

The Next Gaza: The Gaza Strip between a Dead End and a Glimmer of Hope

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In recent years the Gaza Strip has undergone internal processes that in two main aspects reinforce the dead end that currently characterizes the arena. The first is the ongoing failure of the Hamas government to create a reality that extricates the Gaza population from the confines of poverty and neglect that they have long endured (even though Hamas is able to deter any local resistance). The second is the emergence of a new generation that is enraged, frustrated, and stripped of any personal and collective horizon and strives to influence public sentiments in Gaza with regard to opinions about the conflict with Israel, compared to those of previous generations. As a result, in the future the Hamas government is liable to be perceived by the new generation as a regime that does not understand or speak its language and is not committed to provide for its needs. This in turn may well affect the stability of this region. To be sure, this generation does not yet operate as a unified body, and to date there are only inklings of theoretical organization. Nevertheless, one can argue that the Hamas movement is no longer the exclusive shaper of the dominant mindset in

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Gaza, and in a new, symbiotic relationship with the new generation is now increasingly sharing the Gaza ideological stage.¹

The new generation in Gaza comprises a relatively young population (ages 15-30) that has no genuine knowledge of Israel, and whose familiarity with “its neighbors, the Jews” is based mainly on the rounds of fighting with the IDF that erupt every few years. In theory, the greater the cognitive divide between Gaza and Tel Aviv, the lesser the basic dependence of Gazan residents on Israel; however, reality dictates otherwise. The use of media and social networks, the ability to influence international bodies, and the exposure to the outside world all create a mindset among the new generation that blames primarily Israel for the reality in Gaza, and even more than the past believes that Israel is responsible for the local infrastructure and poor means of subsistence. Consequently, Gaza and Israel now seem like Siamese twins whose heads were separated, but are incapable of disconnecting from each other. Moreover, the alienation and hatred continue to fester, mainly because the acquaintance between the parties and the points of interaction are steadily diminishing.

This article discusses the deteriorating reality in the Gaza Strip, not only in relation to poverty and unemployment, but also in terms of politics and mindset. It focuses on both the difficulties and failures that characterize the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, and profiles the new generation in Gaza and its growing expectations from the government. The article presents less familiar aspects of the power centers in the region, and examines their potential ramifications for the future of the Gaza Strip. The article concludes with proposals for possible courses of action to change the current reality in the Gaza Strip and spark a glimmer of hope among the local population.

The Hamas Government in the Gaza Strip: Status Report

Since its violent takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, after nearly twenty years of the movement operating clandestinely and as an opposition movement to the existing government (whether Israel or the Palestinian Authority), Hamas has gained experience in governance. The change in the modus operandi gave Hamas unprecedented power and standing, and the movement developed an appetite for governing and establishing itself as the leader of the Palestinian arena. However, this new standing also imposed a series of restrictions and constraints on the movement unknown to it in the past, primarily the need to attend to the needs of the general public,

including promoting ideas of resistance and jihad, given public sentiments and the population's capacity to "endure" (which received fierce expression during Operation Protective Edge, the most intense military campaign in recent decades that the Palestinian arena in general, and the Gaza Strip in particular, experienced).

Notwithstanding its becoming the ruler in Gaza, Hamas did not completely shed its previous identity as a militant opposition movement whose key operating engine is the idea of resistance. In fact, over the last decade, Hamas established itself as a hybrid entity that vacillates between being a government and a movement. Although it developed official civilian and security governance systems and established its domestic and foreign image as the ruler in Gaza, it continued in tandem to dominate the network of resistance movements that exist outside of the governmental purview. In this context, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, and the movement's political and civilian wings were highly visible. These wings continued to operate with strong links between them, for the most part "behind the scenes" – mainly between the military wing and the internal security forces, and between the movement's institutions and the civilian government ministries.²

At the same time, the Gaza Strip population accepted the Hamas government favorably and almost naturally, at least at the initial stage, as a movement that emerged from within the society that continued to carry out extensive civil activities for the sake of the public and project a grass-roots image. The population perceived this government as different from Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, which over the years were regularly charged with alienation and corruption. However, over time, it appears that Hamas has had to struggle to maintain its image and its traditional support strongholds, and after a decade in power shows a rather meager list of achievements: Gaza suffered three extremely violent military operations, which occurred due to Hamas's desire to maintain its room to maneuver militarily against Israel; the situation of Gaza's population deteriorated dramatically compared to the period prior to 2007, particularly in light of the restrictions that Israel imposed on the Gaza Strip (in terms of traffic to and from the region, and in terms of economic activity); and Hamas itself has experienced acute strategic distress in recent years, due to its loss of support from the crumbling resistance camp.³

Yet despite the persistent distress in Gaza and the growing alienation between the Gazan public and the Hamas government, it appears that

Hamas continues to maintain its dominant position in Gaza. Indeed, there is currently no evident internal threat to the Hamas government, and in fact, the public has demonstrated its reluctance to take action against the movement, mainly due to its fear of violent retaliation. At the same time, other factions are perceived as having limited power, compared to that of Hamas. These include Islamic Jihad, Fatah and representatives of the Palestinian Authority, the Salafist faction comprising a number of “recalcitrant” organizations, and local politically unaffiliated leaders. In the current situation, sources both inside and outside the Palestinian arena tend to define the Hamas government as the lesser of two evils and as preferable to governmental chaos or the rise of factions that are even more extremist than Hamas – with the experiences of Iraq and Syria serving as highly visible warning signs.⁴

Consequently, the principal challenge threatening the Hamas government today is on the socio-cognitive level, which is highly influenced by the demographic factor. This is where the new generation comes in, which differs in many ways from the previous generation and arouses concern among government sources throughout the Palestinian arena. This is a frustrated generation. Many of the young people who acquired an education are hard pressed to find suitable employment, improve their standard of living, or identify any personal and collective horizon. This is a generation that is exposed to social networks, is aware of Western lifestyles, and wants to adopt these lifestyles too, and therefore, this generation also defies the sources of authority and is wont to display skepticism toward traditional ideology and national goals.

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The Palestinian Authority has already gained first hand experience of protests by the new generation of Palestinians in several waves of violence in recent years in the West Bank.⁵ Hamas has not yet experienced a similar threat in the Gaza Strip, mainly because of the public’s intense fear of the government – including among the youth. Nevertheless, it appears that Hamas understands that this is just a matter of time, and given recent precedents in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring, a “version of Bouazizi”

is liable to emerge in the Gaza Strip, which might ignite the pent-up rage of thousands of young people in a spontaneous protest that could be directed against the Hamas movement, as it is the governing body in Gaza.⁶

The New Generation in the Gaza Strip as a Government Alternative

The new generation in the Gaza Strip comprises a large group of young people who are just now coming into their own. This generation constitutes a demographic power and is considered relatively educated compared to the previous generations, but also lacks any personal and collective horizon for the foreseeable future. As a result, the new generation feels trapped in a poor and neglected society and is estranged from the power centers in its environment.⁷ This claim is substantiated in table 1.

Table 1. Gaza Strip Educational and Employment Data⁸

	Gaza Strip: Current Statistics	Implications for the New Generation in Gaza
Education	About 92,000 residents have a college education (less than 5 % of the Gazan population).	About 40,000 of the college-educated in Gaza are between the ages of 20-30 (15% of this entire population).
Unemployment	The unemployment ratio is about 44 % (220,000 unemployed, out of a workforce of about 500,000 people – earning an average wage of 60 NIS per day).	The ratio of college-educated unemployed is 1.5 times higher than among the uneducated or high school educated (mainly because of the difficulty in finding suitable employment).
Jobs	Only about 17% of the potential entrants into the labor market found work during the second half of 2016 (about 3,000 people, out of a population of 17,000).	About 65 % of those employed work at temporary jobs and/ or have no employment contract (it takes an average of about a year and a half to find a job).

At the same time, the new generation in the Gaza Strip reflects the Palestinian arena as a whole, marked by the rage of a conquered people; the ideological ideas adopted from peers in the West Bank; and impressions from the Arab Spring and its aftermath, as well as from additional flare-ups in the Middle East in recent years.

It also appears that this generation is careful not to repeat the mistakes of others and is considering its course of action carefully. Shaul Mishal and

Doron Matza argued in this context that “the Palestinian generation born after the 1993 Oslo Accord echoes the spirit of resistance that characterized the Arab Spring youth and their social, cultural, and socio-economic origins.”⁹ Ido Zelikovitz added that “this is a generation that no longer blindly follows the political leadership and existing political party frameworks. It wants to control its destiny and it wants to see a change in its situation in the here and now.”¹⁰

Examples of the distress and despair among the new generation in the Gaza Strip may also be found in the nightly sagas of young people who attempt to flee to Israel and are arrested by IDF troops along the border. Most of these youths have similar backgrounds: they are in their late twenties; many of them come from the refugee camps in Gaza and drop out of the educational systems at an early age; nearly all report extreme poverty and only occasional contact with their families, who urge them to search for a “different life,” even at the inherent risk of crossing the border fence. These youths have stated that they prefer sitting in prison in Israel – which offers them three meals a day and funding for their families – to unemployment and the miseries of life in Gaza.¹¹

Hamas is aware of the latent dangers in those potential resistance hotspots and of the factors that are liable to threaten its rule over the Gaza Strip in the future. The movement invests considerable resources in the new generation (e.g., in youth camps and summer camps) in order to win them over. Hamas is also trying to channel the young generation’s rage toward Israel and to cast itself as unable to change the situation because of

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Israel’s policies. The movement fans the flames of this allegation and feeds a culture of hatred toward Israel through the school system.¹² As a result, even attempts with Israeli and international support to bring about change and promote normalization in Gaza have been opposed by government authorities in Gaza. It appears that this behavioral pattern is part of the Hamas DNA – which besides being the entity that governs Gaza, continues to demonstrate characteristics of a subversive organization.¹³

However, Hamas’s repeated attempts to deflect and redirect the protests by younger Gazans attest mainly to the latent potential power of this generation. As far as the new generation is concerned, the situation cannot get any worse and they have nothing more to lose, and this reality provides

fertile ground for a deterministic view that divides the world into “good guys and bad guys” and encourages violent confrontation as the basis for bringing about change. One could argue that this is the way that population groups that adopt a militant approach have always behaved, but in the instance of the new generation, it appears that at issue is the potential for a more violent and dangerous reality than ever existed in Gaza.¹⁴

“The Radicalization Track”: The Dead End of the Gaza Strip

With the new generation in the Gaza Strip eager to change its reality, the urgent question is: if change does materialize, what will this change look like? The Hamas government in Gaza has already encountered resistance and threats from all sorts of “recalcitrant organizations”; in most instances, Hamas has deflected them toward convenient targets, and thus also strengthened its control. But this new generation is not another “recalcitrant organization,” and over time, it is likely to constitute a threat to the government and may reshape Gaza according to its vision – with or without Hamas. Much has already been written about the radicalization of the Gaza Strip over time, while from the perspective of the population, not only is their reality not changing, but it is becoming even more harsh and frustrating.¹⁵ Concurrently, there is an evident tendency for Gazans to consider violence as a solution that can lead to a change in their situation, even if there is no guarantee that their quality of life will improve. When there is a lack of support, then anyone who considers himself a victim of this reality believes that all means are legitimate – and the new generation in Gaza indeed sees itself as such.¹⁶

Here one can, with all due caution, propose another perspective on the possibility of a new entity seizing control over the Gaza Strip at the present time, by employing the concept of “the radicalization track” – a consistent process of inciting a change in the public mindset so that it embraces militarism, as a result of feelings of hopelessness (from the perspective of Gazans), tactics that have been used by the forces that have controlled Gaza, and particularly the alternatives that have arisen since 1947. This “radicalization track” raises conundrums and questions about the future and fate of the Gaza Strip since, throughout the years, the alternative to the governing entity (Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Authority) that arose eventually obtained control over Gaza, but did not resolve the problems that it inherited and even exacerbated them. Without delving into the Israeli interest in the identity of the governing entity in the Gaza Strip

in the current reality, the “radicalization track” described here shows us that if something is not done that will bring about a genuine change in the Gazans’ bleak perception of reality, a situation may well arise whereby far more extremist entities, even compared to the Hamas movement, might overthrow the government in Gaza.

Again, the new generation in the Gaza Strip is not yet unified and has not yet aligned itself with an organization that will enable it to constitute a governing alternative (existing movements, like Islamic Jihad, and even the Palestinian Authority, are not currently perceived as capable of overthrowing the government). Nevertheless, most of the past changes in government in Gaza occurred practically without warning – without it being possible to assess either their nature and implications or the identity of the entity that assumed power. The timing of the scenario whereby the new generation bands together or becomes a governing alternative in the Gaza Strip cannot be predicted, and several factors must coalesce to create a substantive threat to the Hamas government. Nevertheless, one can definitely say that this generation has the potential of becoming “the next act” in Gaza.

Conclusion: Glimmer of Hope

While in the current reality the Hamas government is losing strength due to its responsibility for the poverty and unemployment in the Gaza Strip, the new generation is seen to be gaining influence and having the potential to influence the identity of the future governing entity in the Gaza Strip. At least for the time being, this is not good news for the residents of Gaza, and certainly not for the State of Israel. The latent potential danger posed by the new generation derives, inter alia, from the claim that Gaza has been on a “radicalization track” for decades, and that despite the replacements of the governing entity there, no real solutions for the population’s needs have been provided; their situation has become even more bleak; and this has spawned even more radical attitudes among opponents of the government. Thus if nothing is done to alter the “radicalization track,” sooner or later the Gaza Strip is liable to find itself under the control of a more extremist entity that will strive to direct the rage and energies of the new generation and incite them to overturn the government once again.

For the time being, the new generation in Gaza is mainly preoccupied with its need to survive the economic hardships, and is less driven by political interests. This argument is reinforced by the Gordian knot between the civilian-economic situation and the security situation, since the Israeli

view of the Gaza Strip now focuses on the hardships suffered by two million Palestinians living in that congested strip of land, coupled with the understanding that their economic situation has direct, dramatic ramifications on the security situation in the region.¹⁷ Consequently, the more bleak the situation of Gazan residents becomes, the greater the chances of additional rounds of violence in this region in the future.

In light of this, it appears that the types of solutions that are needed at this time in the Gaza Strip must include genuine prospects for the population residing there. This means that a process must be implemented to turn Gaza into a developing environment, with advanced industrial zones, tourist areas, innovative transportation solutions, and infrastructures that will meet the population's needs. Thus despite the strategic and political complexities involved in future development, a process should be designed in the form of a "Marshall Plan" for the Gaza Strip.¹⁸ The plan should include extensive international initiatives and investments that will enable rehabilitation and authentic change in Gaza – in terms of mindset and economics alike – without Hamas being able to oppose or obstruct the plan. Furthermore, such a process should incorporate security and economic arrangements and solutions for additional issues on the agenda, mainly constraining the military growth of the Hamas government and eliminating the stipulation with regard to the return of hostages, MIAs, and casualties of Operation Protective Edge. In other words, it is imperative to create an equation whereby it would not be advantageous for any of the parties involved to oppose the process, and would be expedient for them to welcome it with open arms. Finally, this must all be assessed in light of the recent Palestinian reconciliation agreement, sponsored by Egypt, which on the one hand is improving its relations with Hamas, while on the other hand is trying to put pressure on the Palestinian Authority to restore its influence in the Gaza Strip.

It is true that the party that apparently will benefit, politically and strategically, from significant development in the Gaza Strip is first of all the Hamas government (which is liable to hinder the creation of a new governmental reality in this arena). Parallel to this is the dilemma about the necessity of involving the Palestinian Authority in such a process. This is a fundamental question that must be

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deliberated in the political track, since one of the plausible repercussions is that the Palestinian Authority might make its support conditional upon expanding the process to include those areas of Judea and Samaria that are under its control.

The bottom line is that the process that could transform the Gaza Strip into a developing region is inherently complicated, but not impossible. At the moment, what is mainly missing in order to promote such a plan is the good will of the parties involved, including the Gaza population. At issue is a complex process that may take a long time, and building confidence in such a process requires a degree of patience and consistency by all elements involved. Furthermore, any proposal for changing the current reality in the Gaza Strip will also need to take the new generation into account, both due to its increasing potential power, and because without a solution for the current situation, the young generation is liable to join radical Islamic organizations and adopt a more militant approach, even compared to the Hamas government.

Notes

- 1 Amos Harel, "Gaza is Shouting Hamas," *Haaretz*, November 11, 2015; Adam Hoffman, "Hamas's Triple Challenge," Forum for Regional Thinking, April 25, 2016; and Amira Hass, "A New Palestinian Generation," *Haaretz*, May 17, 2017.
- 2 Yoni Ben-Menahem, "Hamas's Failure in the Gaza Strip," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, January 15, 2017.
- 3 Jacky Hugi, "Against the Backdrop of the Crisis in Gaza, the Severance of Arab Countries' Relations with Qatar is Increasing the Pressure on Hamas," *Haaretz*, June 5, 2017.
- 4 Assaf Orion, "The Next Round in the Gaza Strip: Act Urgently to Avoid It and Prepare for its Outbreak," *INSS Insight* No. 925, May 7, 2017.
- 5 The intention is to the waves of violence that targeted mainly Israeli citizens, but also targets in the Palestinian Authority. See, for example, Kobi Michael, "The Palestinian Terrorism of the Past Year: Causes and Policy Recommendations," *INSS Insight* No. 862, October 14, 2016.
- 6 Mohamed Bouazizi was a Tunisian greengrocer who set himself on fire in December 2010. This act was considered the catalyst for the people's revolution and the fall of the Tunisian government, and also the event that ignited waves of protest in other Arab countries dubbed "the Arab Spring."
- 7 Orit Perlov, "Children of Tunnels, Children of Knives," *INSS Insight* No. 802, March 9, 2016; and Elior Levy, "The Palestinian Youth in the Gaza Strip are Losing Hope," *Ynet*, June 13, 2013.

- 8 The table is based on data published by Hamas in the Gaza Strip and on data of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics from the second half of 2016 and the first half of 2017.
- 9 Shaul Mishal and Doron Matza, "The Palestinian Spring," *Haaretz*, February 4, 2016.
- 10 Ido Zelikovitz, "The Palestinian Young Generation Protests," The Peace NGOs' Forum, June 9, 2016.
- 11 William Booth and Hazem Balousha, "Trapped between Israel and Hamas: Gaza's Wasted Generation is Going Nowhere," *Washington Post*, August 6, 2017.
- 12 Jacky Hugi, "The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories: Hamas is to Blame for the Electricity Crisis in Gaza," *Haaretz*, January 13, 2017.
- 13 Ben-Menahem, "Hamas's Failure in the Gaza Strip."
- 14 Elie Podeh, "There Will be an Explosion in 2017," *Haaretz*, March 6, 2016; and Michael, "The Palestinian Terrorism of the Past Year: Causes and Policy Recommendations."
- 15 Yael Marom, "Thousands of Civilians in Gaza are Protesting: It is Impossible to Live Here," *Local Discourse*, April 9, 2015.
- 16 Avner Falk, "The Psychology of the War in Gaza," *Eretz Aheret* 71 (July 2014); and Perlov, "Children of Tunnels, Children of Knives."
- 17 Yoav (Poli) Mordechai and Michael Milstein, "Six Brigades or Two Million People?" *Maarachot* No. 473, October 2017.
- 18 The example of the Marshall Plan serves to emphasize the magnitude of the investments needed in order to create a real change in the Gaza Strip, and does not purport to compare the situation in Gaza to that of Europe after the Second World War.