

Hamas' Political Impasse: Between Principle and Necessity

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Much can be said to explain, or even justify Hamas' recent political concessions, where its top leaders in Gaza and Damascus agreed in principle with a political settlement on the basis of the two-state solution.

On June 25, Damascus-based leader of the Islamic group's political bureau, Khaled Meshaal reiterated Hamas' rejection of recognizing Israel as a Jewish State, rightfully dubbing such a designation as "racist, no different from Nazis and other calls denounced by the international community." However, he did endorse the idea of a two-state solution, which envisages the creation of an independent Palestinian state on roughly 22 percent of the land of historic Palestine.

The announcement was hardly earth shattering, for other Hamas leaders have alluded, or straightforwardly agreed to the same notion in the past. But what was in fact altered is the language used by Hamas' leaders to endorse the illusive and increasingly unfeasible possibility of two states. Meshaal's language was largely secular, while past Hamas references to the same principle were engulfed in religious idiom. For example, in past years Hamas agreed to a Palestinian state in all of the occupied territories, conditioned on the removal of Jewish settlements, under the provision of a long-term 'hudna', or truce. The term 'hudna' is loaded with implicit religious inferences, and was used to present Hamas' political views as both pragmatic, but also based on time-honored Islamic political tradition.

Ahmed Yousef, chief advisor to the deposed Hamas government in Gaza alluded to the concept of 'hudna' in various writings and media interviews. But his calls sounded more like an attempt to find common space between the Islamic movement's firm religious beliefs and US-led international pressure aimed at forcing Hamas into the same political camp which discredited rival Fatah. But Ahmed Yousef's variation in rhetoric cannot be understood as synonymous with Meshaal's recent political revelations.

The boycott of the elected Hamas government in 2006, and the orchestrated violence that led to a Hamas takeover, and subsequent isolation and siege of the Gaza Strip, were all meant to force Hamas to 'moderate' its position. Immense collective suffering was endured throughout the Gaza Strip in order for Israel and its backers, including the Palestinian leadership based in the West Bank to force Hamas out of its ideological trenches to join the 'pragmatic' camp, which saw little harm in fruitless political compromises.

Hamas' steadfastness was enough to further demonstrate its revolutionary credence and patriotic credentials to most Palestinians and their supporters around the Middle East and the world. Hamas impressed many, not because of its theological references, but political

resilience and refusal to be intimidated. In some way, Hamas achieved the same revolutionary status and recognition as that of Fatah in the 1960's.

It was not until the Israeli war against largely defenseless Gaza starting December 2008, that Hamas seemed politically self-assured, and for good reason. After all, it was a democratically elected movement representing Palestinians in the Occupied Territories . Their rivals' failure to accommodate the new political reality, and incessant Israeli attempts at destroying the movement and imprisoning scores of its elected parliamentarians were not enough to de-legitimize it. Then Israel unleashed one of its grizzliest campaigns against Palestinians, aimed largely at civilians and civilian infrastructure in Gaza . The Israeli war was meant to achieve more than the killing of 1,350 (including 437 children) and the wounding of 5,450 others. It was aimed at disturbing the Palestinian psyche that began seeing a world of possibilities beyond the confining and shallow promises of peace infused by the Oslo peace process, which only served to ingrain occupation and entrench illegal settlements.

International solidarity was building up slowly prior to the Israeli attack. As Israeli bombs began raining atop Gaza 's mostly civilian infrastructure, international solidarity exploded throughout the world. Israel 's brutal folly served to legitimize the very group it was meant to crush. The voices that tirelessly demanded Hamas to live up to fixed conditions, handed down by the so-called Middle East peace quartet, were overshadowed by voices demanding the US and various Western powers to recognize and engage Hamas. A lead voice amongst them is former US President Jimmy Carter, one of the first influential Western personalities to engage Hamas, and to break the news that Hamas "would accept a two-state peace agreement with Israel as long as it was approved by a Palestinian referendum or a newly elected government." (Guardian, April 22, 2008)

Carter's insistence on involving Hamas in any future peace arrangement took him from Damascus , to Cairo to the West Bank , then, to Gaza . His recent visit to the Strip on June 16 was more than that of solidarity, but it was aimed at convincing Hamas to agree to the vision of two states and the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. The alternative conditions are meant to present a more dignified exit than the belligerent and one-sided demands of the quartet. It's unclear whether Hamas would fully embrace his call. But what is clear is that Hamas is sending various signals, such as its willingness to engage in dialogue with the Obama administration, and, again, acceptance of the two-state solution, which according to any reasonable estimation of the Israeli 'facts on the ground' created in occupied Jerusalem and the West Bank, is now a far-fetched possibility.

Needless to say, Hamas as a political movement, with an elected government with some jurisdiction over nearly one-third of the Palestinian people has the right, and even more, the obligation to politically maneuver, reposition and even re-brand itself. Breaking the siege on Gaza requires steadfastness, true, but political ingenuity as well. That said, Hamas must be wary of the political, and historic price that will be paid if it fails to learn from the experience of the discredited and corrupted Fatah. Palestinian rights are enshrined in international law, and corroborated by the endless sacrifices of the Palestinian people, in Gaza and elsewhere. Therefore, the price of engagement, dialogue and political validation must not happen at the expense of the Palestinian people wherever they are, as stipulated in numerous UN resolutions including 194, pertaining to the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

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