



## What should we make of the Palestinian civil war?

Walid Phares

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What most analysts agree on end of June 2007 is that a new reality has transformed the geopolitics of the Palestinian territories to the disadvantage of all parties claiming to represent the "Palestinian cause." And among the most extreme critics of the recent events in Gaza are certainly the disabused Palestinian citizens who witnessed the horrors that took place in those areas. Since 1947, generations of civilians have lost hope and paid the price of leadership misjudgment, keeps repeating today the victims of the latest bloody civil war among Palestinians.

Today, there is a new reality in the two Palestinian enclaves: A Taliban-like power has taken shape in Gaza with a full Hamas control, and across the 40 km of Israeli territory a beleaguered Palestinian authority struggles to maintain the West Bank's enclaves under its wings. A thorough reading in geopolitics leaves us with

little doubt: a Jihadi regime has emerged between the Mediterranean Sea and the Negev desert. Indeed Hamas is an Islamic Fundamentalist movement which believes in Jihadism as an ideology and employs Terror as means. Not only it use extreme violence against the civilians of its declared enemy, Israel, but has recently committed -what Palestinian civilians in Gaza have coined-war crimes. Today questions fuse from all corners of the region and the world: Was Hamas' military victory in Gaza predicted? What are Iran and Syria's roles? Will the Palestinians accept the new reality? Will the Arabs, Israelis, Americans, Europeans and others address the situation? And last but not least, what are the direct consequences of the Hamas coup d'Etat?

### **Predictability**

Was Hamas's military takeover of

the Palestinian authority's agencies and institutions across Gaza predictable? Many in the media and some in academia expressed their surprise at the rapid developments that took place in that enclave. They were among those who advocated the peaceful and "democratic" choices of Hamas within Palestinian politics. Scores of intellectuals and commentators in the West were singing the praises of Hamas' "transformation" into a politically democratic body, who obtained "a legislative majority" as they argued. Many European legislators and commissioners were attempting to convince their electorates that Hamas -like Hezbollah- is neither Terrorist nor fascist. This advocacy logically ended last week with the bloody coup organized by the though-to-be-civil organization. But aside from the failed expertise and myopic political statements in the West, was Hamas' leap into full military power in Gaza foreseeable? Absolutely yes, if we had perceived the group into what it was and continue to be: Jihadist. For, in comparative politics, a sound projection comes from an accurate description. Because many in the West, particularly Europe defined Hamas as a democracy-leaning "political" movement, all subsequent analytical predictions collapsed. For Hamas, as we understood it -based on its own literature and history- is a Jihadi Salafi organization, formerly financed by the Wahabis and currently funded by the Iranian regime. Hence the ballistics of its planning couldn't be clearer: First infiltrate, second penetrate, third takeover and form a Jihadi regime.

### **Hamas's past strategy**

Since its inception as an off shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, the group evolved as of the 1980s from one intifada to another until it claimed a "political" victory in 2006 in Palestinian legislative elections. Obviously, the two decades of financial support from regional regimes and the full control of the political education of the enclave produced a militia-inspired political win. But Hamas played it wisely inside the Palestinian landscape. It surely had several opportunities to strike at its competitors, including Fatah and the PLO as of 1986 and the Palestinian Authority as of 1994. But it opted to grow slowly under the wings of patience and a stream of Syro-Iranian lifeline, until time came: Actually until Tehran and Damascus ordered the final crunch against the Palestinian Authority. Like the old Soviet strategies, the Jihadi "long term plans" have also been used by the Islamists of Hamas. And as it practiced internally, the group also refrained from striking externally against the US, the West and its Arab enemies, and here again, until "orders" will come from the regional master.

### **Iran and Syria's long arms**

Hamas, acronym of Harakat al Muqawama al Islamiya (Movement of Islamic Liberation) is Jihadi ideologically but has developed extended regional cross-sectarian and cross-ideological alliances. Another example of Western intellectual failure in seeing beyond ethnocentric lenses is how academics and commentators

exhausted their energies in convincing audiences that Shiia and Sunni fundamentalists cannot strike deals and nationalists and Islamists cannot work together, when needed. After failing to “see” it in Iraq, then in Lebanon, the elite’s analysis also evaporated with Hamas external ties. Undaunted by the sectarian divide the “very Sunni” Hamas received significant support from the “very Shiite” Iran. And against all so-called mainstream thinking in Europe and North America, the very “Islamist” Hamas struck an alliance with the very “Arab nationalist and secular” Syria. In short, Tehran and Damascus gained long arms in the region by feeding Hezbollah and other groups in Lebanon as well as Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories. Hence, those strategic leaps by the “long arms” were and are in fact moves executed within the wider scope of the Syro-Iranian axis. Only such an analysis could explain why would Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah triggers a war last July and Ismael Hanieh of Hamas launch a blitzkrieg in Gaza this spring.

### **Post Arafat: Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas**

As long as Yassir Arafat was alive, Hamas wouldn’t attempt to take over ultimate power among Palestinians, even though it may had the strength. No Palestinian warlord, even though many have been backed by Arab regimes in the past decades, would have been able to accomplish that task. Once the “abu Ammar” (nick name of Arafat) gone, the clock began ticking in Hamas’ war room.

First, they pressured Abbas (replacing Arafat) for legislative elections while they were still armed and well funded. The results were obvious: they would grab the seats of all districts under their militia control, most of Gaza. Then they formed a cabinet, “playing democracy.” And as they controlled the central part of the executive branch they slowly infiltrated the main PA military and security agencies, upsetting Fatah, also armed. Since both elections, Presidential and legislative the civil war was inevitable. The two camps knew it was inevitable and both lied to their constituencies. Hamas said it would never turn its weapons against other Palestinians, but it did. Abbas said he would not allow a coup to occur, but he did. The ballistics leading to the clash was so obvious over the past few years, rather months. The Hanieh “cabinet” was working extra hours to create a state militia (the “executive force”) and put it under the ministry of interior. Instead of a police force, the “executive units” looked more like a modernized TalibanianieHaneih H

The latter became the pillar of the coup last week. The Fatah militiamen and the Presidential guard were fully aware of the mounting threat but Mahmoud Abbas never gave them the order to strike first. The reason is clear: Abu Mazen made the choice to appoint Hanieh as a Prime Minister and thus couldn’t send his forces to eliminate his own Government: He needed an alibi. While many critics in the West –rightly so– blame Abbas for not acting earlier, reality in Palestine is a little bit more

complex. Abbas had perhaps the constitutional power to disband the cabinet and had enough forces to resist the “Talibanization” of Gaza, but he lacked the legitimacy to do so in the context of the dominant Political culture in the Palestinian national community. Here is why:

### **Political Culture**

For decades, the PLO, then followed by Hamas and PIJ in the 1980s, produced a one way ideological path to the solution of the crisis: the destruction of the state of Israel. Hence, when in 1993 a breakthrough occurred via the Oslo process, the heavy machine of the Palestinian Authority wasn't even able to reverse the ideological trend fully. Arafat himself wasn't capable (some say unwilling because he was one of its founders) to reign in on radicalism. This dominant “ideological culture” loomed over the public discourse in the territories and of course in the regional Palestinian Diaspora. Hamas and PIJ took advantage of the radicalized discourse to shield themselves from any criticism as they developed their suicide bombing tactics. In other words, even though the PA resented Hamas and was practically in a state of undeclared civil war with the latter, it was nevertheless unable to utter the word “terrorist” about a group which was launching attacks on Israel. Abbas was locked in an equation that forced him to wait for the Jihadists to strike first and hard. He was bound by an ideological culture created by his predecessors.

### **Hamas's final leap**

So why did Hamas decide to proceed to the final leap? The short answer is: because it is moving to the next stage of its goals. Hamas as a movement was patient for 21 years until it reached two major benchmarks: One is its consolidation within Gaza, and two is the fact that it formed a “Government.” Western political culture rarely can understand the “long term plans” of the Jihadists. The second benchmark wasn't in Hamas' hands but in the axis'. The blitzkrieg waged by Haniah's men against Fatah and Abbas' positions inside the enclave was strategically “ordered” by the Ayatollahs' regime in the global movements to crumble Peace processes and democratic movements. The chess players in Tehran and Damascus are racing to crumble the situations in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and within the Palestinian Territories. Regionally, Hamas is a pawn moved around by its funding sources, hence it responds to the latter's strategic orders. While domestic tensions with Fatah are the changing variable, the orders from Tehran are the central matrix. As for Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza leaps at Khamenei's clock. The calculations made by both partners, in Palestine and Iran (as well as in Syria) were very thorough and followed an extremely detailed study of the situation of the foe, both Abbas and the United States. Hamas preparations to strike (as well as Hezbollah's in Lebanon) were parallel to the weakening of America's resolve against Ahmedinijad and Assad. Last year's

Congressional elections in the US were read positively by the “axis” not in terms of partisan results but in terms of divisions which would affect US Foreign Policy. The offensives led by Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza few months after the issuing of the Baker-Hamilton report are organically linked to the latter. When bipartisan advice to the President recommended “talking” to the Iranian and Syrian regime about the “future of the region,” followed by a high level visit to Assad led by Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the “axis” kitchen gave the green light to the Spring offensives. In their minds, the anti-democracy planners of the region projected a non-response by Washington. Hamas’ offensive against Fatah finds its roots in the perceived general mollification in the U.S. and in the belief that Israel has been significantly contained in Lebanese and Palestinian affairs.

### **Hamas’s gains**

By launching a coup-like multidirectional offensive against all sites of Fatah, PA and Presidential services in the enclave, Hamas took out the capacities for a counter attack by its opponents. In other words, Hanieh’s forces had to take over “all” positions of their enemies, with the high price in human casualties only because they (Hamas) couldn’t afford leaving any type of holes in Gaza, which could be used by Abbas as beachheads. From this perspective, military analysts can understand the logic of Hamas brutality: it was part of a psychological deterrence, a type of Terrorism, applied against any

Palestinian who would dare thinking about retaliation. Gaza had to be cleansed from all Palestinian security presence other than Hamas (and its allies) in a very brief moment. This may explain the beheadings, torture, executions and other horrors committed by the Jihadists in the enclave. Hamas’ brutality bought repugnant images never seen by Palestinians before, even at the hands of whom they believe were their worse enemies in Israel, Jordan and Lebanon over four decades. The Jihadi massacre of PA and Fatah members and their relatives will create shock and awe among the civilian population in Gaza and beyond. Hamas wanted this treatment a la Taliban to serve as a deterrent within its own new borders, but no one knows exactly how the extreme bloodshed by Hamas will work in terms of reaction. For Palestinian political sociology could produce different and possibly opposed reactions, but it is too early to judge.

However, the “Palestinian-Taliban,” now in charge of the zone can only go forward. With all ties to Mahmoud Abbas broken, the Ismael Hanieh (Gaza) – Khaled Mishaal (Damascus) junta has to rapidly consolidate its grip over Gaza and even begin a campaign to destabilize the West Bank. A Hamas-only “regime” in Gaza, free from the PA international commitments would most likely resort to transform the enclave into a super-bastion for Jihad. This would include:

A mass mobilization, in an attempt to levy an Army of more than 60,000

fighters. Hamas' expectation is to see Iran and eventually Syria and Hezbollah heavily involved in providing weapons and training. But such a projection could be mitigated by international opposition.

Creating dozens of "Fallujahs" in the strip in anticipation of an "outside" offensive at some point. A series of no-surrender fortresses to deter any would be attacking force.

Attempting to deploy a wider and more complex battery of missiles while using the civilian population as shields.

Use civilian travel to the West Bank to insert cells and individuals inside the PA territories.

Link up with the Hamas supporters within the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, Jordan and also inside Israel.

The Gaza "regime", free from Abbas supervision, will activate its overseas operations (including in the United States and the West) to deter American and international potential reprisals in the future.

And last but not least, the Palestinian-Taliban could become the recipient of future Iranian non-conventional weaponry, including tactical nuclear deployment.

### **Western response**

In view of the above, a Western response is strategically obligatory but not necessarily automatically. The rise of an Iranian-backed military

entity between the Israeli and Egyptian borders, with an access to the Mediterranean is a direct threat to Arab moderates, US and Western presence, and the Peace Process between Palestinians and Israelis. Hence, other than Iran and Syria's regimes, this new reality isn't very attractive to the region. But the bigger question now is unavoidably the following: what can be done and by whom?

The Israelis have the military might, but because of many obvious reasons, and aside from last resort defense in a regional war, they shouldn't use it alone: it would - according to projections and lessons from Lebanon- give Hamas all what it needs: legitimacy. The PA units of Abbas should be the ones to counter this project but can't win now: they've just lost all their bases in Gaza and are too weak to defeat Hamas at the present stage. An international force dispatched to the area would be fought by the Jihadists, both locally and internationally with barbaric Terror. Without a strong international commitment under UN Security Council special resolutions, a multinational force at this point would be obsolete. The Arab moderates, particularly Egypt have a direct and vital interest in opposing the rise of a Taliban-regime in Gaza. The bombings by al Qaeda in the Sinai over the past two years are only the appetizers to what is to come if such an "Emirate" is established. But Egypt needs an Arab backing, which could be fought against by Syria, and ironically too by Qatar, the new champion of the Islamists in the re-

gion. Finally, the US is engaged in Iraq and in Afghanistan and its units are called upon in various hot spots around the world: Marines landing in Gaza is not the best idea for now.

So what is the answer to question and is there one? In fact, as in the cases of Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and Somalia, the answers are hard to find because it took a long time for the victims of Jihadism, in this case the Palestinians, to realize how deep the problem is.

But I do argue that a strategic response to the challenge of "Hamas-tan" is possible under a set of conditions, the most important of which is coordination between the various parties called upon to address the challenge. A lot of change of attitude must take place in the region and significant change in direction has to develop in Washington and Brussels.

### **The immediate future**

Expect Hamas and its regional allies to do their utmost efforts to consolidate their "acquisition" for now. Iran and Syria will move regionally and internationally in multiple directions to confirm the new status quo. Damascus and Tehran will deploy all skills in the Arab world to waist as much time as possible and diplomatic "initiatives" will fly all over. Hamas will play two games: One is to deepen the control and widen the defenses of Gaza and two is to reassure everyone they can that they are no threat. Khaled Mashaal, the Syrian-based boss of Hamas used air-time –generously offered by al Jazee-

ra- to assuage feelings and fears. "Yes we are Islamists but we aren't establishing a fundamentalist religious state (yet)," he said, repeating almost word for word what the spokesperson of the Somali Islamic Courts said after their takeover of Mogadishu earlier this year. "We have good relations with Iran and Syria, but that doesn't mean anything," he continued. Then he offered panoply of psychological gadgets: Hamas still recognizes Abbas as a President; it would work on liberating the British hostage (before it would grab more in the future); it welcomes Arab initiatives; it will keep the Palestinian flags higher than Hamas'; and to make sure Jihadi energies are still up, the group's leaders pledged that they will continue their relentless fight against Israel.

In fact, attacking Israel with missiles and suicide bombing is what Hamas has in mind if its feels the threat would come too close from all opposed parties together. It thinks that striking against the "Jewish entity" would be the best shield against a counter attack by the PA and its allies. Thus, it is important that the Government appointed by Mr Abbas and headed by Salam Fayyad would take the initiative internationally and press for an isolation of the Terrorists. The key to the next stage is in the hands of Abbas-Fayyad but in view of Fatah's heavy past, and the significant reforms the movement needs to undertake before it is considered as a full partner in the War on terror, time is now a dangerous factor. It is the temporal space be-

tween Abbas cleaning up his enclaves and reforming the PA radically and Hamas taking the offensive into the West Bank while dragging Israel into confrontation. The immediate future of Hamastan needs hyper skills on behalf of Washington

and Brussels to calibrate the response to the regional Syro-Iranian threat. And until the fog of uncertainties disappears Palestine is now divided between the equivalent of Afghanistan's "Taliban" and "Mujahideen".

*Professor [Walid Phares](#) is the author of *Future Jihad*. He is a Visiting Fellow with the *European Foundation for Democracy in Brussels* and a Senior Fellow with the [Foundation for the Defense of Democracies](#) in Washington.*