The Hamas Tightrope: Between Political Institutionalization and Armed Struggle

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The process of institutionalization of non-state actors is reflected in the development of their ability to govern an area and population. This ability demands political pragmatism and responsible, restrained conduct regarding the use of terror as a political tool. The processes that Hamas has undergone since it seized control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, as seen in the structural tension between its role as a political, governing entity and the preservation of its founding ethos as a resistance movement dedicated to the armed struggle against Israel, form an interesting and challenging subject. Thus with Hamas as a case study, the question examined here is how the process of political institutionalization of non-state actors (in the sense of their becoming an element of government) affects their continued use of violence and armed methods, and whether the use of violence impedes or arrests the process. In this context, the essay will examine Israel's potential influence on some of the variables involved.

Political Institutionalization: Organizational-Bureaucratic and Sovereign-Territorial Development

Two types of political institutionalization processes can be identified in Hamas. The first concerns the development of its organizational and bureaucratic structure as a non-state actor, and the second refers to its development as a sovereign element, ruling over territory and its resident population.

The character of Hamas as a political movement was shaped when it was founded in 1987 to challenge the PLO, and later the Palestinian Authority, which were tainted by their image of corruption and immorality.

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At first, Hamas continued the path of its parent movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, with rapid construction of mosques and the expansion of a preaching and social services network (*dawa*), while building a military infrastructure and conducting terror activity against Israel, to reflect its ideology of armed struggle.[1] Its victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006 enhanced its evolution as a political movement and integration into the Palestinian political establishment as part of the Palestinian Authority government. The Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 turned it into the ruling movement in the Strip, and since then it has acted as a semi-state entity.

The process of political institutionalization was accelerated by the need to consider foreign relations and the international arena, an attempt to establish legitimacy in both external and internal public opinion, and the obligation to meet the needs of the population. This was expressed in more pragmatic Hamas policy toward Israel, such as the formulation of a policy document in May 2017, tactical concessions, and recognition of the existing order. At the same time, Hamas strives to preserve the ethos of armed resistance, employing varying degrees of violence.

Hamas's Use of Violence

Reality forces Hamas to navigate between sovereignty and the development of governance skills and the preservation of its armed resistance ethos. Consequently, the organization still sees terror as a legitimate and necessary tool for promoting its political goals, both to improve the humanitarian reality in the Gaza Strip and to maintain its status as the spearhead of the Palestinian national struggle. Hamas's use of violence fluctuates, with periods of restraint alternating with violent outbursts. The choice to use violence is influenced by several variables, which are classified as restraints and accelerators that fall into two categories: internal and external to the organization.

Analysis shows a number of variables with dual effect – in some circumstances they serve to restrain violence, and in other circumstances, they encourage it. The particular manifestation concerns expectations or horizons in a given reality, and therefore these expectations or horizons can be defined as a kind of meta-variable.

Violence Restrainers

Improving the Humanitarian Situation in Gaza

As a semi-state actor with sovereign and territorial responsibility, Hamas must meet the needs of the Gaza Strip population. This obligation is first and foremost the attempt to prevent a humanitarian crisis, in other words, to achieve a basic improvement in the lives of the people and thereby avoid popular discontent with its rule. Hamas understands that in order to achieve this goal it must demonstrate relative pragmatism, with ideological flexibility in the short to medium term.

The organization is therefore restrained in its violence against Israel, and is careful not to cause an escalation that would draw Israel into a broad military campaign. In a conversation with journalists on August 30, 2018, Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas head in Gaza, said that "the goal of Hamas, and at any price, is to support the people on the side of resistance, and we will not rest until the people can live in dignity," and that "Hamas is not interested in conflict with Israel."[2]

The policy outlined by Sinwar is reflected in the talks held by Hamas in Cairo, mediated by Egypt, with the aim of reaching an arrangement with Israel. These talks followed over four and a half months of violent clashes along the Gaza Strip fence and five rounds of escalation, during which over 600 rockets and mortar shells were fired at Israel. Under the emerging arrangement, based on the ceasefire agreement following Operation Protective Edge, Hamas will be required to stop terror activities against Israel, and in return Israel will open the Gaza border crossings to people and goods.[3]

Hamas Governance of the Gaza Strip

After the enormous damage caused to Gaza and its residents during Operation Protective Edge in July-August 2014, Hamas's military wing focused on rebuilding its military capabilities. This policy comes at the expense of civilian and infrastructure reconstruction and alleviation of the crisis that worsened following the economic sanctions imposed on Gaza by the chairman of the Palestinian Authority. This situation led to popular protests in the Strip, which were swiftly crushed by Hamas's security mechanisms.

This conduct by Hamas indicates "the need for different levels of relationships with the society it deals with [the non-state actor]" and the need "to develop the ability to provide institutional and state services to

its members or supporters and the population under its control, such as security, judicial services, health, allocation and registration of land, and other welfare services."[4] Yet the efforts to achieve greater military power came largely at the expense of the reconstruction and the welfare of local residents.

Enforcing Sovereignty on Recalcitrant Organizations

Since seizing political power in the Gaza Strip by force, Hamas has been obliged to use its military and security capabilities against organizations that challenge its rule. It must therefore operate as a stable, responsible governing body prepared to restrain elements that use or try to use violence against Israel, although this is contrary to its own ideology of armed resistance to Israel.

Evidence of this can be found in Hamas statements condemning instability and expressing a wish to ensure law and order.[5] In addition, in a document sent in April 2010 to former head of the Hamas Political Bureau Khaled Mashal, Hamas officials in Gaza asked him "to root out jihadi Salafism from Gaza."[6] Further evidence can be found in forceful actions and a string of arrests over the years of members of Salafi jihadist groups who refused to cooperate and obey Hamas.[7]

Hamas's Foreign Policy and Desire for Regional and International Legitimacy

As part of its political institutionalization, Hamas attaches importance to its foreign policy and its diplomatic and political contacts. For example, Osama Hamdan, head of overseas contacts for Hamas, stressed that "Hamas wants to retain open and balanced relations at the regional and global level…to establish channels of communication with several Arab, Islamic, and Western countries."[8]

This effort derives from the movement's need to widen the basis of its legitimacy in the Arab and Muslim world and among the international community as the sovereign entity in Gaza, without conceding its identity and status as the leader of the armed struggle against Israel. The Hamas government conducts foreign relations based on close contacts with Turkey,[9] Qatar,[10] and Islamic states such as Malaysia,[11] and enjoys special relations with Russia.[12] All this is in addition to its special relationship with Iran and its channel of communication with Egypt.

Egyptian Influence

In June 2017 Hamas lost its foothold in Qatar, when Doha ordered activists from the Hamas military wing to leave the country, due to pressure exerted on it by the pragmatic Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt.[13] This crisis forced the Hamas leadership to be more flexible in order to reach an agreement with Egypt, which until then had considered Hamas an enemy and an arm of the Muslim Brotherhood that operates in its territory.

The understandings reached between Egypt and Hamas in June 2017 state that Cairo will supply electricity to Gaza, while Hamas will block smuggling from Gaza to Egypt and will stop supporting terrorist elements operating against the Egyptian army in Sinai.[14] Since then, Egypt has acted as a mediator between Hamas and the PLO, and also between Hamas and Israel. During the campaign along the Gaza Strip border in May 2018, Cairo applied strong pressure on Hamas to stop the violent disturbances, and in return agreed to operate the Rafah crossing in an orderly manner and bring about calm. Egypt also mediated between Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and Israel in the May 2018 round of fighting between Gaza and Israel.

Hamas's Attempts to Integrate into the Palestinian Political System

Hamas sports a dual attitude toward the Palestinian Authority. In parallel with its apparently pragmatic political institutionalization practice of public moves toward reconciliation (Cairo Agreement of October 12, 2017) – which reached a dead end following a series of conflicting demands from both parties – Hamas continues to develop terror infrastructures in Judea and Samaria, incite against the Palestinian Authority, and exploit every opportunity to foment unrest and breaches of public order (the al-Aqsa events of July 2017 are a striking example).

For Hamas it is important to revive the reconciliation process with Fatah, since its success could lead to a renewal of the movement's activity in Judea and Samaria, serve as a platform for its integration into the institutions of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, and thus further its political goal of taking control of the whole Palestinian system, while consolidating its image as a political movement and legitimate governing entity, in the eyes of both the Palestinians and the international community.

Israeli Deterrence

Since Operation Protective Edge, Hamas has been careful not to provoke Israel in a way that escalates into a broad military operation. Hamas works

to frustrate attempts by recalcitrant terror organizations in the Gaza Strip to fire rockets at Israel. Even in cases where Hamas feels the need to display its deterrence toward Israel, it chooses to do so at relatively low intensity, and in most cases by implicit permission – turning a blind eye to the activities of the organizations, to avoid a heavy Israeli response.

This conduct is backed by declarations from senior Hamas members. For example, in August 2017 Sinwar said that "Hamas is not seeking conflict with Israel," and in December 2017 he announced that "Hamas has no interest in war with Israel and its not rushing towards it. The movement understands very well that there are issues that will be solved through popular resistance or diplomatic efforts."[15] Important confirmation of this claim can be found in an interview Sinwar gave to *al-Jazeera* on May 16, 2018, after a day of violent demonstrations along the Gaza border fence, in which he clarified that Hamas was seeking calm.[16]

Violence Accelerators
The Political Struggle within Hamas
There have always been disagreements between the leaders of the military wing and the political wing of Hamas. Following the end of Operation Protective Edge, the struggle between the two wings intensified, focusing on what was the preferred solution.[17] The political wing preferred closer ties with the Sunni axis (with the emphasis on Turkey-Qatar) and efforts to improve ties with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, while the military wing led the efforts to renew the alliance with Iran and promoted cooperation with the Wilayat Sinai organization.

Even within the military wing, there are well known tensions between Sinwar and Mohammed Deif around the question of leadership.[18] This tension eased somewhat when Sinwar was elected to lead the movement in the Gaza Strip on February 13, 2017. This was the first time that someone from the Hamas military wing was chosen as its political leader in Gaza. Since Sinwar's election, and against the background of the reconciliation process and the harsh situation in Gaza, tensions between Sinwar and senior members of the military wing have resurfaced. Although Sinwar talks of maintaining ties with Iran,

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perhaps as a kind of "insurance policy" if relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia deteriorate, his conduct demonstrates a clear preference for ties with Egypt.

Political Competition between the Organizations in the Gaza Strip

The more extreme resistance organizations in the Gaza Strip, which reject the relatively flexible approach of Hamas, challenge the organization through violent provocations against Israel, hoping to cause an escalation that will damage Hamas and destroy its status and image as a national liberation movement and leader of the armed struggle against Israel.

Thus, in April 2010 a senior member of Islamic Jihad, Abdallah Shami, attacked the Hamas leaders, arguing that they were "praising the resistance on television, but in fact they are persecuting the resistance fighters and torturing them severely. They don't care about anything but their jobs and positions."[19] The pressure applied to Hamas aggravated the tension and conflicts between Hamas and these organizations, while driving Hamas to more extreme positions in some cases, in an effort to respond to the challenge and minimize the damage.

Failure of the Palestinian Reconciliation Process

While the reconciliation process between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority could accelerate the process of political institutionalization, its failure, and even more so, its abandonment, could have the opposite effect – the choice to use violence. Failure of the reconciliation agreement has already affected Hamas and the situation in Gaza, after the chairman of the Palestinian Authority determined to frustrate the efforts for an arrangement between Hamas and Israel mediated by Egypt. He imposed economic sanctions on the Strip, which harm thousands of employees whose wages are paid by the Palestinian Authority and undermine Hamas governance, and this could lead to a wave of protests.

In order to divert attention from the internal problems in the Gaza Strip, Hamas seeks to direct the anger of residents toward Israel. Indeed, since March 30, 2018 Hamas has organized and operated the March of Return venture, with thousands of residents marching to various points along the border fence for a series of violent demonstrations, combined with terror attacks.

Ideological Strictness and the Policy of Resistance

While the political arm has adopted a relatively pragmatic, tolerant approach to Israel – although this is a matter of tactics rather than a strategic change – and prefers to focus on reconstructing the Strip and consolidating its control, the military wing supports a continuation of efforts to build military strength and a war of attrition against Israel, at the expense of reconstruction efforts.[20]

Further evidence of the lack of agreement between the political and military wings can be found in the efforts by the Political Bureau to promote a deal with Israel on the return of Israeli citizens and the bodies of soldiers held by Hamas. These efforts were blocked by the military wing.[21]

Iranian Influence

Iran has helped Hamas since the movement seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. The Iranian grand strategy, which includes consistent anti-Israel policy, suits the Hamas ideology of violent resistance. In spite of the ethnic (Iranian versus Arab) and religious (Shiite versus Sunni) differences, Tehran sees the resistance movements against Israel as a legitimate means of promoting its interests of harming Israel, undermining regional stability, and exporting the revolution and regional anti-Western influence.[22]

The renewed rapprochement between Hamas and Iran, after a long break following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and Hamas's political isolation, is reflected in the growing numbers of Hamas delegations visiting Tehran, public statements by senior Hamas officials on the importance of the Iranian military assistance, and Iranian support in the form of weapons, funding, and training.[23]

Turkish Influence

In addition to Iran's contribution to the increased violence, Turkish influence intensifies the tension between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. This is particularly evident in East Jerusalem, and in Turkey's permitting the development of the military infrastructure in Judea and Samaria, directing military wing activists in Turkey, and encouraging more extreme attitudes toward Israel. In fact, Turkey – for reasons linked to its ambition for regional hegemony and its self-perception as the leader of the political Islam axis in the area – indirectly encourages Hamas to lower the political institutionalization process and to implement a violent resistance policy.

The Humanitarian Situation in Gaza

In recent years the humanitarian situation in Gaza has deteriorated, resulting in poor water quality, acute shortages of electricity, a collapsing health system, absence of proper sewage facilities, and widespread unemployment and poverty. Consequently, Hamas is the target of harsh criticism from the Palestinian street.

The absence of real expectations for improvement in the humanitarian crisis and the inability of Hamas to provide the Gaza population with a better quality of life are the cause of severe disappointment and despair, which could push Hamas to the use of violence in order to exert pressure on Israel, Egypt, and the international arena to take steps to improve the humanitarian position. This assessment is also supported by security figures in Israel[24] and by others.[25]

The Matrix of Variables

In order to validate this analysis by cross-checking the variables involved and calculating their effect, the two groups of variables were divided into two categories – internal and external. They were also classified by three levels of intensity: high, medium, and low. The assessment of intensity is not derived from a quantitative mathematical model, but from a qualitative description and analysis of the movement's conduct in Gaza over recent years.

The findings of the analysis indicate the existence of four high intensity variables that work to restrain violence, and three high intensity variables that encourage violence. It is also possible to identify two medium intensity pro-violence variables, compared to two medium intensity restraining variables, as well as one low intensity variable encouraging violence and one low intensity variable restraining violence. The opposing vectors, with the emphasis on high intensity variables, help to explain the dual nature of Hamas behavior in the tension between efforts to establish itself as a sovereign government player, and retain the ethos of the armed struggle and use of violence in conditions where the challenge is particularly acute.

Hamas's dual behavior allows it to maintain its status as the governing element in the Gaza Strip, as a proper alternative to the Palestinian Authority and the PLO in the leadership of the national Palestinian struggle; to establish the legitimacy of its rule in the Palestinian street, in the Arab world, and the international community; and to tighten its links with Egypt, which

	Internal Variables	External Variables
Variables that restrain violence	1. Enforcing sovereignty 2. Foreign policy and international legitimacy 3. Maintaining governing control of Gaza Strip	1. Israeli deterrence 2. Egyptian influence 3. Improving the humanitarian situation in Gaza – positive outlook* 4. Palestinian reconciliation process and political integration
Variables that encourage violence	1. Ideological strictness 2. Political struggle within Hamas	1. Political rivalry among organizations in the Gaza Strip 2. Stagnation in the humanitarian situation – negative outlook* 3. Iranian influence 4. Failure of the internal Palestinian reconciliation process 5. Turkish influence

High intensity, medium intensity, low intensity
* Dual variable, dependent on the effect of the horizon and expectations

can help Hamas relieve humanitarian distress – all this while preserving the ethos of violent resistance to Israel.

Hamas must maneuver between the process of establishing itself and continuing the use of violence by suppressing provocations by recalcitrant organizations, while turning a blind eye in certain cases, so that those organizations can "let off steam" and set a price tag for Israel to maintain mutual deterrence. This tactic joins carefully controlled efforts to demonstrate relative restraint in order to avoid escalation, which Hamas sees as a danger to its essential interests.

The pro- and anti-violence variables and their relative intensity exert opposing forces on Hamas. A change in Israeli policy and Egyptian policy toward a security agreement with Hamas as the governing element in the Strip, in return for a civilian agreement to improve the humanitarian and economic situation in Gaza could reinforce the variables that restrain violence and accelerate the process of establishing Hamas as the government of Gaza, and thereby lead to a reduction in violence.

Conclusion

Established as a social-religious movement, Hamas has evolved from a terror organization and violent non-state actor, limited in its capabilities and lacking government responsibility, to a semi-state actor in control of the Gaza Strip and its population, with political and national responsibility like that of a national actor. In this framework Hamas is trying to maneuver between realizing its identity as an ideological resistance movement and establishing itself as a responsible governing entity, using violence of varying degrees of intensity. This conduct confirms the argument in the research literature regarding the continued use of violence by non-state actors during their process of institutionalization.

Hamas's relatively restrained behavior enables the external actors involved, with the emphasis on Israel and Egypt, to weaken the intensity of external variables that encourage violence, such as the influence of Iran and Turkey, and to reinforce the variables that restrain violence, such as improving humanitarian and economic conditions, strengthening the factors that deter Hamas from increasing its military strength, and influencing its process of establishment in a way that improves the security situation, while rehabilitating living standards in Gaza. In terms of the Palestinian system, the significance is the possible weakening of the Palestinian Authority, but since there is little probability of the Palestinian Authority returning to power in the Strip, this would appear to be the least undesirable of all the existing options.

Notes

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