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Focus:

Political developments in Israel and Palestine

Margret Johannsen
Seeking recognition
Palestinian state-building beyond Oslo

Ilan Pappé
The search for a new paradigm
Past and present critical trends in Israeli historiography

Omar Shaban
From exchange of rockets to exchange of messages
Analysing the relations between Hamas and Israel

Peter Lintl
Understanding coalition formation in Israel
Party positions and cleavages in light of the 2015 election

Michael Borchard
Waking up with Bibi
How stable is the Israeli government?

Benedetta Berti
The evolving role of Hamas
Recasting labels?

Gerald M. Steinberg
Conflict or conflict management
in Israeli-Palestinian relations?

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Editorial

Dear ORIENT readers,

Looking at the lack of progress in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, many experts have lost hope that a two-state solution on the basis of UNSC resolutions will be achieved in the near future. This issue of ORIENT looks into recent developments and the basic facts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

What are new developments and what are constants in the conflict? Over the course of recent years, different trends have seemingly reshaped the dispute: Israel's political landscape appears more divided and hawkish than ever, while the PA has begun to strengthen its position by means of international recognition. What are we to make of these developments? Have the recent Gaza War in 2014 and the Israeli elections of March 2015 had an impact on the status quo? What are the chances of agreement on a solution acceptable to both sides?

Dr. Margret Johannsen analyses the state-building attempts of the PA after the Oslo agreeements. **Prof. Dr. Ilan Pappé** sheds light on critical approaches to Israeli historiography and stresses the need to consider such factors when aiming for a solution. **Omar Shaban** focuses on the relations between Hamas and Israel, stressing how there are signs of secret communication. Following that, **Peter Lintl** explains the goals and differences of Israeli parties before **Dr. Michael Borchard** analyses the recent elections in Israel. **Dr. Benedetta Berti** subsequently delves into the question of defining and categorising Hamas. Finally, **Prof. Dr. Gerald M. Steinberg** examines Israeli foreign policy in light of regional and international developments since 2010.

I hope that the current issue will provide you with worthwhile insights and new perspectives on the current situation in Israel and Palestine.



Dr. Gunter Mulack
Director of the German Orient-Institute

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Peter Lintl is a scientific assistant at the Professorship for Politics and Contemporary History of the Middle East at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. His main research interest are the current behaviour of Israeli political parties with a particular regard to the intersection of religion and politics.

Dr. Michael Borchard

Waking up with Bibi

How stable is the Israeli government?

Contrary to previous predictions, Netanyahu won the general election in Israel and will continue his leadership with a razor-thin majority. By highlighting the recent developments in Israeli society, Dr. Borchard explains the difficulties in forming the new government with coalition partners and shares an analysis of voter behavior and how it came to Netanyahu's re-election. How stable is the new Israeli government and to what extent will the election results have implications for the German-Israeli relations?

Dr. Michael Borchard is a German journalist, political scientist and current Director of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) in Jerusalem, Israel. Over the years, *Dr. Borchard* has published numerous reports about past and present political agenda, recently concentrating on the Israeli-German relationship – for which he gained international recognition and support.

Dr. Benedetta Berti

The evolving role of Hamas: Recasting labels?

The article briefly analyses the political, social and military evolution of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement – Hamas – since the group's victory in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative elections. It emphasises the multi-layered, hybrid and complex nature of the organisation and its strategy, highlighting how better understanding and dealing with the 'Hamas question' remains elusive, yet crucial, for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Dr. Benedetta Berti is a fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, a post-doctoral fellow at Ben Gurion University and a TED 2015 Fellow. Her research addresses non-state armed groups, internal conflicts and post-war recovery and reconstruction with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa region.

Prof. Dr. Gerald M. Steinberg

Conflict or conflict management in Israeli-Palestinian relations?

In his article, Gerald M. Steinberg examines the recent developments in Israeli foreign policy. He particularly emphasizes how the relation between Washington and Jerusalem have soured over the past years. In a second step, Steinberg sheds light on the regional developments since 2010 and their impact on Israeli foreign policy and the country's role in the region.

Gerald M. Steinberg is Professor of Political Studies at Bar Ilan University and founded the Programme on Conflict Management and Negotiation. He is also founder and president of NGO Monitor. His main research interests include the changing nature of power in international relations, focusing on Middle East diplomacy and security.

Benedetta Berti

The evolving role of Hamas
Recasting labels?

I. Defining Hamas: Defying labels

When looking at non-state armed groups – organisations not under the formal or de facto control of the state that are willing and capable to use force to attain their political, economic or ideological goals[1] – both scholars and decision-makers tend to apply a rather narrow framework, with groups classified and analysed mostly based on their reliance on violence. When it comes to understanding the structure and strategy of a complex organisation like Hamas, the Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement, there is a similar tendency to focus predominantly on the group's violent activities and to downplay its social, political and economic dimension.

Yet, since its initial creation as the armed wing of the Gaza-branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1987, Hamas has grown into a complex and integrated politico-socio-military organisation, with the group's use of force also undergoing a profound evolution. As a result, Hamas today does not neatly fit the traditional criteria commonly associated with terrorist organisations – the label most often used to describe the group. It is by no means a small, 'conspiratorial' or underground organisation, it does have an important political strategy and constituency, and it invests a significant portion of its time and political capital in *non-military* activities. For these reasons, its modus operandi has been described as more accurately fitting the label of 'insurgent organisation'.[2] Yet even this categorisation falls short of representing the group's complex evolution.

Today, to better understand Hamas and its evolution, it is important to characterise the group as a *sui generis,* hybrid organisation that blurs the line between insurgent and conventional tactics, between extra-institutional and institutional political activism and, ultimately, between state and non-state actor.

First, Hamas's use of force merges terrorism, insurgency and hybrid or semi-conventional tactics. From an operational perspective, Hamas has gone from being a relatively unsophisticated violent faction that relied on individual stabbings against Israelis to being capable of orchestrating and carrying out large-scale terrorist and rocket attacks deep into Israel. But the group's operational evolution does not end here: indeed in the past decade Hamas's military capabilities have further evolved, transforming it into a hybrid actor with high-combat skills capable of engaging its enemy through both classic guerrilla and insurgent tactics such as ambushes, improvised explosive devices and suicide missions, as well as by employing more conventional stand-off tactics to target and kill Israeli soldiers.

Second, in addition to its hybrid combat skills and operational doctrine, Hamas also simultaneously developed an extra-institutional movement and an institutional political party, becoming an outsider/insider actor over the years. Hamas has been involved in grassroots politics since the late 1980s, consistently and directly taking part in elections in universities, work places and trade unions. The group first began discussing the possibility of participating in institutional politics in the early 1990s, following the Oslo Accords, the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994 and leading up to the 1996 Palestinian legislative elections. On that occasion Hamas decided to refrain from taking part in elections, due to a mix of ideological, political and strate-

[1] Schneckener, *Spoilers or Governance Actors?*, 2009, 8-9.
[2] Moghadam, Berger and Beliakova, *Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent*, 2014.

gic considerations. That position was gradually reversed in the following decade, with Hamas first participating in the Palestinian municipal elections in 2004-2005 and subsequently running (and winning) the legislative elections in 2006. In the early 2000s, electoral participation was considered desirable due to two main changes in the Palestinian political arena. Firstly, Hamas argued that joining the electoral race in the mid-2000s was no longer an implicit approval of the Oslo Accords. In fact, Hamas argued that the Accords and their legacy had de facto been undermined by the Second Intifada. Secondly, after the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004, the Palestinian political system had 'opened up', thus providing a strong incentive for Hamas to pursue political participation through institutional politics.

By running in the municipal and legislative elections and by taking part in Palestinian institutional politics, Hamas became simultaneously an extra-institutional movement active at the grassroots political level as well as an institutional political party.

The complexities of defining this hybrid military, social and political organisation do not end here: over the years Hamas has also expanded its boundaries, developing certain attributes that are normally associated with state actors. This is not only because it is involved in the creation and administration of a vast array of social services through its welfare network, but also because of its de facto running the Gaza Strip since its takeover in the summer of 2007.[3]

In short, when looking at the complex process of evolution of the Palestinian Hamas, it is important to emphasise its multi-layered and sophisticated structure and identity and to highlight the group's internal process of adaptation, focusing on how the group blurs the lines between insurgent and conventional tactics, extra-institutional and institutional political activism and between state and non-state actor. These processes have all been accelerated since the group's takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007.

II. Hamas after 2007: Critical change and constant adaptation

Hamas' decision to participate in the 2004-2005 municipal elections and in the 2006 legislative contest represented a watershed moment in terms of the Hamas's political trajectory. This trend culminated with the Hamas's electoral victory, albeit with a relatively narrow margin. In the months following Hamas's electoral success, the Palestinian political arena became marked by the especially tense and conflictual relationship between Hamas on the one hand and Fatah and the Palestinian Presidency under Mahmoud Abbas on the other. Indeed, after 2006, Palestinian politics rapidly saw the polarisation of the political system between the Presidency and the government, between Gaza City and Ramallah, and between the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority Security Forces and, after April 2006, the Hamas-created "Executive force".[4] Eventually, and despite a number of attempts to bridge the political gap between the parties, the clash between Hamas and Fatah escalated into an armed confrontation, leading Hamas to assume control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 and generating a stark split in Palestine.

After 2007, Hamas became the de facto government and sole political authority in the Gaza Strip; a drastic change that pushed the group to prioritise establishing governance and control. To that end, Hamas focused on assuming control over the main branches of government in Gaza, reforming in the process the executive, legislative and judicial sectors and creating a self-standing political system separated from the Fatah-led PA in Ramallah. The group also worked on creating a functioning and loyal security sector with the purpose of both increasing its control over the ter-

[3] See Berti, *Armed-Political Organizations*, 2013.
[4] Cavatorta and Elgie, *The Impact of Semi-Presidentialism on Governance*, 2010, 35.

ritory and population in Gaza as well as establishing itself as the effective and competent political authority. With the same objective, Hamas also invested in the provision and delivery of social services as well as in managing Gaza's fragile economy.[5]

After gaining control of Gaza, Hamas hence further developed its politico-social strategy and its interest and capability to be a governance provider, prioritising consolidating its power and entrenching itself in Gaza. In doing so, the group further transitioned from being a rebel, anti-systemic group into a hybrid armed-political organisation involved simultaneously in institutional politics and governance as well as in extra-institutional armed struggle. Controlling Gaza also had direct implication on the group's armed apparatus, with the Qassam Brigades generally able to further develop their arsenal and capabilities, as well as to further transition towards a hybrid model of warfare.

At the same time, becoming the ruling political authority in Gaza also heightened the internal tensions between the needs of Hamas as a 'resistance' movement – needing to support and sustain its armed struggle against Israel – and the priorities of Hamas as a 'ruler' – necessitating a more risk-adverse approach with respect to Israel and to focus on domestic governance and on maintaining stability. Hamas indeed faced a dilemma: on the one hand a zero-tolerance posture with respect to attacks against Israel was perceived as a risky option that could have strengthened the notion – advanced by Hamas' detractors – that the group had given up on its jihad against Israel, while also risking to create a serious rift between the Hamas's government, its military wing and its external leadership. On the other hand, allowing military operations to occur in an unrestrained fashion was also seen as an equally unappealing option to the Hamas government as this would both weaken Hamas's position as the effective ruler, while also risking an Israeli retaliation that could ultimately threaten Hamas's grip on Gaza. Thus, following the takeover of the Strip, the logic of armed confrontation and the logic of governance repeatedly clashed. Squaring the circle has not been easy for the group and it has led to growing internal clashes within Hamas as well as to alternating cycles of violence with Israel, followed by times of relative quiet.

Hamas's ability to preserve simultaneously its extra-institutional armed apparatus and its governance system has been similarly challenged since the summer of 2013. In this sense a watershed moment was certainly the ousting of the Mohammed Morsi government in Egypt and the gradual establishment of a new political authority hostile to Hamas. Indeed, while the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was largely regarded by Hamas as a positive development in light of the historical, political and ideological ties with the Egyptian movement, Morsi's downfall mostly spelt trouble for Hamas.

First, Hamas lost an important regional backer. Second – and more importantly – the new Egyptian authorities began to crack down on Hamas's underground tunnels between the Sinai and Gaza whilst increasing the restrictions on the inflows and outflows of goods and people. The rising economic and financial pressure on Gaza, combined with ongoing Israeli and international restrictions, put an inordinate amount of pressure on the Hamas government and limited its ability to perform its governance functions, including paying the salaries of the workers on its payroll. Eventually, Hamas attempted to overcome its predicament by agreeing to form a technocratic unity government with Fatah in the spring of 2014. But with the new unity government not providing the financial relief the group sought and facing increasing internal tensions and external pressure, Hamas entered into yet another war with Israel in the summer of 2014. Despite the risks, Hamas

[5] Berti, *Non-State Actors as Providers of Governance*, 2015.

likely assessed that a short-term military confrontation with Israel would allow the group to both restore its reputation and keep internal conflict under control. Just as importantly, Hamas desperately needed to change the status quo in Gaza and thus it banked on military force as a tool to exert concessions from Israel and Egypt and to obtain relaxation of restrictions on flows of goods and people.

In the ten-months following the August 2014 ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, the group's predicament has not been substantially altered. Economically, Hamas remains under intense pressure and is still unable to pay the salaries of the civil workers on its payroll. Internationally, the group continues to be isolated, with the Egyptian government's policy with respect to Hamas focused on keeping restrictions on Gaza and 'putting the squeeze' on Hamas. What is more, the post-war reconstruction efforts have been severely delayed and under-funded, adding to the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza and placing additional strain on Gaza's civilian population. Frustration and discontent have also affected Hamas, not only internally but also through the rise of more vocal domestic opposition in Gaza.

In these circumstances of growing weakness, Hamas may very well be moving towards a new stage in its process of evolution and adaptation. In this context, the group may seek to overcome its crisis and maximise stability by extending a ceasefire with Israel and by reaching a deal with the PA. On the contrary, inability to pursue this venue – either because of internal frictions or external unwillingness – may push Hamas to seek another escalation as a tool to escape its current predicament.

III. Looking forward: Hamas as the missing factor?

Since its establishment in the last 1980s, Hamas has undergone a dynamic and fast-paced process of evolution; transitioning from being an anti-systemic and relatively unsophisticated violent organisation to becoming a complex and hybrid socio-politico-military apparatus involved simultaneously in armed struggle and institutional politics as well as in 'rebel governance'.

Understanding the different components of the group's strategy as well as assessing its level of political, military, social and economic entrenchment is especially important when assessing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a whole. Indeed, it stresses the point that Hamas continues to be an elusive yet crucial actor for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is especially important as, following the group's takeover of Gaza in 2007, the main Israeli policy with respect to the group – backed by a number of international players – focused on weakening Hamas through a mix of isolation of the Gaza Strip and parallel negotiations with the Fatah-controlled PA.

Needless to say, economic restrictions and political and international isolation did not lead to Hamas stepping down in Gaza, nor did ignoring the Gaza Strip and its ruler facilitate the achievement of a political agreement between Israel and the West Bank Fatah leaders. In this sense, an in-depth look at Hamas's evolution and political role suggests that, in the future, the 'Hamas factor' can simply not be ignored.

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