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The Storm within Hamas

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Sharp differences of opinion within the Hamas leadership have surfaced since an agreement about who will be the prime minister of the Palestinian unity government was signed between Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Palestinian Authority, and Khaled Mashal, Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, in Doha on February 6, 2012. The agreement lifted a major obstacle in the reconciliation process between the organizations, once the two leaders agreed that Abbas would head the national unity government that is to be established as part of the process. Mashal signed the agreement without receiving authorization from Hamas institutions, claiming that this was a tactical rather than a strategic move, which would have required the approval of the Political Bureau and the Shura Council.

Mashal's move was met with serious opposition within the organization, and since the agreement was signed, many Hamas leaders – some publicly – have expressed their reservations and sought to have it revoked. The most strident of the opponents to the agreement has been Mahmoud a-Zahar, one of the Hamas leaders in Gaza, who declared that the fate of the Doha agreement would be the same as that of the unity agreement signed in Cairo three years ago, because both agreements were stillborn. He claimed that the agreement granted Abbas full power and denies the legitimacy of Hamas leaders. Likewise, he demanded a clear decision from Hamas institutions, saying this was clearly a strategic matter.

For years Hamas has made a point of presenting the image of a unified body that maintains an orderly, straightforward decision making process, departing significantly from Fatah's chaotic, authoritarian, corrupt conduct. Since the May 2011 signing of the Cairo unity agreement between Fatah and Hamas, which jumpstarted the current process of reconciliation, the organization has found it increasingly difficult to maintain this facade, and deep internal divisions and disagreements have been aired publicly. Many Hamas leaders still feel the need to sweep the disputes under the rug when addressing the world at large, and therefore have chosen not to express their opposition publicly. For

example, Musa Abu Marzouk, Mashal's deputy, opted not to voice any opinion in public. Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas' Prime Minister in Gaza, publicly voiced his support for the agreement, but his close associates in the Gaza Strip have harshly condemned the agreement. The military wing is similarly caught up in the dispute. Its acting commander Ahmad al-Jabari, expressed public support for Mashal's position, while its nominal head, Mohammad Deif, supports the position of the civilian leadership in Gaza (a-Zahar and Haniyeh).

In the end, it appears that Hamas will not revoke the Doha agreement, primarily due to the steep cost such a move would incur: internal division, offense to Qatar, and offense to the organization's leaders. Indeed, on February 22, 2012, Cairo hosted a meeting of Hamas leaders at which the agreement was ratified. But these deep differences of opinion and their public expression indicate that Hamas is undergoing a difficult process of adjusting to the changes in the region that emerged with the Arab spring. More specifically, as a result of the events in the Arab world, Hamas has found itself in an unfamiliar situation. In the past it bore the standard of resistance vis-à-vis Israel, was identified with the resistance axis of Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah, and enjoyed widespread support in the Arab street. Suddenly it finds itself aligned with those who are identified as "the bad guys": Hamas is categorized with Iran and Syria, whose regimes oppress their peoples, and is aligned with the Shiites and their associates against its own sectarian comrades – the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. This position is intolerable from the organization's point of view, especially as the Islamic movements on the rise in the Sunni Arab states embody several opportunities for Hamas. Hence the need to reposition itself, which first of all has geographical implications. The various elements of the Hamas leadership have in practice left Damascus and divide their time between Cairo and Doha. They also need to reposition themselves in terms of their political stance, both outwardly and inwardly.

Indeed, the Palestinian public demands unity above all as a move towards democracy and elections, and this means an end to the split between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The Hamas and Fatah governments are both considered illegitimate because they were not elected, and Hamas was forced into a reconciliation process with Fatah in which elections are supposed to be a central component. Outwardly, Hamas must adapt to the new spirit in the Arab world, whose core is not armed resistance but rather other ideals, such as democracy, human rights, transparency, and social justice. The Islamic movements are also called on to adjust to this new agenda in order to earn votes in elections and maintain subsequent popular support, whether they do so wholeheartedly or disingenuously. This is why Mashal was ready to agree to a policy whose central feature was extending the ceasefire with Israel and the use of "popular resistance" only, i.e., protests but not violence, in the agreement signed with Abbas in Cairo in May 2011. This has also caused

a reorientation of Hamas' relations with the various loci of regional power. Hamas is distancing itself from Iran and Syria and forging closer relations with the leaders of the Sunni camp in the Middle East: Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

Close examination of the split between those opposing and those supporting the Doha agreement reveals that this split is not based on ideology rather is the result of local and personal interests. Typical examples are Haniyeh and a-Zahar. They are opposed to suspending the armed struggle and changing Hamas' orientation as well as turning a cold shoulder to Iran and Syria (evidenced by Haniyeh's visit to Tehran, which earned much criticism within Hamas). The reason is clear: they are worried that Mashal's concessions during the reconciliation process will hurt their own position as those in charge of the Gaza Strip. Another example is the argument within the military wing. Al-Jabari is a close associate of Mashal and relations with him are power base, whereas Deif is associated with the Hamas leadership in Gaza.

It seems that the process of change occurring in Hamas is presenting Israel with more opportunities than risks. First of all, Hamas' interest in maintaining the ceasefire between Israel and the Gaza Strip is growing. Second, Hamas' new patrons are less problematic for Israel than the old ones, and Israel can use them to exert influence on Hamas' positions. In the longer run, there is the chance that Hamas will join the Palestinian consensus regarding a peaceful resolution with Israel.

It therefore appears that Israel should reexamine its policy and its possible contribution to encouraging Hamas in the direction led by Mashal. So, for example, it is highly questionable whether the Israeli response to the reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah – the core of which is a message to Abbas that should a national unity government arise Israel would not view it as a viable partner for dialogue and would impose financial sanctions on it and resort to other actions liable to push Hamas back into the open arms of Iran and Syria – genuinely serves Israel's interests.

