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The End of the *Muqawama*?

Should Hamas and Hizbollah Face Reform or Collapse

Discourse on the Palestinian and Lebanese Social Networks

Orit Perlov

Current discourse on Palestinian and Lebanese social networks indicates that a surprising trend has emerged over the past six months with potential momentous consequences for Israel's security concept and the strategic challenges before it. The violent resistance (*muqawama*) against Israel by Hizbollah and Hamas has lost much of its legitimacy in Lebanese civil society and Palestinian society, respectively.

The two movements were founded, Hizbollah in the early 1980s and Hamas in the late 1980s, as Islamic resistance movements based on the principle of violent struggle as both a vision and a means of freeing Arab lands from the "Zionist occupation." The widespread support, sympathy, and admiration they earned over the past 30 years, domestically and in the Arab world, have dissipated. Since the onset of the "Arab Spring" these two movements have lost much of their political power, the support of Arab public opinion, and most important, their domestic support.

"The Enemy Within"

One of the most evident results of the "Arab Spring" has been the shift in focus by Arab civil societies from outside to inside – from foreign policy to domestic affairs. Civil society in the Arab world is demanding the redressing of injustices. Nationalism and Islamism have been replaced by a demand for democratization, rights, and freedom.

The Gazan and Lebanese civil societies, which have experienced civil wars and violent struggles against Israel, are not eager for revolutions or the collapse of the political and social structures. Moreover, as reflected in the social media discourse, the Palestinians and the Lebanese believe far less than they were wont in violent struggle as a successful and legitimate means of achieving their political, socioeconomic, and national reforms. Trend analysis of the social networks among over one million Palestinians (which represents approximately 35 percent of the Palestinian population) and half a million

Lebanese (15 percent of the population) reveals that for the first time in the past 30 years, the “enemy from within” (Hizbollah and Hamas) is regarded as more dangerous than the “from without” (Israel).

Civil society in Lebanon in large, including parts of the Shiite population), now reflects overwhelming opposition to Hizbollah’s policy in Syria and Lebanon. The announcement by US President Obama in late August that the US intended to launch a military strike against Syria exposed the depth of the domestic Lebanese criticism of Hizbollah. Many Lebanese politicians attacked the organization’s policy, and Hizbollah ally Michel Aoun, a member of the March 8 Coalition, announced that if Hizbollah intervened in Syria during an American attack, he would withdraw from – and thereby dissolve – the coalition. Many TV channels mobilized to exert massive public pressure on Hizbollah not to intervene in the Syrian civil war, and many commentators and interviewees publicly opposed any Hizbollah military action against Israel. The public “turned its back on Hizbollah,” and some even tweeted that “Hizbollah is more dangerous to Lebanon than Israel.” Indeed, Israel has become marginal to the domestic Lebanese discourse, with the three main themes of being the Syrian civil war and its effect on Lebanon; the deteriorating security situation and the domestic ethnic Lebanese struggle; and the domestic effect of Hizbollah’s political weakening.

A similar picture applies to Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The wave of revolutions in the Arab world has brought about a change in domestic Palestinian discourse: from a focus on “Israel, the enemy without” to “Hamas, the enemy from within;” from a discussion of a violent nationalistic struggle to a discussion of rights, freedom, and a better standard of living. Internet discourse reveals that for the first time since the establishment of Hamas, a majority of the Gaza population want to overthrow the Hamas regime. This is the first time that Gazan public opinion has indicated that the public regards Hamas’ policy as a greater threat than Israel to their well being.

The collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has accelerated the process, and made it unmistakably clear that the slogan “Islam is the solution” hasn’t achieved economic prosperity either in Egypt or the Gaza Strip. On the contrary; the situation in Gaza is deteriorating. The Egyptian military has launched an unprecedented attack on Hamas in Gaza, from its leadership to tunnels to weapons smuggling and to the terrorist factions jockeying between the Gaza Strip and Sinai. A “buffer zone” between Egypt and the Gaza Strip was created, and public opinion in Egypt has even begun to demand collective punishment of Gaza: no fuel, gas, or food. The border crossing between Gaza and Egypt is almost completely closed (except for special cases), and Egyptian state media (both social networks and the press) have declared that Hamas is a “terrorist entity” and Gazans

are “terrorists.” They have even stated that Hamas and Gaza currently constitute a danger to the national security of Sinai and Egypt.

“The Enemy Without”

A majority of Lebanese civil society currently regards the civil war in Syria, Syria’s political dissolution, and the consolidation of the radical al-Qaeda-affiliated movements there as the true dangers to Lebanon’s stability and security. For its part, Hizbollah is concerned about the survival of the Assad regime, the weapons smuggling routes from Syria to Lebanon, and the effect of a future settlement in Syria. While Israel is not considered a threat to Hizbollah’s survival at present, a collapse of the current system in Syria and the emergence of a new order that includes Sunni jihadist movements on the Lebanese border jeopardizes the security of Lebanon in general, and that of Hizbollah and the Shiite population in particular. In addition, among Shiites and Hizbollah supporters, *muqawama* has been demoted to third place on the list of priorities, following Hizbollah’s intervention in Syria and efforts to ensure the survival of the Assad regime, and internal Lebanese politics and issues related to the Shiite population and the Sunni jihad movements. When the Lebanese public speaks about the external enemy, it therefore does not refer to Israel. Some Lebanese regard the Assad regime as a threat, while others fear the radical Sunni jihad movements currently operating in Syria.

The vast majority of social discourse in the Gaza Strip currently concerns Egypt and its policy towards Gaza. Many on the networks assert that the policy of the Egyptian military toward Gaza is tougher than that of Israel. The Gazan public objects to “Egyptian abuse” and the harsh sanctions imposed on the Gaza Strip, which are turning it into a prison with lengthy power outages and at times no clean water. Sentences like “Egypt has become Gaza’s jailer” and “They are starving and punishing us” are seen frequently on the social networks. Most of the demonstrations today in the Gaza Strip are staged on the Rafah border, whether they were initiated by Hamas or by Gazans demanding change. And as with Lebanon, Israel has been relegated to fourth place in the public discourse behind a) Egyptian policy toward Gaza; b) the deteriorating economic situation; c) the civilian protest against Hamas; d) Israel. If the “enemy from within” is Hamas, the “external enemy” is now Egypt, not Israel.

Reform vs. Collapse

Current domestic discourse on the two *muqawama* movements on Palestinian and Lebanese social media suggests only two options for the future of these movements: reform and transformation or collapse. Social media users are united in their demand for change, but they have not explained the nature of the necessary changes nor how these changes will be implemented. Hizbollah is the element with the most military power in Lebanon; the same is true for Hamas in Gaza, and therefore no local movement or militia

is capable of challenging or overthrowing either resistance movement. Nevertheless, without international, Arab, or domestic political legitimacy, these two movements lack socioeconomic power, and thus lose their ability to exert political influence in the areas under their control. According to domestic social media discourse, if elections were held today in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, Hizbollah and Hamas would not win. This is the first time that this widespread public sentiment has been sounded, along with the sense that an attempt by these organizations to divert public attention from their weakness through another round of violence against Israel would only hasten their collapse.

Is this the End of the *Muqawama*?

The discourse on the social networks thus points to three conclusions. The first: Ideology is no longer the same driving force as in the past. The Lebanese and Gazan publics no longer believe that the violent struggle is an effective means of realizing their social, economic, and national aspirations. In the dialogue on the social networks, a public demand for a violent struggle against Israel no longer exists. Two, both movements are losing political power. The slogans used by Hamas and Hizbollah, “Islam is the solution” and “ideology built on violent struggle,” are rapidly losing their legitimacy. Finally, the two movements will have to reform their internal and external policies. Otherwise, they are likely to collapse.

