



FACTS ON THE GROUND: THE GROWING POWER OF HAMAS'S GAZA LEADERSHIP

By Jonathan Spyer*

This article will observe the process whereby Hamas has consolidated and maintained its rule in Gaza. It will argue that the gradual strengthening of the Gaza leadership within Hamas preceded the upheavals of 2011. The fallout from the events in Egypt and Syria, however, served to accelerate and accentuate the process whereby the Gaza leadership made gains at the expense of the external leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The upheavals in a number of Arab countries that began in the spring of 2011 have presented the Palestinian Islamist Hamas movement with both dilemmas and opportunities. On the one hand, Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and various branches of this trans-national movement have emerged as winners as a result of the upheavals. In Egypt, Tunisia, and in a more complex way also in Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood has vastly increased its power and influence as a result of the decline and/or collapse of the secular, nationalist military regimes in those countries. Most importantly, in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood now dominates the parliament, and is contending for the presidency.

For Hamas, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is of central significance. Since July 2007, Hamas has maintained exclusive control over the Gaza Strip area, which borders Egyptian-controlled Sinai. The prospect of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt is thus of strategic importance for the movement.¹ Yet the Arab upheavals have also presented a challenge to Hamas. In the mid-1990s, the movement began building a close alliance with Iran and its so-called “resistance axis,” which includes the Shi‘i Hizballah organization and the Asad regime in Syria. Hamas’s overall leadership was based in Damascus. The Gaza enclave, meanwhile,

was heavily dependent on Iranian arms and money.

The outbreak of an uprising against the Asad regime in Syria placed Hamas in an uncomfortable position. The uprising rapidly took on a sectarian aspect. It consisted of a revolt largely by Sunni Arabs against a non-Sunni dictatorship. The Asad regime, meanwhile, responded to the uprising with extreme brutality. Around 16,000 people have died so far as a result of its attempt to crush the opposition. The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria was of course a supporter of the uprising, and rapidly moved toward a powerful position within the main opposition alliance, the Syrian National Council. Iran, meanwhile, provided vigorous support for the Asad regime in its attempt to crush its opponents. Other elements of the “resistance axis,” such as Hizballah, also played their part.

This presented Hamas with a dilemma. On the one hand, its strategic allies and hosts were engaged in a combined effort to crush a threat to one of their allies. However, on the other hand, the threat consisted of an uprising by Sunni Muslim Arabs against a brutal, Alawi regime. This uprising, furthermore, was of at least partially Sunni-Islamist character, and Hamas’s fellow Muslim Brothers were playing a prominent role in it.²

Hamas dealt with this dilemma by quietly withdrawing its leadership from Damascus, while declining to hold public events in solidarity with the Asad regime in the

movement's Gaza enclave. At the same time, the movement hoped not to sever relations entirely with Iran and its allies. The main political fallout from this new situation facing Hamas has been the relative strengthening of the movement's Gaza leadership, at the expense of the overall external leadership. This has manifested itself most clearly to date in the decision to transfer crucial areas of authority, including over the movement's budget, to the Gaza leadership, and away from Khalid Mash'al, the movement's nominal leader.

This article will observe the process whereby Hamas has consolidated and maintained its rule in Gaza. It will argue that the gradual strengthening of the Gaza leadership within Hamas preceded the upheavals of 2011. The fallout from the events in Egypt and Syria, however, served to accelerate and accentuate the process whereby the Gaza leadership made gains at the expense of the external leadership.

The longer-term process derived from the fact that the Gaza leadership has built up a strong and stable center of real power and actual rule over the Palestinian population in Gaza. The external leadership could boast no similar tangible asset. It did, however, handle relations with the movement's main patron in Teheran. The relative lessening of the importance of this relationship made the changing balance of power in the movement a near inevitability, with the consequences that followed.

HAMAS IN GAZA: A QUASI-SOVEREIGN ISLAMIST ENTITY

The Hamas movement has exercised exclusive control in the Gaza Strip since 2007. Following the collapse of the short-lived PA national unity government and Hamas's armed ousting of Fatah from the Strip in June 2007, the movement took over all functions of public administration in the Gaza Strip. Hamas inherited the relatively sophisticated administrative apparatus, which had been developed by the Palestinian Authority since

1994--with the help of the international donor community.

Once the question of power had been settled at the highest level, the movement appears to have experienced little trouble in administering this apparatus. According to one report, Hamas "succeeded in monopolising control of governance functions in Gaza, including security, economics, welfare, and the public infrastructure"³ within six months of the June 2007 coup. How was the movement able to achieve this?

Gaining Security Control

The first issue facing Hamas was the consolidation of its security control of the Gaza Strip. Observation of the establishment of Hamas's power in this sector shows the way in which the movement has succeeded in absorbing the machinery of the PA, leaving much of it in operation, while placing it firmly under the supreme authority of Hamas. Following the 2007 coup, the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority leadership called on all PA security forces to cease operating in Gaza. At this point, Hamas had two forces available for its use. These were the movement's long-standing armed wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and the Executive Force, which Hamas had been building up around the Interior Ministry held by Fathi Hamad in Gaza.

The Qassam Brigades benefited from the capture of a large arsenal from the PA following the coup. The Brigades and the Executive Force succeeded in the period ahead to establish themselves as the dominant armed force in Gaza. While the Qassam Brigades remained engaged with the primary movement task of "resistance" against Israel, the Executive Force was divided into three separate branches in the period immediately following the 2007 seizure of power. These included the Civil Police, the Internal Security Forces (an agency concerned with intelligence gathering and security within Gaza), and the National Security Forces, which functioned as an external border guard and defense "army." Hamas sought to present these as "non-

political” forces quite separate from the Qassam Brigades and Hamas’s own security structures. To this end, the Civil Police and National Security Forces were nominally headed by non-Hamas figures. The police, notably, were headed by Tawfiq Jabir, a former Fatah man, until his death on the first day of Israel’s Operation Cast Lead in 2008. He was replaced by Brigadier General Abu Ubaydah al-Jarah.⁴

Statements by senior Hamas figures notwithstanding, it is highly doubtful that a coherent case can be made of any real separation between Hamas movement and “civil” security structures. This is because the civil structures are in any case ultimately answerable to a political leadership consisting entirely of Hamas men. The Hamas movement structures and the “civil” structures are both instruments available to the Gaza leadership, and can work separately or in coordination with each other depending on the context.

Still, the attempt to bring into existence different and parallel security structures, with one more politically loyal to the leadership but all ultimately subordinated to it resembles practices familiar with other authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes of nationalist, Islamist, and monarchical types. Syria, the West Bank Palestinian Authority, Iran, and Saudi Arabia each in their own way have maintained similar systems of parallel authority, with more ideologically “pure” units with their own systems of command coexisting alongside regular units.

While never entirely disarming other paramilitary groups, Hamas has been able to force them to accept its ultimate authority when this proved necessary. On occasion, and when it suited its purposes, Hamas was prepared to use violence against these other groups. This applied to organizations such as Islamic Jihad, which sought to pursue an independent campaign of rocket fire on Israel, which sometimes conflicted with Hamas’s needs of the day.⁵ It also applied to the Salafi groupings, which flourished in Hamas-controlled Gaza. These groups were tolerated as long as they did not interfere with the

Hamas monopoly of power. When they overstepped this mark, as in Khan Yunis in 2009, they were dealt with swiftly and effectively.⁶

It is likely that Hamas preferred to allow Islamic Jihad and other smaller groups to maintain their military capabilities, as these could provide a certain deniability for the Hamas authorities when they nevertheless wished to put pressure on Israel. Ironically, this process resembles the use made of Hamas by the PA leadership in the 1990s. Hamas’s long claim to represent an Islamic resistance option also meant that it was reluctant to challenge frontally organizations purporting to represent either of those principles in a more rigorous way than did Hamas itself.

Nevertheless, Hamas did act against these groups if and when it felt that its own position was threatened, ensuring its ultimate authority. Hamas also worked to curb independent armed activity by clan-based groups. In so doing, it succeeded in creating a far calmer public space than had existed under PA rule.

Having established its ascendancy, if not quite monopoly, of the means of violence in Gaza, Hamas then set about achieving control over the tunnel system from Egypt that was the main means for the smuggling of weaponry and other goods into Gaza. With this achieved, the movement was able to begin the process of turning its makeshift military forces into a quasi-army, armed with sophisticated weapons systems brought in via the tunnels. Once the physical assurance of control over Gaza was achieved, Hamas then began the work in earnest of acquiring control over other aspects of life in the Strip.

Gaining Political and Judicial Control

A decision by the West Bank Palestinian Authority to order 70,000 of its employees not to report for work in the Gaza Strip (effectively, the PA paid them not to work) did not have the presumably desired effect of rendering Gaza ungovernable. In the pre-June 2007 period, endless wrangling between Hamas officials and Fatah-affiliated civil servants was a notable feature of the

governance of the Strip. Following the coup, Hamas was required to create an administrative elite of its own, to work under its government.

The movement was able to draw on a large pool of loyal university graduates in this task, and it was achieved with considerable success. The partial and piecemeal implementation of the Fayyad government's order to employees not to work aided Hamas in this task, since use could also be made of the previous elite. The need to rapidly create a new elite served to accelerate the process of Hamas's transformation of Gaza, in that thousands of teachers and other public employees were rapidly replaced by movement members. Where PA employees attempted to remain loyal to the West Bank PA, as in the judicial sector, Hamas simply created its own judicial structures, based on Shari'a law, to bypass them.

Hamas security officers dispensed summary justice, approved by clerics. More lastingly, the movement expanded the role of the already existing Islamic Conciliation Committees, which began to play an official, rival role to the courts.⁷ These quickly issued judgments, operating according to Hamas's interpretation of Islamic law. The system functioned under Hamas's executive control, ending any pretence of judicial independence.

Hamas also established a Higher Justice Council, which gave the ruling authorities the power to fire judges. The head of this council, Abd al-Raouf al-Halabi, eventually took over the Gaza Supreme Court with an armed escort of Hamas men. This led to a strike by judges, which enabled Hamas to sack 44 judges, appointing others more to its liking.

Isma'il Haniya, who serves as prime minister of the Hamas authority in Gaza, assembled a cabinet consisting entirely of Hamas men in the days following the 2007 coup. This body remains responsible for control of executive authority in the Gaza Strip. Following the 2007 coup, The PA parliament, the Palestine Legislative Council, was reconvened as an exclusively Hamas body other than a single independent legislator. It continues to meet weekly, but its role is formal

and rhetorical. It plays no real role in overseeing the actions of the executive or in legislation.

More important than the rump PLC are Hamas's regional and district Shura Councils in Gaza. The councils are elected by internal movement elections and seek to ensure that government policies are in line with Hamas's broader agenda. The 77 members of the Gaza regional Shura Council in turn elect the 15 member political bureau, which is the most senior body of Hamas in Gaza.⁸

GAZA: A ONE-PARTY ISLAMIST STATELET

The structures of governance and control put in place by Hamas in the months following the 2007 coup remain in place today. Gaza today thus constitutes an Islamist one-party statelet. The Hamas regime survived Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009, and has faced no serious internal challenge to its rule. As seen above, Hamas has imposed its control over the judiciary. It has emptied the PA legislative bodies of all power and content. The movement maintains exclusive security control. A cabinet composed exclusively of Hamas members enjoys executive authority.

The nature of Hamas rule in Gaza has received insufficient attention, because it was widely assumed that the split between Gaza and the West Bank was a temporary phenomenon, so no great importance was attached to the way that Hamas ruled. Though Palestinian reconciliation efforts remain, such an assumption can no longer be made.

The Gaza Leadership Gains at the Expense of the Hamas Political Leadership

Hamas's internal decisionmaking processes are kept deliberately opaque by the movement. Yet even prior to the Arab upheavals of 2011, it was clear that the emergence of an Islamist statelet in Gaza was creating rival centers of power in Hamas. The de facto government in Gaza was responsible for the lives of 1.3 million people and for the daily administration of an area over which it held sovereignty. It

thus represented real power for Hamas for the first time.

However, the exiled leadership in Damascus and the head of the Political Bureau, Khalid Mash'al were able to maintain overall control of the movement primarily because of the financial dependence of the Gaza enclave on support from the movement's international backers, most importantly Iran.

Observation of the Gaza enclave's budget for 2012 reveals that of a total of \$769 million, only around a quarter is raised from local taxation and revenue. Jamal Nassar, a Hamas official in Gaza, revealed that the rest would come from international "donors," primarily Iran.⁹

The exiled leadership in Damascus, and above all Political Bureau head Khalid Mash'al were responsible for developing and maintaining the links with Iran. This ensured the continuous flow of funds, which alone made the Gaza statelet viable. Most crucially, the control by the exiled leadership of the movement's sources of income gave it, among other things, financial control of the movement's armed wing, the Qassam Brigades. These were based in Gaza, and as the main armed element in the Strip, they possessed the final say as to who could rule it. Thus, the control of their funding by the external leadership afforded it leverage over the Gaza leaders.

After 2004, Hamas became increasingly dependent on Iranian support, as funding from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf began to decrease. This led to the movement being widely seen as a member of the Iranian-led regional axis. Yet as a result of the uprising in Syria, the movement was presented with a dilemma, of which the external leadership has ended up being the main victim.

The external leadership departed from Damascus gradually in the latter part of 2011. Contrary to initial expectations, it has not succeeded in reconstituting itself elsewhere. Rather than making a smooth transition from the patronage of Iran to the support and domiciling of a Sunni-Arab state, the former Damascus-based leadership has found itself spread across the region.

Khalid Mash'al, for example, became a resident of Qatar; Imad Alami, a senior member of the Political Bureau in Damascus, was the only member of the Damascus leadership to take up residence in Gaza (where he has aligned with hardline elements opposed to Mash'al, to whom he was opposed even when still in Damascus). Moussa Abu Marzouk, who is himself originally from Gaza, left Damascus for Egypt. Other Hamas officials formerly resident in Damascus have turned up in Istanbul and Khartoum.

It is worth noting that the countries where the external leadership might have been expected to have reestablished itself--Qatar, Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, perhaps Jordan--all in different ways have normal relations with the West, of a type which Syria and Iran do not. As such, they would likely be reluctant to challenge the West frontally by offering a new home to the Hamas leadership, for little tangible gain.

Thus, as a result of events in Syria, Hamas's external leadership ceased to operate as a united, coherent unit. According to a number of reports, Iran was angered by Hamas's failure to express support for the Asad regime and swiftly imposed financial sanctions on Hamas in Gaza. A Gaza-based academic close to Hamas was quoted as saying that Teheran had terminated financial support worth \$23 million per month to Hamas-controlled Gaza as a result of the movement's stance over Syria.¹⁰ (Other sources placed Iranian support for Hamas at \$400 million annually).

In January 2012, Khalid Mash'al announced that he would withdraw his name for consideration for reelection to the leadership of the movement. This move, however, signaled the beginning of a political contest between the external leadership and the Gazans. Contrary to previous depictions, in which Mash'al had been seen as the more "ideological" leader, and the Gazans more pragmatic, in the first months of 2012, Mash'al appeared to take a more pragmatic stance. Haniya, on the other hand, visited Iran and made a series of statements confirming Hamas's ideological goals--most centrally, its

support for the destruction of Israel and opposition to any diplomatic process between Israelis and Palestinians.

An interesting dynamic emerged as a result of this contest, in which Mash'al sought to achieve the long-elusive reconciliation with the West Bank Palestinian Authority in order to remove the alternative, autonomous power structure that had emerged in Gaza. This attempt appears, for the moment at least, to have failed. Mash'al signed an agreement in early February 2012, in Doha with Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas. However, in a key indication of where the power now lies in Hamas, the Gaza leadership declined to accept it. The precise reason for rejecting the agreement, according to a Hamas statement to the PLC, centered on the fact that it would have seen PA Chairman Abbas becoming both president and prime minister of the Palestinian Authority. Yet this detail is less important than the fact that the movement's "internal" representatives chose to reject an agreement already signed by the supposed overall head of Hamas.

The failure of the Doha agreement was the first sign that a truly important shift was under way in Hamas. Since then, reports have emerged suggesting that Isma'il Haniya in April 2012 won elections for the leadership of the movement in Gaza--emerging as the first person to hold this position since Abd al-Aziz Rantisi was assassinated by Israel in 2004. The reports indicated a broad series of gains for the movement's military leadership in the April 2012 elections.

According to Israeli analyst Ehud Ya'ari, 12,000 voters in Gaza delivered a stinging series of defeats to Mash'al loyalists in elections in Gaza. Ya'ari noted that very few individuals associated with Mash'al had succeeded in getting elected to the various institutions, including the district Shura councils, the Gaza Shura council, and the 15-member Gaza Political Bureau. Instead, individuals associated with the Qassam Brigades, such as Ahmad Jabari and Marwan Issa, were elected to the Gaza Political Bureau. A number of civilian politicians who were elected to the Political Bureau, such as

Khalil al-Hayya, also owed their positions to the support of the Qassam Brigades.¹¹ Media reports have also asserted that control of the organization's budget and of the Qassam Brigades have been removed from Mash'al.

Mash'al's efforts toward reconciliation are ongoing and are obviously connected to the larger context of the contest between him and the Gaza-based leadership. If Mash'al manages to secure a reconciliation process, this will greatly weaken the Gaza leaders, who will be obliged to cede control of executive authority in the Strip, at least following the elections, to a renewed united PA leadership. This would pave the way for a Hamas bid for control of the PLO, and thus of the Palestinian national movement as a whole. (An alternative possibility that has been raised is that in the event of the sides failing to agree to the terms for the reuniting of the two authorities, a joint overall government could be formed, with Fatah continuing to control the West Bank and Hamas to control Gaza.)

CONCLUSION: GAZA ASCENDANT?

While it is of course difficult to make predictions, it should be noted that reconciliation talks and various announcements of breakthroughs have taken place periodically since 2011, yet reconciliation itself has remained elusive. This does not necessarily mean that Mash'al will fail to keep his position as the ostensible head of the movement (though Ya'ari predicts that Abu Marzouk's strong links with the Gazans may well give him an advantage in a leadership battle with Mash'al.) If, however, reconciliation does continue to prove elusive despite Mash'al's best efforts, this is probably an indication that the Gaza leadership does not want it. Their ability to achieve what they want and prevent a move that would lead to a significant loss in their power, in turn, shows their growing strength.

Thus, a process has emerged since 2007 in which the Hamas Gaza leadership has first consolidated its control in the Gaza Strip, and has then parlayed this into an increasingly powerful and decisive role within the Hamas

movement as a whole. This process has been exacerbated by the scattering of the external leadership as a result of the uprising in Syria. This process is in some ways analogous to the growingly important role taken by the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, at the expense of external Fatah leaders following the establishment of the PA.

It is important to note, however, that there is no indication that the Gaza leadership's experience of power and administration in the Gaza Strip is leading it toward moderation or pragmatism. On the contrary, the elements that hold power in Gaza--in particular the forces around the Qassam Brigades and such figures as Foreign Minister Mahmoud Zahar--are strong believers in the path of military struggle and the destruction of Israel.

This is in contrast to the once oft-made claim that the external leadership was more inclined to an ideological stance, while Haniya and the Gaza leaders tended more toward pragmatism. In the limited sense that the Gazans have seen it in their interest to preserve a relative quiet between Israel and Gaza in the years that followed Israel's Operation Cast Lead, they are certainly capable of a "tactical" pragmatism. However, as recent statements by Haniya and others in favor of the path of armed struggle show, this has not altered their fundamental definition of the situation and of how they perceive their movement's role.

Indeed, it has been Mash'al who has made remarks that have sounded more conciliatory, while Haniya visited Iran and confirmed the movement's commitments to its strategic goals. In each case, the statements of both men should be related to the power struggle between them and their interests, rather than a pure clash of ideas. To remain relevant, Mash'al needs reconciliation. Without it, having lost his control of the movement's purse strings, and as the steward of the decreasingly important relationship with Iran, he risks growing irrelevance. Haniya, by contrast, aligned with the military leadership in the Strip, wants to find a context to resist reunification in order to preserve "fortress Gaza." The ideological arguments vary

according to the practical needs of the rival camps.

It is impossible to predict the outcome of this contest, of course, but the achievement of power in Gaza and its retention is for Hamas the most significant development since its foundation in 1987. The rise to power and prominence of its fellow Muslim Brothers elsewhere in the region and most notably in Egypt creates great possibilities for the movement. The Gaza leadership is likely to seek to preserve its autonomous existence in order to benefit from the changes now under way.

* Dr. Jonathan Spyer is a senior research fellow at the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya. His first book, *The Transforming Fire: The Rise of the Israeli-Islamist Conflict*, was published in 2010.

NOTES

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⁴ See Yezid Sayegh, "'We Serve the People': Policing in Gaza," Crown Paper v, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, April, 2011, <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/cp/CP5.pdf>.

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