

Understanding the Hamas Agenda

By Mohammed Yaghi

PALESTINIAN PRESIDENT Mahmoud Abbas's strategy of integrating Hamas into the Palestinian political system backfired with Hamas's sweeping electoral victory in the legislative elections. Abbas had hoped that Hamas, as a minority party in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), could be tamed by its acceptance of the rules that it had consistently flouted since rejecting the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA); he thought he could disarm Hamas through democratic means. But with Hamas's winning majority control of the PLC, a chance no longer exists to dictate terms to it.

Already, Hamas's leaders have said they will not compromise their core principles, even if it means a cutoff of international aid to the PA. Khaled Mashal, the Damascus-based chief of Hamas's political bureau, announced: "Hamas will manage and the Arab countries and Muslims won't let the Palestinians down. Hamas will not trade its political program for money from the international community." In this context, it is important to understand what Hamas's political program will be, including its domestic priorities, international policies, and strategy toward Israel.

Hamas's Strategy toward Israel

In a January 29 press conference broadcast on al-Jazeera, Mashal said Hamas is willing to negotiate a long-term truce, or *hudna*, with Israel in return for a complete Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines, creation of linkage between Gaza and the West Bank, and release of all Palestinian prisoners. Mashal, however, suggested that the door would remain open when he said, "When Israel proposes a genuine offer, we will look into it, but right now there is nothing on the table to discuss." As for the Quartet's Roadmap to Peace, Mashal denounced it as "Sharon's map, and Hamas will never accept it." Hamas thus wants to replace the concept of a comprehensive peace agreement based on the idea of mutual recognition and a two-state solution in finalized borders with a long-term, indefinite cessation of hostilities.

Hamas's rejection of a two-state solution and its preference for a long-term truce stem from three factors. First, Hamas's Islamic ideology believes that any part of the Muslim land is an Islamic endowment, or *waqf*, and no Muslim has the right to give up ownership of the land. Historic Palestine is an especially significant *waqf* in as much as it contains the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem—the first Kiblah, or object of Muslim prayers.

Second, Hamas's religious connection to the land coincides with its role in the wider Muslim Brotherhood movement, which values the essential importance of establishing Islamic regimes throughout the region as prerequisite to liberating historic Palestine. Recognizing Israel's right to exist is thus anathema to Hamas's Islamic identity and its identity within the Muslim Brotherhood.

Third, Hamas also derives the concept of *hudna* from Muslim tradition, where the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad teaches that seeking a truce with enemies is legitimate as a practical measure whenever Muslims are not in a position either to conquer their foes or to impose their demands on them. The Prophet himself arranged such a truce with his rivals in Mecca before conquering them two years later after they violated the agreement. For Hamas, the *hudna* represents an opportunity to rest and rebuild. A truce is not, by any means, a final resolution of the conflict, unlike the "end of conflict" agreement envisaged in both the Oslo process and the roadmap. For now, Hamas says it will respect existing agreements between the PA and Israel, but this approach is limited only to resolving issues of daily life rather than applied to forging a longer-term peace.

Hamas's long-term intentions can also be gleaned from its desire to join a "wider resistance front comprised of Iran, Syria, and Hizballah," according to Mashal, and its refusal to consider disarming its Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. A more formal alliance with Iran and Hizballah, which could include increased Iranian financial support of a Hamas-controlled PA,

might lead Hamas to launch attacks against Israel in response to international pressure against Iran to halt its nuclear program. In order to maintain such a weapon, Hamas will not disarm or disband the Qas-sam Brigades, whose role Mashal noted is to “confront the occupation.” Hamas may even merge its military arm with those of other factions to form a more official “popular army” with the mission of defending Palestinians and liberating their land.

Hamas’s Domestic Priorities

Hamas has denied being surprised by its victory in the legislative elections, only admitting that it had not anticipated the margin by which it won. Indeed, Hamas wanted to secure at least some domestic authority through the elections, which was the very reason why it accepted the *tabdiyya* from Abbas in March 2005 in exchange for ensuring elections would proceed. And while Hamas was using the last year to prepare its election campaign, Fatah was descending into chaos and disarray.

Within the PA, Hamas will attempt to produce what Abbas failed to do in his first year in office. It will focus on securing law and order, primarily in Gaza, by confronting local armed gangs responsible for kidnapping foreigners and fomenting chaos in the past months. Hamas will attempt to purge corruption from the PA by prosecuting those responsible for embezzlement and misuse of funds and by publicly disclosing such activities. Based on the precedent of how it has run the municipalities it has taken over in the past year, Hamas will trim government spending and try to create an environment more conducive to economic investment and growth.

Politically, Hamas will begin to widen its base of support and firm up the allegiance of those who voted for its candidates in the districts. It will also try to isolate Fatah’s leadership from its base by reaching out to Fatah’s militant groups and those employed by the bureaucracy of the PA. The most difficult institution for Hamas to co-opt will be the security forces, the vast majority of whom are Fatah members who voted for Fatah in the election. Hamas will face a great challenge trying to use these forces to keep internal order, par-

ticularly in the West Bank, and will need to ensure they are not working against Hamas’s own interests. It will try to reach a modus vivendi with the security services either by buying the allegiance of specific commanders or by appealing directly to individual soldiers to gain their loyalty.

Hamas will also seek integration into the formal institutions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a process suggested in the March 2005 Cairo Agreement between Abbas and the Palestinian factions. The newly elected legislative council members will automatically be considered part of the PLO’s broader representative base, the Palestinian National Council. Hamas will try to use the precedent of elections to propel more of its members from outside the PA into the ranks of the Palestinian National Council. Because the PLO remains the “sole legal representative” of the Palestinian people and the PLO, not the PA, retains foreign recognition by more than 100 states, Hamas views joining the PLO as a means of obtaining international legitimacy. Furthermore, now that Hamas has supplanted Fatah in the PA, its next step will be to accomplish the same objective in the PLO—the very strategy Fatah itself employed in 1965 when it seized control of the PLO.

Hamas and Violence

Hamas will retain the potential of attacking Israeli targets as a means of securing its domestic control over Palestinian politics. Initially, Hamas has no interest in resuming violence because it can most easily begin to achieve its “change and reform” agenda when it is not at war with Israel. But should Hamas face a drastic reduction in international aid and determine that it will not be able to deliver the services and good governance promised during its campaign, it may choose to provoke violence with Israel in order to rally Palestinians around a national agenda. Hamas may also use violence against Israel as a means of preempting an internal confrontation with Fatah should Fatah resist the transfer of power when the next government is formed, or if the security forces begin to obstruct Hamas’s agenda. Finally, Hamas may play the card of violence to pressure Abbas to appoint a prime minister acceptable to Hamas if the

president attempts to challenge Hamas's political ascendancy. In all scenarios, violence against Israel will remain an integral component of Hamas's arsenal.

Hamas will not want to appear to grow soft and allow other groups, such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) or the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, to assume a more prominent role in the resistance. In the past year, PIJ was responsible for almost all of the suicide bombings in Israel, and Hamas limited its attacks as part of its effort to ensure elections would proceed. However, depending on the seriousness of the "Resistance Front" described by Mashal, PIJ—influenced by Iranian and Syrian pressure—may possibly suspend its activities in the short term to allow Hamas the space to achieve its domestic agenda. Hamas will also attempt to gain the allegiance of the al-Aqsa brigades, a process it began months before the election.

Hamas's Approach to the Cabinet

The margin of Hamas's victory in the legislative council gave its bloc more than enough votes to approve the next cabinet, assuming Abbas cooperates by nominating a prime minister to Hamas's liking. But in order to manage the transition of power, Hamas prefers a unity government with Fatah for three reasons. First, Fatah's presence in the government will increase the likelihood that international donors will not cut off aid to the PA. Second, Hamas wants to ensure the loyalty

of Fatah's own base in the aftermath of the elections and hopes to minimize the possibility of civil disorder. Moreover, by offering Fatah partial responsibility for the government, Hamas will maintain the political weakness and divisions within Fatah and prevent Fatah from uniting in opposition. And finally, Fatah's presence in the government may enable Hamas to oversee limited negotiations with Israel on issues concerning Palestinian life without its members having to deal directly with the Israelis.

If Fatah refuses to join a Hamas-led government, then Hamas will likely try to gain the allegiance of the smaller Palestinian parties in order to isolate Fatah in opposition. Under any scenario, Hamas will insist on controlling the ministries of health, education, and social welfare in order to expand its already prominent role as provider of social services to the Palestinian people.

Conclusion

Since its founding in 1987, Hamas has shown patience, strategic acumen, and organizational discipline. As it approaches the issues of internal governance and relations with the outside world—including the question of violence toward Israel—Hamas can be expected to evince these same characteristics that have enabled it to displace Fatah and emerge as the dominant player on the Palestinian political landscape.