



Published on *openDemocracy* (<http://www.opendemocracy.net>)

[Home](#) > Meet the 'new' Hamas: strategic shift or temporary deviation from a violent path?

## Meet the 'new' Hamas: strategic shift or temporary deviation from a violent path?

Benedetta Berti, 15th January 2012

**Subjects:** [International politics](#) <sup>[1]</sup> [Democracy and government](#) <sup>[2]</sup> [Conflict](#) <sup>[3]</sup> [Civil society](#) <sup>[4]</sup> [Palestine](#) <sup>[5]</sup> [Israel](#) <sup>[6]</sup> [Social Innovation](#) <sup>[7]</sup> [Violent transitions](#) <sup>[8]</sup> [Arab Awakening](#) <sup>[9]</sup> [Benedetta Berti](#) <sup>[10]</sup>

Contrary to the widespread assumption that the recent 'nonviolent turn' would be a new and unprecedented development in the evolution of Hamas, the history of the group reveals a constant internal tension along this political-military line

About the author

Benedetta Berti is a fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and a lecturer at Tel Aviv University. She co-wrote the book *Hamas and Hezbollah: a Comparative Study* (John Hopkins University Press, 2012) and is author of forthcoming, *Armed Groups as Political Parties and Their Role in Electoral Politics* that also looks at Hamas's political activism.

Known to much of the world for its suicide terrorism campaigns, its violent anti-Israeli rhetoric and its role as 'spoiler' in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian Islamic Resistance - Hamas - has in the past few weeks been the object of intense international scrutiny due to its alleged 'non-violent turn'. Could it be that, after over two decades of armed struggle and terrorism against Israel, Hamas has finally decided it is time to lay down its weapons and pursue an alternative, nonviolent, route?

A first look at the group's recent declarations seems to confirm this hypothesis. Firstly, according to a much quoted Jane's intelligence report, in November 2011 the group officially signed an agreement with its historical political opponent, Fatah, accepting a shift in gears and agreeing to suspend its violent activities. Secondly, even leaving aside the (so far unconfirmed) report, Hamas leaders have in the past few weeks repeatedly stated that, although the organization refuses to renounce its right to resort to violence, they are still willing to give 'peaceful activism' a chance. Accordingly, the group asserted that unarmed politics would now represent the preferred strategic tool to confront Israel. Thirdly, the ongoing progress of the inter-Palestinian reconciliation process, together with recent reports indicating the downgrading of Hamas-Syrian relations in favor of a rapprochement with regional actors like Egypt and Qatar, also seem to point out in the direction of a new and more 'moderate' Hamas.

In order to contextualize and make sense of this seemingly radical transformation in group strategy, it is important to look closely at Hamas' history, focusing specifically on its strategic imperatives, ideology, and organizational development.

Since its emergence from the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1987, Hamas' strategy and decision-making process has been guided by two strategic imperatives: the need to stay relevant and the quest for local Palestinian support - infusing into the organization a high dose of pragmatism. In turn, this has allowed Hamas to develop, very early on, parallel discourses: a dogmatic and inflexible ideology matched by a more nuanced, more flexible, political discourse. Under this paradigm, while Hamas never formally renounced or amended its Charter openly calling for the destruction of Israel and rejecting any type of political negotiations - it also developed a parallel set of concepts in order to get around its own ideological limitations, like that of accepting a long-term ceasefire as part of an interim solution that would allow the Palestinians to have their own state on the basis of the 1967 borders. Similarly, while never formally renouncing the prohibition of recognizing Israel's right to exist, Hamas began to develop a political theory according to which it would agree to deal with Israel as a 'de facto' entity.

In other words, Hamas's recent emphasis on the nonviolent struggle discourse can indeed be seen as part of the group's long-standing flexible strategy to create parallel political frameworks. This allows the group to benefit from the best of both worlds, ensuring the loyalty of its 'hardcore' constituency by preserving its commitment to jihad against Israel, while also embracing a more mainstream set of values and priorities geared towards the rest of the population and the international community alike.

In addition, Hamas has also constantly been concerned with its own popularity and legitimacy within Palestine, as exemplified by the correlation between the number and magnitude of violent attacks perpetrated by the group and the public's support for such attacks. Specifically, in periods where the public's support for violence significantly declined (such as in the years following the Oslo Accords), so too did the group's reliance on violence.

Taking these two elements into consideration, it is possible to understand why, in late 2011, Hamas is choosing to stress its political and nonviolent struggle. Keeping in mind the group's need to be both pragmatic and popular reveals how the ongoing impact of the so-called Arab Spring, with its new discourse centered around socio-political rights and freedoms, has led Hamas to carefully rethink its branding strategy.

Firstly, the new regional developments seem to point out to a new, albeit not yet fully developed, model exemplified by the rise of non-violent groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In this sense, it is unsurprising that Hamas wants to be associated more with the new rising stars of Middle Eastern politics, with the group formally discussing its 'reintegration' in the Muslim Brotherhood (as reported by [Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat](#) <sup>[11]</sup> in late December 2011).

Secondly, the Arab Spring has not only represented an ideological challenge to the 'old' Hamas, but also a rather pragmatic one: with the ongoing turmoil raging in Syria and the potential demise of the Assad regime, it makes perfect sense for the group to look elsewhere for new strategic allies. In addition, Hamas' refusal to strongly back Assad in the course of the protests has weakened the group's relations with both Syria as well as Iran, in turn opening a true window of opportunity for Hamas to partially redefine its regional alliances by moving away from the 'Axis of Resistance' and its discourse, repositioning itself closer to the rising Sunni camp.

From this perspective, the potential shift in the regional balance of power and the growing popularity of the 'Muslim Brotherhood brand' of Islamism in the region helps us

understand why Hamas would choose to focus on marketing its nonviolent strategy in order to stay popular and relevant. What's more, since Hamas has been in charge of the Gaza Strip in 2007, the realities of power have already substantially degraded the number and magnitude of armed attacks perpetrated by the group against Israel, thus reaffirming the need to focus on alternative strategies to confront its enemy.

However, if looking at Hamas's strategic considerations and ideology can help clarify the motivations behind the group's purported shift, in order to understand its long-term implications it is necessary to look at Hamas's history and organizational development.

Contrary to the widespread assumption that the recent 'nonviolent turn' would be a new and unprecedented development in the evolution of Hamas, the history of the group reveals a constant internal tension along the political-military line. Hamas has often found itself struggling between preserving its armed struggle and maximizing its political and social activism, alternating these organizational priorities in the course of its development. For example, in the years following the Oslo Accord and the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas - just as it is doing today - also shifted its focus onto its grassroots politics and social activities, trying to deemphasize its reliance on its military wing. At the time, the group attempted to reposition itself to increase its domestic relevancy and legitimacy in a time where armed struggle was particularly unpopular amongst Palestinians. However, by the end of the 1990s, a combination of the failed political negotiations with Israel, together with a decline in the popular legitimacy of the PA and the nonviolent route, all led Hamas to reverse this process of 'politicization' and invest again in its armed wing. In turn, this led the group to emerge from the second intifada as a powerful political and military alternative to Fatah.

This point is particularly important: Hamas had in the past similar cycles of 'moderation.' However, such cycles have been reversible (and reversed) and the group has not hesitated to move away from nonviolent struggle when pragmatism and popular support gave them a reason to do so. Applied to the 2011 transition, this suggests that Hamas' purported shift should be observed with a measure of caution, as this transformation could very well be temporary and ephemeral.

Two factors will contribute specifically to determine the future development of the group: its perception of the security environment and the success of the political reconciliation project. If inter-Palestinian reconciliation does indeed achieve the normalization of Palestinian political life and result in the creation of a united political coalition, then Hamas will have a higher interest in continuing to invest in nonviolent politics - provided the group is allowed to have a significant share of political power in 'post-reconciliation' Palestine. Similarly, if the group perceives the security environment as non-threatening, it may have an interest in deemphasizing its military apparatus.

However three important factors stand in the way of this development: firstly, Hamas has over the past few years invested in boosting its military apparatus, suggesting that any attempt to sideline the military leadership might result in dire internal conflicts. Secondly, it is unclear whether Hamas's 'hardcore' constituency would allow a nonviolent strategic shift, or whether this would lead to additional internal conflict, deeply threatening the internal cohesion of the group. Thirdly, a resolute international and Israeli refusal to deal with any Palestinian government that includes Hamas may indeed lead to a renewed marginalization of the group, which could in turn backfire, empowering Hamas's more radical leaders and minimizing the nonviolent discourse.

In this sense, the future of Hamas's nonviolent strategy is as promising as it is uncertain, hanging by the thread of the Palestinian reconciliation process, the internal tensions along the political-military line, the evolution of the 'Arab Spring', and international and Israeli responses to these developments.

**Country or region:**

Israel

Palestine

**Topics:**

Civil society

Conflict

Democracy and government

International politics



This article is published by Benedetta Berti, and openDemocracy.net under a [Creative Commons licence](#) [12]. You may republish it with attribution for non-commercial purposes following the CC guidelines. For other queries about reuse, [click here](#) [13]. Some articles on this site are published under different terms. No images on the site or in articles may be re-used without permission unless specifically licensed under Creative Commons.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.opendemocracy.net/benedetta-berti/meet-%E2%80%98new%E2%80%99-hamas-strategic-shift-or-temporary-deviation-from-violent-path>

Created 01/15/2012 - 15:00

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/topics/international-politics>

[2] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/topics/democracy-and-government>

[3] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/topics/conflict>

[4] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/topics/civil-society>

[5] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/palestine>

[6] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/israel>

[7] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/freeform-tags/social-innovation>

[8] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/freeform-tags/violent-transitions>

[9] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/freeform-tags/arab-awakening>

[10] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/author/benedetta-berti>

[11] <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=449042>

[12] <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

[13] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/about/syndication>