The specter of Hamas - what they will and will not do - haunts nearly every discussion about a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Many of us have been confused as of late in thinking about Hamas since the group has applauded suicide bombing and has spoken out strongly against a two-state solution. Yet, lately, statements by some in their leadership appear to show moderation and possible backtracking on their hard-line positions. In order to answer the questions which frequently are asked whenever Hamas is discussed and to provide background information to assist our reader in understanding the Palestinian political situation, we researched and developed this "backgrounder" on Hamas. We hope it assists our readers in gaining a general understanding of their origins and what the future may hold in store for them - and for those of us who advocate a negotiated settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This first backgrounder is offered in a "popular education" style to make it accessible to a broad audience. Complex details have been simplified for the sake of brevity. We hope that this abbreviated history will help readers gain a better understanding of Hamas’s role in Palestinian politics. This is important as we watch the ongoing developments in the Middle East as well as the attention which will be focused on the possibilities for a final status peace agreement in the coming months.

A Brief History of Hamas

The roots of Hamas are found in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni movement established in 1928 which held that Muslims had become vulnerable to colonization through a lack of religious observance. Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip from 1949 to 1967, and thus the Brotherhood was already familiar to Palestinians when Sheikh Ahmed Yassin created the Islamic Center to coordinate Brotherhood activities in Gaza in 1973.

Hamas was established after the eruption of the first intifada in December 1987, to serve as the Brotherhood's local political arm and as an alternative to the secular Palestinian leadership; “Hamas” is an acronym of Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya, or Islamic Resistance Movement, and translates as “zeal.”

Israel initially encouraged the growth of Islamic movements in the occupied territories, believing they could serve as a counterweight to the PLO. During the first intifada, however, Israel arrested Sheikh Yassin, holding him until his release in a 1997 prisoner exchange and ultimately assassinating him in 2004.

Hamas has always seen politics and religion as naturally intertwined, and is today the leading Palestinian Islamist movement, focused on domestic issues rather than a broader international vision for Islam. From its inception, the movement called for a Palestinian state in all of historic Palestine, spreading its message through violent action against Israel and religious teaching, developing an extensive network of schools, orphanages and healthcare clinics. Much of Hamas’s annual budget is dedicated to social services.

After an initial refusal to participate in Palestinian Authority (PA) politics in protest of the Oslo peace process, Hamas began in 2005 to take part in municipal elections, often successfully.
The unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in August of that year created expectations that Palestinians would be able govern themselves independently, but as the Israeli government retained control of the Strip’s borders and air space, it in fact remained the occupying power, according to international law. This reality bolstered Hamas’s position. It was able to claim that its militancy, including suicide bombings, forced the Israelis to withdraw, and the government led by moderate PLO leader President Mahmoud Abbas had little to point to in response.

Hamas participated in the January 2006 legislative elections, and won 42.9% of the popular vote. Palestinian election laws meant that this translated to a disproportionately large number of seats in the Palestinian legislature, 74 out of 132. Israel, the US, and most of the international community immediately declared they would not deal with any Hamas-led government until it met three pre-conditions: recognition of Israel’s right to exist, renunciation of violence, and commitment to abide by all previous agreements between Israel and the PLO.

The subsequent imposition of a strict economic blockade created a dramatic downturn in the Palestinian economy; growing poverty created an increasingly desperate populace. In spite of these pressures, however, Hamas consistently said that it would not meet the preconditions directly. Instead, statements have been floated suggesting a willingness to accept the preconditions as the result of a comprehensive agreement.

Hamas did attempt to form a unity government with Fatah, resulting in the 2007 Saudi-brokered Mecca Agreement culminating in the establishment of a Hamas-Fatah government in April 2007. In June 2007, however, long-festering tensions boiled over into battles in Gaza, with Hamas quickly taking over in the Strip.

Since then, Hamas has given conflicting signals, calling on President Abbas to begin talks toward a new unity government, but also instituting quasi-military rule and steadfastly refusing to renounce the regular firing of Qassam rockets into southern Israel.

**Ideology and Activities**

The Hamas Charter calls for the destruction of Israel (“Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before”), couching its ideology in clearly religious terms: “The nationalism of the Islamic Resistance Movement is part of its faith, the movement educates its members to adhere to its principles and to raise the banner of Allah over their homeland.”

As part of its effort to achieve these aims, Hamas has become best known for its horrific use of suicide bombings. One of its first such attacks came on April 6, 1994: A suicide bomber rammed an explosives-laden car into a bus, killing eight and wounding 34 in the Israeli town of Afula, a response to the earlier murder of 29 Muslims by Baruch Goldstein, in Hebron. Many Palestinian and Israeli experts understand the introduction of suicide bombings, intended to kill as many Israelis as possible, as an effort also to embarrass the PLO and reverse the peace process.
These bloody attacks, combined with Israel’s harsh reprisals and accelerated settlement expansion, served to effectively freeze the diplomatic process in the late 1990s. In August 2004, however, Hamas declared a unilateral ceasefire and has largely maintained a moratorium on suicide attacks ever since. On the other hand, the movement’s military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, has maintained a more uncompromising approach, and is considered responsible for most of the continuing violence out of Gaza.

Since the 2006 elections, the political arm of Hamas has shown greater pragmatism than in the past. In May 2006, Fatah and Hamas leaders imprisoned in Israel achieved the Palestinian Prisoners’ Document, in which influential Hamas members agreed to the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders. In a November 2006 New York Times editorial, Ahmed Yousef, senior adviser to Hamas Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, called for a hudna, a long-term ceasefire, “to initiate a period of peaceful coexistence during which both sides would refrain from any form of military aggression.” In January 2007, The Guardian reported that according to leader Khaled Meshal, “Hamas accepts the existence of the state of Israel but will not officially recognize it until the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.”

In February 2007, in agreeing to a national Unity government, Hamas went on record as “respecting” (as opposed to “being bound by”) the Arab League Peace Initiative that calls for an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders and resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue. Israel and the US did not recognize the unity government because of Hamas’s refusal to openly recognize past agreements and (in rhetoric geared toward Palestinian audiences) has continued to refuse to recognize Israel and advocates of “armed resistance.”

**Domestic and International Relationships**

Unlike Hamas, Fatah is in spirit very similar to the nationalist movements that developed in Europe, dedicated to the establishment of a modern nation-state in historical Palestine. Over the years, Fatah and the PLO have moved toward the acceptance of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, making it official policy in 1988.

Since Hamas came to power in 2006, most of the international community has funded and backed Fatah, cutting off funding for the Hamas-led government. Since the 2007 violence in Gaza and the Hamas take-over, the US, Israel and most of the international community have followed a “West-Bank-first” strategy advocated by President Abbas, continuing the previous policy of isolating Hamas by providing financial, political, diplomatic, and military support for the West Bank Abbas-led PA.

An important question is how much popularity does Hamas actually enjoy among Palestinians? Without doubt, the profile of Hamas has risen dramatically, but the notion that Hamas won a landslide victory in January 2006, and that its approach to Islam in daily and political life is shared widely among Palestinians, is inaccurate.

After years of widespread corruption in Fatah-led institutions, many Palestinians were impressed by Hamas promises to clean up the Palestinian government, voting for the
movement’s anti-corruption platform. Since January 2006, a clear majority of Palestinians have said in poll after poll that they support a negotiated, two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In September 2007, a poll conducted by Near East Consulting found that 72% of the Palestinians support Palestinian participation in the upcoming peace conference, and 69% support a peace settlement with Israel.

Furthermore, Hamas lost support after its takeover of Gaza. A poll conducted by Palestinian university An-Najah found that half of the Palestinian population condemned Hamas for its actions and more than 70% approved of the emergency government formed in the West Bank by President Abbas. A different poll found that if Fatah underwent organizational reform, 78% of Palestinians would vote for it over Hamas.

Yet it remains true that many Palestinians support Hamas for its continued violent resistance to the occupation. The movement’s frequent use of extreme rhetoric serves a purpose filled in the past by the PLO’s once-revolutionary language: providing a counter-narrative to the daily reality of deprivation and powerlessness faced by most Palestinians.

The Near Future
The peace conference planned for Annapolis, Maryland specifically excludes Hamas. Abbas has encouraged this isolation, hoping to make a deal with Israel and improve life on the West Bank before dealing with Hamas. Israeli policy is complimentary, based on the assumption that the split between Hamas and Fatah will free Abbas to achieve an agreement without having to acquiesce hardliners.

Some have warned, however, that if Hamas is kept from the conference, the movement may assume the spoiler role it’s played in the past, hoping to scuttle negotiations before they begin. Hamas has already called for a boycott of the conference until national unity has been achieved, and has urged Arab countries not to normalize relations with Israel.

A number of prominent officials and analysts have weighed in on possible solutions. In a letter to President Bush on the peace conference, eight former government officials suggested that “a genuine dialogue with the organization is far preferable to its isolation; it could be conducted, for example, by the UN and Quartet Middle East envoys.”

Analysts Gaith Al-Omari and Rafi Dajani suggest it’s possible for President Abbas “to reach an agreement with the Israelis… without Hamas, if a meaningful process toward Palestinian statehood is started, following a document of principles setting the general contours of a peace agreement… If such an agreement meets Palestinian national aspirations and is backed by key Arab countries, namely Saudi Arabia, it is hard to imagine Hamas opposing it and risking alienating the Palestinian people.”

In September 2007, 13 of Israel’s leading intellectuals called on Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to negotiate “a comprehensive cease-fire without preconditions” with Hamas, and to make every effort to achieve “substantial agreements” with Abbas at the summit.
An August 2007 poll reveals Fatah-Hamas détente to be a priority among Palestinians, and if for no other reason, it seems clear that ultimately, it will be necessary to integrate Hamas into the process if final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians are to succeed – no agreement has a chance of lasting if such a large and powerful sector of Palestinian society feels it has no stake in the process.