

# Hamas's Role in the Future of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Written by Samantha Borders

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SAMANTHA BORDERS, JUL 21 2013

The process of peace and creating a stable future for states in conflict is always complex and can at times seem counterintuitive. In dealing with the power balance between the participating entities, it is essential to understand what each individual party brings to the negotiations. Within the context of the on-going Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israeli government and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) have historically been the primary representative bodies for the Israelis and Palestinians respectively. However, following the Oslo Accords, the political party Fatah took control of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as an extension of the PLO. Although it did not have the same historic precedence, Islamist group Hamas emerged in the late 1980s and set the stage for an entirely new dynamic to play into these exchanges. Challenging the secular nationalism of the PLO (and consequently, the PA), Hamas created an appeal to the wider Palestinian communities through its civil services and vows to regain all of historical Palestine. This disturbed the distribution of influence and political sway in the region, an action that still reverberates today.

While it is acknowledged that both the PLO and Israel must take part in agreeing on the future of Israel and Palestine, the role of Hamas in future dealings is less certain. Due to being branded as a terrorist organisation by various international bodies, it is typically regarded as an obstacle to peace. However, when examined in comparison to Fatah, not only is Hamas a successful political movement, but can also pose a challenge to the hegemonic power of its West Bank counterpart as a representative of the Palestinian people. While both operate under the heading of national Palestinian governments, Hamas is increasingly distancing itself from this body due to its physical isolation as well as ideological differences over how the future of the Occupied Territories should be negotiated. This essay thus seeks to examine the future role Hamas will play in the peace negotiations and power balance between Israel and Palestine. In spite of its controversial nature, it will be demonstrated that Hamas stands as an essential partner in creating a lasting peace due to the increasing delegitimisation of the PA (and Fatah) as well as its own steadfastness to the cause of liberating Palestine from Zionist oppression.

The notoriety of Hamas hardly requires introduction in light of its participation in suicide bombings of Israeli civilians and chartered belief in armed struggle against the Zionist occupation of historical Palestine. However, an explanation of its nature and interactions with the PA and Israel is vital in illustrating its position of power within the peace process. The bond between Hamas and the PA can be likened to a fraternal relationship, inherently attached via the Palestinian people but rivals for political dominance as well. Unlike praise that '[t]he continued relationship between the PLO and the PA has ... [been] necessary for the peace process'<sup>[1]</sup>, Hamas has been the brunt of much blame for its involvement in violent action and refusal to cooperate with the PA on matters concerning the peace process. In essence, the two are almost pitted against one another for the leadership of the Palestinian people.

Under the header of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's work, government in the West Bank and Gaza can be defined as "competitive authoritarianism" due to their developing natures that have not fully emerged as what is conventionally defined as democratic institutions. This term implies that 'formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority ... [however, leaders] violate those rules so often and to such an extent ... that the regime fails to meet ... standards for democracy'<sup>[2]</sup> because of corruption. Although Fatah has historically been the ruling power of the PA, Hamas is rising in importance and increasingly

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presenting more of a challenge to the status quo. Marsha Pripstein Posusney further explains that 'electoral struggles can play a role in helping undermine authoritarian rule'<sup>[3]</sup>, even with Islamist groups taking proactive roles in this context. While both Fatah and Hamas are participants under a competitive authoritarian regime, Posusney's theory gives optimism to the situation and suggests a better synthesis can be reached within the Palestinian Authority.

At the heart of this rivalry lies a struggle over the nature of Palestinian Nationalism and how it should take form in the liberation movement. Fatah, following in suit with Palestinian cultural norms, has taken a secular stance towards Nationalism and seeks to establish a Palestinian state on universal human right values without the confines of religious dogma. Conversely, Hamas is a self-proclaimed Islamist organisation that intends to implement an Islamic government. While Palestinians themselves have traditionally leaned towards secularisation in the public sphere by means of religious tolerance, this trend has now shifted slightly in favor of Hamas. This, however, is not indicative of an abandonment of non-religious movements. In his 2006 essay discussing democratic resistance in the Occupied Territories, Graham Usher stated that the recent victory of Hamas in the elections revealed 'Palestinian disillusionment that peace or meaningful negotiations with Israel were anywhere on the horizon ... appreciation for Hamas's civic role as a service provider ... [and] revulsion from a decade of Fatah's misrule of the PA'<sup>[4]</sup>. Having also proven its effectiveness ten years prior through a shock takeover of the representative majority in the PA, a Hamas dominated government was formed. While this victory was a shock to the international community from a seemingly small player in the political arena, this is not as surprising as it may appear when studied under closer analysis.

With Israel's occupation of historical Palestine having lasted for several decades, many Palestinians grew to resent the continuous streams of ineffective efforts to liberate the country or to gain political autonomy. Just prior to the first Intifada, the creation of the Islamist party Hamas embodied a new wave of thinking while retaining elements of the original charter of the PLO. As the party of Arafat (Fatah) began to concede more and more of the aspirations of the Palestinians, 'Hamas became the only organization calling for liberation of the whole of Palestine, and rejecting negotiated settlement'<sup>[5]</sup> and therefore caused a great stir in the political arena. The fiery rhetoric of these leaders, who implemented ideologies from their parent organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood, began to challenge their rivals and proactively took a divergent course of action amidst the peace process that led to the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 and the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993. Providing social services as well as a militant front, Hamas offered the hope of restored dignity to a people tiring of constant oppression and inept leadership.

Unlike Fatah, Hamas did not renounce the usage of arms against Israel. Its leadership viewed this concession on the part of the PA as weakness, feeling that '[i]n the absence of a powerful neutral arbiter who can force Israel to live up to its commitments, negotiations by themselves are unlikely to do so'<sup>[6]</sup> and therefore required the willingness to carry out militant operations. With an increasingly desperate situation arising in the West Bank and Gaza as a result of the Israeli border closures, discontent with the government amongst Palestinians rose. Not surprisingly, the appeal of Hamas began to grow because of their political platform reflected emotions felt by many Palestinians. Acknowledging an unbearable reality, Hamas's political leader Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi states that "[t]o die in this way is better than to die daily in frustration and humiliation"<sup>[7]</sup>. For the multitudes of Palestinians living under daily oppression and anxiety, this sentiment resonates and can be used to justify armed resistance. Additionally, their dedication to civil service and providing for their constituents appealed widely, especially since many Palestinians are close to or under the poverty line.

Because of the decline of NGO aid to the PA, there was a 'strengthening of Hamas's social network at a grass-roots level'<sup>[8]</sup>, that created a broader base of appeal because of the structured civil services they provide. Although not all agreed on the religious nature of the group, its aims offered an alternative to the disappointment of the PA and Fatah's inability to improve the deteriorating circumstances of life in the Occupied Territories. Bluntly put, Gunning illustrates the stark contrast between Fatah and Hamas, stating that '[a]mong the Palestinian factions, Hamas is one of the most democratically orientated-certainly in comparison with Fatah'<sup>[9]</sup>. As a result of its prioritization of citizen welfare and reliance on popular support, Hamas aims to represent the will of the people and guard the interests of Palestinians within and beyond the boundaries of historic Palestine.

The Islamist nature of Hamas embodies a unique dynamic in the case study of democracy and the organisation's participation in establishing a lasting peace. Despite the prevalent Western view of Islamism posing a threat to

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democratic systems, this is not necessarily always the case. Contrary to these stereotypes, Francesco Cavatorta states that 'the 'radicalism' of Islamism is forcefully expressed in ... [their] policies,' and therefore are scorned by outside parties 'because some groups may threaten established regional and Western interests'<sup>[10]</sup> by provided access to alternative modes of government. Because of their grass-roots orientation, their popular support, and success as a governing body, Hamas represents a proactive threat to both the PA and Israel since neither can exercise complete control over the territory of Gaza. For this reason, Hamas employs a degree of autonomy from these bodies and is an active wild card in the developing situation, since it feels little allegiance to other Palestinian political parties and views Israel and its Zionist government as their chief oppressors. According to Jeroen Gunning, Hamas is not a "total spoiler" but rather an "outside spoiler" due to its willingness to cooperate with the Palestinian Authority's recognition of Israel (the joint agreement was signed in 2007) while simultaneously operating outside these groups and pursuing its own interests<sup>[11]</sup>. Because it acts as an almost external force and maintains its unwillingness to recognize or directly negotiate with Israel, Hamas's status as an outside spoiler gives it a pivotal position to drastically change the circumstances in diplomatic dealings.

However, the perception of Hamas' level of influence varies; but what can be gathered irrespective of narrative is that this Islamist group has the capability to disrupt the balance of power and peace. Certainly, its mere presence is enough to stir the international community into action when involved in an event. With the power shift from Fatah to Hamas in the 2006 elections, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice claimed 'the PA was becoming a "terrorist authority"' and therefore posed enough of a threat for the US to condone Israel freezing tax rebates from the Palestinian government despite its acquiescence that the elections were fair and valid<sup>[12]</sup>. This knee-jerk reaction is indicative of a more general view of Islamist groups. However, Hamas takes a focal role in this case and is a frequent target of mistrust and demonization. In Dietrich Jung's pamphlet for the EUI Working Papers, he states that 'the Jewish-Islamic dimension can serve as an ideological platform to undermine any kind of peaceful relationship with Israel'<sup>[13]</sup> and therefore views Hamas as a threat to stability in the region. Because of this view of subversion, it is apparent that Gunning's observation of Hamas being an outside spoiler is a logical conclusion. However, this conclusion does not fully encompass the role Hamas has to play in the future of Israel and Palestine.

In the eyes of both Israel and the PA, Hamas is highly problematic and presents a challenge to establishing a firm diplomatic agreement. With regards to the PLO and eventually the PA, Arafat considered Hamas to be 'latecomers who had never done much for the cause and had no claim on Palestinian leadership'<sup>[14]</sup>, and therefore were illegitimate actors in the region's politics. Likewise, Israel is very wary of its neighbor to the south, and frequently engages in various skirmishes with, and acts of oppression towards, the Gazan people via border closures and strict regulation of the importation/exportation of goods, even to the point of almost complete severance from any other place outside of Gaza's small jurisdiction. Because '[t]he Israeli government's actions suggest that it believes Hamas to be a total spoiler'<sup>[15]</sup>, their activities and attitudes towards the Gaza Strip suggest a method of corporate punishment on this territory due to the activities of its leading power.

In an ironic sense, both the PA and Israel look upon Hamas as a threat and have tried to stamp out its influence despite being at odds with each other. Because of the dissonance between the Fatah-lead PA and Hamas continues to be an issue in Palestinian politics, a reconciled front against Israel is currently weak at best and places both parties in vulnerable positions. Seeing this vulnerability, Israel further exacerbates the problem through its own military initiatives against Gaza and the subsequent fighting that occurs. Usher notes in his article that '[t]he Israeli-U.S. assault is actually to break down Hamas's so far steadfast refusal to renounce the right to resist an imbalanced political process'<sup>[16]</sup> and consequently crush the resistance that embodies a hope for the liberation of Palestine as Palestinians originally desired. In the case between the PA and Hamas, their diverging views on how best to solve the conflict have proven almost irreconcilable.

While Hamas has maintained its position on the insistence to return refugees to their homes and that it has the right to armed defence, the PA has ceased to promote serious discussion of the right of return and rarely challenges Israel's military prowess; thus, establishing a trend of compromise that has robbed Fatah of its constituents' trust. The PA tried over time 'to restrain Hamas and meet its commitments to Israel'<sup>[17]</sup>, but has had little result until recent years when a firmer reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas was created. The possibility that the PA might 'hold talks with Israel behind its back to reach agreement on disposing of Hamas if its social status and political influence

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were deemed to have become too powerful<sup>[18]</sup> is a constant threat to this Islamist group. This reflects Gunning's statement that Hamas must become non-existent, whether through a crippling of their organisation or an enabling of 'Hamas's socialization [that] will come at the price of accommodation on the part of Israel (and to a lesser extent the PA)<sup>[19]</sup>'. However, this over-simplifies the power dynamics at hand.

In light of the apparent threat Hamas poses to the peace process, it is justifiable to say that perhaps it is more than a meddling outside spoiler. With time and active engagement in the struggle for liberation, 'Hamas has matured ... [and] found it practical to modify positions and downsize objectives to maintain its political force'<sup>[20]</sup>, thereby rendering itself more likely to make concessions for the sake of a ceasefire. Furthermore, it has already taken measures to mend the breach between itself and Fatah. The organisation has come to accept 'the principle of power-sharing ... [and] has scaled down expectations regarding ... its absolutist insistence on the liberation of all Palestine'<sup>[21]</sup>, freeing itself to be a more proactive party in creating unification. However, that is not to say Hamas has degraded its position. Cavatorta shrewdly points out that because of Hamas's unwillingness to participate in or honor the Oslo Accords, 'the current stalemate in the peace process is the result of what Hamas and a great majority of Palestinians see as a 'bad agreement''<sup>[22]</sup>. In this way, they have stood by their pledge to represent the Palestinian people and their interests and maintained their popularity and position of trust. Gunning goes on to add that a deal 'carrying Hamas's acceptance and one attempted without Hamas's support is that the former would have the legitimacy that the PA so sorely lacks'<sup>[23]</sup>, thereby bolstering the PA's image and becoming not just important, but essential to the peace process.

Although initially seen as a minority, separatist movement, Hamas has transformed itself into an influential body in the Israel-Palestinian conflict and peace process. Because of the PA's decline in popularity and ability to provide for the Palestinian people, Hamas has offered an alternative leadership option for the Palestinian people (despite its Islamist nature) in light of its strong focus on public works and defending Palestinian liberation interests. Despite the mutual desire to decrease or eliminate the threat of Hamas, Israel and the Palestinian Authority have thus far been unsuccessful in suppressing this party regardless of its supposed insignificance. With the current power balance shifting, the future of peace in the region is increasingly reliant upon an agreement between these three bodies. The legitimacy Hamas would provide the PA in the eyes of its constituents would bolster the joint-government of both the West Bank and Gaza should reconciliation come into full effect. Rather than continue in the cycle of struggle from hegemony, the evidence examined here suggests that Hamas is a vital asset to the future of Palestine and can perhaps lay foundations for a stronger Palestinian government.

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[20] Kjørliien, "Theory and Practice", 4.

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