

Intelligence report: The Hamas collective

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Israeli intelligence chiefs, cabinet ministers and media commentators are puzzled and confused about one of the most important questions of the third Gaza war – who calls the shots in Hamas? An answer to this question is vital to understand when and how a cease-fire and a long term agreement will be put in place.

Listening to some commentators and to official briefings, the impression is that they don't have a clue.

On one occasion, we receive an elaborated and seemingly educated explanation that the ultimate decision maker within the organization is the military wing – the Izzadin Kassam Brigades and its supreme commanders. On another, a senior media commentator or ex-IDF general or a past senior Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) official claims the opposite – that the political leadership makes the strategic decisions.

“The fact of the matter is that nothing substantial has changed in the decision making process of Hamas,” I was told by a former senior Shin Bet official who asked not to be named. “Hamas was and is an organization in which decisions are seriously deliberated and taken by consent and therefore the process can be tiresome and long” especially during times of war when the communication between the leaders in Gaza and abroad as well as within Gaza itself is difficult.

Hamas was cofounded in 1987 in Gaza by the crippled Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a disciple of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement who was killed by an IAF strike in 2004 during the second intifada.

Yet despite being created by a religious scholar and the religious nature of its covenant, it is by and large a sociopolitical organization that is rooted in Palestinian national politics.

Hamas has three major governing bodies. One is the Majlis al-Shura (“consultative

council”) – a religious body that is supposed to make the ultimate strategic decisions and to be responsible for supervising all Hamas activities, **Benedetta Berti**, a research fellow at the **Institute for National Security Studies** who studied Hamas, observes that the Shura members are not named publicly in fear that they would be assassinated by Israel. A few months ago, however, Mahmoud Tuama, a Shura member in charge of economic and financial matters from Saudi Arabia, was arrested and is awaiting military trial.

Subordinated to the Shura Council is the Political Bureau that is currently headed by its chairman Khaled Mashaal who lives in Qatar. One of his deputies, Ismail Haniyeh, known as the “Hamas prime minister” in Gaza. This geographical reality has created the impression that within Hamas there are two wings: Hamas inside and outside of Gaza.

Under the Shura and the Political Bureau is the military wing. The chief and undisputed commander of the military wing is Muhammad Deif who escaped a few Israeli assassination attempts. On July 12, 2006, Israeli aircraft bombed a house in which high-level Hamas leaders were meeting. Deif survived the blast, but suffered severe spinal injuries. After this event, he relegated his responsibilities to Ahmed Jabari who became the acting commander of the military wing. In the meantime, Deif was recuperating and gradually he returned to active duty. Unlike the current war, the November 2012 Operation Cast Lead began with a shock and awe blow. Precise intelligence enabled the IAF to assassinate Jabari.

After the war Deif returned to lead the military wing, but because of his health problems he is assisted by a few military chiefs such as Marwan Issa. But still he is considered to be first among equals. All the military leaders, as well as some political chieftains, knowing that they are wanted by Israel went into hiding underground. On Tuesday, Deif made a rare taped TV appearance in which he reiterated Hamas’s conditions – previously stated by Mashaal – to end the war by lifting of the siege imposed on Gaza by Israel and Egypt.

“Since 2007” added **Berti**, “we can detect some divisions between senior Hamas officials that are expressed publicly in regard to the attitude to Israel. This is interesting if we compare Hamas to other religious groups such as Hezbollah.

Hezbollah would never launder its dirty laundry in public.”

But despite the debates and arguments, serious experts including within Israeli intelligence admit that when it comes to strategic decisions Hamas speaks in one voice. In other words, those who argue that Deif is calling the shots or that Mashaal is the voice of the organization are wrong.

They are also wrong, added the former senior Shin Bet official, if they think that Hamas makes spontaneous emotional or/and capricious decisions.

“No way. It is a very hierarchal, disciplined and calculated organization. It does not shoot from the hip.”

Indeed the decision to launch the rockets against Israel was a calculated risk that the organization took knowing that provoking Israel may lead to a war. Hamas political and military leaders alike in Gaza and abroad unanimously decided that their isolation and economic bankruptcy left them no choice but to launch the war.

“They felt that they have nothing to lose,” said the former Shin Bet official.

It’s true knowing that Israeli intelligence is bugging their phone lines and computers, it is more difficult for the leaders to communicate and deliberate in an organized matter about the decisions that have to be taken. But still, Hamas manages to evaluate the situation and to make rational decisions.

If there are cracks and miscommunications in the organization, it’s among the rank and file mid-level commanders and not the top echelon. There is a growing sense by them that their leaders have abandoned them. For example, a Hamas combatant arrested by the IDF during the current operation told his Shin Bet investigator that he stayed for three weeks in a tunnel living on water and dates without being instructed or visited by his commander.

“We sense some cracks in the determination and steadfastness of the leadership,” a senior Israeli military source told me, adding, “the fighting will have weakened due to the devastation we inflicted on their military structures such as tunnels, rockets caches and [by] killing hundreds of their combatants.”

Because of it being a sociopolitical movement, it does care to a certain degree about the people’s feelings and moods. The leaders are not totally blind to the suffering and misery of the people in Gaza, but probably so far the situation is manageable.

Yet if Hamas decides to agree to a cease-fire, it will be a collective decision with no single leader or wing having the upper hand. And because of this, it will likely be a time consuming process until a final decision one way or another is made.

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