounds", the settler enterprise now has currents aimed at securing increased autonomy.

Arguably, the most important similarity is that both present considerable complications for their respective governments and threaten stability. In relation to Hamas, the Palestinian political divide in 2006 is the most concrete manifestation of this. For the majority of Israelis, the recent acts of violence by the 'Israeli radicals' are unacceptable and shocking.

Having highlighted the similarities, it is essential that the differences are not overlooked: Hamas is part of the Palestinian arena and is fighting for liberation from an occupying force; the Israeli settlers are a symptom of the occupation. The radical Israeli groups are a small minority within the Israeli right wing, while Hamas had from the onset commanded a strong following amongst Palestinians.

The currents have particular sets of drivers and different characteristics that would clearly differentiate them from one another. Still, a number of things can be deduced from a high level comparison. The Hamas experience has shown that marginalising an extreme current by using repressive tactics against it without significantly addressing the anomalous environment which gave rise to it in the first place is counterproductive. If the underlying sources of tension are not dealt with actively and efficiently, such a current is likely to gather ferocity and popularity.

As such, and under the present circumstances where peace talks are virtually nonexistent, the Israeli and Palestinian parties can do much to harness these currents to achieve goals which would otherwise be much more difficult to attain. The Palestinians should actively capitalise on the apparently positive changes within Hamas and work towards a functioning unity government that is more representative and less corrupt. The Israelis and the international community should support such efforts and stop their knee-jerk reaction against a government which is inclusive of Hamas.

Israel should recognise that working with the Palestinians towards a final status agreement is the only way to manage their own internal extremist trends. Postponing a final agreement in the continued hope of creating 'facts on the ground' and entrenching the historic power imbalance is not only unsustainable because of demographic challenges; such an environment breeds extremism, and not only for the Palestinians. Israelis should use the grim picture being painted by their own extremists to force concessions on their government and make it a more serious peace partner.

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