

Organizational Change within Hamas: What Lies Ahead?

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Since its creation as the armed wing of the Gaza-branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1987, the Palestinian Islamic Resistance, better known by its acronym Hamas, has been an organization characterized by high internal dynamism and fast-paced change. Indeed, over the nearly three decades of its existence, Hamas has experienced a series of substantive, qualitative changes. At the military level, the organization evolved from a relatively unsophisticated violent faction that relied on stabbings of individual Israelis to a well-trained and orderly armed group capable of deadly suicide bombings and rocket fire deep into Israel. Furthermore, during Operation Cast Lead and even more recently in the course of Operation Protective Edge, Hamas demonstrated its transformation into a hybrid actor with high combat skills capable of engaging its enemy through both classic guerrilla tactics such as ambushes, IEDs, and suicide missions, as well as conventional standoff tactics to target and kill Israeli soldiers. Hamas' military evolution and reliance on hybrid warfare has also been mirrored by an even more profound social and political transformation, as it moved from the margins to the center of the Palestinian political stage while administering a sophisticated social welfare network.

Not surprisingly, over the years Hamas has evolved significantly as an organization. In its early years the group was centralized, cohesive, and overseen by one of its historic founders, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. It operated through district-based units centered in local mosques primarily in Gaza, and it lacked any type of strict internal institutions. Then, following Yassin's arrest in 1989 and increased external pressure from Israel, Hamas opted for a more decentralized, specialized, and dispersed structure and geographical expansion. Since then, the group's activities and its leadership have been

both geographically dispersed and compartmentalized, with Hamas' centers of power divided between the group's diaspora-based Political Bureau, the political leadership in Gaza, and the military commanders of the Qassam Brigades (with the West Bank leadership traditionally playing a secondary role). Over the years – and especially since 2007– the group's center of organizational power has vacillated between Gaza and the diaspora.

Moreover, since 2007 the group has weathered especially rapid and potentially disruptive internal changes. First, Hamas' status and organizational strategy underwent a major transformation following the group's victory in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections. In 2007, after a failed attempt at a unity government with its historical political foe Fatah, and witnessing both growing international pressure and deteriorating relations with Fatah and the PA, Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, quickly becoming its sole and uncontested ruler. This move created a political split between Gaza and the PA-ruled West Bank.

Between 2007 and 2013, Hamas invested in consolidating its control over the Strip, for example by taking over and reforming the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government in Gaza and by creating an extensive security sector completely independent of the PA. Meanwhile the group managed to keep the economy afloat, despite international isolation and biting Israeli and international economic restrictions. Upon becoming the *de facto* government in Gaza, the organization experienced increasing tensions between the needs of Hamas as the representative of the “resistance” – calling for sustained confrontation against Israel – and the requirements of Hamas as a “ruler,” which pressured the group to take a more risk-averse position and focus on internal power consolidation rather than external war. Between 2007 and 2013, the interaction between these two competing needs resulted in a series of violent interactions between Israel and Hamas, followed by times of relative quiet. Within Hamas, the at times diverging strategies of government and armed struggle led to increased organizational tensions between the group's political, military, and external leaders who often disagreed not only on the question of how and when to conduct armed attacks but also on the thorny question of reconciliation with Fatah.

Hamas' political landscape shifted again in the summer of 2013. Following the ousting of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi, Hamas found itself in an increasingly complex position, as the loss of the group's main regional political patron, combined with the new

Egyptian authorities' efforts to further isolate Gaza and Hamas economically, resulted in a deep political and financial crisis. This predicament affected Hamas' capability to keep Gaza and its economy afloat, continue to rule as the effective authority, and meet its financial obligations as the de facto government, including salary payments for the roughly 40,000 employees on its payroll. This loss of control sheds light on why, in early summer of 2014, Hamas finally decided to overcome the post-2007 rift with the PA and Fatah and agree to the creation a Palestinian unity government of technocrats.

Since the creation of the unity government, Hamas' prospective loss of control in Gaza, together with the urgency of the financial crisis (with the much expected PA economic relief and payment of Hamas salaries failing to materialize) heightened internal tensions within the organization. In addition, the group was propelled to attempt to project and reestablish its role as a Palestinian national group, focusing its attention both on Gaza as well as on the West Bank. In this context, the situation following the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank – which was immediately attributed to Hamas' military wing – further complicated the organization's predicament, as Israel moved in the weeks following the abduction to target both Hamas operatives and infrastructure in the West Bank. The Israeli operations in the West Bank, combined with Hamas' internal debate over resuming attacks against Israel, led to a new barrage of rockets launched against Israel, prompting yet another round of hostilities.

Hamas' goals in the 2014 war, which became apparent immediately, included restoring the organization's reputation and strength with respect to Israel as well as in the Palestinian political arena, and – just as importantly – keeping internal conflict at bay. Militarily, Hamas wanted to restore its image as the Islamic resistance and project strength. This attitude explains why the group invested in attempts to infiltrate Israel, capture soldiers, and employ higher risk standoff tactics to kill Israeli soldiers. Hamas likely calculated that a short military escalation would allow the group to increase popularity domestically while gaining international visibility and, more significantly, intensify its bargaining power and force Israel as well as Egypt to relax economic restrictions on the Strip and implement the terms of the 2012 ceasefire, which included not just “quiet-for-quiet” but also progressive normalization of the flows of goods and people to and from Gaza. Any meaningful political concession from Israel would represent for Hamas both a material improvement of the status quo – relieving some of

the pressure on the group – as well as a tool to reassert internal cohesion and obtain a political victory and improve its somewhat shaky political standing.

An understanding of the Hamas calculus and desired political objectives helps clarify why the organization was divided over the issue of a ceasefire, despite the steep price paid in the last round of confrontation. Hamas' goals and strategy told the story of a group under extreme internal and external pressure. Internally, the continuation of the conflict revealed sharpened differences of opinion between the Gaza-based political leaderships, the Qassam Brigades, and the Hamas leaders abroad, led by Khaled Mashal. Even within the Qassam Brigades, the unit-based, localized model of combat adopted to maximize the autonomy of each unit allows Hamas to increase its flexibility and resilience, but at the expense of clear command and control, coordination, and communication. As to its external environment and with the noteworthy exception of Qatar and Turkey, Hamas also faced increased regional and international isolation.

The conclusion of the war with an open-ended ceasefire, to be followed by indirect talks, only partially eased Hamas' predicament. In the short term, the group was able to preserve internal cohesion and position itself at the center of the political stage, resulting in a boost to its popularity in both Gaza and the West Bank. Hamas also denied Israel a clear cut victory, was de facto able to dictate the duration of the war by rejecting successive ceasefire offers, and displayed improved military skills over those seen in Operation Cast Lead. Yet the group paid a heavy price, with significant losses to its arsenal, infrastructure, and military leadership. In addition, Hamas' political and financial position continues to be precarious, with the group facing growing regional isolation and seemingly forced to allow PA security forces to be deployed at Gaza's borders in order to obtain any significant relaxation of the economic restrictions it has sought so vigorously.

Looking ahead, Hamas will likely continue to find itself in a complex position. On the one hand, to capitalize on the short term popularity boost in view of future Palestinian elections, Hamas needs to maintain the unity government (a condition for the transfer of funds that will pay the salaries of employees on its payroll and allow entry of international aid and reconstruction funds into Gaza). On the other hand, to preserve internal cohesion and retain control of its military wing, the group must keep its independence and freedom of action in Gaza. These two interests are to some extent competing, and thus likely to generate more internal friction as well as an external crisis.