

ICCT Interview on Hamas

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Brief Analysis

A conversation on the group's strategic pivot, internal debates, hostage calculations, postwar prospects, and more.

Joana Cook (JC), Senior Project Manager, ICCT: Hi Dr. Margolin, thanks for speaking with me today. Many people—yourself included—have argued that Hamas's October 7th attack on Israel was a pivot for the group. Why do you and others think that is the case? Could Hamas change its attitude on the total destruction of Israel?

Devorah Margolin (DM), Blumenstein-Rosenbloom Fellow, The Washington Institute: When Hamas was founded in 1988, its charter explicitly declared that “there is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad.” And between 1988 and 2007 the group did just that: it carried out numerous bombings, suicide attacks, vehicular attacks, and stabbings. The group even once won the praise of Osama bin Laden. But in 2006, Hamas did something that shocked not only the international community, but also other violent extremist groups—it took part in Palestinian Legislative Council elections, and won.

And since then, for the last 16 years, Hamas has strived to present itself to the international community as a legitimate political entity. Some of those studying Hamas even argued that the group's charter—which is full of religious rhetoric, called for violence, and riddled with antisemitism—was no longer representative of the group and its ideology. They pointed to Hamas's continued governance of Gaza, its foreign policy positions, and its more moderate language—including its 2017 updated doctrine of principles. And yet, despite this, Hamas never stopped using violence. It continued to carry out and claim attacks in Israel and the West Bank, and had numerous conflicts with Israel, in which it used rockets to indiscriminately attack Israeli civilians.

That being said, historically, Hamas's violence has generally targeted adults, whom the group sees as legitimate targets due to Israeli military draft laws that draft most of the Israeli population—men and women—at the age of 18. The group has also indiscriminately targeted civilians through rocket attacks and suicide bombings, but Hamas

views these civilian casualties as “collateral damage”. Finally, while Hamas has taken hostages in the past, these have all been adult men.

Because of all of this, October 7th was different. Hamas not only targeted civilians, but explicitly targeted vulnerable groups, children, and the elderly. They also took over 240 hostages, the vast majority of them civilians, the oldest 85 and the youngest just a few months old. For those of us who have studied Hamas, even the most cynical amongst us, Hamas actions on October 7th clearly demonstrate a pivot in strategy. Any illusions surrounding Hamas’s legitimacy or possible moderation have been shattered. This is also true for Hamas itself. There is no putting the “genie back in the bottle”, there is no going back. Hamas has made it extremely clear that the goals outlined in its charter, specifically the complete destruction of Israel, remain its ideology.

JC: Do you think there is currently a consensus in Hamas’s leadership over the current direction of Hamas?

DM: First and foremost, we need to acknowledge the ideology of Hamas, which drives the structure of the organization. As a Muslim Brotherhood-inspired group, it follows a bottom-up ideology that looks to draw support from the populace. This also means that it believes in participating in the existing political structure. Unlike ISIS, it doesn’t have one supreme leader. Rather, Hamas has internal elections in which it picks its top leaders both inside and outside of Gaza, and it is guided by a Shura council. Thus, there are many who “speak” for Hamas and there is not always one clear voice.

As I mentioned, I think the October 7th attack baldly contradicted Hamas’s articulated political strategy, which since 2007 presented the group as a moderate and a legitimate political entity. Thus, the inability of those in the West to see the possibility of Hamas’s attack could first and foremost be due to a gross misunderstanding of Hamas and its goals.

Since the attack, some of those who speak for Hamas have proclaimed that the group did not attack civilians, that its actions were directed strictly at military targets. Others have reveled in the numerous civilian deaths and taking of hostages. This “disconnect” could be due to an ongoing struggle between the Gaza-based military leadership, which led the attack, and Hamas’s political leadership, headed by the Qatar-based Ismail Haniyeh, who watched the attack on TV. I do not think that we have any definitive answers on this at the moment, but unfolding events should clarify things somewhat.

JC: A lot of people are stating Hamas is like ISIS. How, or do, you think they are comparable?

DM: Recently, we have seen a lot of comparisons between ISIS and Hamas and I do, on the surface, understand this. To the casual observer the two seem similar. Both are violent Islamist groups that believe in using violence in order to achieve the goal of a society ruled by sharia law. However, the end goals of the groups, and how they seek to achieve those goals—including what they deem to be legitimate violence -- are different.

While October 7th taught us that Hamas has learned from some of the more repugnant tactics of ISIS—which was a pivot for Hamas—these groups are still very different. In very simple terms, ISIS is a Salafi-jihadi group that exerts top-down control, seeking to destroy existing political systems. In its place, it wants to create a caliphate that expands beyond the idea of nationalism, which it disavows. ISIS’s use of violence starts at home, mostly targeting local Muslim communities across the Middle East. This last point in and of itself differentiates ISIS from other Salafi-jihadi groups like Al-Qaeda.

In contrast, Hamas is a nationalist group, calling for a Palestinian state, ruled by sharia, with itself at the helm. As a Muslim Brotherhood-inspired organization, Hamas is a bottom-up group that seeks to gain political support from the population for its cause using the existing political system in place. The group’s main target for its violence has been Israel, which it seeks to destroy. That being said, when its first choice of popular support has not worked, Hamas has also used violence against its own population in order to bend them to its will.

JC: What kind of support is Hamas getting from external actors right now?

DM: Most prominently, Hamas has had a long and well-documented relationship with Iran. While these relations soured a bit due to Hamas's disputes with the Assad regime in Syria, Iran kept funding Hamas. Some recent reports, which have not been fully confirmed, indicate that both Iran and Hezbollah appeared to have backed or at least supported the Hamas-led operation on October 7th, even perhaps offering training to its fighters.

To a lesser degree, Hamas also appears to be getting support—or at the very least sanctuary—from Qatar and Turkey. Qatar has publicly—with Israel's knowledge—given monthly stipends to Gaza for fuel for electricity, and to help pay public sector wages. Moreover, Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas's top political leader, is Qatar-based, and in the days since October 7th, Qatar has utilized its unique relationship with Hamas to engage in hostage negotiations. Turkey, for its part, has hosted Hamas leaders in the past, though it claims to have expelled top leaders since October 7th.

But to be honest, in the days since the attack, it is clear Hamas is not getting the type of external support it expected. Not only did Hezbollah not immediately join the war, but many Arab states with newly formed relations with Israel did not immediately break them off. Indeed, we have seen several speeches made by Hamas leaders decrying the inaction coming from those they expected to join their multi-front war. That being said, we have seen several tactical responses from Hezbollah in the north against Israel and the Houthis in the south, as well as Shia militias targeting US interests—including in Iraq and Syria.

JC: Do you anticipate Hamas to come out weaker or stronger in the current conflict?

DM: I do not think there is an easy answer to this. It is important to remember that Hamas's attack was designed to elicit a response so “disproportionate” from Israel that it would draw international condemnation and overshadow Hamas's own violence on October 7th. In doing so, Hamas hoped this attack and the Israeli response could bring others to its side. In some ways this has happened, but not, I think, to the extent that Hamas expected.

When we talk about how Hamas comes out of this conflict, I think there are two elements to consider. The first is Hamas's organizational structure—Israel is clearly targeting the heart of Hamas's capabilities and leadership. But you can't defeat a group like Hamas through blunt military force alone. The fight against ISIS is instructive in this regard. While ISIS has lost its physical caliphate, the group still exists as long as the ideology exists. We have seen this play out in northeast Syria up through today.

The second is Hamas's ideology. Blunt military force has consequences, including civilian deaths. This, in turn, can lead to radicalization and support to the cause. True supporters of Hamas will see the October 7th attacks as a victory for the group. Israel's attacks on Gaza are likely to strengthen their resolve. For them, it proves their point; from their perspective, Israel is the aggressor and Hamas are the only defenders against them. But not all in Gaza will see it this way. Some see Hamas's attack as a betrayal of its governance promise and are speaking out against the group and the crimes it has committed against its own people in Gaza. In the Arab world we are not seeing people flock to Hamas's aid the way the group hoped, much to its dismay. While Hamas must be defeated militarily, it must also be defeated ideologically.

JC: Thank you.

This interview was originally published on the ICCT website (<https://www.icct.nl/publication/interview-devorah-margolin-hamas>). ❖



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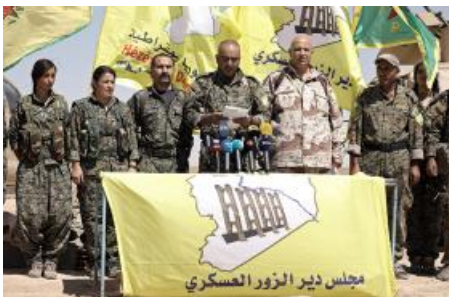
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