

HAMAS AND THE ARAB SPRING

INTRODUCTION

Frode Løvlie and Are Knudsen

Mr. Løvlie is a researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute and a PhD candidate at the Department of Comparative Politics, University of Bergen. Dr. Knudsen is a senior researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute.¹

The Arab Spring is a critical juncture for examining Hamas, a movement created in the context of a popular revolt (against Israeli occupation) similar to those that have reverberated throughout the Middle East. Palestinians have repeatedly protested domination and, like no other group, they embody the image of the popular uprising, the *intifada*. The first (1987–93) and second (2000–05) intifadas established Hamas as the new Islamist contender for power. As the Oslo accords crumbled, Hamas progressed from movement, to party, to governing body. The 2006 parliamentary elections sidelined Fatah and forced Hamas to form a government alone, only to be targeted by a debilitating international boycott that caused factional infighting and divided the Gaza Strip and the West Bank into two political entities, governed by Hamas and Fatah respectively. This deepened divisions inside occupied Palestine and stalled several attempts at reconciling the two, including the prospects for Hamas to join the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The still-unfolding Arab Spring is testing Hamas's tactical and strategic prowess.

Since the outbreak of the Arab revolts in December 2010, the political landscape of the Middle East has been recast, forcing Hamas to respond to a host of fundamental challenges. And as Hamas is challenged, so is our received wisdom about the movement. This special section is dedicated to complementing the extant knowledge on Hamas through analyses of the movement and its responses to the Arab Spring on the domestic, regional and internal levels.

THE REGIONAL DIMENSION

For the past decade, Hamas was a key member of the “Axis of Resistance,” together with Hezbollah and its two main sponsors, Syria and Iran.² Although Hamas was never simply a proxy for either country, its relationships to these regimes have been crucial, and have influenced most analyses of the movement. But, after siding with the revolutionaries in the Syrian civil war, Hamas abruptly left Damascus and quit the Axis of Resistance. By opposing Assad and leaving Syria, Hamas also weakened its ties to Iran.

Hamas left the axis in the hopes that the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood

in Egypt would become its main backer. Notwithstanding the recent removal from office of the Brotherhood government, the calculus behind this attempted switch of benefactor seemed sound. Hamas is the Palestinian offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood, and they share a common history and ideology. Intuitively, the movement could expect to benefit from the rise of the Brotherhood in Egypt. Added to this, it can be argued that Hamas's alliance with Hezbollah, Syria and Iran was always one of tactical convenience, not ideological conviction. The other members of the alliance are all Shiite Muslims (or members of its offshoots), an increasingly salient factor given the rise of Sunni sectarianism and Salafism throughout the region.

However, Hamas's hopes that the Brotherhood would become its new benefactor were dashed when the Egyptian army deposed the newly-elected government. Having abandoned its former sponsors and without a new ally ready to compensate for the shortfall of political support, Hamas currently finds itself in a difficult situation. The regional upheavals most certainly will continue to affect Hamas, with the now uncertain future role of Islamist movements being particularly crucial.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

On the national level, the main issue facing Hamas is the stalled reconciliation process with Fatah. Here, also, the Arab Spring had a direct bearing. The demonstrations throughout the Arab region sparked protests within the Occupied Territories calling for national unity, forcing Hamas and Fatah either to reconcile or risk being ousted from office. With Egyptian mediation, the two movements signed the Cairo agreement in April 2011. It stipulates

that future Palestinian elections should be held not only for the presidency and the Palestinian Authority (PA) legislative council but, significantly, also for the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the parliament and supreme political body of the PLO.

By agreeing to hold elections to the PNC, Hamas aims — for the first time — to join the PLO without preconditions. And an eventual implementation of the 2011 Cairo agreement promises to reshuffle relationships among Hamas, Fatah and Israel and raises questions regarding Hamas's strategy for the upcoming elections to the PA and the PLO.³

INTERNAL DELIBERATIONS

Officially, Hamas remains committed to its initial goals and demands. These include ending Israeli occupation, maintaining an armed resistance, insisting on the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and establishing a Palestinian state “from the river to the sea” (the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea) with Jerusalem as its capital. These goals contradict the Quartet Principles,⁴ which require Hamas to recognize Israel, adhere to previous agreements, and renounce violence in exchange for international recognition.

The changing regional environment, however, has forced Hamas to reevaluate its long- and short-term strategies. Most important, Hamas has pondered its positions on armed resistance, negotiations, the 1967 borders, and an “interim” vs. “final” solution to the conflict. As such, it can be argued that Hamas has come close to meeting the Quartet's demands, albeit indirectly or implicitly.

The movement has stopped short of recognizing the state of Israel, but has repeatedly offered a temporary two-state

solution based on the 1967 borders. Israel has consistently either rejected or ignored this offer. Although Hamas's acceptance of a two-state solution is worded as a temporary measure, defended ideologically through the Islamic concept of *hudna* (long-term truce), it implies an acknowledgment of Israel's existence.⁵

As for previous agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, Hamas has said little, apart from its blatant condemnation of the Oslo accords, which were all but declared dead with the outbreak of the second intifada in the fall of 2000.⁶ However, the movement's willingness to join the PLO through PNC elections implicitly means that it is ready to adhere to previous agreements, at least until Hamas can overturn them from within the PLO. This would require the movement to secure sufficient seats in the PNC.

Finally, the movement has discussed a change of strategy with regard to armed resistance, in effect inching ever closer to fulfilling the Quartet's demand to renounce violence.⁷ Of course, discussing a change of strategy is not the same as changing it. Nevertheless, the internal debate on the merits of armed resistance sends a powerful signal that there are voices within Hamas that would prefer a new mode of operation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Hamas is biding its time. Although there are indications that the movement might be willing to change elements of its strategy, it has so far remained content to discuss alternative avenues rather than

decide on a new course of action. The movement has adopted a wait-and-see attitude, hoping that the end of the region's authoritarian regimes and the rise to power of Islamist movements will usher in a more supportive geostrategic environment for Hamas. It is careful not to take any risks in a region still in flux. In light of the recent developments in Egypt, this wait-and-see attitude has been prudent. While Hamas did not foresee the deposing of President Morsi and the dismissal of the Brotherhood government, a development which has worsened the movement's strategic situation, its cautious approach to strategic change has so far proved wise.

In many ways, this is the same Hamas we have observed before; a movement skillfully maneuvering in a volatile political environment, but more reactive than proactive, adapting to developments rather than shaping them. This is only part of the picture, however. The debates within Hamas regarding alternative strategies indicate that the movement is prepared to change its *modus operandi*, if and when the international, regional and domestic situations become more conducive. Second, Hamas has become more assertive than before, as demonstrated by its uncompromising stance towards reconciliation with Fatah. This newly won confidence is tightly linked to the hope that Islamist movements will continue to rise and rule throughout the region. Although such hopes have suffered setbacks in recent months, Hamas stands on the verge of change.

¹ This special section is based on a workshop organized jointly by the Chr. Michelsen Institute and the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy (Muwatin) in Bergen, Norway, September 7, 2012. It was funded by the Research Council of Norway, grant no. 197027.

² Erik Mohns and André Bank, "Syrian Revolt Fallout: End of the Resistance Axis?" *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 3 (2012): 25–35. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2012.00545.x.

³ The elections have been postponed several times. At the time of writing, no dates have been announced for PLC/PNC elections.

⁴ The Quartet is a diplomatic coalition made up of the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia.

⁵ Beverley Milton-Edwards and Alastair Crooke, "Waving, Not Drowning: Strategic Dimensions of Ceasefires and Islamic Movements," *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 295–310. doi:10.1177/0967010604047528.

⁶ Sara Roy, "Why Peace Failed: An Oslo Autopsy," *Current History* 101, no. 651 (2002): 8–16.

⁷ Harriet Sherwood, "Arab Spring Uprisings Reveal Rift in Hamas over Conflict Tactics," *Guardian*, January 6, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/06/arab-spring-hamas-rift-gaza>.