

Islamic Palestine or Liberated Palestine?

The Relationship between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas

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Brief Analysis

Hamas has succeeded, through its popular influence and close relations with leading elements in the Palestinian Authority (PA), in making some important moves toward the "Islamization" of the PA/Fatah on one hand and a large part of the Palestinian public on the other. The longstanding rivalry between Hamas and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)/PA started with Fatah in the late 1970s, in the context of the Muslim Brotherhood's abstention from the Palestinian armed struggle. The PLO/Fatah, backed by the Marxist fronts, treated the newly established Hamas as if it were unimportant and posed no challenge to the position of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians. Yet, Hamas viewed itself as an ideological and political alternative to the PLO.

Now, Hamas has a different goal, which is to "Islamize" the PLO/PA, rather than to seize power within that structure or establish itself as an alternative leadership. The present cooperation between Hamas and important elements of the PA/Fatah can be interpreted in two ways: either that Hamas is making progress in "Islamization," or that Hamas has adopted a policy of pragmatism about working with nonreligious Palestinian nationalists rather than a strict ideological stance of maintaining isolation from them. Such pragmatism would explain its willingness to engage in Palestinian nation building for the time being, despite its disagreement with the overall PA framework and policies. Since the start of the first intifada in 1987, and especially since the establishment of the PA in 1994, there has been a mutual influence of Hamas on elements of the PA, and the PA on Hamas.

Characteristics of Hamas

Hamas, originating in the Muslim Brotherhood movement, emphasizes social work, the abstention from violent activity against the PA regime, and most importantly the concept of "sabr"—patience and perseverance. Approximately 90 percent of its work is in social, welfare, cultural and educational activities. These are important elements of Hamas's popularity that keep it closely tied to the public. Hamas is more effective than most PA institutions, which is not surprising considering the difficulties and corruption of the PA. Its only real competitors are several nongovernmental organizations that cannot or do not want to translate their work into political influence.

Hamas has an ability to swim against the political current, even when it undertakes an unpopular policy, as it did between 1967 and 1987, when, despite the general Palestinian public's anger and frustration, it rejected terrorism and carried out only a single terrorist act against Israel. Similarly, Hamas went on with terrorism and political violence in 1993-94—after the Oslo Accords, during the period when the establishment of the PA had changed the expectations of the majority of the public in the Occupied Territories toward a willingness to abandon violence.

Hamas developed within the territories, unlike the PLO which was shaped much more by those outside the territories. This has given Hamas a natural affinity with that part of the PA leadership which comes from within the territories, unlike the many who came with Arafat from abroad and who make up the majority in the PA's military

infrastructure. In particular the leadership of the PA security forces and the Fatah Tanzim, like the leadership of Hamas, has roots in the local public therefore Hamas's cooperation with Tanzim and local elements of the security forces may reflect this common background shared by both groups. At the same time, some of those in the PA military infrastructure who returned to the territories from abroad may collaborate with Hamas as a means to create an alliance with local elements.

Hamas is the only Muslim Brotherhood movement that engages in terrorism, although from Hamas's point of view, the terrorist acts are a part of a self-defense jihad against Israel. That said, in many ways Hamas behaves—unlike the leadership of the PA—as if the state of Israel does not exist, or as if Israel's existence is merely a temporary episode to be disregarded because it will one day soon pass from the scene. Therefore, Hamas is mainly concerned with its relations with the PA and does not shape its actions in reaction to Israeli policy; indeed, Palestinian actions influence Hamas's behavior and stance, not Israel's.

The Future of Hamas and the PA

Arafat does not seem to view Hamas as a real threat to his personal rule, and he has succeeded in planting this view in his loyal Fatah followers and security forces. Arafat traditionally only retaliates when his personal position is threatened. Because he does not see Hamas as such a threat, Arafat has not taken real steps against Hamas military activists. Arafat may arrest a few people but will not do anything to actually harm Hamas's operational ability, unless he sees that ability as a threat in the event that he renews negotiations with Israel.

Even though it may not present a threat to Arafat, Hamas does threaten other parts of the complicated PA system, as well as elements in the future struggle for the succession of Arafat. Because of the present intifada, Hamas might be viewed as a legitimate ally to future PA ruling elements, mainly the Fatah/Tanzim in the emergence of a permanent or temporary coalition in the PA; such a coalition might take as a model the relations between the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and the royal Hashemite family. During the past year, Hamas's renewed popularity has spurred more dangerous developments, such as the growing popularity of Hizballah, Hamas's cooperation with and legitimization of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the possible infiltration of Iranian influence within the territories.

It seems that there has been a return to the 1970s, when terrorism was the most influential element in relations between Israel and the Palestinians. If the allies of the PLO were the Marxist groups in the 1970s, the new ally is Hamas—and to a certain degree Hizballah and Iran. As long as Arafat does not return to negotiations with Israel, Hamas may come to some understanding with Arafat or his loyalists in the Fatah Tanzim. Hamas may halt the suicide operations inside Israel for some period; lately, Hamas has published several declarations indicating that they have succeeded in their goal of carrying out ten suicide bombings, perhaps implying they may not carry out anymore for a while. But no matter how much the tactics they use may vary, Hamas remains dedicated to its goal of an Islamic Palestine.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jacqueline Kaufman.

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