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Amending the Charter: What's in It for Hamas?

Earlier this month, reports surfaced that Hamas might soon amend its charter. Those reports were soon overtaken by the news that Hamas had elected a new leadership in the Gaza Strip.

This is not the first time the movement has attempted a change in the charter. Indeed, Hamas has been aware since 2006 of the need to amend, if not overhaul, its charter, as its entry into politics that year put the document – written in 1988 – at odds with its words and actions. However, fear of creating an internal rift and losing its constituency's support has kept Hamas from taking action.

What are the current considerations that Hamas is likely to take into account in regard to amending its charter?

- Certain changes to Hamas's charter at this point would not affect the unity of the movement and could help it build external relationships. Two such amendments are 1) the elimination of the requirement that the PLO adopt Islam as the way of life as a precondition for Hamas to join the organization; and 2) a change in the discourse that characterizes the movement's struggle as religious. In contrast, any amendment that would confine resistance to the lands within the 1967 borders could alienate supporters. In this sphere Hamas would likely be limited to tweaking some language and cutting some phrases.
- The international community's issues with Hamas are less to do with the charter than with the movement's political behavior toward Israel. In this regard, the charter serves as a useful tool to attack and condemn Hamas. Thus, if Hamas's intention in changing the charter is to establish a relationship with the international community, this effort is likely to fail. Particularly within this political climate, Hamas will simply face other prerequisites for engagement, such as adhering to the three conditions set by the Quartet – or even more stringent stipulations, given the rise of right-wing movements in the United States, Europe, and Israel.

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- The timing for charter reform is crucial. Hamas knows that it must choose a moment of strength, for if it acts during a time of weakness, this will likely lead to internal schisms. The organization's supporters will assume that it has succumbed to local and international pressures, and has effectively been defeated. This will lead to the strengthening or creation of new extremist religious organizations in Palestine.

Certain changes to the Hamas charter would not affect the unity of the movement and could help it build external relationships