

Tracking Hamas's Leadership: Insights into the Organization's Structure and Evolution

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Brief Analysis

Recent events suggest that seismic forces may be developing within Hamas that may have a decisive impact on the course of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Download (</media/7560>) a free PDF copy of the Institute's Handbook of Hamas Palestinian Legislative Council Members.

Taken together, the kidnapping on Sunday of an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldier and the signing on Tuesday of an agreement among Palestinian factions to create a unity government for the Palestinian Authority (PA) suggest that significant seismic forces may be developing within Hamas that may have a decisive impact both on the organization's solidarity and on the future course of Israeli-Palestinian relations. While the unity agreement itself has little significance beyond internal Palestinian politics—it is a nonstarter for the Israelis and represents a major retreat from previous Palestinian positions—its importance lies in the fact that it highlights the possible emergence of a fissure within the Hamas organization between its internal leaders, headed by Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniyeh, who experience the brunt both of popular concerns and Israeli reprisals, and its external leaders, chief among them Damascus-based Khaled Mashal, who are free of these constraints and therefore able to insist on more maximalist positions. However, in signing this agreement—apparently without full consultation with, or the approval of, the Damascus contingent—the Hamas leaders in the territories have signaled both their independence and their intention to embark on a more pragmatic path than that preferred by Hamas's more ideological external elements. Indeed, the timing and nature of the attack seems to have been specifically intended to disrupt the effort to agree on a unity government with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, and thereby, the possible emergence of a more moderate Hamas strategy.

Hamas's Leadership Dilemma

The rifts Hamas is currently experiencing mirror those experienced by previous revolutionary terrorist organizations as they, like Hamas, attempted the transition from violent military organizations to mainstream political actors. It will be acutely important to maintain relevant data on Hamas leadership as the fast-moving events

of such a transformation unfold. With up-to-date information, observers of these events can more accurately measure the internal forces operating within these organizations and estimate their future trajectories. The course of Hamas's evolution will depend significantly on other variables, two of the most important being Hamas's ability to broaden its legitimacy and to develop the political skills needed to govern in the postelection environment.

In order to maintain its position at the head of the Palestinian government, Hamas must maintain its legitimacy, not only in the eyes of the Palestinian people, but also in the eyes of other major actors in the Middle East peace process. To do so, Hamas's leaders will likely attempt to revise their strategic vision from one that is semi-clandestine, decentralized, and focused on violence to one that is more overt, hierarchically controlled, and at least outwardly amenable to a peaceful solution to the conflict. Such a transition would find support both among the Palestinian people, where polls indicate a preference for a turn away from violence toward pragmatism, and among Hamas's foreign interlocutors, both sympathetic and unsympathetic, who urge less violence and more dialogue with Israel. These pressures notwithstanding, events of the past week suggest Hamas will find such a strategic shift exceedingly difficult.

Because the new political milieu largely precludes the option of operating as both a terrorist organization and a legitimate political actor, some of the more pragmatic Hamas elite may seek to shift Hamas's center of gravity from the military to the political sphere. The political dynamics of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) will favor individual Hamas members who are skilled in the arts of politics, negotiation, and compromise; if such individuals do not come to the fore, Hamas will not achieve lasting success in the political sphere. To this end, the PLC will play an important role in the education, recruitment, and selection of future Hamas leaders.

The Hamas Handbook

The Hamas-dominated PLC represents an important window into how Hamas will deal with its transition to nonviolent politics, how it will mitigate internal cleavages, and, most importantly, how it will evolve. Although Hamas was by no means an enigma prior to elections, its internal mechanisms remained largely beyond the view of all but the most determined observers. As the dominant party in the PLC, however, Hamas can no longer avoid close scrutiny. Indeed, by carefully examining the rhetoric of Hamas's PLC members, important insights can be gained concerning Hamas's internal operations. For this reason, The Washington Institute has, since the election, compiled data on the biographies, statements, and decisions of the recently elected legislators and cabinet members. The results to date are summarized in the **[Handbook of Hamas Palestinian Legislative Council Members](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=385)** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=385>), available for free download from the Institute's website.

Because the PLC is a major actor in Palestinian decisionmaking, it is likely that its Hamas members are an important part of the movement's elite. Furthermore, because the background and activities of PLC members can be documented, following the ups and downs of the careers of Hamas PLC members will shed light on how Hamas selects its elite. By maintaining a comprehensive record of the rhetoric and actions of Hamas's elected representatives and cabinet members, as the Handbook does, an estimate of the relative status of each PLC member in the hierarchy of Hamas can be formulated.

Future editions of the Handbook will also include biographical data concerning the representatives of other political parties in the PLC and the external leadership of Hamas. By offering a pool of data by which to compare and contrast the status and behavior of other elites in the Palestinian arena, a greater understanding of Hamas's political platforms, legislative strategies, and relationships with other parties can be derived. The Handbook will be updated soon to show which Hamas leaders have been arrested by Israel and what charges are brought against them. Many of the leaders arrested in recent days are already listed in the Handbook.

Clearly, no single source of data can completely illuminate the path Hamas will take in the future and whether its cleavages will be of significance. Nevertheless, what Hamas' political elites say, how they interact, and how the movement selects its future leaders, especially in times of crisis, are key indices in this regard. To the extent that the information compiled in the Handbook achieves this goal, a clearer understanding of the Hamas organization will emerge.

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