

# Regional Security Implications of the Hamas Electoral Victory

By Michael Eisenstadt

THE ECHOES OF the Hamas electoral victory are likely to reverberate well beyond the West Bank and Gaza. Indeed, Hamas's success at the polls could have long-term implications for the domestic balance of power in Jordan and Egypt, efforts by al-Qaeda and its affiliates to establish a base of operations in the Palestinian territories, the simmering confrontation between Syria and the West, and Iran's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## Headaches for Egypt and Jordan?

As a branch of the international Muslim Brotherhood movement, the Hamas victory is likely to energize and embolden fellow Brotherhood organizations in neighboring Jordan and Egypt. And should Hamas's experiment in Islamic governance be seen as a success, it is likely to enhance the appeal of the Islamic model in other Arab and Muslim countries.

In Egypt, the Brotherhood is outlawed, though members have run for parliament as independents, increasing their share of seats from 17 of 444 in 2000 to 88 of 454 in the November–December 2005 elections. The Hamas victory is likely to intensify pressure on the Mubarak regime to recognize the Muslim Brotherhood as a legal party. Ironically, Cairo finds itself in the uncomfortable situation of urging the world to deal with Hamas (widely recognized as a terrorist group) while it refuses to accept the legality of the Egyptian Brotherhood (which it acknowledges has not engaged in terror or violence for more than three decades).

In Jordan, the Brotherhood is represented in politics by the Islamic Action Front (IAF), which garnered 17 of 104 seats in 2003 elections. (Those numbers probably understate the IAF's popular appeal; Jordan's election laws favor tribal candidates and independents over Islamists and Palestinians, who constitute a major share of the IAF's voting bloc.) The Hamas victory is likely to embolden the more radical, Palestinian wing of the

IAF, which has largely displaced the traditionalist, East Bank wing from the party leadership. The IAF is liable to demand electoral reforms that would enhance its political clout while seeking to broaden and deepen its ties with Hamas. (In the past, the IAF is believed to have provided logistical assistance to Hamas and to have facilitated communications between that organization's internal leadership in the West Bank and Gaza, and its external leadership in Damascus.)

The Egyptian and Jordanian Brotherhoods might also press their governments to increase direct aid to the PA, should the United States or Europe reduce or suspend financial assistance. Because of their special relationship with Hamas, the Egyptian and Jordanian Brotherhoods will ensure that developments in the West Bank and Gaza receive greater attention in Egypt and Jordan than they have in recent years, potentially inflaming public opinion and complicating U.S. relations with Cairo and Amman.

Finally, the Hamas victory might spur Cairo to rethink security cooperation with the PA and its security posture along the Egypt-Gaza border. On the one hand, Cairo might recall its thirty or so officers that are training Palestinian security forces in Gaza to avoid accusations that by assisting a Hamas-led PA, it is aiding a terrorist organization. On the other hand, Cairo might finally get serious about border security in order to prevent the smuggling of weapons by radical Islamists and disrupt efforts by al-Qaeda or its local affiliates to sink roots in the Sinai peninsula and Gaza.

## Opportunities for Al-Qaeda?

Al-Qaeda has long had a foothold in Lebanon through its local, largely Palestinian affiliate, 'Asbat al-Ansar, whose activities have generally been confined to the Lebanese arena. In recent years, however, al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and local groups inspired by al-Qaeda have become increasingly active in Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

- In October 2002, Syria-based members of the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi group assassinated U.S. Agency for International Development official Lawrence Foley in Amman, Jordan. In April 2004, gunmen set off a bomb and had a running gun battle with police in a residential neighborhood of Damascus, Syria. Although no group took responsibility for the latter operation, suspicions focused on a local al-Qaeda affiliate, Jund Muhammad (Army of Muhammad).
- In April 2004, an attempted attack by the Zarqawi group on Jordanian intelligence headquarters was thwarted by Jordanian security; in August 2005, al-Qaeda in Iraq (the Zarqawi group's new moniker) launched a rocket attack that targeted U.S. naval vessels docked in Aqaba, Jordan, and Eilat airport in Israel; and in November 2005, the Zarqawi group conducted simultaneous suicide bombings of three hotels in Amman, killing dozens of Jordanians.
- In October 2004 and July 2005, a local bedouin-Palestinian jihadist cell based in the Sinai set off a series of car bombs in the Egyptian Red Sea resorts of Taba and Sharm al-Sheikh, killing more than 100 Egyptians and foreigners. Although no evidence exists of a formal al-Qaeda link, the group is believed to have been inspired by al-Qaeda and its ideology of global Jihad.
- In December 2005, al-Qaeda in Iraq took credit for the launch of ten katyusha rockets into the northern Israel town of Kiryat Shemona.

In the past year, signs have indicated that al-Qaeda may be interested in setting up in Gaza in order to open a new front against Israel. A new al-Qaeda affiliate, Jundallah (Army of God) has reportedly been formed in the Gaza strip by former Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) activists disillusioned by the strategic pragmatism of those groups, while a series of rocket attacks on Israeli villages prior to the disengagement from Gaza were claimed by Palestinians in the name of al-Qaeda. Finally, Israeli officials have claimed that al-Qaeda operatives infiltrated into Gaza through a

breach in the border barrier created by Palestinian gunmen following the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

How a Hamas government might affect the prospects of al-Qaeda is unclear. Continued chaos and violence in Gaza and the West Bank are likely to create conditions conducive to the growth of al-Qaeda (as it did in Afghanistan, and as it has in Iraq's Sunni Triangle). The failure of the PA or Egyptian government to secure the border with Gaza from infiltration from the Sinai (though both have good reason to do so) could likewise create conditions favorable to the growth of al-Qaeda in Gaza. Finally, should Hamas continue the *tabdiyya* (the lull in terrorist attacks against Israel to which it agreed in early 2005) in order to garner international recognition and financial assistance, some of its more radical members might join the nascent al-Qaeda organization in Gaza in order to continue along the jihadist path. For a variety of reasons, then, conditions in Gaza are likely to favor the further development of al-Qaeda there.

### A Lever for Syria?

Syria has traditionally sought a central role in Palestinian politics to prevent Palestinian actions that could harm Syrian interests (for example, provoking a war or concluding a separate peace with Israel) and to advance its interests in the Levant and in pan-Arab forums. Syria has traditionally supported those Palestinian groups that reject peace with Israel, including Hamas, whose external leadership is currently based in Damascus. For both Syria and Hamas, the relationship was borne of tactical necessity and not necessarily of a common strategy or goals.

Does the Hamas electoral victory provide Syria with new leverage in its ongoing confrontation with the international community over Lebanon or with Israel over the Golan? On the one hand, given Syria's political isolation and military weakness, and conditions in the Palestinian territories, it is hard to see how the Hamas connection provides Syria with the leverage needed to compel Israel to restart negotiations over the Golan or to parry international calls to investigate the murder of the late Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Were Syria to close down the Hamas headquarters in Damascus, the organization's activities in the West Bank and

Gaza would not be significantly affected. Moreover, Syria lacks the ability to goad Hamas into actions that run counter to its vital interests. On the other hand, the likelihood that Syria will emerge as the Arab state with the warmest relations with a Hamas-led PA will likely boost Damascus's regional and international influence and standing at a moment when it is almost friendless in the global arena.

### **An Opening for Iran?**

To preserve its autonomy, Hamas has always maintained a discreet distance from Tehran, even when it has cooperated with the Islamic Republic. Initial contacts between Hamas and the Islamic Republic date to the late 1980s; in the early 1990s, Hamas personnel began attending Lebanese Hizballah and Iranian Revolutionary Guard training camps in Lebanon and Iran. As part of its efforts to undermine the Oslo process, Iran compensated the families of suicide bombers and transferred to Hamas cash bonuses worth tens of thousands of dollars for each successful terrorist attack against Israel (in addition to providing millions of dollars' worth of financial assistance to Hamas annually). Those efforts culminated in a series of suicide bombings in the first three months of 1996 (three by Hamas, two by PIJ) that left more than eighty Israelis dead and hundreds wounded. Those attacks further complicated Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and contributed to the defeat of the Israeli Labor government and the triumph of the Likud in elections in May of that year.

Following the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in September 2000, Iran abandoned its policy of hostility toward Yasser Arafat's PA and—working with the Lebanese Hizballah—sought to fan the flames of violence by arming the PA. Iran also sought to exploit the financial hardships created by the uprising by recruiting and co-opting cash-strapped members of the violent, radical arms of Arafat's Fatah movement, the Fatah Tanzim and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. More recently, Iran and Hizballah have had some success recruiting members of Hamas, which was financially hard pressed as a result of U.S. and Saudi efforts following the September 11, 2001, attacks to

halt Hamas's fundraising in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere. Hizballah has also helped Hamas develop and extend the range and capability of its Qassam family of homemade rockets, so that it could threaten major population centers in Israel. Finally, Iran has attempted to recruit Hamas and PIJ militants to conduct mortar and rocket attacks against Israel from Jordan, though Jordanian security has repeatedly disrupted these efforts.

With its victory at the polls, Hamas stands to become a major beneficiary of Iranian largesse. Should international financial assistance to the PA dry up, Iran is liable to become the major financial backer of a Hamas-run PA (for details, see the Clawson essay). Under such conditions, Hamas might abandon its aversion to working too closely with Tehran in order to ensure its survival as a political movement and avoid failing in its first chance at governing. Hamas's short-term interest in preserving relative calm, however, might clash with efforts by Iran and Hizballah to ratchet up the pressure on Israel, leading to tensions in the relationship and perhaps opportunities for Iran and Hizballah to recruit disaffected ultra-radical members of Hamas. Conversely, Iran and Hizballah may view the potential embodied by a Hamas victory as so great—offering a historic opportunity to advance the anti-Zionist cause—that they may be willing to offer financial support to Hamas without strings attached. This outcome could, in the long run, strengthen Hamas and further entrench the influence of Hizballah and Iran within the Palestinian territories. And it could add an additional source of uncertainty and risk for the region, should Iran eventually acquire nuclear weapons.

### **Conclusion**

Although the success of a Hamas-led PA could embolden Islamists in neighboring states and enhance the appeal of their Islamist message, failure could benefit the extremists waiting in the wings—al-Qaeda, Hizballah, and Iran. In either case, the coming period is likely to witness increased instability in the Palestinian areas and beyond, a situation that will pose difficult challenges to Israel, its partners in peace—Egypt and Jordan, and the United States.