

Hamas: Constrained or Nimble?

Wednesday 15 August 2018, by [ALSOOS Imad](#), [BROWN Nathan J](#) (Date first published: 11 April 2018).

In 2017, the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas made news by taking three major steps that did not involve firing a single shot: it issued a new charter; it elected a new leadership; and it allowed the administration in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip to answer to the ministries of the Palestinian Authority (PA) based in the West Bank, a relationship that had been sundered a decade earlier.

These measures were interpreted by observers as [having been brought about by external political constraints](#). There were good reasons for reaching such a conclusion, since Hamas was, and to an extent still is, hemmed in from all sides. However, focusing solely on external considerations misses a great deal and is hardly sufficient for explaining why and how Hamas behaves as it does. The movement's ability to take observers by surprise was dramatically illustrated in April 2018 with a series of marches on the fence [surrounding the Gaza Strip](#).



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Rather, three additional factors must be taken into account. First, Hamas's leadership does not passively respond to outside conditions, but actively evaluates them in order to optimally manage its responses. Second, international pressure does not so much directly affect Hamas's calculations as it has an impact on domestic public opinion, which in turn shapes the group's understanding of opportunities and constraints. And third, Hamas is distinctive on the Palestinian scene in that it has developed an institutionalized rather than a personalized organization, one with mechanisms linking its leadership with the rank and file.

Understanding Hamas's internal dynamics helps to show how its actions reflect strategic choices, allowing for a better comprehension of the way the organization interacts with political realities, makes concessions, and capitalizes on these to maximize its gains. This, in turn, allows observers to grasp how Hamas achieves its goals, manages challenges, maintains its integrity, and survives, despite the formidable obstacles it has encountered in recent years. Such resilience has particular resonance at a time when Hamas's main rival, Fatah, is showing signs of incoherence and decay, when many Palestinian political structures are in crisis, and when the Palestinian national movement is facing an uncertain predicament.

THE HEADACHE OF GOVERNING

Hamas was founded on the eve of the First Palestinian Intifada (1987-1993) as an “Islamic resistance movement.” While it has long sought to join the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), this has never happened. Fatah has dominated the PLO since 1969 and is unwilling to cede to Hamas any part of its power. Hamas rejected the Oslo Accords of 1993 and the negotiations with Israel that followed. When this process led to the election of a Palestinian president and parliament in 1996, as part of a supposedly temporary Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, Hamas refused to go along with it.



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In 2000 the Second Intifada broke out, following the failure of the Oslo process to establish a Palestinian state. Hamas was active in the protests, solidifying its standing in Palestinian society. When new parliamentary elections were scheduled for January 2006, Hamas decided to participate, even though it continued to reject the Oslo process. The organization quickly showed a remarkable capacity for mobilizing in opposition to the PA, and this helped propel it to a stunning electoral triumph.

That triumph, which led to Hamas’s entering government for the first time, was met with a harsh international response. The Middle East Quartet—an ad hoc body created to mediate in Middle East peace talks, made up of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations—sought to [impose conditions on Hamas](#) for negotiations to continue. These involved recognizing Israel, accepting past agreements with Israel, and renouncing violence. When Hamas demurred, Israel and the United States took steps aimed at generating popular discontent with the Hamas government in Gaza and the West Bank. Israel ceased transferring tax revenues to the new Hamas-led Palestinian government while Western backers stopped providing it with budgetary support. Even private banks, fearing sanctions, put an end to their dealings with the new government. Under such pressure, Hamas did agree in principle with Fatah to form a national-unity government in 2007, but the efforts to unseat it continued. These efforts, spearheaded by the Palestinian security forces loyal to Fatah, failed, showing Hamas’s significant ability to maneuver domestically.

Power struggles between Fatah and Hamas over control of PA institutions escalated during that period, until there was a major outbreak of violence in June 2007, when the two groups engaged in a military showdown in Gaza. The ensuing Hamas victory allowed the organization to take over PA institutions in the territory. This provoked a rift in Palestinian areas, with Hamas ruling over Gaza and Fatah over the West Bank, from where it retained control of the PLO. While Hamas’s refusal to comply with the Middle East Quartet’s conditions had led to a momentary [increase in its popular support](#), this did not help Hamas to overcome growing public dissatisfaction with the tightened

blockade on Gaza imposed as a result of its victory, which began [eating away at its popularity](#).

Hamas's leaders justified their military takeover in 2007 as a reaction to what they said was a [planned coup by Fatah](#), but their actions placed them in a difficult position. The organization had crossed its own self-imposed redlines of never killing Palestinians or attacking other Palestinian groups. Hamas imposed a tight grip on power in Gaza, but it also [lost its reputation](#) as a more principled movement in the eyes of much of the population.

Even if the situation was corrosive to Hamas's status, it was manageable. The PA deposed the Hamas-led cabinet after its takeover of Gaza, but this came with a decision to continue funding the salaries of PA employees in the territory, allowing it to retain a base of loyalists there. In response, Hamas set up a parallel administration, hiring thousands of people, whose salaries the PA refused to pay. To counter the stranglehold on Gaza by Israel and Egypt, Hamas encouraged the growth of a "tunnel economy," whereby economic activity took place through hundreds of tunnels dug under Gaza's border with Egypt. This provided Gaza's inhabitants with work and cheap goods, generating renewed satisfaction.

As a result of the tunnels, Hamas's revenues rose, so that by [2009 they totaled \\$150-\\$200 million annually](#), a figure that would rise to about \$375 million in 2011, when the regime of Egypt's then president Hosni Mubarak fell. During the same period, unemployment in Gaza [dropped from 45 percent to 32 percent](#). This led to the increased stability of Hamas rule and a bigger regional role for the organization after the election of Mohamed Morsi as Egypt's president in 2012. All this seemed to promise an end to Hamas's isolation.

Periodically, the rival Palestinian leaderships would pledge to reconcile, and at times specific steps were taken to further this, such as extensive negotiations in 2011. Generally, it was the weakness of one side or the other at a particular time, and sometimes both, that led to efforts to appear to favor unity. However, neither side was willing to risk surrendering authority in its respective realm and international actors remained guarded, with some even hostile to such attempts.

Things changed for the worse for Hamas after July 2013, when Egypt's military overthrew Morsi and the political system led by the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas's sister organization. The military-dominated regime in Cairo put an end to the tunnel economy, exacerbating the impact of the blockade on Gaza. The ensuing economic strains forced Hamas to accept the [Shati Agreement](#) of April 23, 2014, an unprecedented development in the Fatah-Hamas relationship that was aimed at allowing the Fatah-led PA to govern Gaza again. The accord collapsed following the war between Hamas and Israel in summer 2014, as both Palestinian groups focused on retrenchment rather than reconciliation. However, the brief opening revealed that Hamas was looking for a way out of the Gaza straitjacket in a manner that would strengthen its domestic popularity.

HAMAS CHOOSES RENEWAL

In early 2017, amid the continuing stalemate in Hamas-Fatah relations, Hamas once again faced a crisis. In an attempt to raise the heat on Hamas, the PA cut the salaries of some of its own employees in Gaza as well as other forms of support for the territory, because such revenues facilitated Hamas's continued rule by reducing discontent. The organization concluded that, despite [widespread dissatisfaction with the PA](#), "popular agitation would turn against [Hamas] rule," as one activist put it. [\[1\]](#) The collapse of the tunnel economy and the PA's punitive measures had pushed Gazans to their limit, [given the misery in which they lived](#). Hamas's stark choice was either "reconciliation at any cost" and handing Gaza's administration over to Fatah, or accepting an "inevitable catastrophe."

This new reality forced Hamas and its electorate to be pragmatic with regard to the internal and external challenges the organization was facing. Hamas elections in February and October 2017 brought in Saleh al-Aroui, as deputy head of the Hamas Political Bureau, and Yahya al-Sinwar, as the movement's head in Gaza. While both were seen as hardliners, they moved forward on a reconciliation agreement with the PA. The difficulties all around seemed insurmountable, but the two new leaders' status as former Israeli prisoners and the fact that they represented new faces gave them the latitude to take Hamas in a new direction. As Sinwar [stated in a meeting with Gaza trade unions](#) in October 2017, reconciliation was a collective decision by the movement at home and abroad.

Under the reconciliation agreement that ensued, ministers from the PA in Ramallah are supposed to take formal control of political structures in Gaza, with Hamas ending any governing role there. However, full implementation seems unlikely at present. A unified cabinet in Ramallah nominally governs Gaza, but its effective control of the bureaucracy there is shaky and untested. Several outstanding issues, such as Hamas's insistence on retaining an armed wing, will likely remain unresolved. But even if parts of the agreement remain frozen, it has allowed Hamas to cede governing responsibility without losing influence over much of what goes on in Gaza. Even a bomb attack in Gaza in March 2018 targeting visiting PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, though it raised tensions, failed to bring about a collapse of the accommodation between Fatah and Hamas.

Why was Hamas willing to discontinue governing Gaza? And how did the election of seemingly uncompromising figures lead to its more relaxed grip on power and a more flexible ideology? External constraints, acting on public discontent in Gaza, had generated enormous pressure on Hamas, making its leaders realize that they could no longer govern, let alone wait out the blockade. However, Hamas also had choices, and in 2017 it showed that it could react not by accepting defeat passively but by turning crisis into opportunity.

Hamas was able to do this because its internal deliberations are conducted in such a way as to allow for the emergence of a broad consensus. The organization has always striven to have in place mechanisms allowing it to sustain itself, maintain links between the leadership and the base, and ensure that its members are united around party structures and a common strategy. That is why when Hamas faced external challenges, geographical isolation, a lack of allies, and rising popular discontent in 2017, it reacted by electing a new leadership. During this period it also altered its charter in a protracted, movement-wide process that suggested a willingness to compromise without formally repudiating past positions. These moves, aimed at giving new momentum to the organization, came as part of Hamas's preparation to disengage from its governing role in Gaza.

While Hamas has decisionmaking institutions, it gains by being able to anchor its choices in interactions between these institutions and local activists on the one hand, and between the organization and the broader public on the other. Hamas activists emphasize that all members were involved in deciding on a number of strategic choices in recent years, through forums providing for intense discussions—including whether to participate in local or legislative elections, to approve of a truce with Israel, or to endorse reconciliation talks with Fatah. [2]

A mechanism that Hamas uses for internal dialogue is monthly gatherings that it calls *lailat katiba* (or "battalion night"), in which its leaders share the movement's ideas with all members in each region. [3] Hamas also depends upon local bodies to create informal networks based on kinship, friendship, and neighborhood ties. In addition, these local bodies build a profile of the population by conducting surveys and registering people in the organization's database of inhabitants. [4] This allows Hamas to get a sense of the public mood about issues, in particular its standing and general attitudes toward its behavior and political choices.

WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR HAMAS?

Were the measures Hamas adopted in 2017 anything more than a quick fix? Hamas's ability to reestablish its position will depend on regaining the popular support it once enjoyed in Gaza, as well as on its success in rebuilding regional alliances to mitigate its political and geographical isolation. Achieving breakthroughs on these fronts depends on Hamas's organizational potential and its strategic choices.

Hamas's support dropped sharply as a result of its military takeover of Gaza and preservation of order through the heavy hand of its security forces. The organization realized it had to pursue conciliation as the violence had [led to the death](#) of dozens of people, [leaving influential local families embittered](#). Hamas's social and political interaction with the public had shifted its initial approach, from direct and largely unrestricted access toward more limited contact suiting an autocratic governing authority. Hamas sought to reverse course and once again position itself as the protector of the population, rather than as a force policing society and suppressing the political opposition.

Hamas does have a history of reviving itself. During the Second Intifada between 2000 and 2005, after years of repression by the PA at a time when Palestinian-Israeli negotiations were ongoing, Hamas was able to persuade many of its compatriots that the arrest of its cadres and the torture of some of its top leaders had been necessary to defend popular interests. [5]

However, while the post-2007 period allowed the movement to organize freely at the local level throughout Gaza, its current quest to regain public support could prove more difficult. Hamas's decision to abandon governance in the territory and work in favor of Palestinian reconciliation, particularly societal reconciliation in Gaza, might facilitate this task. However, the organization's enemies will not make it easy for Hamas to regain its previous stature.

Regionally, Hamas is attempting to revive its past relationships in a highly contested environment. The Middle East is polarized between a Saudi-led coalition that includes Egypt, Jordan, and the PA, and an Iran-led alliance that includes Syria and Hezbollah. Hamas is caught between the two poles. To bridge the gap with the Saudi-led camp, Hamas accepted some ambiguity about a two-state solution in its amended charter. It also dropped any mention of its links with the Muslim Brotherhood, which Egypt and Saudi Arabia consider a terrorist organization, a contrast with how Hamas had presented itself in the past. However, such efforts will be complicated by the fact that Sinwar and Arouri come from Hamas's military wing, whose primary supporter has long been Iran.

It is unlikely that Hamas will be able to navigate the regional split for long. The divisions are too strong and bitter for the organization to succeed in retaining a foot in both camps. Today, Egypt and Iran are the main rivals for Hamas's allegiance, each important with regard to the organization's specific political priorities, which are themselves a reflection of its multifaceted identity.

Hamas's relations with Egypt deteriorated after Mohamed Morsi's removal from power. However, the organization cannot afford to be on bad terms with the largest Arab country and the neighbor that controls Gaza's major lifeline, its twelve-kilometer southwestern border. Egypt is also the one actor that can persuade the PA to implement a reconciliation agreement with Hamas, and push Israel to go along with it. For its part, Egypt needs Hamas's cooperation to combat the Islamic State, a common enemy that has been effectively contained in Gaza, but not on the Sinai Peninsula, where an insurgency continues.

At the same time, there are strong forces attracting Hamas to the Iranian camp, even if the relationship worsened in 2012. Khaled Mishal, then the head of the Hamas Political Bureau, publically supported the uprising against the Syrian regime, Iran's major regional ally. Yet Hamas

needs Iran's financial support, which was suspended following that fissure, to pursue its social and political activities. Rebuilding the alliance would allow Hamas to resume providing services to the population and would help it regain regional standing as a major opponent of Israel. Iran, in turn, believes that renewed ties with Hamas would permit the Islamic Republic to recover its reputation as leader of the regional "resistance axis," rather than just as the sponsor of a sectarian Shia coalition.

The regional context suggests that the Iranian pull may be stronger since it is based on a longer-term, strategic concurrence of views. Arouri has described the relationship as being built on "[solid ground](#)." By contrast, the connection with the Saudi-led coalition seems to reflect détente more than any strong alignment. However, the lesson that Hamas learned from the failure of its alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab uprisings in 2011 is that it is better not to be tied to an ideological framework, but, instead, to pursue Hamas's interests according to circumstances. A Hamas leader, [Mahmoud al-Zahar](#), has emphasized this, arguing, "We are not at a stage where we are comfortable with ideological alliances [as they involve us in] regional [political] games."

But the cold pursuit of Hamas's interests may prove tricky today. Regional polarization between the Saudi- and Iranian-led camps leaves little room for the organization to maneuver as it pleases. Hamas is also at its weakest internally and regionally since its establishment in 1987, which means that it is not in a position to play each side off against the other. Any attempt by Hamas to generate advantage from one camp will provoke problems with the rival camp.

FOLLOWING IN FATAH'S FOOTSTEPS?

Hamas has stood out among Palestinian groups for its ability to maintain its power and effectiveness over time, while remaining united and cohesive. But if the organization is strong, its strategy has been more problematic. Hamas's control over Gaza highlighted the contradiction between the organization's resistance role, intended to defend Palestinians, and its governance tasks, which frequently meant imposing strict, unpopular control over the population.

Against this backdrop, Hamas and its electorate reacted in 2017 by bringing in a new leadership, introducing hints of compromise into its charter, and showing a greater readiness to adjust to internal Palestinian and regional political realities. In a comparison that Hamas leaders would find distasteful, the organization had to manage the same tensions faced earlier by Fatah in the period after each Palestinian intifada, when it sought to prioritize a political strategy over armed resistance. Fatah's unpersuasive performance led directly to its electoral defeats in local elections in 2004 and legislative elections in 2006.

As an organization, Hamas may fare better than Fatah, because it has a greater ability to deliberate, decide collectively, and even vote internally. But while the organization is likely to survive and renew itself, it faces a real problem down the road. The new leadership of Hamas has no clear solution to the strategic vacuum lying at the heart of the Palestinian national movement that it seeks to lead.

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P.S.

Footnotes

[1] Author interview with a Hamas activist, Gaza, November, 2017

[2] Author interview with a Hamas activist, Gaza, April 30, 2012.

[3] Author interview with a Hamas activist, Gaza, April 9, 2012.

[4] Author interview with a Hamas activist, Gaza, March 15, 2013.

[5] Author interviews with Hamas activists, Gaza, March 12 and March 18, 2012.