



HAMAS DIVIDED: TIME FOR A NEW POLICY?

By Tally Helfont

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September 2010 marked the beginning of renewed peace negotiations in the Middle East. The American-brokered talks took some time to restart—18-months to be exact—and its two primary participants, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, were reluctant at best. The parties met on three separate occasions: in Washington D.C. from September 1-2, in Sharm El-Sheikh from September 13-14, and at the Israeli Prime Minister's official residence in Jerusalem on September 15. It is difficult to say whether there was any tangible progress achieved during these meetings, but as it currently stands, the continuation of these efforts is uncertain, and some would even say, unlikely. The United States, on the one hand, and Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia on the other, are exerting significant diplomatic pressure to bridge the current gaps and bring the two sides back to the negotiating table. But what about those who seek to obstruct such efforts?

Chief among this camp is the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas. Through numerous statements and acts of violence, Hamas seemed intent on attracting attention during this period of negotiations. Yet at a closer look, the message that the militant group was sending through its activities was quite muddled, resembling a hydra with each head trying to go its own way. The explanation for Hamas' inconsistency can be explained by the current factionalized nature of its movement. Diverging elements exist within Hamas today, each vying for a different party line.

Tensions can clearly be seen between Damascus-based senior political leader, Khaled Mashal and Gaza-based Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyah. More than a power struggle, tensions have emerged on three levels: 1) a doctrinal dispute between Damascus and the Palestinian Territories; an operational quarrel between Hamas' members located in the West Bank and those in the Gaza Strip, and 3) a conflict between Hamas and some of the lesser militant groups including the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In effect, Hamas' vaunted ideological, organizational, and strategic unity seems a thing of the past. This article will discuss Hamas' marginalized position in the Middle East peace negotiations by examining its most recent statements on these proceedings and other relevant aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In focusing on three major areas—namely, attacks, Arab partners, and “rejectionist” elements—it will become clear that the group has been advancing multiple, and often competing strategies simultaneously. It is this inconsistency that has, to a large extent, led to its weakened position. And yet, it may be possible to exploit these divisions within Hamas to expand the current policy options of engagement, isolation, or confrontation to include: division plus selective use of the former options towards different factions within the group.

Hamas, as a result of its own erratic strategies, now finds itself on the sidelines while major decisions of Palestinian national interest are being made. Despite the group's efforts to reposition itself at the fore of the Palestinian agenda, its statements on major issues such as peace negotiations, statehood, cooperation with international actors, and even the destruction of Israel have been utterly schizophrenic. Even when only focusing on the September negotiations, the inconsistent nature of both its rhetoric and its behavior has resulted in acceptance of the '67 lines by one spokesman and rocket attacks targeting territories inside the '67 lines by another branch of the movement in the same day.

Hamas' use of violence and more specifically, when and why it chooses to use it, is an issue of contention among Hamas' leadership. There are factions within Hamas, which at various times have included both Haniyah and Mashal, that have

accepted a Palestinian state based on 1967 borders as part of a broader peace agreement with Israel.¹ Despite the fact that this acceptance is fraught with caveats, it nonetheless represents a promising starting position. In fact, Iraqi newspaper, *Al-Zaman*, reported that the so-called “deposed government,”² run by Ismail Haniyah in the Gaza Strip, sent a request in recent weeks to the U.S. administration to begin a dialogue with Washington and to restart the Palestinian reconciliation efforts.³ In spite of this, statements made just as recently from Dr. Sami Abu Zuhri, a senior spokesman for Hamas’ political wing, argued that “... the movement cannot abandon the path of jihad and resistance,” implying that peace with Israel is impossible.⁴ The latter sentiments have been loudly echoed in the form of rocket attacks into pre-1967 Israel ordered by Izzadeen Al-Qassam Brigades (Hamas’ military wing) chief, Ahmed Jabari. As such, Hamas is now torn between some of the political echelon’s preference for restraint and other political and military leaders’ preference for pre-Gaza War levels of bombarding Israel.

In fact, there have been an increased number of attacks on Israel of a varying nature since the launch of the September peace process. A few dozen short-range rockets and mortars have targeted Israel as well as at least two phosphorus bombs. Along with this shelling, an Israeli citizen was stabbed in Nablus and several shootings took place, including a highly publicized point-blank shooting of four Israelis near Hebron, one of whom was pregnant.⁵ Hamas claimed responsibility for these attacks, issuing the following clarifying statements: Ezzat al-Rashk, a member of Hamas’s political office, told London-based *Al-Hayat* newspaper that “Zionist settlers are the Occupation’s first reserve military force ... Attacking settlers is a natural thing,”⁶ while Hamas spokesman, Abu Zuhri, said the attacks were a “normal reaction” to Israel’s “occupation crimes.”⁷ Al-Rashk’s comments are of particular note because of his distinction between the killing of settlers as opposed to, let’s say, non-West bank Israelis living in Tel Aviv. This distinction further highlights the divergence of opinion within Hamas regarding whether to pursue a state based on ’67 lines or to engage in resistance “until the whole of Palestine is liberated.”

However, these attacks on Israel intended to derail the peace process were not the handiwork of Hamas alone. On September 4, Abu Ubaida, a spokesman for the Izzadeen Al-Qassam Brigades, said that 13 Palestinian militant groups would unify and work together to launch “more effective attacks” against Israel. When asked whether these attacks would include suicide bombings, he responded, “All options are open.”⁸ Despite the pooled efforts of these other actors to disrupt the talks, it has been made clear by Hamas’ military wing leaders that they intend to call the shots. Having given these groups the go-ahead to operate on a small scale, Hamas’ military wing is also restraining them to a degree so as not to force the Israeli Defense Force back into Gaza.⁹ One is therefore left to decide whether these attacks are business as usual or an attempt by Hamas to be heard while the negotiations marched on without it. Abu Zuhri would have us think that it is the former case, having said that its attacks are not a message to the negotiators since negotiations are doomed to fail anyway. Considering the current status of the talks, Abu Zuhri and those in Hamas’ upper echelons, who have echoed this sentiment, might even be congratulating one another for being right.

Along with Hamas’ inability to reconcile with the Palestinian Authority as of yet—a move that would create a unified front to champion Palestinian aspirations—the group has also been at odds with most of the Arab countries in the region for quite some time. Hamas fell into disfavor with the Arab states not because its practice of terrorism was deemed counterproductive or destructive to the region, but rather because it chose to ally with the “other side”—Iran. Over the past decade, a new political order has emerged in the Middle East, pitting those actors willing to work within the established framework to

¹ In a July 2009 interview with the Wall Street Journal, Khaled Mashal declared, “We along with other Palestinian factions in consensus agreed upon accepting a Palestinian state on the 1967 lines ... This is the national program. This is our program. This is a position we stand by and respect.” See Jay Solomon and Julien Barnes-Dacey, “Hamas Chief Outlines Terms for Talks on Arab-Israeli Peace,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 31, 2009.

² Hamas’ Gaza-based Ministry of Information issued a memorandum to media outlets saying that “Using the term ‘dismissed government’ when talking about the Palestinian government in Gaza is political, biased and illegal, and reverses the facts.” See “Hamas Government: Don’t Call Us ‘Deposed,’” Ma’an News Agency, January 22, 2010 <www.maannews.net>

³ “Haniyah Requests a Dialogue with Washington,” *Al-Zaman*, September 19, 2010 <www.azzaman.com>. The Hamas-run government in the Gaza Strip issued an appeal to the media in early 2010, asking editors not to describe it as the “al-muqalah government”, translated as “dismissed” or “deposed.”

⁴ “Will Not Abandon the Path of Resistance Regardless of the Sacrifices” *Ezzadeen Al-Qassam Brigades - Information Office*, September 21, 2010 <www.alqassam.ps>

⁵ Israel, for its part, has responded intermittently to these violent incidents, ordering a series of airstrikes on militant targets in Gaza, and even killing a senior commander of the Hamas military wing.

⁶ Jihan Al-Husseini and Muhammad al-Makki Ahmad, “Hamas: Abbas Did Not Go to the Negotiations with Arab Cover” *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*, September 4, 2010 <<http://international.daralhayat.com>>

⁷ “The Most Notable Reactions to the ‘Torrent of Qassam Rockets,’” *Palestinian Times*, <www.paltimes.net>

⁸ The 13 armed groups include the Izzedin al-Qassam Brigades, Al-Quds Brigades (Islamic Jihad), Nasser Salah Addin Brigades, Al-Nasir Salah Al-Din Brigades of the Mujahideen, Hama, Al-Aqsa, Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (Fatah), and units of the martyr Nabil Massoud, Brigades of Abu Ali Mustafa (PFLP), Saif Al-Islam, Jihad Jibril Brigades (General Command), SS (Syrian Baath), and Al-Ansar. “13 Militant Wings Committed to Derailing the Negotiations by Escalating Armed Action,” *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, September 4, 2010 <www.aawsat.com>

⁹ For more, see Yaakov Katz, “Analysis: Hamas Stuck between Peace Talks and the IDF,” *The Jerusalem Post*, September 16, 2010.

achieve political goals against those looking to disrupt the status quo through subversive and violent means.¹⁰ Hamas, because of funding, ideological conviction, or an alignment of short-term goals, has allied itself with Hezbollah, Iran, Syria, and more recently, certain Turkish elements. Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, have been at loggerheads with those actors, and it is with this second camp that the Palestinian Authority has made its alliance. So now, when matters of the utmost importance are being discussed by Israel, the Palestinian Authority (P.A.), the United States, and Arab statesmen from Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, Hamas is being intentionally left out.

With regards to its relationship with the Arab States, and specifically Egypt, differing factions within Hamas have been pursuing competing strategies. Relations between Hamas and Mubarak's government have been rocky at best, oscillating between active cooperation on the Palestinian national reconciliation agenda and tacit provocation through Hamas' strategic use of violence. During the September negotiations, it seemed quite clear that elements in Hamas were interested in provoking Egypt by attempting to draw Cairo into its conflict with Israel. According to Maan News Agency, Egyptian security forces were on high alert based on intelligence they received regarding the intention of certain Palestinian militants to smuggle rockets into Egypt and strike at Israel from southern Sinai.¹¹ Israel Army officials say that Hamas chose Sinai so as not to expose itself to Israeli retaliation and to entangle Egypt.

Egypt has been aggressively using its military forces and intelligence units to thwart attacks in or from its territory. One of Cairo's more publicized efforts in this regard was its detention of Hamas' head of security, Mohammad Dababesh (aka Abu Radwan) by Egyptian security officials at Cairo International Airport. Dababesh, who was returning from a religious pilgrimage to Mecca, was held and questioned on suspicion of involvement "in many activities that are harmful to Egyptian national security." Hamas spokesmen have demanded Dababesh's immediate return and have gone as far as to call it "an abduction." Abu Zuhri declared that, "the arrest of Dababesh represents a continuation of the policy of escalation pursued by Cairo against Hamas,"¹² while other Hamas officials warned that the detention would inject tension into the already strained Egypt-Hamas relationship.

Fawzi Barhoum, yet another of Hamas' cadre of spokesmen, called for the Arab countries to "withdraw the cover" they are granting to "the negotiations between the Authority and the Occupation" in favor of "defending the Palestinian people."¹³ However it seems that from Cairo's perspective, playing an active and helpful role in the negotiation process may serve its interests on several levels. First among these interests is to prevent the solidification of an independent Islamist entity on its northeastern border bolstered by Iran; something that the P.A., Israel, the United States, among others, all have a stake in preventing. Additionally, Egypt's participation has the potential to alleviate US pressure on key domestic issues including human rights issues, upcoming elections, and the prospect of Gamal Mubarak's succession.

In the meantime, Iran also weighed in on the negotiations. Addressing a pro-Palestinian rally held in Tehran, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that Middle East peace negotiations were doomed to fail and that "The fate of Palestine will be decided in Palestine and through resistance and not in Washington."¹⁴ He went on to criticize Abbas' participation in the negotiations, saying Abbas lacked the legitimacy to "make concessions" on behalf of the Palestinian people and accused him of being "a hostage of Israel." Nabil Abu Rudaineh, spokesperson for Mahmoud Abbas, responded to Ahmadinejad's comments by telling the Iranian leader effectively to butt out.¹⁵

Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinian Authority have all expressed anger and suspicion at Iranian involvement in the Palestinian issue, seeing it as a bid to expand Iran's sphere of influence and destabilize the region. Furthermore, Fatah has accused Hamas of sacrificing strategic national interests including reunifying the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for the sake of maintaining its alliance with regional forces—Syria and Iran—and opposing the Palestinian Authority until, as Khalil Shikaki puts it, "... [Hamas] can either impose its own will or fully separate the Gaza Strip from Israeli and PA control."¹⁶

As it stands today, Hamas is a fragmented movement, caught between competing forces. While certain elements within Hamas

¹⁰ For more on this alignment, see Tally Helfont, "Egypt's Wall with Gaza & the Emergence of a New Middle East Alignment." *Orbis*, Summer 2010.

¹¹ "Egyptian Sources: Palestinian Groups Try Attacking Israel with Missiles from Sinai," Maan News Agency, September 19, 2010 <www.maannews.net>

¹² "Abu Zuhri: Debabeche Did Not Violate the Laws of Egypt and his Abduction is Unacceptable," The Palestine Information Center, September 22, 2010 <www.palestine-info.info/ar>

¹³ "Barhoum: The Occupation Uses the Negotiations as an Effective Cover to Commit Crimes," Ezzedeem Al-Qassam Brigades - Information Office, September 22, 2010 <www.alqassam.ps>

¹⁴ David Gardner, "Hamas Warns it Will Lead Terror Groups in New Wave of Attacks Against Israel in Response to Washington Peace Talks," *Daily Mail UK*, September 4, 2010.

¹⁵ "President's Office Slams Ahmadinejad Remarks," *Ma'an News Agency*, September 5, 2010 <www.maannews.net>

¹⁶ Khalil Shikaki, "The Palestinian 'Reconciliation' Maze," U.S./Middle East Project, Inc. Policy Brief, July 14, 2010.

seem ready to abandon the group's most extreme views, embodied in its incendiary and oft-referenced charter (1988),¹⁷ others elements still adamantly uphold these principles. Through the myriad of contradictory statements relating to 1) an arrangement with Israel, 2) the use of violence, and 3) relations with other regional actors, it is clear that Hamas is no longer a single, unified organization with clear objectives and therefore should not be treated as such. Much of the contemporary analysis of Hamas focuses on the group as either an unchanged militant organization bent on Israel's destruction, or a movement that has moderated and can now be a partner in the region. Accordingly, most policy recommendations at present suggest that the United States and other international actors engage, isolate, or confront Hamas based on the understanding of the group as one or the other. These polar understandings each miss the mark and have thus far, led to unsuccessful policy prescriptions.

As is evident in this article, I argue that Hamas is not a unified movement but rather, separate factions with separate leanings towards either militancy or moderation. Taking this split within Hamas into account is crucial for forming sound recommendations, especially because it may allow policy makers to expand from engagement, isolation, and confrontation to include division. It has been possible to engage one faction of the Palestinian people to conduct peace talks. Therefore, it may also be possible to engage only one faction within Hamas so as to advance the peace process. Through public diplomacy and a degree of back-channel maneuvering, the United States, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority should seek out elements within Hamas who are willing to curb resistance to the peace process in exchange for assurances that these factions will have a role in the future Palestinian state. This strategy has three clear benefits: 1) providing an incentive for these elements to prevent the subversion of the negotiations, 2) adding legitimacy to the future Palestinian State, and 3) isolating the factions within Hamas dedicated to militancy. The current policy towards Hamas has produced an untenable situation in which the P.A lacks enough legitimacy to conclude peace negotiations. At the same time, it sidelines elements within Hamas that may be useful to the process. If policymakers can implement the above strategy, they may be able to reverse the situation.

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¹⁷ Also known as the Hamas Covenant, this document is the source of Hamas' most unyielding, and extreme doctrine. See: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp