

HAMAS AND THE NORMALIZATION PROCESS— MORE OF THE SAME

KOBI MICHAEL*

The normalization process rests on two rationales or conventions related to the legitimacy of the very existence of the State of Israel. The first is recognition of Israel's existence and its acceptance as a state in the region. The second is recognition of the importance of Israel's integration into the region and its essential role in a new regional architecture, within which—and under American auspices—a camp of stable and moderate states would be formed.

The early signs of the normalization process can be identified in the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt (1979), which at the time of signing was the most important Arab state in the region, and later in the Oslo Accords and the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan. In those years, open relations began to emerge between Israel and various Arab and Muslim states, alongside less overt ties with other countries. The Abraham Accords (2020), formulated with Saudi support, laid the foundation for a new regional architecture. Israeli-Saudi normalization was expected to be the crown jewel—solidifying a new regional architecture as a basis for enhanced military cooperation (even if not a formal defense alliance), economic and political collaboration, and a broader framework for addressing the Palestinian issue.

The new regional architecture, backed and led by the United States, whose components include pragmatic Sunni Arab states aligned with the U.S. and the West, alongside the State of Israel, is intended to serve as a counter-axis to the radical “Axis of Resistance” led by Iran and to weaken it. The goal is to

* Prof. Kobi Michael—Senior Research Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies

thwart Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions and the destructive capacities of its proxies.

Hamas is a central component of the radical axis, supported militarily, economically, in intelligence, and politically by Iran—even if not necessarily in the same manner as Iran's other proxies. This is because Hamas is not a militia created by and under the auspices of Iran; its roots are inherently Palestinian. Hamas' alignment with Iran dates back to the early 2000s and was led by Khaled Mashal as head of Hamas's political bureau, which was based in Syria.

Since 2017, Hamas' leadership has developed a multi-front strategy against Israel, aligned with Iran's "ring of fire" logic. In practice, the shared motivation of Iran and Hamas to destroy Israel bridges religious and other differences between them and underpins their military, intelligence, technological, and economic cooperation—including the planning, albeit not down to the exact details or timing, of the October 7, 2023 attack. This was conceived as a strategic move to trigger a multi-front assault on Israel, stretch it to the point of collapse, and derail the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which they view as a strategic threat—one that would severely undermine their ability to advance the vision of Israel's destruction.

Hamas as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has, from its founding, denied the right of the State of Israel to exist, and has declared in its charter the intention to destroy it. Throughout its existence, Hamas has worked to build its capabilities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, while also developing capabilities outside the Palestinian territories. The organization's significant leap in translating its religious and nationalist ideology can be identified in June 2007, when it violently seized control of the Gaza Strip and became its de facto sovereign. Since 2007, Hamas has invested most of its resources in building its military capabilities—above and below ground—and patiently and persistently strengthening its ties with Iran

to draw on its assistance in building a terrorist army and preparing it for a “Day of Reckoning,” which arrived on October 7, 2023.

Alongside its efforts to strengthen ties with Iran, Hamas also successfully brought Qatar into its orbit. In 2012, against the backdrop of the Syrian civil war, Hamas–Iran relations entered a crisis due to Hamas’ support for the rebels against Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Hamas’ external leadership was forced to leave Syria and relocated to Qatar. The relationship between Hamas and Qatar grew stronger after 2017, when Ismail Haniyeh was elected head of Hamas’ political bureau and Yahya Sinwar was elected leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Qatar hosted Hamas’ external leadership on its soil with royal honors, provided it with a security umbrella and freedom of action, gave financial support to Hamas in Gaza, and enlisted the Al Jazeera network—owned and controlled by Qatar—to amplify Hamas’ messaging during periods of calm, and especially in times of war. Qatari support became one of Hamas’ most important strategic assets, providing economic and political backing thanks to Qatar’s immense wealth, its unique regional status, and its proximity to the United States.

Under Erdoğan, Turkey saw itself as a patron of Hamas, seen as a sister movement to the ruling AKP party. The patronage it provided was part of a broader Turkish policy seeking a greater foothold in the Palestinian arena and expanded regional influence as part of its aspiration to establish itself as a regional power. Turkish support manifested in financial aid to Hamas and later in the form of the 2010 Mavi Marmara flotilla to Gaza, which led to a severe crisis in Turkish–Israeli relations. Turkey hosted Hamas operatives on its soil, including some released in the 2011 Shalit deal, and assisted them in establishing a forward command center in Istanbul, including through the provision of Turkish passports and cooperation from Turkish intelligence. Many Palestinians who fled Gaza over the years found refuge and a future in Turkey, which was willing to receive them. Since the October 7 attack, Turkey has intensified its rhetoric against Israel to the point of accusing it

of war crimes and equating it with the Nazi regime. Simultaneously, Turkey has ramped up its humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and is extending broad support to Hamas and its leadership.

The Abraham Accords were a thorn in Hamas' side. In the organization's view, normalization entrenches regional recognition of Israel and, worse, such recognition translates into deeper Israeli integration into the region, which enhances its security and expands its influence. The Hamas leadership viewed the agreements as a betrayal of the Palestinians and a threat to its own standing and influence.

The Palestinian Authority also opposed the Abraham Accords, saw them as a betrayal of the Palestinians, and identified them as a direct continuation of President Trump's "Deal of the Century" (2020), which it rejected with disdain. However, unlike Hamas, the PA limited its response to condemnation and diplomatic protest, whereas Hamas actively and violently opposed them. The October 7 attack is the clearest and most extreme expression of that course of action.

The Biden administration's accelerated effort to promote normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia disturbed Iran and Hamas more than anything else. The administration's efforts and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's willingness to implement normalization were, in their eyes, a tipping point. Saudi Arabia's regional status and its significance in the Islamic world make normalization with Israel a formative strategic event—one that could fundamentally restructure the Middle East and create a counter-axis to the radical Axis of Resistance led by Iran and its proxies.

Hamas' position, expressed in numerous statements by its senior leadership—including a prominent one by Saleh al-Aroui, deputy head of Hamas' political bureau (to Al Mayadeen in August 2023)—focused on preparing for a regional war to liberate Palestine. The implementation of normalization may be the final nail in the coffin of Palestinian resistance and the vision of liberating all of Palestine and destroying Israel. Fears that

normalization would strengthen Israel, allowing it—under Saudi approval—to offer only vague statements about the future of a Palestinian state, along with concerns about the weakening of Iran’s position as a regional power and the diminishing role of Qatar as Hamas’ patron due to its marginalization in the new regional architecture, convinced Hamas leadership that it was time to derail the process. From there, the path to the October 7 attack was short.

Hamas’ opposition to any normalization with Israel is existential for the organization. The expansion of normalization threatens its preservation as a significant political actor in the Palestinian arena and its ability to rebuild militarily and politically after and as a result of the war with Israel in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, in Hamas’ view, normalization may accelerate the resolution of the Palestinian issue as part of the construction of a new regional architecture, in which it is clear that the partners to this new framework prefer the Palestinian Authority and Fatah over Hamas, and will use their considerable influence to thwart Hamas’ recovery and its integration into any future Palestinian leadership. The weakening of Hamas following Israel’s response to the October 7 attack and the possibility that it will lose its grip on Gaza greatly diminish its ability to significantly disrupt the renewal of the normalization process.

In order to foster greater prospects for advancing normalization, Hamas’ governmental and military capabilities must be dismantled, and it must be prevented from regaining sovereignty in the Gaza Strip. Damaging Hamas in this way would also weaken Iran and its proxies, and thereby reduce their potential to harm this vital normalization process.