

# Advancing Palestinian Society by Weakening Hamas

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Brief Analysis

Currently, the Gaza Strip is in a state of stagnation; it is a place where freedom does not exist and where violence and anger flourish. These circumstances have led to the emergence of Hamas as a powerful and influential alternative to the Palestinian Authority (PA), which has failed to offer adequate welfare solutions to an ailing society. Despite its status as a terrorist organization responsible for killing hundreds of Israelis in numerous suicide attacks, Hamas is perceived by many Palestinians as a trustworthy movement that is primarily concerned about welfare issues. In fact, Hamas has the potential to evolve into a long-term alternative to the PA, which many Palestinians view as corrupt. A strengthened Hamas poses real challenges for Palestinians and Israelis alike, and the organization's increasing momentum should therefore be halted. This could be accomplished by giving the entire Palestinian population access to a new, modern welfare infrastructure, one that could gradually replace the services provided by Hamas.

## Hamas As an Alternative to the PA?

In December 2003, a delegation of top PA officials (headed by Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei) and representatives of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad held talks in Egypt for the purpose of reaching a ceasefire. The talks failed, however -- a development that strengthened Hamas's position and left a sense of imminent change in the air. On December 19, several thousand Hamas activists in Gaza held street demonstrations that served as a show of military power, with weapons and armed vehicles displayed for local and foreign television cameras. Even before this development, the Hamas movement seemed to be gaining considerable momentum among Palestinians. For example, the organization garnered the approval of 22.6 percent of respondents in an October 2003 poll of Palestinian attitudes, compared with 29.3 percent for Yasir Arafat's Fatah party. Indeed, Gaza Palestinians in particular may soon come to embrace Hamas's viability as an alternative to the ailing PA.

Hamas is reshaping Palestinian society through the practice of *dawa* (a call to Islam), used to recruit and mobilize Palestinians. In Gaza, *dawa* has taken the form of a network of social welfare institutions established by Hamas. This network has contributed to Hamas's reputation among many Palestinians as a movement free of corruption, primarily concerned with their welfare. In fact, during 2002-2003, Hamas invested approximately \$60-70 million toward this end. Hamas's *dawa* network affects Palestinian society in a number of crucial areas:

**Education.** Hamas operates more than 100 educational institutions in Gaza, ranging from early childhood centers to universities. Most notable are the Islamic University and the Daar al-Arkam school. Also noteworthy is the al-Salah school in Dir al-Balach, which is sponsored by a charity organization that purchases thousands of school supplies for Palestinian children. Another institution, the Islamic Society, operates annual summer camps designed to spread the message of the *shahids* (martyrs) to thousands of children.

**Health.** Hamas operates dozens of medical clinics in various Gaza neighborhoods. In addition, advanced medical equipment and pharmaceuticals are offered free of charge to the Palestinian public via several Hamas-affiliated charity organizations in Gaza.

Incitement. Some of the same Hamas-affiliated charity organizations that donate millions of dollars to the sick and poor also support the families of suicide bombers. Moreover, mosques can provide a convenient venue for incitement against Israel and recruitment into Hamas. For example, of the twenty-four mosques in the Gebaliya area alone, twelve are identified as being strongly affiliated with Hamas. Indeed, the violent conflict with Israel has reinforced the organization's religious and ideological fundamentalism, as most Palestinians have come to perceive Hamas activists as heroes and shahids bravely fighting the Israeli occupier.

Since its inception, Hamas has carefully guarded its political agenda and avoided any kind of relationship with external sponsors that could force it to adopt a different agenda. Toward that end, the movement has maintained financial independence, fully exploiting its elaborate global web of so-called charity organizations. Nevertheless, Hamas will have to overcome major obstacles if it hopes to gain enough momentum to supplant the PA. For one thing, the movement lacks the kind of organization needed to effectively deal with the wide spectrum of problems facing the Palestinian population. Hamas's social welfare efforts are no more than a means to an end; they are not a sufficient substitute for what the Palestinian government is expected to do, namely, to provide bona fide solutions to the problems of Palestinian society in the areas of employment, welfare, education, and health. Moreover, although Palestinian political leaders are reluctant to physically confront Hamas, the PA still has considerable strength, with nearly 25,000 armed personnel in Gaza alone. This strength poses a tremendous challenge to Hamas.

#### Providing an Alternative Social Welfare Infrastructure

At present, the PA is incapable of independently responding to the dire needs of its people. If substantial external investment in social welfare is not made soon, Hamas will continue to grow in both size and power. In particular, heavy external investment in building a network of neighborhood clinics, nursing homes, early childhood centers, and a liberal school system is essential to countering the challenge posed by Hamas's social welfare network. Such investment would ideally help Palestinians to become familiar with the benefits of modern social welfare infrastructure and to appreciate democracy, liberalization, and freedom of choice as avenues toward a better future.

Even at the beginning of such an infrastructure project, it is important to engage key PA figures who are politically moderate and open-minded and who aspire to lead the way toward true change. These figures must also be experienced in security issues and in the prevention of terrorism. Such individuals will eventually be able to establish themselves as leaders, so teaming up with them early on is critical. Israel will have to play a vital "behind the scenes" role in order to make this project a success. In particular, Israel could help by simplifying things bureaucratically and by prioritizing smooth passage into the Palestinian territories for building materials.

Although Arafat would probably avoid publicly vetoing such a project, he could try to stymie it indirectly in order to forestall the weakening of his own position. Hamas, of course, would try to sabotage it in every conceivable way; any such initiative would constitute a real threat to the movement's existence.

#### Conclusion

Weakening Hamas is a pressing challenge shared by the PA, Israel, and neighboring Arab countries such as Egypt and Jordan. The United States and the European Union -- both of which are concerned with stability in the Middle East and have expressed a desire to spread freedom and economic prosperity in the region -- are the only entities capable of carrying out such an enormous project. It is uncertain whether the creation of an alternative Palestinian social welfare infrastructure would reduce the level of terrorism in the near term. In the long term, however, it would undoubtedly benefit Palestinian society and end the prospect of the fundamentalist and antidemocratic Hamas supplanting the PA.

Clearly, then, effective action against Hamas should be broadly concentrated on several fronts: Israel should continue to fight Hamas terrorism. In the meantime, the financial pipeline from charitable fronts around the globe

(mainly in Saudi Arabia) should be constricted, and the PA leadership should be pressured to reach finality in the conflict with Israel and fight fundamentalist movements that do not abandon terrorism. Such efforts may constitute the only way of preventing Hamas from achieving dominance over Palestinian society.

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