

Secret Hamas Elections Point to Internal Struggle

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The ongoing Hamas elections will strengthen the military wing, weaken Khaled Mashal, make reconciliation with the PA more difficult, preserve close collaboration with Iran, and, perhaps, forge closer ties with Egypt.

The secretive elections for new Hamas leadership bodies are unofficially scheduled to continue until later this month, but it is already safe to point out some emerging trends as the movement struggles to cope with fierce debate over its future course. Top leader Khaled Mashal has been considerably weakened as his rivals in Gaza gain more influence and commanders in the military wing assume a much broader political role. In all likelihood, these developments will further complicate the group's stalled reconciliation efforts with the Palestinian Authority, accelerate its dash to achieve mass self-production of longer-range, more accurate missiles, and prevent -- at least for the foreseeable future -- a political divorce from Iran.

UNPRECEDENTED TURNOVER

As a rule, Hamas does not publish any election details, including the names of candidates, the number of voters, the location of polling stations, the institutions for which elections are held, or the results. Citing "security considerations," the group keeps all such information secret and prohibits campaigning. Despite these efforts, a fairly complete picture of the group's internal political struggle is already emerging. According to one senior Hamas official, more than 30 percent of members in the organization's different leadership institutions have been replaced by new faces. That is a dramatic change for a conservative movement that has been very reluctant to oust veteran figures.

Initially, separate elections were to take place in each of the movement's four designated regions. Two of these "regions" are now expected to bypass voting and instead select their representatives through a process of "consultations" (e.g., appointments).

First, Hamas prisoners will no longer choose their delegates through a complex system of mouth-to-ear ballot casting as they did in the past. Instead, those who already serve as the "command" for Hamas inmates -- usually in dealings with the Israeli Prison Service -- will be nominated as members-in-absentia to the movement's supreme bodies. Among these nominees will be convicted arch-terrorists such as Ibrahim Hamed, former chief of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades in the West Bank; Abbas al-Sayyed, mastermind of the 2002 Passover Eve massacre in Netanya; Hassan Salameh, architect of the group's suicide bombings in the 1990s; and Jamal Abu al-Haija, former Qassam commander in the Jenin district. Their participation in leadership deliberations will be limited to occasional requests for their opinions, submitted through their lawyers and family visitors. Yet it should be pointed out that during recent negotiations to end a prison hunger strike, these leaders of "the prisoners movement" -- as it is known in Palestinian political jargon -- essentially dictated to the rest of the Hamas leadership the terms for a deal with Israel, brokered by Egyptian intelligence.

Second, the West Bank is likely to skip Hamas elections for the first time ever given the difficulties posed by continuous harassment and detention of group members by both PA and Israeli security agencies. Saleh al-Aruri, who founded the Qassam Brigades in the West Bank and was released from an Israeli prison in March 2010, is now the key man in determining which Hamas members in the defunct Palestinian Legislative Council will be selected to fill this region's quota in the leadership bodies. Aruri has been operating for some time out of Turkey -- with Ankara's tacit blessing -- in an effort to resurrect Hamas infrastructure in the West Bank. He is now recognized as the group's de facto top leader in the West Bank at the expense of veteran local political figures, and has thus acquired important standing in the new Hamas hierarchy.

In the third region—Gaza—elections were concluded in late April, with 12,000 voters delivering a severe defeat to supporters of Mashal, head of the Hamas Executive Committee (a body established in 2009 yet never proclaimed as the official replacement for the old Political Bureau). Few if any Mashal loyalists made it to the different elected institutions: namely, the various district shura councils, the seventy-seven-member Gaza Shura Council (expanded from fifty-nine seats), and the fifteen-member Gaza Political Bureau (Salah al-Bardawil, Muhammad al-Jumasi, Issam Daghlas, and other key members lost their seats in the latter body). So-called moderates such as Ahmed Yousef and Ghazi Hamad were defeated, while sworn Mashal rivals enjoyed victories: Imad al-Alami -- former chief of the "military (or intifada) committee" who recently returned from Damascus after long years of tension with Mashal -- was elected deputy to Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh in the latter's unannounced other capacity as head of the local Political Bureau.

MILITARY ASCENDANCE

Although Haniyeh once again proved to be the most popular Hamas leader in Gaza, he is quite reluctant to claim overall leadership and often avoids controversy by letting more outspoken colleagues speak their minds. Alami, now widely perceived as a potential future successor to Mashal, better represents the most salient trend: the "Pasdarization" of Hamas. Similar to the way the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (or Pasdaran) have managed to take over Iran's state apparatus over the past decade, the Hamas military wing is now assuming control over the movement's political course.

For example, perhaps the biggest winners at the Gaza polls (which are usually placed in mosques or charities) were Qassam Brigades commanders and their political partners. Muhammed Deif -- the behind-the-scenes Qassam shadow supremo who has yet to fully recover from the severe injuries he suffered during an Israeli assassination attempt ten years ago -- did not run himself, preferring to maintain his traditional low profile. Yet others won impressive victories on their way to the Political Bureau: Qassam leaders Ahmed Jabari and Marwan Issa; Yahya al-Sinwar and Rawhi Mushtaha, Qassam commanders who were released from Israeli prison as part of the Gilad Shalit deal; and Hamas interior minister Fathi Hamad, a close collaborator with the military chiefs. Aside from Mahmoud al-Zahar (who managed to overcome military attempts to subvert his candidacy), all of the other elected "civilians" were supported by the significant percentage of votes controlled by the Qassam Brigades, including such figures as Khalil al-Hayya and Nizar Awadallah.

"OUTSIDE" MEMBERS STILL VOTING

At present, Hamas is still conducting elections in the fourth region, which consists of a few thousand "outside" members (including around a thousand from the group's disbanded Damascus headquarters, currently scattered in different Arab and Muslim countries). Voting is taking place at Hamas branches in the Persian Gulf states, Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, and Europe, and the expectation is that at least some of Mashal's lieutenants may lose their seats in the fifteen-member "outside" Political Bureau. One key outside member -- Mustafa al-Leddawi, a first-generation Hamas leader deported from Gaza by Israel -- was the first to come out publicly against Mashal, and was subsequently kidnapped for a few days in late April from his home in the Yarmouk refugee camp near Damascus. The unknown gunmen who seized him were widely believed to be enforcers employed by the remnants of Mashal's entourage.

The main challenge to Mashal's faction in the outside region comes from his deputy and rival Mousa Abu Marzouk, whom Egyptian authorities permitted to settle in Cairo after the dissolution of the Damascus headquarters, whereas Mashal was compelled to pitch his tent in Doha, Qatar. A native of Rafah in southern Gaza, Abu Marzouk has cultivated much closer contacts with the Gaza leadership than Mashal (originally from a West Bank village) can hope to achieve. The rivalry between the two stems not from ideological differences, but mainly from longstanding personal competition, since Mashal replaced Abu Marzouk as Hamas chief when the latter was detained in the United States.

IMPLICATIONS

In the end, a combination of the Gaza military and the Abu Marzouk camp will likely control the top leadership institutions: that is, the Hamas General Shura Council, composed of sixty members from all regions, and the nineteen-member Executive Committee, which runs the group's daily affairs.

For his part, Mashal will enjoy the support of most, but not all, of the West Bank representatives, though he will not command a majority. There are some indications that he may be reelected as Executive Committee head even though he announced in a secret Hamas gathering in Khartoum early this year that he does not intend to run for a third term. He was apparently hoping that his colleagues would plead with him to change his mind, but that did not happen. Still, his rivals aim not to depose him, but rather to limit his room for maneuver and submit him to majority rule. They have no interest in creating an open divide in the movement, and even his harshest critics realize the extent of his popularity among Palestinians.

Prior to the elections, Mashal sought to lead Hamas toward comprehensive reconciliation agreement with Fatah and was willing to sacrifice the movement's monopoly of power in Gaza to this end. His hope was to win future elections in the West Bank and take over the Palestine Liberation Organization. This policy was vehemently rejected and, in the end, foiled by his opponents in Gaza, who refused to dismantle the Hamas government there. They view the strip as a captured "fortress" that should never be relinquished, and as "the shortest route to al-Aqsa Mosque," in Haniyeh's words.

Moreover, while Mashal aspires to reshape Hamas as a Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood in line with the Arab Spring trend in other countries, his adversaries want to maintain the movement's standing as an armed resistance. Like some Gaza members, Mashal also believes that Hamas should maintain its distance from Iran despite receiving some \$400 million annually from Tehran. Yet the military wing, and certainly Alami, see no alternative to close collaboration with the Islamic Republic as their main supplier. They also want to curb intensive Iranian support for Palestinian Islamic Jihad's military buildup in competition with the Qassam Brigades.

Before deciding to leave Damascus, Mashal had an advantage over Hamas officials in Gaza, since he held the purse strings and supervised arms smuggling to the strip. The center of gravity has now shifted back to the Gaza leadership, which is capable of developing its own network of foreign support given the upheaval in neighboring

Egypt.

As a result, Mashal's capacity to lead the movement has been severely impaired. He is no longer first among equals, but more of a figurehead. Every move he makes from now on will need to be approved by his partners in Gaza beforehand, and military interests will likely trump political calculations in many situations.

Regarding specific issues, Hamas will no doubt resume the dialogue with Mahmoud Abbas, but reconciliation will now need to be reached on Gaza's terms. The group is also bound to be more attentive to Egyptian priorities, especially in maintaining the de facto ceasefire with Israel and avoiding open clashes with Cairo's interests in the Sinai. One may also assume that Qatar's influence will grow as its contributions to the Hamas treasury increase beyond the \$200 million provided last year. Finally, in much the same way that the PA's establishment sidelined the PLO, the local Gaza leadership is now gaining ground at the expense of the outside leadership.

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