COMMENTARY | POLITICS

Hamas: Dismantling the Dilemmas of Governance and Resistance

By: Belal Shobaki · September, 2021

Overview

With the end of the Second Palestinian Intifada, the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, expressed its willingness to participate in the Palestinian Authority's (PA) municipal and legislative elections, ultimately winning many electoral contests. Hamas viewed its participation in official electoral politics as a way of strengthening the Palestinian resistance movement, as well as a means of bolstering the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the face of rising external pressures. For their part, the actors with the greatest influence on formal Palestinian politics saw the entry of Hamas into the formal political establishment as the fastest way to "tame" it.[1]

Based on these two perspectives, this commentary discusses the major dilemmas with which Hamas has attempted to reckon. It argues that, although the movement has partially overcome the doubts and allegations regarding its stance vis-à-vis democracy and its ability to govern while continuing to operate as a resistance movement, it faces an even more serious challenge: namely, the attempts to circumscribe its political role exclusively within Gaza, thereby forcibly isolating it from the rest of colonized Palestine. Hamas has worked to counter this

isolation by adopting a two-fold strategy of expanding its forms of resistance and, second, gradually abandoning the strategy of self-governance under occupation.

Hamas Participates in Political Leadership

Hamas participated in the 2006 legislative elections on fresh political ground made possible by several factors, including the internal Palestinian dialogue that culminated in the Cairo Declaration, the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, and the de-escalation of the Second Intifada. At the time, Hamas worked to present itself to Palestinian voters as a viable alternative, capable of salvaging the PA from its failed policies, corruption, and high rates of unemployment. It also refuted allegations that its participation in the elections implied any kind of acquiescence to the 1993 Oslo Accords. The equation was not an easy one, as oppositional Palestinian political movements, including Hamas, had to either play by the PA's rules or leave Fatah to monopolize governance, thereby allowing existing crises to deepen.

Hamas insisted that its 2005 decision to participate in the legislative elections – a decision made by the movement's leader in Nablus, Mohammad Ghazal – marked the culmination of its victory in Gaza, materializing in the withdrawal of Israeli occupation forces from the enclave, and that such participation was on the basis of the Cairo Declaration that superseded the Oslo Accords. Ghazal added that Hamas' participation was an effort to bolster the PA in the face of international pressures. This was an advanced stance at the time, as it cast Hamas in the position of a committed supporter of Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), rather than as a rival or competitor.

A few months later, Hamas won the 2006 legislative elections and the right to form the new government. After the movement assumed leadership of the government, the question was no longer whether its participation in the elections implied its acceptance of the Oslo Accords, but how it would reconcile resistance

and governance. Hamas indicated that its goal was neither to take power nor to abandon the resistance. The two most important indicators in this vein were Hamas' insistence on forming a unity government, and the continuation of the resistance activities of the Qassam Brigades, its military wing.

Nevertheless, those two indicators were not sufficient to prove that Hamas would be able to reconcile resistance and governance. One may have been able to consider this resistance and governance possible in the year of Hamas's electoral victory, but since then, the contradiction between resistance and governance strategies has been too stark. Hamas' governance has been stunted and its resistance has been in crisis, with the latter being tamed by the former. Hamas' political discourse gradually shifted to one of maintaining steadfastness and emphasizing the right to resist, rather than on governance and exercising resistance.

Another equally important question revolved around how a religious movement could reconcile its ideology with the requirements of democratic governance. Over the years following the election of Hamas' Change and Reform Bloc, the division between the Hamas-administered Gaza Strip and the Fatah-administered West Bank, and the multiple subsequent reconciliation attempts, Hamas was gradually able to provide favorable answers to these two questions. The resistance in Gaza was able to garner strength that would not have been possible had Hamas not taken over the enclave. Hamas used its position in Gaza to fortify its resistance and create a space that was relatively free of Israeli and PA security restrictions. However, this did not mean it succeeded in governance as much as in holding its ground under the siege. Hamas' most recent military campaign in May 2021, the Sword of al-Quds, highlights the growing strength of the Qassam Brigades and its success in garnering overwhelming popular support, support that the factions committed to political compromise with the Israeli regime have been unable to

mobilize.

Furthermore, Hamas evolved its discourse and positionality with regards to the question of reconciling its religious ideology with the principles of democratic governance, ending most of the controversy in this regard. Despite the risks of angering its highly ideological popular base, Hamas adopted a modern discourse in its political manifesto of 2017 that is consistent with democratic principles. However, its rule on the ground has been marred with numerous violations of human rights and democratic principles, leaving a gap between its newly stated positionality and its actual practices as a governance body.

The Sequestration of Hamas Within Gaza

Although Hamas partially succeeded in addressing the tensions between governance and resistance on the one hand, and between ideology and democracy on the other, other dilemmas were rapidly gaining importance. Most importantly, since 2007, Israel and its allies have actively sought to forge an exclusive link between Hamas and Gaza, and to separate the movement from Palestinian locales outside of the enclave, in order to contain Hamas and treat it as no more than the temporary governing administrator of the blockaded enclave.

Throughout the years of division that resulted from disregarding the 2006 election results, this concept has increasingly taken root in the Palestinian psyche, posing yet another challenge for Hamas by obstructing its attempts to grow beyond Gaza into the rest of Palestine, the region, and beyond. Linking Hamas exclusively to Gaza was not solely aimed at confining it, but also at enabling the Israeli regime to intensify its aggression against the blockaded enclave, for it realized the strategic risk that Gaza and its refugee population poses to the future of the Israeli regime.

While Hamas was eager to break this conceptual sequestration, many factors have worked to entrench it. At the regional level, for example, the Arab uprisings and their counter revolutions, the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the instability in Syria, pushed Hamas' political bureau to relocate several times, ending up in Gaza. Given regional rivalries, this has strained Hamas' capacity for political maneuvering on a regional level.

Indeed, Hamas has expended great effort at striking a balance between its need to open communication lines with regional states, especially Egypt, and its determination not to alienate its popular support base which has developed deep solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood. Although Hamas was able to maintain open communication lines with several countries including Egypt, that communication took place primarily on the humanitarian and security levels from the standpoint that Hamas was the de-facto administration in Gaza, not a national liberation movement that could engage with Fatah with regards to the future of the Palestinian struggle overall.

Meanwhile, Hamas has confronted a propaganda machine aimed at conceptually confining it to Gaza, and casting the enclave as an incubator of tyrannical Islamic rule. Palestinian and Arab rivals have overstated some policies of the Hamas security apparatus that interfered with such things as dress codes and cultural events to present Hamas as a carbon copy of outcast extremist religious movements shunned by the people and governments alike in the region. In doing so, Hamas' rivals took advantage of popular revulsion against ISIS rule in particular.

Israel, for its part, was more focused on linking the Hamas-led military resistance with the terrorist acts of groups such as ISIS in the region, overlooking the fundamental differences between the two and the fact that Hamas staunchly confronted ISIS-affiliated groups in Gaza. Although Hamas was successful in its

confrontation with such Islamist extremism, it has been compelled to take a defensive position and present evidence, however indirectly, to counter the Israeli propaganda machine's efforts to cast Hamas as analogous to ISIS.

Furthermore, the PA and Israeli regime launched a systematic campaign to uproot Hamas from the occupied West Bank. This began with an assault on Hamas' West Bank institutional infrastructure, including its mosque-based educational institutions, charitable organizations, Zakat committees and research centers, as well as the growing number of Hamas-affiliated prisoners of conscience. As a result, Hamas was unable to mobilize a new generation, nor play an active role in political life as it had in the past. Its existing members had to fend for themselves as they sought to secure their most basic rights. The Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR) reported thousands of cases of human rights violations in the West Bank that were based on political affiliation.

Moreover, the dismantling of Hamas' political and military organizational structure has rendered the movement unable to base any of its resistance activities against the Israeli regime in the West Bank, as it had in the First and Second Intifadas, and in between. These factors have also worked to cast the West Bank as Fateh's field of operations, and Gaza as Hamas'.

What Hamas Has Done in Response

Over the past five years, Hamas has worked relentlessly on several fronts: working against the confinement of Hamas to Gaza; presenting itself as an umbrella for resistance against the Israeli occupation and one of the legitimate political representatives of Palestinian people anywhere and everywhere; and to fundamentally address the dilemma of joining resistance with governance. These strategic objectives required that Hamas do the following:

Expand its Forms and Aims of Resistance

Palestinian political culture associates resistance with military acts of struggle, especially after Oslo and during the Second Intifada, as well as the successive wars on Gaza. However, and considering that Hamas can no longer carry out military resistance in the West Bank, there is a pressing need for all parts of the liberation movement, including Hamas, to embrace other forms of resistance, especially mass popular resistance. Moreover, Hamas's resistance in Gaza has become too costly despite its evolving capabilities, as Israel has adopted a strategy of inflicting more civilian casualties with every new offensive in order to engender popular pressure against the resistance. Although Israel has failed thus far, the continuation of military resistance in Gaza affirms the Hamas-Gaza linkage and the perception that resistance only serves a Hamas agenda.

Related to this, since its founding as a military resistance movement, Hamas aims at eroding Israel's occupation and through a sustained war of attrition. Since Israel imposed its brutal blockade on Gaza in 2007, Hamas has increasingly treated resistance as leverage to ease the siege on Gaza and to secure the most basic survival requirements for Palestinians in Gaza. As such, it became all the more of a priority for Hamas to expand the forms and aims of resistance as a tool to ensure that the occupation and siege of Gaza do not end on terms set by the Israeli regime. To this end, Hamas took three measures:

- First, it supported popular resistance in Gaza through the 2018 Great March of Return as a less costly form of resistance against Israeli occupation forces without forsaking military resistance. By engaging in popular resistance activities, it also succeeded in joining the ranks of Palestinians everywhere within the struggle, undercutting attempts to reduce Hamas to Gaza;
- Second, Hamas urged its members and supporters in the West Bank to support all forms of popular resistance. Although Hamas was banned there, participation in popular resistance meant that the movement could

still be part of the overall resistance movement in the West Bank despite the severe curtailment of its ability to carry out military resistance activities;

- Third, Hamas sought to harness its military resistance in Gaza to serve Palestinian national causes, and not only to ease the siege. It did this during the Sword of al-Quds campaign, when it linked its military action with the rights-based demands of Jerusalemites, specifically in the Sheikh Jarrah and Bab al-Amud neighborhoods.

Gradually Abandon the Idea of Governance Under Occupation

This policy can be inferred from Hamas' recent discourse on the PLO, as it has neither overtly forsaken the idea of governance under occupation nor entirely abandoned it. Rather, it has renewed its desire to participate in the legislative elections and rolled out its electoral list under the slogan "In al-Quds We Shall Meet." However, this may not necessarily reflect a true conviction in the elections as much as a desire to prevent Fatah from monopolizing the administration of Palestinian institutions. This suggests that Hamas is gradually forsaking governance under occupation as its recent discourse has been focused on the need to reform and join the PLO, while its participation in PA governance seems a secondary issue. It is worth mentioning, nonetheless, that Hamas's drive to join the PLO precedes its campaign to join the PA, and that this conviction previously existed, but ruling Gaza has made it more pronounced.

Hamas' focus on the need to reform and join the PLO derives from its realization that Palestinians cannot overcome the impasse of governance under occupation without realigning the PLO's political options away from political settlement. The PLO must also harness Palestinians' energy in the diaspora and the homeland to serve the liberation struggle. This would necessitate that Hamas join other PLO factions in reforming the PLO.

As a prelude, Hamas clearly changed its position towards the PLO. This is evident in its new political charter, in repeated political statements by its leadership, and in its insistence on empowering a provisional leadership in the PLO. Hamas boosted this rhetoric after the Sword of al-Quds campaign, when the movement's leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, motivated by the mass support for the resistance, stated that without Hamas and the other resistance factions, the PLO was no more than a political salon. Though some consider this statement to be no more than bravado following the success of the Sword of al-Quds campaign, a more serious reading sees it as an indication that Hamas now views itself as having more power and legitimacy derived from its resistance, which entitles it to question the PLO's representativeness of Palestinians.

Ongoing Challenges to Reconciling the Dilemmas

One may argue that Hamas was successful in expanding its forms and aims of resistance to the extent that it garnered the support of millions of Palestinians of all walks of life and political backgrounds. Indeed, it has become the pillar of contemporary Palestinian struggle and a framework that transcends intellectual and ideological differences. And while many Palestinians disagree on Hamas' governance and ideology, there is consensus around its centrality to the resistance.

As for abandoning the idea of governance under occupation, this hinges primarily on Fatah. Hamas will remain unable to join the PLO and contribute to its reform unless new conditions emerge that limit Fatah's power, or compel it to embrace new options that include Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

The conditions in question are internal and require the Palestinian public to continue to redouble efforts to determine their political sphere. Indeed, the continued human rights violations committed by the PA, including the

assassination of political activist Nizar Banat, have impelled Palestinians to take to the streets demanding radical changes in the PA and an end to the political status quo.

1. *To read this piece in French, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.*

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