

Hamas: The Agony of Victory

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"Human nature finds it harder to endure a victory than a defeat." Nietzsche's insight on the individual will is pertinent to the situation in which Hamas finds itself following the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections of late January 2006. In the aftermath of the elections, observers of Palestinian politics can ignore neither the strength of Hamas's electoral victory nor the impact of the resulting far-reaching changes to the balance of forces within the Palestinian political system. They also cannot ignore the intense reactions to the election results expressed on the regional and international levels.

Until the elections, the institutions of both the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) were controlled by the Fatah movement. Within the PA, this meant control of the presidency, the government, the security forces, and the parliament. In this way, the "triangle of rule," comprising the presidency, the legislative branch, and the executive authority lay in the hands of the nationalist camp. Hamas's rise to power fundamentally changed this situation. Hamas won 74 out of the legislative council's 132 seats, capturing a majority and becoming the dominant force in the new Palestinian government.

Hamas's electoral victory over the Fatah-led nationalist camp is not merely an act of transfer of power

but a mandate for regime change. Regime change, unlike transfer of power, entails a revision of the fundamental principles of government and the overall goals of the Palestinian Authority – a redefinition of the PA's regional and international policies, as well as its basic parameters and red lines concerning its approach to Israel. Given Hamas's Islamic doctrine, regime change harbors religious significance for the Palestinian national agenda. The Islam-driven worldview spawns several principles, first of all, a commitment to territorial maximalism with an eye towards the establishment of an Islamic state throughout all of Mandatory Palestine. This vision replaces the political realism that accepts the framework of a two-state solution, Israel alongside a Palestinian state. A second principle is Islamic social activism, instead of a civil-minded, state-wide program; and a third principle is the perception

of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a predetermined clash of destinies, instead of a conflict over boundaries.

Intra-Palestinian Friction

Despite their electoral success, however, there are indications that the victors are having difficulty translating their achievements into a comprehensive transformation of the Palestinian political reality. The outcome of the election has created a Palestinian political arena rife with intra- and inter-organizational contradictions, personal conflicts, and inter-generational rifts. These tensions have impacted on the relationships between Hamas and the Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen)-led Palestinian presidency and between Hamas and Fatah, as well as on internal dynamics within Hamas itself.

Tensions have emerged between Hamas and the Palestinian presidency over the constitutional inter-

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pretation of the division of power, realms of governmental responsibility, and control of the Palestinian Authority institutions. According to the Palestinian constitution, the chairman holds powers in a variety of areas, the most important of which

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are: supreme command of the armed forces; appointment and dismissal of the prime minister; approval of all legislation passed by the legislative council; and the return of legislation to the legislative council for additional discussion. Yet while the chairman functions as the commander in chief of the armed forces, he does not have the power to appoint the chiefs of the security forces, as this power is held by the government. Similarly, although the chairman is empowered to convene and disband the government as a whole, he is not able to appoint and dismiss individual ministers. The clear interest of Abu Mazen and his colleagues in ensuring the dominance of the presidency as the leading force in the Palestinian political system in the face of a Hamas-controlled government has resulted in initiatives such as the outgoing legislative council's efforts to establish a high constitutional court and enact a Communications Supervision Law. These two efforts are aimed at

providing Abu Mazen with broad legal powers to eclipse the powers held by the Hamas-led government.

Hamas's victory in the PLC elections has called into question the future control of the Palestinian security forces, until now controlled by Fatah. Disagreements between Fatah and Hamas within the context of the new political reality have increased Fatah members' sense of personal and institutional uncertainty. This has encouraged Fatah activists to preserve the military, organizational, and financial capabilities necessary for ensuring the future existence and independent functioning of their movement. Moreover, the fragile relations between Hamas and Fatah and between Hamas and Abu Mazen have been further complicated by rivalries already existing within Fatah itself. Over the years, tensions within Fatah have developed between the movement's old guard, associated with the founding generation; the intermediate generation, which emerged during the Palestinian uprising (intifada) of 1987-1993; and the younger generation, associated with Tanzim, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and the Popular Resistance Committees, products of the second Palestinian uprising, known as the al-Aqsa intifada, which erupted in September 2000.

Hamas Organizational Discord

Tensions and disagreements surrounding the shaping of the Palestinian agenda and control of the Pales-

tinian Authority's centers of power have also surfaced within Hamas. Friction has emerged between the "outside" leadership of the movement, led by Hamas political leader Khaled Masha'al and his deputy Dr. Musa Abu Marzuk on the one hand, and the movement's "inside" leadership, whose most prominent representatives are Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud al-Zahar. The al-Aqsa intifada accentuated the differences between these two camps. The high price in human and economic resources that the Palestinian population had to pay, coupled with Israel's assassination of the senior leaders of the movement's domestic leadership, softened the local Hamas worldview and moderated its positions regarding the PA's relations with Israel. It is here one should look in order to understand why it was Hamas's internal leadership, not its external

Since its establishment, Hamas has espoused a strategy combining an ideological platform and an agenda that takes into account immediate community interests.

leadership, that supported the cease-fire agreement (*hudna*) and thereafter the "calm" (*tahdiya*). The movement's inside leadership also subsequently mobilized the support of the outside for participation in the Palestinian

local and parliamentary elections. Its prominence during the al-Aqsa intifada, the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005, and the PLC elections of 2006 have all augmented the status of the Hamas inside leadership and have stressed its relative importance in relation to the movement's outside leadership. This explains why Hamas's outside leaders have attempted to minimize the presence and visibility of internal Hamas leaders within the new

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Palestinian government. Instead of a Hamas government led by the movement's senior internal leaders, the external leadership has preferred the establishment of a government of technocrats, including independent personalities. This is meant to serve the interests of the movement's outside leaders by ensuring their own central role concerning issues of ideological and strategic importance, as well as their continued influence over shaping the movement's future policy. For its part, the internal leadership has preferred as broad a government as possible, ex-

tending to Fatah and all other parties that won seats in the parliament. This includes the parties of the left that received more than 5 percent of the vote; the independents, which earned close to 4 percent; and the more liberal parties (such as the Third Way party) identified with the nationalist stream, which likewise gained nearly 4 percent of the vote.

With regard to key political issues related to recognizing Israel and complying with agreements between the PLO and Israel, the divisions between "external" and "internal" have been blurred, especially since the electoral victory. Masha'al and al-Zahar have supported more uncompromising positions than Abu Marzuk and Haniyeh. An interview with al-Zahar on al-Arabiya television on March 18, 2006 reflected the hard-line opinion: "If Hamas joins the government, it will do so on the basis of its economic, social, and political program, which does not cede even one centimeter and which grants a long-term ceasefire, leaving the conflict unresolved, even though we will not be talking about a military struggle.

The difference between Hamas and others is that Hamas is based on a religious foundation, which regards Palestine as Islamic land. If the present generation lacks the capability to carry this out, it does not mean that [this ideal] needs to be relinquished." A more conciliatory tone could be detected in the words of Abu Marzuk in an interview published in the *Washington Post* on January 31, 2006. Abu Marzuk suggested that Hamas might be able to co-exist with Israel, on the condition that Israel surrender its aspirations of domination and that the United States agree to play the role of a fair and impartial mediator between the two parties.

Platform vs. Agenda

This organizational friction has prompted Hamas to adopt strategies of action aimed at bridging the gap between the drive to translate the movement's ideology into changes in the essence of the existing regime and recognition of the fact that the electoral victory must be treated as a transition of power. In contrast to regime change, transition of power requires that all actions that intend to initiate change must take careful account of the principles underlying the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and must respect the political and financial obligations that the Authority has incurred.

It thus appears that despite Hamas's impressive electoral performance, the elections



Ismail Haniyeh (center) at press conference with Hamas associates

have intensified ideological differences, sharpened political dilemmas, and highlighted internal organizational tensions and disagreements among (and within) various factions regarding governmental structure and modes of governance. This may explain why the Hamas leadership was dedicated to practices and rhetoric aimed at overcoming the inconsistencies between the commitment to its territorial vision of all of Palestine and its communal concerns emphasizing the need for political pragmatism. While Hamas has ruled out formal recognition of Israel, which could help in reaching a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, leaders have declared a willingness to achieve a long-term ceasefire that would imply recognition of Israel as "an existing reality" (Masha'al) or "an

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established fact" (al-Zahar), in return for an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders.

The tension-laden reality in which Hamas has found itself in the wake of the January 2006 elections began to emerge during the first intifada, which erupted in December 1987, and escalated during the second intifada. Since its official establishment

in the summer of 1988, Hamas has espoused a strategy of action combining an ideological platform that expresses a long-term vision and requires continuous struggle for the establishment of an Islamic state in all of Palestine, and an agenda that takes into account immediate community interests and requires short-term recognition of a temporary arrangement in which a Palestinian state exists in the West Bank and Gaza Strip alone. As an Islamic movement that boasts an alternative outlook, Hamas cannot shake off its radical image. However, as a social movement, Hamas must take into account the needs and priorities dictated by everyday life that require coming to terms with the reality of political arrangements. Hamas's ideology and symbolic world call for uncompromising activism and focus on maximalist aims. In practice, however, the movement has adopted a policy that is more pragmatic than dogmatic and more reformist than revolutionary.

Hamas's policy of maintaining a balance between the poetry of its ideology and the prose of Sisyphean reality is what has enabled its leadership to develop modes of flexibility without losing political credibility. This was as true with Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and 'Abd al-Aziz Rantisi as it has been for Khaled Masha'al, Musa Abu Marzuk, Ismail Haniyeh, and Mahmoud al-Zahar. This strategy has facilitated Hamas's acceptance of ceasefires and periods of calm in its armed struggle against Israel. Such policy options have made it easier for

Hamas leaders to vacillate between the unrealistic position of being fully obligated to their declared doctrine and the visible openness to political flexibility, and then revert to their original intransigence.

Israeli and American positions have made it difficult for Hamas to continue employing its yes/no strategy.

Hamas leaders' frequent post-election statements relating to critical issues such as the recognition of Israel, commitment to a two-state solution, respect for Palestinian agreements that have already been made with Israel, and disavowal of terrorism do in fact indicate a quest for a "hybrid" or "mixed strategy." The aim of this strategy is to legitimize the existence of a governmental framework that would necessarily result in unresolved contradictions. In this context, Hamas has favored reliance on political strategies that have not been aimed at resolving key political issues. The more the leadership succeeds in mobilizing internal legitimacy and external support for initiatives that require neither the recognition of Israel nor the full acceptance of the Oslo accords – nor the complete rejection of either – the greater their chances will be of skirting decisions on fundamental issues.

The changes in Hamas's internal and external surroundings that resulted from the January 2006 elec-

tions, as well as increasing regional and international interest in developments within the Palestinian Authority, raise questions regarding the extent to which Hamas as a ruling party will be able to navigate its political path effectively by making repeated use of "mixed strategies" that combine ideological heresy and piety.

The Deterministic Approach

The assassination of Sheikh Yassin in March 2004 left Hamas with a leadership vacuum. Since Yassin's death, Hamas has suffered from the lack of a high-stature charismatic leader capable of serving as a source of ideological inspiration, a political authority, and a figure to whom strategic initiatives can be addressed. Hamas must also cope with the absence of a hierarchical decision-making structure. With regard to major issues such as relations with the Palestinian Authority, participation in the Palestinian elections, and acceptance of ceasefires and periods of calm with Israel, Hamas has employed a system of consultation and opinion-sharing based on committees representing a spectrum of figures and groups. This procedure served to create a broad basis of consensus and has strengthened internal unity. It also minimized the potential for insolvable disagreements and conflicts of interest that could result in the dissent of some groups and their rejection of decisions. However, the existence of a decentralized, splintered, and slow moving organizational framework also exacts high costs. In the context

of Hamas as a ruling party, it is immensely difficult for a voluntary decision-making process to replace the governmental structure necessary for making decisions on key domestic, regional, and international issues.

The complex relationship between Hamas and Fatah that has resulted from the elections has also raised questions regarding the suitability and relevance of Hamas's decision-making strategies within the new political reality. As a result of the elections, Fatah, which lost its status as a leading force in the political life of the Palestinian people, has found itself in the midst of an internal crisis and a struggle for its survival. This development has intensified Fatah's struggle with Hamas over sources of power within the Palestinian regime. In this context, the assessment of Fa-

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tah activists is that Hamas will refrain from any far-reaching deviation from its mixed yes/no strategy. This is because divergence from this strategic approach on the part of Hamas is likely to result in an internal crisis and deterioration of relations to the point of a serious rift. According to this approach, Hamas will prefer not to bow to external pressure and yield on its political positions past a point

of no return. Hamas's unwillingness to adjust its decision-making process to the new political reality will hasten its fall, thus opening a new window of opportunity for Fatah to regain the reigns of leadership.

Israeli and American positions have also made it difficult for Hamas to continue employing its yes/no strategy, as the maximum political concessions that Hamas is willing to make as a ruling party in order to gain American and Israeli recognition and cooperation are short of these two countries' minimum demands. Under these circumstances, one may argue that relations between Israel and the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority will deteriorate into a renewal of an armed confrontation and the return of a bloody intifada. Such a development might bring about an end to the Hamas regime. At the same time, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip could become an attraction for regional and international radical Islamic extremists, who will work against Israel and pro-Western Arab regimes such as Jordan and Egypt. If this were to happen, the Palestinian territories – in contravention of their better interests – would become a second Iraq, and Hamas would be remembered merely as an ephemeral local episode.

The Network Array of Opinions

The turn of events described above is certainly not etched in stone. The assessment that Hamas's yes/no strategy will push parties within the Palestinian political system into a hope-

less, zero-sum dynamic of conflict is based on a static and deterministic view of the Palestinian "other." According to this approach, Hamas is an object with predetermined strategic priorities, firm political positions, and ultimate anti-Israeli goals. Its behavior, therefore, depends neither on Israeli positions nor on Israel's relations with Hamas.

To a large extent, this deterministic approach towards Hamas has been inspired by a thought process in which Israel's strategic aims and political and security priorities determine how the Palestinian "other" views the situation, independent of the complex reality in which Hamas is now functioning. It therefore neglects the need to follow continually the logic, spectrum of opinion, nuances, contradictions, and tensions reflected in Hamas public statements and positions. This approach perceives Hamas as an uncompromising body that is focused rigidly on ultimate goals and is willing to bring its politics to absurd extremes to achieve them. It is what breathes life into the perception that future Hamas actions are premeditated and thus predetermined, stemming purely from promulgated movement ideology. Therefore, entertaining the prospect of moderation in Hamas's positions is futile, and talk of political compromise is aimed solely at dulling the senses. According to this logic, Hamas will be driven to distance its vision from the realm of strategic constraints and beyond the spectrum of political substance.

A more realistic thesis will view

Hamas as a movement that is operating within an ever changing historical context, aware of practical constraints, sensitive to its surroundings, attentive to circumstances, and subject to considerations of cost effectiveness. According to this approach, it is likely that internal, regional, and international pressures will lead Hamas to demonstrate a thought process that is more network-oriented than goal-focused, to display more political pragmatism than religious extremism, and to distance itself from its radical image in order to facilitate a strategy of intellectual openness.


For Israel, formulating clear priorities requires perceptual flexibility alongside strategic openness and operative determination.

Above all else, what is perceived in the deterministic approach as an inviolable obstacle that hastens the return of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute to a state of predestined confrontation may be perceived according to the network perception and multi-level approach as a clash of interests over borders and a final status agreement.

The likelihood that certain changes will take place in regional and international priorities in the wake of Hamas's electoral victory and its transformation into a ruling party

means that the network perspective and multi-level approach might possibly overshadow the deterministic approach. From a regional and international perspective, the Israeli-Palestinian issue has become too sensitive and too volatile to be left in the hands of the two parties alone. The Jordanians, Egyptians, and Saudis fear that the economic deterioration of the Palestinian Authority and the renewal of military confrontation between the PA and Israel will bring about Islamic radicalization that could threaten their own political stability. In their eyes, this has made their intervention in the issue crucially important. This is also true of the United States and the European Union, which fear the deterioration of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute into a conflict between Islam and the West. This, they are concerned, would play into the hands of Iran and the global jihad.

Under these circumstances regional and international actors will act to minimize the disadvantages of the current situation rather than bring about a radical change. Far-reaching steps taken by Israel against Hamas, such as financial strangulation and diplomatic isolation, are likely to be perceived by regional and international actors as a boomerang that, in the spirit of Baudelaire, transforms the hangman into the accused and the injury into a dagger. One may assume that such kinds of Israeli steps might lead to harsh world-wide reservations that will develop into broad opposition. In this light, it is quite certain that regional actors and the



international community will invest great efforts in reviving the existing political initiatives and possibly even propose new ones, in order to bridge the gap between Israel's minimum demands and the maximum concessions that the new Palestinian regime will be willing to make. It can also be assumed that in light of the changes that have taken place in the Palestinian arena, such initiatives will redefine regional and international priorities according to the interests of the relevant actors. According to this reassessment, it is possible that regional and international forces will mold joint principles to guide political activity built on an agreed upon agenda. This agenda will distinguish between the following three types of issues:

- Essential issues with immediate and critical strategic implications for the actors' main interests on local, regional, and international levels

- Important issues with immediate strategic implications for the parties' interests that will only be of critical importance at a later date

- Core issues that constitute the heart of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, which require extended negotiations but do not present immediate and critical implications in the short term.

Assuming that the "three dimensional framework" will serve as a common denominator in shaping the behavior of the external actors, renewal of the dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians will depend more on regional and international arrangements in which Israel and the Palestinians talk to each another through a third party. The Arab peace plan advanced by the Beirut summit in the summer of 2000, which was originally a Saudi initiative, and the combination of this plan with the American roadmap, are the types of initiatives that will characterize the new political era in which Hamas is the Palestinian partner.

From Israel's perspective, the transformation of the conflict from the bilateral to the multilateral arena and acknowledging a three-dimensional perspective require a reassessment of

Israel's priorities and strategies of action for the foreseeable future. Since the prevalent Israeli wisdom is dominated by certain premises on who the Palestinians are and what they really want more than by terms of questioning and thought-provoking challenges to common ways of thinking, Israeli policies should be guided by three questions:

- What does Israel hope to gain in the short run?

- What does Israel expect in the foreseeable future?

- What does Israel hope to achieve in the long term?

Formulating clear priorities requires perceptual flexibility alongside strategic openness and operative determination. In a reality of insufficient reasonable Israeli awareness of the Palestinian "other," such an approach will at first be perceived as inconceivable. Thus it might be hard-pressed to thwart the eruption of a renewed bloody intifada. Then it will face rough opposition. In the end, however, it might turn into inevitable reality.