

The Hamas and Terror: An Alternative Explanation for the Use of Violence

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Ehud Barak's election as prime minister in May 1999 resulted in expectations that Israel and the Palestinians would accelerate efforts to achieve a permanent agreement. At the same time, some voiced concern that the advancement in the peace process would prompt terrorist attacks similar to those in 1995-1996. Proponents point to the decrease in terrorism between 1996-99 when the peace process made little progress and the attempted bombings in Tiberias and Haifa in September 1999 after Israel and the Palestinian Authority reached another agreement.

But the motivation of Hamas, the largest Palestinian group opposed to reconciliation with Israel, is not necessarily linked to the pace of the peace process. A key factor is Hamas's relationship with the PA and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Palestinian uprising in the late 1980s, the 1993 Oslo Accords, the 1998 Wye River Memorandum and subsequent negotiations on final status are developments that have changed the political-societal context in which Hamas has operated.

The basis of Hamas as a protest movement was established during the Palestinian uprising. During this period, Hamas established its position in Palestinian society and politics, particularly in its relations with the PLO. The Hamas bombing attacks in 1995 and 1996 can be explained as a response to the changes in Palestinian society, particularly the establishment of the PA in 1994.

Therefore, the bombings were not directed to effect change in Israel; rather, they were intended to undermine the PA.

Hamas's military capability depends on its popular support and the degree of cooperation by supporters. The movement's difficulties to launch attacks since 1997 derive from changes in Palestinian society. As the PA continues to strengthen, Hamas's role as a channel for protest has diminished. As the PA enters Hamas's strongholds of social welfare and medical and educational services, Palestinians have given less support to Hamas and the movement's operational ability has declined. Muhi Eddin Sharif, one of the senior members of the military arm, was killed in an explosion in April 1998, attributed to his rivals within the movement. The Awadallah brothers, prominent in Hamas's Izzedin Kassam military wing, were killed by Israeli forces that September. The killings, as well as numerous arrests of Hamas members and the foiling of several terrorist plots – by both Israel and the PA – have led Hamas members to acknowledge that their military capabilities have been reduced. Moreover, the PA has placed restrictions on Hamas's social welfare activities as well as obtaining funds from abroad.

All of these difficulties have resulted in a crisis in Hamas. This crisis raises concern that the peace process could spark a new wave of terrorism. Hamas appears to be split between radicals and pragmatic wings and Israeli security sources have

asserted that the attempts to bomb Haifa and Tiberias in October were "not institutional." In other words, the Hamas leadership did not approve the attacks. The attacks could point to a splinter Hamas group that does not follow the directives of the leadership.

The Intifada Shaping the Rules of the Political Game

Hamas's roots lay in the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in the 1920s, and by the mid-1980s the Gaza leaders in the brotherhood were preaching violence against Israel. Hamas served as an ideological and social alternative to the PLO. Unlike the revolutionary Fatah wing of the PLO, Hamas began as a social movement and focused on educational, medical and religious services. By the end of 1987, when the Palestinian uprising erupted – again largely directed by Hamas – the Islamic organization was ready to launch attacks through its Izzedin Kassam military arm. Hamas became the Islamic alternative to the more secular PLO. Hamas terrorism and its focus on attacking Israeli soldiers and security agents enhanced its image. Unlike the much smaller Islamic Jihad and splinter groups, Hamas did not depend on support from Iran.

Hamas's Islamic orientation, nationalism and support by conservative clerics and business elements turned the movement into an alternative to the PLO. During the late 1980s and early 1990s,

Hamas chalked up victories in elections in labor unions and student organizations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the absence of elections, these results produced a greater impression of Hamas influence than its actual strength in the field. Hamas managed to challenge the view that the PLO was the official representative of the Palestinian people and established the Islamic movement as a serious contender.

Despite their rivalry, Hamas and the PLO have rarely engaged in physical violence. Both sides feared a breakdown that might result in civil war. Instead, the PLO and Hamas launched a dialogue to alleviate tensions. The Palestinian uprising helped shaped the coexistence between the two organizations, which has continued until today. But the Israeli-Palestinian accords and the current negotiations on final status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip have steadily eroded the rules of the game.

Hamas and the Oslo Accords

The PA, created as a result of the Oslo Accords, is unique. The PA has responsibility for the territories under its control, but it is far from being the absolute authority as Israel remains the dominant player in security issues. The result is a decline in PA credibility. Moreover, the absence of a Palestinian tradition of governing has constrained the PA ability to define the role of its opposition.

Still, the PA has avoided striking a fatal blow to either the military or social arms of Hamas. Again, PA restraint stems from

its concern over civil war as much as its failure to provide basic services. Hamas leaders did not want a confrontation, either, and they exploited every opportunity to express their concerns over a civil war. Such a prospect appeared likely in 1994 after PA security forces mowed down Hamas activists after Friday mosque prayers in Gaza, in which 14 people were killed. But cooler heads and Arab pressure prevailed and months later a dialogue was launched in Khartoum between the Fatah faction of the PLO and Hamas.

But the shared concern has not led to any political cooperation. Hamas has refused to join PLO institutions or the PA. The Islamic movement has continued to maintain its network of charities, clinics and schools. This network ensures Hamas's influence in Palestinian society and preserves its positions as an eventual alternative to the PA.

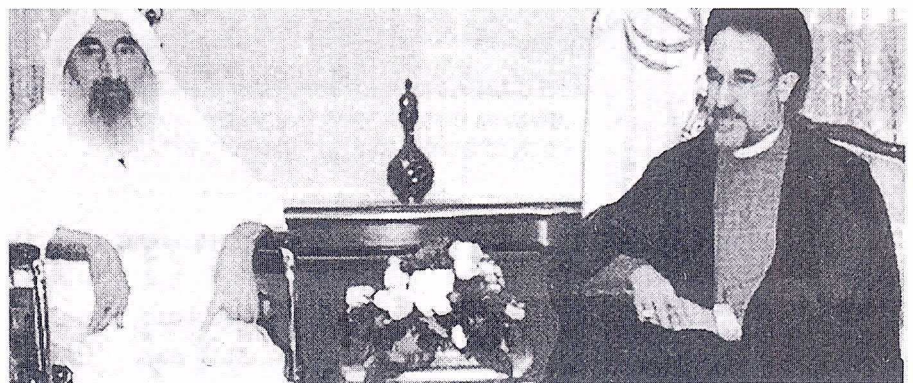
Beginning of a Defensive

Although the PA has tried to woo Hamas, the authority has not demonstrated any intention to share power. Instead, the PA has tried to co-opt Hamas in an attempt to control the

organization. As the PA gained more experience, it has become better equipped to confront its opposition. The PA has been aided by both Israel in their intelligence exchange, and by the United States, which also provides training and equipment.

With all this support, the PA has been transformed into a civil service bureaucracy. With low salaries and poor conditions, Palestinian security forces have increasingly begun to regard themselves as civil servants. The bureaucracy has also served as a source of jobs and patronage for those who cooperate with the PA, thus eroding the power of Hamas. Many former uprising activists were absorbed into the PA security agencies to prevent them from joining the opposition.

Hamas was caught in a no-win situation. Had it remained passive, the Islamic movement would have watched its influence steadily erode. But the 1996 Hamas terrorist campaign against Israel prompted the PA, alarmed that the violence would stop the peace process, to crack down on the opposition. This, in turn, further reduced Hamas's operational capability and diverted the organization's energy away from Israel to the PA. The



result was a cautious Hamas policy that has undermined its ideological commitment and fervor and might eventually affect its terrorist infrastructure.

Hamas's decline in operational capability has also been attributed to a drop in popular support and funding. This affected Hamas social services that helped shield the highly-compartmentalized military wing. The setbacks in Hamas's military wings and the killing and arrest of Izzedin Kassem members reflect the movement's difficulty in maintaining an operational infrastructure. Public opinion polls report a drop in Palestinian support for Hamas. Surveys by the Nablus-based Center for Palestinian Research and Studies (CPRS) conducted in 1998 and the first half of 1999 indicate a decline in support for Hamas: The rate of support for Fatah (PLO) was 39 percent, compared to 12 percent for Hamas and 3 percent for the Popular Front (PFLP). Another 47 percent of those surveyed did not indicate political affiliation according to an April 1999 poll.

Hamas could not even benefit from the suspension of the peace process. In 1998, more Palestinians expressed support for attacks against Israel even as Palestinian support for Hamas decreased. The trend has abated since the Barak election. The aggregate of data does not demonstrate a link between the adoption of a hard line against Israel and support for Hamas. The surveys in June and July 1999 also report an increasing number of Palestinians who are not politically affiliated. This has also hurt Hamas, which relies on the support of its constituents.

Hamas and the Wye River Memorandum

The Wye River Memorandum was another development that forced a review by Hamas of its tactics. The accord brought the PA and the United States closer than ever and introduced the CIA as an element in Palestinian security agencies. This further enhanced the status of the PA both among the Palestinians as well as in the region. The PA immediately reacted with a crackdown on Hamas and even took the unprecedented step of placing Hamas founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin under house arrest. In addition, Hamas militants were arrested and offices, including the newspaper aligned with the movement, were closed. The PA crackdown affected Hamas's power base.

Hamas's response was an attempt to move toward the PA. Yassin and two of his senior aides agreed to attend the PLO Central Committee as formal observers. Yassin and his colleagues participated in the dialogue as part of a Hamas effort to create ties with the PLO. Yassin's decision was criticized by Hamas leaders in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, the first time the sheik was directly criticized from within the movement.

Jordan's closure of Hamas offices in August 1999 can also be attributed to the changes in the movement's fortunes. Immediately after the signing of the Wye River Memorandum, Jordanian authorities informed Hamas leaders based in the kingdom to lower their profile. Jordan also imposed restrictions and activists were arrested. After Barak was elected in Israel, Jordan intensified its restrictions. Four

senior officials, including Mussa Abu Marzuk and Ibrahim Ghoushe were deported from the kingdom. One of the reasons cited for the arrests and the closure of the offices was the growing ties between the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and the Hamas leadership based in Jordan.

At the time, Hamas was beginning to lose control over Izzedin Kassam units in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Hamas representatives in Iran and Syria tried to establish direct channels of communications with the military arm in the territories. More than one incident testifies to the organization's weakened control. At the height of the Wye River talks, a car-bomb was driven toward an Israeli school bus. An Israeli soldier was killed when his jeep blocked the Palestinian car from approaching and the bomb inside the vehicle exploded. Hamas, blamed for the attack, was embarrassed and denied responsibility. Hamas leaders said those abroad ordered and planned the bombing. The PA viewed the incident as violating the rules of the game and launched a drive to contain Hamas in measures stipulated in the Wye River accords.

Still, Hamas continues to record achievements. But their significance remains unclear. Recent wins by Hamas in student and syndicate elections do not demonstrate an increase in strength. Hamas victories in such elections as the student councils of An Najah University, Bir Zeit University and Hebron University or the Engineers Association mean little more than a loss of prestige for the PA. At the same time, Hamas has not been able

to sustain its victories. It lost a major election for the union leadership at the United Nations Refugees Works Association.

If anything, Hamas victories prove that the organization remains a force outside the PA. It is consistent with the findings of studies that indicate support by Palestinian academics of Hamas, a trend that widens the group's appeal from the lower-income strata to that which

comprises the upper portion of Palestinian society.

The changes demonstrate that Hamas has been plunged into crisis. In short, the organization is on the verge of a split between a pragmatic wing, willing to compromise with the Palestinian Authority, and a radical segment supported by Iran and determined to remain faithful to armed struggle. The success of one wing will come at the

expense of the other. So, if the radical wing succeeds in launching terrorist attacks, the subsequent PA crackdown will affect the political and more pragmatic elements.

A split in Hamas will make it more difficult to fight terrorism. Hamas splinter groups might plot any number of terrorist attacks. But the capability of the terrorists will be weakened by the splits in Hamas and the lack of a constituency to support these activities.

Conclusion

The Hamas movement is in danger of being torn apart. Hamas offices in neighboring Jordan have been closed and the movement's headquarters in Syria could be the next target. This might lead elements in Hamas to embark on spectacular terrorist attacks in a campaign that would not be authorized by the organization's leadership.

Currently, the Israeli assessment is that the PA is taking significant steps to foil Hamas attacks. The Israeli government regards the PA as a partner in both counterterrorism efforts and the peace process. Israel believes that any Hamas terrorist campaign will aim to undermine the PA by halting the peace process.

Israel's policy must reflect a new assessment of Hamas. The longtime policy of punishing the PA for Hamas terror

attacks is no longer feasible. Instead, Israel must ensure that the Palestinian security services are making the utmost effort to foil attacks. Israel must insist on full cooperation with the PA on counterterrorism efforts and the exchange of information, but it should not insist on a drive to destroy the Islamic opposition.

Instead, Israel must ensure that the PA provides its political opposition with sufficient room for expression and peaceful activities. Driving Hamas and other political opponents underground will merely ensure that they renew terrorism against Israel in their campaign to discredit the PA. During final status talks, Israel should insist that any Palestinian state established must contain guarantees of democracy, human rights and political expression that will deflect violent opposition against Israel. Israel can no

longer afford to see a totalitarian Palestinian entity.

At the same time, Israeli policy should rethink the ties that have been developed between the PA and U.S. and European intelligence services. Israeli officials have discouraged the involvement of the CIA in Israeli-Palestinian security issues. But as the Palestinian entity become increasingly sovereign, its cooperation in counterterrorism must be based on more than fear of Israeli retaliation and punishment. Instead, Palestinian cooperation must be a cornerstone of a Western aid and development policy. The consequence would be that a halt in PA cooperation with Israel would endanger the Palestinians's diplomatic and economic ties with the West, a prospect that would sober the lion's share of Palestinian critics.

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