



Backgrounder: Hamas

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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 Muslim Brotherhood

The Roots of Hamas are in the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni religious and political organization established in Egypt in 1928, when Egypt was officially independent but still de facto controlled by the British.

The Brotherhood's ideology stood in contrast to the predominant Western-style anti-colonialist movements which emphasized values of liberalism and secular democracy. Instead, the Brotherhood taught that Muslims had become vulnerable to colonization through their lack of religious observance and spirituality.

The Brotherhood sought political independence for all Muslims and the establishment of a pan-Islamic *caliphate* throughout the Middle East. The Brotherhood's combination of religious zeal and political purpose appealed to many in the increasingly fractured Arab world, and local groups sprung up throughout the region.

The organization's growth was accelerated by the defeat of the Arab states in the 1967 Six Day War, and the collapse of the dominant ideology of pan-Arabism, a secular nationalist ideology that held that all Arabs were members of one nation and should be united into one country. The most prominent pan-Arabist, Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser, was deeply humiliated by the defeat of his army in 1967 – the largest and strongest in the region – and lost much support in the Arab world.

The Brotherhood Comes to Gaza

Because Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip from 1949 to 1967, the Brotherhood was already known among Palestinians when Sheikh Ahmed Yassin created the Islamic Center to coordinate Brotherhood activities in Gaza in 1973.

Yassin and a small cohort of like-thinkers established Hamas after the eruption of the first intifada in December 1987, both to serve as the Brotherhood's local political arm and as an alternative to Fatah leadership of the Palestinian movement. They hoped this new organization - *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*, or Islamic Resistance Movement – and whose name means “zeal,” would be more in line with fundamentalist Islamic thought.

Israel initially encouraged the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood and later Hamas, by turning a blind eye to Islamist activities. By and large, Israeli governments viewed the religious Muslim movements through the lens of social reform, devoid of political agenda and focused on spiritual transformation of Palestinian society.

They also believed Hamas could serve as a counterweight to the more openly nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a multi-party Palestinian confederation which had long agitated for a Palestinian state. Hamas was allowed to hold rallies and maintain its own uncensored radio station and newspaper at a time when such activity by the PLO was prohibited. During the first intifada, however, Israel arrested Sheikh Yassin, holding him until his release in a 1997 prisoner exchange (ultimately assassinating him in 2004).

Historically, Hamas has operated as an Islamic voice of opposition to secular Palestinian independence movements. They called for a Palestinian state in all of historic Palestine, which it viewed as a sacred endowment to Muslims and not subject to negotiation. Hamas spread its message through violent action and religious teaching. They developed an extensive social services network of schools, orphanages, healthcare clinics, nutrition sites, and sports leagues. Hamas also provided direct assistance to the families of killed and injured militants as well as to prisoners and their families.

Much of Hamas's annual budget, estimated to be in the tens of millions of dollars, is dedicated to social services. Its funding has come historically from Palestinian expatriates, private donors in moderate Arab states, and Iran.

Move Into the Political Sphere

Hamas began its overtly political forays during the late 1980s and early 1990s in labor unions and student organization elections, experiencing some success. An initial refusal to participate in Palestinian Authority (PA) politics in protest of the Oslo peace process, Hamas reversed its non-participation policy in recent years. Though it boycotted the 2005 Presidential elections in which Mahmoud Abbas was elected, the organization participated successfully in many municipal elections later that year, forming local governments throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

The unilateral Israeli withdrawal of troops from the Gaza Strip in August 2005 created an unprecedented scenario in which – at least theoretically – the Palestinian people would govern themselves independently in one portion of the occupied territories.

This was not the case in practice, however, as the Israeli government retained control of the Strip's borders, air space, export and import routes, and much of its water and electrical supply in the name of security. According to international law, Israel remained the occupying power in Gaza. This reality, combined with the unilateral – rather than negotiated - withdrawal from Gaza bolstered Hamas's position within the Palestinian polity. Hamas claimed their militancy, including suicide bombings, had forced the Israelis to withdraw, and the Abbas-led government had little to point to in response. As a result, Hamas had a spike in popularity.

Hamas participated in the January 2006 legislative elections, and won 42.9% of the popular vote. Why this success? In part it was due to the fact that in many races more than one Fatah-affiliated candidate – some nominated by their party, some not – competed for the same seat, thus splitting the party's vote. Hamas voters – a generally more disciplined bloc than Fatah supporters – were thereby able to win a disproportionately large number of seats in the Palestinian legislature (74 out of 132).

Post-Election Fallout and Civil War

Hamas's electoral victory brought to the forefront those agreements previously signed by the PLO. These included recognition of Israel's right to exist and a renunciation of violence. The Palestinian Liberation Organization, is responsible for Palestinian foreign affairs and is the signatory to all treaties, while the PA was formed as part of the 1993 Oslo Accords as an interim Palestinian ruling body with limited authority over domestic issues in parts of Gaza and the West Bank, pending the negotiation of a permanent agreement with Israel.

The framework of the Oslo Accords, was signed by the PLO as “the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.” Hamas, which has never been a member of the PLO, did not see itself bound by any of the PLO's past agreements.

Immediately following Hamas’s 2006 electoral victory, Israel, the U.S., and most of the international community declared that 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 Bush Administration and Congress stated categorically that the U.S. would have nothing to do with the Hamas government, and took immediate steps to isolate the PA in an effort to convince Hamas to change its ideology and opinions, or encourage Palestinians to overthrow their government.

The subsequent imposition of a strict economic blockade by the U.S., Israel, and the international community created a dramatic downturn in the Palestinian economy. This, in turn, meant deteriorating public services as the government ran out of funds to pay workers. Growing poverty created an increasingly aid-dependent populace.

In spite of these pressures, however, Hamas has consistently said that it will not meet the preconditions directly. Instead, its spokespeople have floated statements suggesting a willingness to accept the preconditions as the *result* of a comprehensive agreement negotiated by the PLO and accepted by the majority of the Palestinian people in a referendum.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh told the *Washington Post* in February 2006: “We are surprised that such conditions are imposed on us. Why don't they direct such conditions and questions to Israel? Has Israel respected agreements?”¹ In fact, both the Israeli government and the PA violated agreements made in the Oslo Accords throughout the 1990s.

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, the long-festering tensions between the two movements boiled over into bloody street battles in Gaza, with Hamas quickly gaining the upper hand and taking over in the Strip.

Since then, Hamas has given conflicting signals. The Hamas-led government in Gaza facilitated the release of kidnapped British journalist Alan Johnston, worked to end

¹ Yitzhak Ben-Horin. “We don’t want to throw them into the sea.” *Ynet News*, February 25, 2006. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3220875,00.html>.

Gaza's rampant street lawlessness, and called on President Abbas to begin talks toward a new unity government. However, it also instituted quasi-military rule (including the issuance of fundamentalist edicts touching on daily life), accumulated large amounts of arms through a combination of collecting privately-owned weapons and assuming control of smuggling routes from Egypt, suppressed opposition political activity. They have steadfastly refused to renounce or attempt to quell any of the violence in Gaza, including the regular firing of Qassam rockets into southern Israel. The *Washington Post* reported that the Hamas-run Executive Force has been used to repress Fatah supporters and local journalists, saying that "Hamas leaders are increasingly imposing harsh interpretations of Islamic law and using brute force to bolster their isolated administration."²

Ideology and Activities

Hamas and the Islamist Movement

Far from divorcing religion and social reform from political activism, Hamas has always seen the two as naturally intertwined.

In the most straightforward sense, "Islamist" describes an organization that operates according to strict adherence to Islamic law (*sharia*), advocating for a larger role for Islam and *sharia* in public life. All such organizations believe that the Qur'an and the collected sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunna*) provide the ideal path for political organization and social life. While there are radical Islamist groups that justify and perpetrate violence based on their religious beliefs, the word "Islamist" does not, in and of itself, mean radical, violent, or terrorist.

Hamas is the predominant Palestinian Islamist movement. Like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas is a Sunni organization, focused on the reversal of Muslim fortunes through a strict interpretation of Islam and political transformation of the lands in which Muslims live. Hamas, like most Brotherhood movements today, has a domestic rather than an international focus and thus stands in contrast to Fatah with its pointedly non-religious ideology, even though the vast majority of its members are Muslim.

With the shutdown of international aid that followed the 2006 election, Hamas has sought and received backing from highly secular Syria and financial support from the Shi'ite theocracy, Iran. While its ideology has been focused on the establishment of a Sunni-nationalist Palestinian state, Hamas is clearly not opposed to accepting the help of those with very different viewpoints, especially when backed into a corner.

The Hamas Charter

² Scott Wilson. "Hamas's New Order Exact Toll on Gaza." *Washington Post*, September 17, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/16/AR2007091601487.html>.

Created in 1988, the document calls for the destruction of Israel and the creation of a theocracy in all of pre-1948 Palestine: “Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before...the land of Palestine is an Islamic *waqf* [religious endowment] consecrated for future Muslim generations [and] should not be given up.”

The charter makes explicit reference to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, accepting the virulently anti-Semitic forgery as fact: “Their scheme has been laid out in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and their present [conduct] is the best proof of what is said there.”

It also takes an all-or-nothing view: “No one can renounce [Palestine] or part of it... No Arab country nor the aggregate of all Arab countries... has that right nor any organization or the aggregate of all organizations, be they Palestinian or Arab.... When our enemies usurp some Islamic lands, Jihad [“struggle” or in this context “war on behalf of Islam”] becomes a duty binding on all Muslims.”

Hamas couches its ideology in clearly religious terms: “Renouncing any part of Palestine means renouncing part of the religion; 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 they fight their Jihad.”³

Political vs. Military Wings

While the political body of Hamas has declared a unilateral ceasefire, its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, has frequently fired mortars and rockets into Israel from Gaza, resulting in deaths, injuries, significant damage to property, and psychological distress.

Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, is considered more uncompromising than the political wing. When Hamas won the January 2006 elections, it established an Executive Force as an “official” militia that serves as something of a policing force. Although the Executive Force coordinates its activities with the Brigades, it maintains a separate command structure.

Hamas’s political wing remained silent as rockets continued to fall during the summer of 2007 and into the early fall, but an Izz al-Din al-Qassam leader, Abu Muhammad, said this in a September 2007 interview: “Firing rockets is one of the means Palestinians employ to show their frustration and anger. It is to send a message to the world that there is a nation in Gaza that is suffering under an illegal and oppressive occupation and that

³ The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, “The Middle East 1916 - the Present, A Documentary Record.” Yale University, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/mideast.htm>.

the world must move to help us by exerting pressure on Israel to stop this occupation and give Palestinians their rights . . . The reason for the rockets is the Israeli occupation.”⁴

The political wing will, however, take advantage of Izz al-Din al-Qassam’s actions to make a political point. When a Qassam injured dozens of Israeli soldiers in mid-September, Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum declared it “a victory from God for the resistance.”⁵ Israel has often responded to such “victories” with deadly military incursions into Gaza.

Hamas and Terrorism

Hamas calls for the creation of a Palestinian state through “resistance,” including armed attacks against Israeli citizens. As a result of such attacks, it appears on the lists of terrorist organizations maintained by Canada, the European Union, Israel, Japan, and the U.S.

In the West, the movement is best known for its horrific use of suicide bombings within Israel proper. One of its earliest uses of this tactic was on April 6, 1994 when a Hamas suicide bomber rammed an explosives-laden car into a bus, killing eight and wounding 34 in the Israeli town of Afula, claiming it was in response to the murder of 29 Muslims by Baruch Goldstein in Hebron on February 25, 1994.

In a terrible irony, the attacker utilized methods learned after Israel deported more than 400 Palestinians, including many Hamas members, to southern Lebanon in 1992-93, an expulsion that transformed them into heroes and martyrs among Palestinians. In Lebanon the deportees were housed and fed by Hezbollah, a militant Lebanese organization established in 1982 to fight the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon

Many Palestinian and Israeli experts understand the introduction of suicide bombings, which were clearly intended to kill as many Israelis as possible, as an effort to embarrass the PLO and reverse the peace process – a process which Hamas opposed because it would lead to recognition of Israel (as epitomized by the 1993 Declaration of Principles, which called for the withdrawal of Israel from parts of the West Bank and Gaza, limited Palestinian self-government and a phased process intended to culminate in a Palestinian state).

Hamas is estimated to have killed over 500 people, civilians as well as combatants, in more than 350 separate attacks, including suicide bombings and assaults using mortars,

⁴ From “A Palestinian view: Gaza expects an Onslaught. An interview with Abu Mohammad,” Bitterlemons, posted Sept. 17, 2007, <http://www.bitterlemons.org/previous/bl170907ed35.html#pal2>.

⁵ Steven Erlanger. “Rocket Injures 40 Israeli Soldiers.” *New York Times*, September 12, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/12/world/middleeast/12mideast.html?_r=2&hp=&adxnnl=1&oref=slogin&adxnnlx=1190310149-+/ABM5nfCmmckMo8yKHqWA.

short-range rockets, and small arms fire. Perhaps the most notorious suicide bombing came on March 27, 2002, when 29 Israelis were killed and more than 100 injured while attending a Passover Seder at the Park Hotel in Netanya.

From 1994-1997, and then again after October 26, 2000, Hamas's use of suicide bombings was often a direct and calculated reaction to perceived Israeli provocation and the action or inaction of the PA. Those launched during the negotiations known as the Oslo peace process (1993-1996) often appeared to be strategically timed to undermine specific progress at the negotiating table.

Clearly, it is difficult to determine whether the unquestionable damage to the peace process was a central motive of the organization or simply a by-product that Hamas was happy to exploit. Regardless, Israel often responded not by targeting the PA rather than Hamas, with the end result being that Hamas's suicide bombings served to greatly destabilize the PA, in addition to causing immense suffering among Israelis.

The peace process was effectively frozen in the late 1990s largely as a result of these bloody attacks and Israel's harsh reprisals and accelerated settlement expansion. In August 2004, however, Hamas itself declared a unilateral ceasefire and has largely maintained a moratorium on suicide attacks since that time. The January 2005 attack on the Karni crossing in Gaza and the bombing in August 2005 in Beersheba are disputed as to their origins and may be two exceptions to this moratorium.

Who's in Charge?

The geographical separation of the Palestinian people (with some in the West Bank and Jerusalem, others in Gaza, and still others scattered in many other countries) has meant that separate political leadership cadres have developed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with a third center in Syria.

Many commentators have found the West Bank leadership to be the most pragmatic, followed by the leaders in Gaza, and finally those in Syria, who are often most strident. The positions of these groups often shift in response to the political realities in which they operate and the constantly shifting power dynamics within the organization. What is clear is that statements by leaders from the three different areas are often very different in tone and message.

Efforts to draw clear lines between the various leadership groups tend to be overly simplistic. "The movement, used to operating in opposition and led by a diverse and geographically dispersed group, has grown accustomed to hammering out vague

statements that hint at many things but commit to very little,”⁶ according to George Washington University political scientist Nathan Brown. Since the Hamas electoral victory, it does not appear that the various leadership groups have been able to unify around a coherent program.

To Recognize or Not to Recognize?

Since the 2006 elections, the political arm of Hamas has shown somewhat greater pragmatism than in the past. In May 2006, Fatah and Hamas leaders imprisoned together in Israel hammered out the Palestinian Prisoners’ Document, in which influential members of Hamas agreed for the first time to the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders – perhaps a first step toward accepting a two-state solution. Discussing the agreement, Kadura Fares, a Fatah leader on the West Bank, told *The American Prospect*: “The Israelis should not read this agreement by Israeli eyes. As Fatah, it took us more than 20 years to make a change. With Hamas, it takes five months.”⁷

In a November 2006 New York Times editorial, Ahmed Yousef, a senior adviser to Hamas Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, called for the establishment of a *hudna*, a long-term ceasefire, to “bring about an immediate end to the occupation and to initiate a period of peaceful coexistence during which both sides would refrain from any form of military aggression or provocation.”

Yousef’s editorial echoed ideas floated by Hamas leaders, including founder Sheikh Yassin, as far back as the late 1980s. A *hudna* does not require Hamas to recognize Israel or relinquish its claims to greater Palestine, but it would mean an end to the violence. Critics argue that Hamas would use the peace of a *hudna* to re-arm in a manner similar to that of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

In January 2007, the British daily *The Guardian* reported that “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, according to the Hamas leader in Damascus, Khaled Meshal.”⁸

In the same article, *The Guardian* also quoted Ahmed Yousef as saying “Israel is there, it is part of the United Nations and we do not deny its existence. But we still have rights and land there which have been usurped and until these matters are dealt with we will withhold our recognition.”

⁶ Nathan Brown. “Living With Palestinian Democracy.” The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/pb46_Brown_final.pdf.

⁷ Jo Ann Mort. “The Man Behind the Mecca Agreement.” *The American Prospect*, February 13, 2007, <http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?articleId=12450>.

⁸ Conal Urquhart. “Hamas leader acknowledges ‘reality’ of Israel.” *The Guardian*, January 10, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,,1987305,00.html>.

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, which 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 U.S. 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.”

It is possible to see these developments as part of a larger, though shaky, shift toward a more pragmatic approach for some.

According to Nathan Brown, “Hamas is a movement that prides itself on its principles and is unlikely to abandon them easily. Even if some of its leaders wished to shift positions, its ponderous collegial decision-making structures would make it difficult to do so quickly...So any change in the movement’s positions will likely be gradual.”⁹

Domestic and International Relationships

The PLO, Fatah and Hamas

The disagreement between Hamas and the PLO, as led by Fatah, is largely one of different aims.

In spirit, Fatah is similar to the nationalist movements that developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe, dedicated to the establishment of a modern nation-state in historical Palestine. Over the years, Fatah and the PLO have moved gradually toward the acceptance of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, making it official policy at the 1988 meeting of the Palestinian National Council (though this was not widely understood until Arafat signed the Declaration of Principles with Israel in 1993).

Hamas, on the other hand, is a Palestinian Islamist party, dedicated to the establishment of a state based on its interpretation of Islamic law. It is in part a national project and in part a religious revival, meant to reclaim once-Muslim lands for a broader Islamic future.

Founded in the course of the first intifada as a minority opposition movement, Hamas has always done what it could to undermine the power of the established Palestinian leadership, which in turn did what it could to undermine the spread of Islamist influence.

Since Hamas came to power in 2006, most of the international community has funded and backed Fatah in opposition to the democratically elected Hamas, while

⁹ Nathan Brown. “Aftermath of the Hamas Tsunami.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/BrownHamasWebCommentary.pdf>.

simultaneously cutting off funding for the Hamas-led government. And although there was some support for the short-lived unity government, the U.S. opposed it.

The 2007 violence in Gaza and the Hamas take-over meant the complete breakdown of the unity government. Since then, the U.S., Israel and most of the international community have followed a “West-Bank-first” strategy advocated by President Abbas, chairman of both Fatah and the PLO, and have continued their previous policy of isolating Hamas by providing financial, political, diplomatic, and military support for the West Bank Abbas-led PA.

The PA has employed a heavy hand against Hamas in the West Bank through imprisonment of members and sympathizers; demotion or dismissal of civil servants associated with Hamas; closure for "administrative irregularities" of many charities linked to Hamas; raids on mosques; and confiscation of Hamas materials.

Interestingly, Hamas has made efforts for several years to join the PLO, albeit based on a renegotiated and revised PLO charter reversing recognition of Israel, but has been blocked by President Abbas and other PLO leaders. One of the main provisions of the Mecca Agreement on the unity government, was a decision “to move ahead in measures to activate and reform the PLO”¹⁰ with Hamas inside, but nothing happened before hostilities broke out between the factions.

Limited Support

How much popularity does Hamas enjoy among the Palestinian people? Without doubt, the profile of Hamas has risen dramatically over the past 10-15 years, 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 serious and widespread corruption in Fatah-led institutions, many Palestinians were impressed by Hamas's pre-election promises to clean up the Palestinian government. As the domestic platforms of the parties were similar, the election focused largely on competence and credibility. The lack of any progress toward peace or the establishment of a Palestinian state made irrelevant Fatah's claim to be a better negotiating partner with Israel.

The Palestinian electoral system is structured in such a way that although Hamas candidates received 42.9% of the popular vote, the party was awarded a disproportionately large number of seats in Parliament. Additionally, an al-Jazeera poll taken within days of the election, showed that, far from embracing an ideology which includes opposition to a peace agreement, fully three-quarters of the Palestinian people

¹⁰ Jerusalem Media & Communications Centre, “The text of the Mecca Agreement,” <http://www.jmcc.org/new/07/feb/meccaagree.htm>.

wanted Hamas to negotiate with Israel.¹¹ At that time, only 1% of Palestinians said they wanted to see an Islamic theocracy established in Palestinian lands.

Since January 2006, a clear majority of Palestinians continue to say in poll after poll that they support a negotiated, two-state solution. In September 2007, a poll conducted by Near East Consulting found that 72% of the Palestinians support Palestinian participation in the upcoming peace conference (currently slated for Fall 2007) and 69% support a peace settlement with Israel.

Furthermore, Hamas lost popular support as a result of its violent takeover of Gaza. A poll conducted by Palestinian university *an-Najah* indicated 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 moderate President Mahmoud Abbas. The Near East Consulting poll found that if Fatah underwent organizational reform, 78% of the Palestinian electorate would vote for it over Hamas.

Hamas maintains the support it does enjoy for a variety of reasons. Many impoverished Palestinians were helped by Hamas's extensive welfare network; others have appreciated the fact that once the Islamists were in power in Gaza, they made serious efforts to curb lawlessness.

Finally, a number of Palestinians support Hamas for its continued armed resistance to the Israeli occupation, believing that Hamas alone is truly fighting for Palestinian rights and has not been co-opted by the U.S. or Europe. The movement's frequent use of extreme rhetoric serves a purpose filled in the past by the PLO's once-revolutionary language – providing a powerful counter-narrative to the reality of deprivation and powerlessness faced daily by most Palestinians.

The Near Future

President Bush has called for a peace “conference” or “meeting” among the stakeholders in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Fall 2007 in Annapolis, Maryland with the specific exclusion of 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 up Abbas to achieve an agreement without having to acquiesce to Hamas hardliners. The hope is that if this happens, Hamas's power will wane.

¹¹ Al Jazeera English, “Palestinians want Hamas reform – poll,” *Al Jazeera*, February 2, 2006, <http://english.aljazeera.net/English/archive/archive?ArchiveId=18163>.

However, some analysts have warned that if Hamas is excluded from the conference, the movement may well assume the spoiler role it has played in the past, in an effort to scuttle the negotiations before they begin. Hamas has already called on all Palestinian factions to boycott the conference until national unity has been achieved and has urged Arab countries not to normalize relations with Israel. There is real concern that the organization could resort to terrorism and effectively veto any advances made at the meeting. Furthermore, isolation may yet push Hamas further toward alignment with Iran.

A number of prominent officials, policy makers and analysts have been weighing in on possible solutions in the run-up to the upcoming peace conference. Eight former U.S. State Department and Pentagon officials, including Zbigniew Brzezinski and Theodore C. Sorensen, suggested that Hamas be invited and drawn to attend a *second* peace conference. Such attendance, “implicitly would accept [the results of] the first one and Israel’s existence.”¹²

In a letter to President Bush on the peace conference, eight former, high-level government officials suggested, “as to Hamas, we believe 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.”¹³

Analysts Gaith Al-Omari and Rafi Dajani suggest that “it is entirely possible for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to reach an agreement with the Israelis after the fall Mideast meeting 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 (including Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, Alice Shalvi and David Grossman, whose son was killed in the 2006 Lebanon War) published a petition calling on Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to negotiate a ceasefire with Hamas, and to make every effort to achieve “substantial agreements” with Abbas at the November summit: “Israel has negotiated in the past with its worst enemies, and now too it is negotiating with Hamas, rightfully, in order to bring [captive IDF Sergeant] Gilad Shalit home. These negotiations must also include an attempt to achieve a comprehensive cease-fire without preconditions. The end of reciprocal attacks will provide security to

¹² Daniel Levy, “Bipartisan Foreign Policy Leaders on Annapolis Conference,” from Prospects for Peace, posted October 10, 2007 http://www.prospectsforpeace.com/2007/10/bipartisan_foreign_policy_lead.html.

¹³ “A Guide to a Successful November International Conference,” *Israel Policy Forum Focus*, Vol. 5(30), October 10, 2007. <http://www.israelpolicyforum.org/display.cfm?id=10&Sub=12&dis=2>.

the residents of the western Negev, will prevent additional suffering among Gaza residents, and will increase the chances of success for the political process.”¹⁴

In the end, it will be necessary to reintegrate Hamas into the Palestinian polity if final status peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians are to succeed. An August, 2007 poll reveals Fatah-Hamas détente to be a priority among Palestinians, and reports in the Arabic-language, Israeli and European press indicate that serious efforts are being made to achieve some kind of rapprochement.

There were reports in October that Fatah and Hamas had agreed to launch secret talks in Cairo. Fatah subsequently ruled out such talks until Hamas relinquishes their rule over Gaza, questioning Hamas’s sincerity in pursuing dialogue. Hamas, for its parts, hopes that talks may lead to a lifting of the economic sanctions on Gaza. Ultimately there must be some accommodation with Hamas to implement a peace agreement with Israel in the Gaza Strip.

There is an urgent need to bring peace and economic well being to the lives of Palestinians and true security to the lives of Israelis, and Hamas will have to be part of the equation. The alternative? Continued Qassams and Hamas playing a spoiler role; or worse: organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, which rejects modern democracy and politics altogether in favor of a pan-Islamic religious caliphate. Such groups have been enjoying increased popularity, and there are worrying signs of a growing al-Qaeda presence in Gaza, previously unheard of.

It will require some careful and very creative maneuvering, but the stakes are too high and the threat of failure and increased violence too real not to pursue every possible avenue for peace and reconciliation with Hamas.

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¹⁴ Americans for Peace Now, Middle East Peace Reports, “Agreement with Abbas, cease-fire with Hamas” Vol. 8 (4), September 24, 2007. <http://www.peacenow.org/mepr.asp?rid=&cid=4077>.

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