

**LIGHT AT THE END OF THEIR TUNNELS?  
HAMAS & THE ARAB UPRISINGS**

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## LIGHT AT THE END OF THEIR TUNNELS? HAMAS & THE ARAB UPRISINGS

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hamas never has faced such large challenges and opportunities as presented by the Arab uprisings. It abandoned its headquarters in Damascus, at much cost to ties with its largest state supporter, Iran, while improving those with such U.S. allies as Egypt, Qatar and Turkey. Asked to pick sides in an escalating regional contest, it has sought to choose neither. Internal tensions are at new heights, centering on how to respond to regional changes in the short run. Leaders in the West Bank and exile tend to believe that with the rise to power of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in particular and the West's rapprochement with Islamists in general, it is time for bolder steps toward Palestinian unity, thereby facilitating Hamas's regional and wider international integration. The Gaza leadership by contrast is wary of large strategic steps amid a still uncertain regional future. These new dynamics – Islamists' regional ascent; shifting U.S. and EU postures toward them; vacillation within their Palestinian offshoot – offer both Hamas and the West opportunities. But seizing them will take far greater pragmatism and realism than either has yet shown.

The Arab uprisings hardly could have caused a more stark reversal of Hamas's fortunes. In the stagnant years preceding them, it had been at an impasse: isolated diplomatically; caged in economically by Egypt and Israel; crushed by Israeli and Palestinian Authority security forces in the West Bank; warily managing an unstable ceasefire with a far more powerful adversary; incapable of fulfilling popular demands for reconciliation with Fatah; and more or less treading water in Gaza, where some supporters saw it as having sullied itself with the contradictions of being an Islamist movement constricted by secular governance and a resistance movement actively opposing Gaza-based attacks against Israel.

Facing reduced popularity since the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections that brought it to power, Hamas had to contend with criticism from without and within, the latter accompanied by defections from a small but important group of militants who left to join groups more committed to upholding Islamic law and to engaging in attacks against Israel. All in all, the movement could take comfort in little other than that Fatah was doing no better.

The Arab revolts seemed to change all that. Positive developments came from across the region: the toppling of Fatah's strong Arab ally, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak; the rise in Egypt of Hamas's closest supporter and mother movement, the Muslim Brotherhood; the opening of the Gaza-Sinai crossing at Rafah, control of which the former Egyptian regime had used to pressure, constrict and impoverish what it perceived to be Gaza's illegitimate rulers; the empowerment of Islamist parties in other countries; growing instability in states with large Islamist oppositions; and the promise of a new, more democratic regional order reflecting widespread aversion to Israel and its allies and popular affinity with Hamas. As Hamas saw it, these and other events promised to profoundly affect the advancement of each of its primary goals: governing Gaza; weakening Fatah's grip over the West Bank; spreading Islamic values through society; ending its diplomatic isolation; and strengthening regional alliances in opposition to Israel.

Yet, regional changes also have come at a cost. Above all, the uprising in Syria, where its political bureau had been based for more than a decade, presented the movement with one of the greatest challenges it has faced, tearing it between competing demands. On the one hand, the movement had to weigh the gratitude felt to a regime that had supported it when nearly all other Arab countries had shunned it; the cost of breaking relations with a regime still clinging to power; and the risks entailed in alienating Iran, its largest supporter and supplier of money, weapons and training. On the other hand, Hamas considered its connection to the Muslim Brotherhood and to Sunni Arabs more generally, as well as its indebtedness to the Syrian people, who had long stood with the movement. Hovering over these were its obligations to Syria's hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, who could pay with their homes and lives for the decisions made by some of their political leaders.

Difficult as the external balancing act has been, the Arab uprisings also have forced upon the movement a no less trying challenge by bringing to the surface and exacerbating internal contradictions and rifts among its varied constituencies. The impasse at which Hamas had been stuck

before the Arab upheavals allowed the movement to keep its many differences largely beneath the surface; with few significant opportunities before it, no contest among visions needed take place. But once Hamas found itself in a dramatically altered environment with novel challenges and possibilities, longstanding tensions came to the fore and new forms of friction emerged. Broadly speaking, these reflect several interrelated factors: the group's geographic dispersion and its leadership's varied calculations, caused by differing circumstances (in Gaza, prisons, the West Bank or outside); ideological distinctions, particularly albeit not exclusively related to varying assessments of the impact of the Arab upheavals; roles in the movement's political, military, religious and governance activities; and pre-existing personal rivalries.

The contest within Hamas has played out most vividly and publicly over the issue of Palestinian reconciliation. That is because it is a primary demand of Palestinians and touches on many of the most important strategic questions faced by the movement, including integration within the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), control of the Palestinian Authority, the status of security forces in the West Bank and Gaza, the formation of a joint national strategy with Fatah and Hamas's political endgame with Israel.

Hamas's differences over national strategy, particularly over how far to go in reconciliation negotiations, stem in large part from contrasting perceptions of what near-term effects the Arab uprisings will have on the movement. These in turn have been shaped by the distinct first-hand experiences of the leaderships in Gaza and, until recently, Damascus. Broadly speaking, the strategic divide corresponds to two views, themselves related to two different sets of interests: that, on one hand, because regional changes are playing largely to Hamas's favour, the movement should do little other than hold fast to its positions as it waits for the PA to weaken, economic conditions in Gaza to improve and its allies to grow in strength; and that, on the other, it should take this rare occasion to make tough decisions that might bring about significant long-term gains.

The international community has a stake in the choices Hamas ultimately makes. The movement will continue to play a vital role in Palestinian politics, affecting the prospect of renewing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations as well as their odds of success. Reuniting the West Bank and Gaza is not only desirable; it also is necessary to achieving a two-state settlement. And territorial division, coupled with Gaza's persistent economic isolation, contains the seeds of further conflict with Israel. For these and other reasons, the world – and the West in particular – must do more than merely stand on the sidelines as Hamas wrestles over its future. Instead, the U.S. and Europe should test whether they can seize the opportunity presented by two related developments: first, the rise to power (notably in Egypt) of Islamist movements that are keen on improv-

ing relations with the West, crave stability and are signalling they do not wish to make the Israeli-Palestinian issue a priority; second, the intense internal debates taking place within Hamas over the movement's direction.

Even if Hamas is susceptible to influence by third parties, the West should not overreach or exaggerate its influence. The Islamist movement is uncertain and in flux but not about to abandon fundamental positions; getting it to accept the Quartet conditions as such is out of the question. Instead, acting in concert with Egypt and others, the U.S. and EU should set out to achieve changes that are at once less rhetorical, more meaningful and less onerous for Hamas.

These could include entering a more formal ceasefire agreement with Israel over Gaza; exerting efforts to help stabilise the situation in Sinai, the gravity of which was underscored by a 5 August attack by militants on Egyptian soldiers; reaffirming, as part of a unity deal, President Mahmoud Abbas's mandate to negotiate a final status agreement with Israel; and pledging to respect the outcome of a popular referendum by Palestinians on such an accord. In return, Hamas could benefit from reciprocal Israeli guarantees over a Gaza ceasefire; an improvement in the Strip's economic status; and an assurance by the U.S. and EU that they would engage with a Palestinian unity government that carried out those commitments.

Egypt – even under the Muslim Brotherhood – shares objective interests with Israel on each of the above: it too wants to see calm in Gaza; it too would prefer to stabilise the situation in Sinai, as it has sought to do with a military campaign launched in reaction to the 5 August attack; and it too might benefit from resumed negotiations under Abbas's aegis, which would help remove a potential irritant in U.S.-Egyptian relations, improve the overall regional climate and prepare the ground for a new peace process. Why not try to take advantage of this?

Twice in the past – after the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections and after the 2007 Mecca unity accord – the international community missed the boat in its approach toward Hamas, adopting policies that produced almost precisely the reverse of what it expected: Hamas consolidated its control over Gaza; a war and dangerous flare-ups have occurred with Israel; Fatah has not been strengthened; democratic institutions in the West Bank and Gaza have decayed; and a peace deal is no closer. With a third chance coming, amid dramatic improvements in relations with Islamist movements region-wide, the West should make sure it is not, once more, left stranded at the dock.

**Gaza City/Cairo/Jerusalem/Ramallah/Brussels,  
14 August 2012**

## LIGHT AT THE END OF THEIR TUNNELS? HAMAS & THE ARAB UPRISINGS

### I. INTRODUCTION

The tide of upheaval that began sweeping through the Arab world in early 2011 presented Hamas with both the greatest opportunities and the greatest challenges it had faced since its founding nearly a quarter century ago. It had been at an impasse, isolated diplomatically, restricted economically, stifled in the West Bank and losing popularity in Gaza, where it faced criticism from within and without. Almost its only solace was that Fatah appeared to be doing no better and arguably worse.<sup>1</sup> Yet, especially in the early months of the Arab revolts, Hamas's fortunes seemed to be changing in a way the movement could have only dreamed of, offering what it hoped would be an unprecedented chance to advance its goals in the region, as well as in Gaza, the West Bank and Palestinian society generally.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A Hamas leader said, "in 2010 we reached an impasse. All doors were closed". Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Beirut, 10 December 2011. An adviser to Prime Minister Haniyeh said, "the Palestinian national cause has retreated during the last six years. Hamas has been besieged in Gaza, and Fatah has been doing security cooperation in the West Bank. Hamas did not bring the Palestinian cause forward during this time, but it preserved it in its place". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 23 February 2012.

<sup>2</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°110, *Palestinian Reconciliation: Plus Ça Change ...*, 20 July 2011; N°104, *Radical Islam in Gaza*, 29 March 2011; N°85, *Gaza's Unfinished Business*, 23 April 2009; and Briefings N°30, *Gaza: The Next Israeli-Palestinian War?*, 24 March 2011; and N°25, *Palestine Divided*, 17 December 2008.

### II. TWO SIDES OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS

#### A. A WEDDING IN CAIRO

When the uprisings began, Hamas rejoiced at what it saw as the reshuffling of a regional deck that had been stacked against it. As early as 1988, Hamas posters had called upon subjects of the Arab rulers who had "turn[ed] their backs on Palestinians" to "reclaim an important and leading role in the struggle for liberation".<sup>3</sup> Secular Arab dictators, in Hamas's view, were being toppled in no small part because of their suppression of Islamists, submission to Western diktats, cowardice before Israel and abandonment of the Palestinian cause;<sup>4</sup> indeed, in December 2010, a senior Hamas leader predicted that the Egyptian regime cooperating with Israel and the Palestinian Authority to impose closure upon Gaza would soon fall.<sup>5</sup>

Hamas saw its own 2006 electoral victory, which was followed by financial isolation from much of the Arab world,<sup>6</sup> as a precursor to the popular Islamist wave currently pushing aside the old order. Revolutionaries across the Middle East and North Africa spoke of their own intifada (uprising) and *sahwa* (awakening), echoing Hamas's ear-

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<sup>3</sup> Hamas poster no. 33, 12 December 1988, as cited in Matti Steinberg, *Facing their Fate: Palestinian National Consciousness 1967-2007* (Tel Aviv, 2008), in Hebrew.

<sup>4</sup> "It is no secret that most of the Muslims who were arrested or deported won the elections throughout the region. The Muslim Brotherhood succeeded in these elections because the people hated these secular regimes". Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Nablus, February 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza Health Minister Bassem Naim, 27 December 2010.

<sup>6</sup> According to the World Bank, "direct budget support [to the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority government] virtually came to a halt. Nevertheless, donors provided assistance through alternative routes. In particular, while Arab donors channelled their assistance through the Office of the President [Mahmoud Abbas], multilaterals and other bilateral donors did so through a Temporary International Mechanism". "Staying Afloat? The Role of International Aid and Social Assistance", in *Coping with Conflict: Poverty and Inclusion in the West Bank and Gaza*, World Bank (2011), p. 119.

liest messages exhorting captive Arab masses to rise up and awaken their dormant Islamic faith.<sup>7</sup>

For the first time, Hamas could claim it was witnessing the beginnings of its long-predicted vision of a pan-Islamic effort to liberate Palestine. On 15 May 2011, Nakba Day, when Palestinians commemorate the displacement that accompanied Israel's creation in 1948, protesters marched on Israel's borders from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt, much as Hamas, in 1988, had called on Palestinian refugees in Jordan to do in order to unilaterally fulfil their right of return.<sup>8</sup> In Morocco in 2012, tens of thousands of Islamists marched in solidarity with Palestine while chanting, "we will never forget you, [Hamas founder] Ahmed Yassin".<sup>9</sup> In Tunisia, the origin of the uprisings, to which Western eyes turned hopefully for a model of post-revolutionary politics, Rashid Ghannouchi, leader of the country's largest political party, An-Nahda, forecasted the impact of the Arab revolts on Israel:

I bring glad tidings that the Arab region will get rid of the germ of Israel. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, leader of the Hamas movement, once said that Israel would disappear before 2027. ... Israel may disappear before that.<sup>10</sup>

Months later, following An-Nahda's victory in Tunisia's fall 2011 elections, a Hamas parliamentarian, Houada Naim, was invited to address a Tunisian political rally for the first time. Beside her stood incoming Prime Minister and An-Nahda Secretary General Hammadi Jabali, who declared: "The liberation of Tunisia will, God willing, bring about the liberation of Jerusalem".<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hamas poster, unnumbered, 15 January 1988, as cited in Matti Steinberg, *Facing their Fate*, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> See *Hamas* (Hamas Journal in Palestine), no. 10, October 1988, p.1, as cited in *ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> "At least 11,000 join pro-Palestine march in Morocco", Reuters, 26 March 2012. On 14 July 2012, Hamas political bureau chief Khaled Meshal attended a conference of Morocco's Party of Justice and Development, the Islamist party's first since winning polls in November 2011. Earlier that week he had attended the conference of Tunisia's ruling Islamist party, An-Nahda, declaring: "We must build an Arab-Muslim strategy to liberate Palestine and turn the page on negotiations [with Israel]. ... The Palestinians aren't selfish, so take your time to get through this difficult transitory period – it is your right. ... The only way to liberate Palestine is the struggle". "Hamas chief attends Morocco ruling party conference", Agence France-Presse, 14 July 2012; "In Tunisia, Meshal calls for turning page on talks with Israel", Naharnet, 13 July 2012.

<sup>10</sup> "Interview with Rashid Ghannouchi", *Alarab*, 2 May 2011. According to a minister in the Gaza government, "Rashid Ghannouchi said to Haniyeh, 'We consider ending your suffering one of our first priorities in Tunis'". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 3 November 2011.

<sup>11</sup> "Hamas representative addresses Tunisian political rally", *Tunisia Live*, 15 November 2011.

Even Jordan, a firm U.S. ally with good relations with Israel, began to change its tune toward Hamas. In October 2011, then-Prime Minister Awn Khasawneh said his nation's expulsion of Hamas in 1999 had been "a political and constitutional mistake";<sup>12</sup> almost three months later, for the first time since the movement's deportation, Hamas political bureau chief Khaled Meshal paid Jordan an official visit, which was followed by a second in June 2012.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Of Khasawneh's statement, a Hamas leader said, "I am sure such expressions have to be made in coordination with the King. Abdullah sees what the U.S. does with its allies in the region [referring to Obama's abandonment of Mubarak]. And now he is trying to protect himself". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 3 November 2011. Asked if he and other leaders in the region believe they "cannot rely on the U.S.", King Abdullah said, "I think everybody is wary of dealing with the West ... Looking at how quickly people turned their backs on Mubarak, I would say that most people are going to try and go their own way. I think there is going to be less coordination with the West and therefore a chance of more misunderstandings". "Jordan's King Abdullah on Egypt, Syria and Israel", *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2011.

<sup>13</sup> The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood praised the first visit on its website: "The meeting today (Sunday) is historic. Qatari mediation is supporting the palace's efforts to reformulate Jordan-Hamas relations in line with national interests". "Hamas chief Meshal makes 'historic' visit to Jordan amid Islamists' praise", Al Arabiya, 30 January 2012. The same month as the second visit, its head, Sheikh Hammam Saeed, visited Hamas leaders in Gaza. "Meshal meets with King Abdullah in Jordan", *The Daily Star*, 29 June 2012; "'Miles of Smiles 13' convoy arrives in Gaza", Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades – Information Office, 12 June 2012. Hamas leaders nonetheless predicted the warming of relations would go only so far. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Beirut, 10 December 2011. A Hamas political bureau member added: "King Abdullah is not a strong person who can make a decision on his own. Others advised him against the opening. He and the regime are scared of Hamas. The rapprochement started because they were afraid Abu Mazen could sell out the Palestinians by agreeing to a deal with Israel for next-to-nothing. They were afraid he could make a deal without consulting Jordan about refugees; and he wanted to display more even-handedness toward all Palestinians [rather than siding with Fatah]". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 23 November 2011. Two months after the first Meshal visit, King Abdullah stressed that Hamas would not reopen offices in Jordan: "Hamas will not reopen offices in Jordan and there is no change in this policy. As for the late January meeting between myself, Khaled Meshal and the Crown Prince of Qatar, it was in the framework of Jordanian support for peace efforts, Palestinian reconciliation, and the Palestinian National Authority's efforts to realise the aspirations of the Palestinian people. I reiterated Jordan's stance that negotiations, with the support of the international community, are the only way to restore Palestinian rights. So, no change in strategy there either". "Interview with King Abdullah II", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 4, March 2012. Likewise, a Jordanian official emphasised that Meshal's higher-profile June audience with the king should not be interpreted as a change in government policy. Crisis Group

Hamas's ally Qatar, among the greatest beneficiaries of regional changes, had mediated the rapprochement.<sup>14</sup> A senior Hamas leader said:

Qatar and other countries use Hamas to gain credibility inside their state. When they receive Hamas leaders or support the movement, they lessen pressure at home. Qatar and Iran are now on opposite sides regarding [the uprising in] Syria. But they both fund us. They need us. Now is the Muslim Brotherhood's era, and Hamas is a part of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>15</sup>

For Hamas's domestic adversaries, a worry no less great than the rise of official support for the movement was that it enjoyed favourable coverage on Qatar's satellite channel, Al Jazeera,<sup>16</sup> one of the most influential actors driving the rapid spread of the Arab uprisings and which for years had been accused by leading PA and Fatah officials of being "an organ for Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood".<sup>17</sup>

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interview, Amman, July 2012. In August 2012, Meshal again travelled to Jordan, for the funeral of a Hamas founder, Sheikh Omar al-Ashqar.

<sup>14</sup> A member of the Hamas political bureau said, "Jordan wants four things out of the rapprochement with Hamas: money from Qatar; new relations with Qatar; to pressure Syria by taking the Hamas file away from them; and to calm their own street [the largest opposition party in Jordan is the political wing of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Action Front]". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 23 November 2011; see also Rana Sabbagh, "Rapprochement between Jordan and Hamas with the help of Qatar", *Dar Al Hayat*, 8 November 2011.

<sup>15</sup> He added: "Qatar is like a person who sins on one side and tries to fix it from the other: to compensate for the presence of a U.S. military base and its relations with Israel, Doha supports Hamas. Since 2006, they have continually funded Gaza's government. They try to balance their image". Crisis Group interview, Hamas senior leader, Beirut, 25 February 2012. A Hamas political bureau member said Qatar's aid had not been great: "Qatar is not giving much money to Palestinians". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, January 2012. One month later, Hamas announced it would soon forge an agreement to receive \$250 million in aid for reconstruction projects in Gaza. "Hamas, Qatar to sign 250 million USD deal to rebuild Gaza", Xinhua, 26 February 2012. In early July 2012, Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh confirmed that Qatari projects in Gaza valued at \$250 million would soon launch. "Haniyeh: 'The resistance will not fail'", Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades – Information Office, 10 July 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Khaled Hroub, "How Al-Jazeera's Arab spring advanced Qatar's foreign policies", *Europe's World*, autumn 2011; "Qatar wields an outsize influence in Arab politics", *The New York Times*, 15 November 2011.

<sup>17</sup> The accusation was made by former Fatah leader and PA national security adviser Mohammed Dahlan. PLO and PA officials have made similar statements and called for the station to be shut down. See "Top Palestinian journalist seeks asylum in Norway", *The Jerusalem Post*, 1 July 2007. Hamas officials say

Most noteworthy of all were signs of a coming shift in the policy of Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood won parliamentary (though these later were voided) and presidential elections, raising hopes in Hamas that the Mubarak government's diplomatic and economic isolation of Gaza would soon be undone.<sup>18</sup> After an August 2011 attack on Israeli civilians by Sinai-based militants and the killing later that day of six Egyptian soldiers by Israeli forces,<sup>19</sup> Cairenes demonstrated outside the Israeli embassy, coming far closer to it than the Mubarak regime had permitted; weeks later, a crowd of thousands tore down a recently erected protective wall, then stormed the embassy, throwing official documents from the windows and breaking through all but one security door separating them from six Israeli staff members hiding in a safe room with guns drawn – "very close", in the words of an Israeli foreign ministry official, "to being lynched".<sup>20</sup> A senior Hamas leader in Gaza saw the ransacking as a harbinger of a new era in which Egypt's isolation of Gaza and alliance with Israel would be reversed:

In the future, there will be no Israeli embassy in Cairo. What happened was a real violation of their embassy, a violation of their dignity. Egyptians who threw their documents into the streets are considered national heroes. Relations between Israel and Egypt will deteriorate; and relations between Egypt and Palestinians, and especially Gazans, will be much improved.<sup>21</sup>

In March 2012, during a brief but intense escalation in violence between Israel and Gaza-based militants, primarily from Islamic Jihad,<sup>22</sup> the Egyptian parliament, in which the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party holds a plurality of seats, unanimously passed a motion, albeit largely symbolic, to halt gas sales to Israel, expel the Israeli

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that Al Jazeera's coverage of the movement has recently become far less sympathetic. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza City, Cairo, February 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, January 2012. Hamas officials said that for the last several years of Mubarak's rule, Mohamed Morsi, who replaced Mubarak as president, had been their primary interlocutor in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, August 2012. Israelis have been deeply concerned about the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, especially given some of its leadership's rhetoric. See, eg, "Antisemitic and Anti-Israel Articles on Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Website", Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), 13 January 2012.

<sup>19</sup> "Sixth Egyptian soldier shot by Israel dies in hospital as a result of his injuries", *Ahram* (online), 10 September 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, November 2011. "Egypt commandos save 6 Israelis in embassy attack", Associated Press, 10 September 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 11 September 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Other groups, such as the Popular Resistance Committees, also participated in the hostilities, but Hamas did not.

ambassador and endorse a parliamentary committee report proposing a complete reversal in Egypt's policy toward Israel.<sup>23</sup>

Hamas's diplomatic isolation was weakening. In January 2012, parliamentarians from Gaza visited Switzerland, where they attended a meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Union;<sup>24</sup> two months later the UN Human Rights Council invited a Hamas leader from Gaza, Ismail Ashqar, to speak.<sup>25</sup> Several high-level Egyptian delegations have visited Gaza, beginning with the first official visit by the Muslim Brotherhood, followed by members of parliament and of the Salafi party, Al-Nour.<sup>26</sup> Turkey pledged hundreds of millions of dollars of support to Gaza,<sup>27</sup> and Arab League Secretary General and former Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Araby asked Khaled Meshal to act as a mediator in negotiating an end to violence in Syria.<sup>28</sup>

In late 2011 and early 2012, Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh left Gaza for the first time since 2007, embarking on two regional tours that included stops in Egypt, Sudan, Turkey, Tunisia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab

Emirates and Iran; Hamas leaders found particularly noteworthy the visit to the Emirates, with which their relations had been strained.<sup>29</sup> To the apparent consternation of officials in Ramallah, Haniyeh was met in many of these countries, including Tunisia, Turkey and several Gulf states, not as a Hamas leader but as a prime minister.<sup>30</sup>

In Cairo, the deputy head of Hamas's political bureau, Musa Abu Marzouk, has established an office, and Hamas officials have been upgraded from dealing exclusively with intelligence officers to also meeting with officials of the foreign ministry and President Morsi himself.<sup>31</sup> "Even though much of the Egyptian apparatus is still part of the old regime", a senior Hamas leader said, "their behaviour toward us changed. Ismail Haniyeh hadn't been able to leave Gaza since 2007 because Mubarak didn't let him. Today he is travelling everywhere".<sup>32</sup> On 12 August, Morsi fired Egypt's top two military officials, Defence Minister Mohammed Hussein Tantawi and Chief of Staff Sami Anan; should he further consolidate power over the remnants of Mubarak's regime, Hamas's relations with Egypt likely will continue to improve.

In February 2012, thousands of ecstatic worshippers in Cairo thronged to greet and lift Haniyeh after he delivered a sermon at the ancient seat of Islamic learning, the Al-Azhar Mosque.<sup>33</sup> That evening, a Hamas official pointed to two photos juxtaposed above an online news article about the speech: in one, taken after the Egyptian government denied him entry to Gaza in December 2006, Haniyeh crouches alone at night on the curb outside the Rafah crossing, hugging himself to keep warm in the winter air; in the other, he smiles broadly as members of the crowd at Al-Azhar grasp and carry him aloft. The two

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<sup>23</sup> Only Egypt's ruling military council had the power to enact the decisions called for in the vote. The report called upon the government to recall its ambassador to Israel and "review all its relations and accords with that enemy"; approved Palestinian resistance "in all its kinds and forms"; and declared "Revolutionary Egypt will never be a friend, partner or ally of the Zionist entity, which we consider to be the number one enemy of Egypt and the Arab nation". "Egypt's parliament wants Israel's ambassador out", Associated Press, 12 March 2012.

<sup>24</sup> "Israel fury as Hamas attends global parliamentary forum", Agence France-Presse, 16 January 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Following Israeli protests, Ashqar's speech was cancelled at the last moment. *Haaretz*, 19 March 2012.

<sup>26</sup> The deputy chairman of the Muslim Brotherhood, Gomaa Amin, led a delegation visiting Gaza in October 2011. "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood makes first visit to Hamas-led Gaza", Reuters, 29 October 2011. "Egyptian parliamentary delegation wrap up Gaza visit", Egyptian State Information Service, 31 March 2012. An-Nour party chairman Emad Addin Abdul Ghafour headed an eleven-member delegation. "Egypt Salafist leader visits Gaza Strip", Ma'an News Agency, 21 April 2012.

<sup>27</sup> An official in the Gaza prime minister's office said that Turkey had pledged some \$300 million in aid toward development projects in Gaza. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, January 2012. The Turkish foreign ministry denied that it pledged "cash aid" to Hamas (rather than to development in Gaza), but said it was engaged in numerous humanitarian projects in Gaza, citing the construction of a \$40 million hospital. "Turkey denies aid to Hamas, leaves door open to its office in Turkey", *Today's Zaman*, 29 January 2012.

<sup>28</sup> "Arab League asks for Hamas help with Syria", Reuters, 6 January 2012. This elicited a harsh rebuke from PLO Secretary General Yasser Abed Rabbo, who said Meshal had "no right to mediate on behalf of any regime - Syrian or any other". "Sources: Meshal failed to pass on Arab League's message to al-Assad", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 20 January 2012.

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<sup>29</sup> "For the first time the UAE received Ismail Haniyeh. They were previously totally against Hamas. They had supported [former Fatah security chief Mohammad] Dahlan with money and weapons before. Now Kuwait and Bahrain received Haniyeh; the Gulf states are receiving Haniyeh". Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, 13 February 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interviews Hamas official, Gaza City, January 2012; Fatah Central Committee member, Ramallah, 1 March 2012. See also, "PA denies Haniyeh allegations of trying to obstruct Arab tour", Palestinian News & Info Agency (Wafa), 14 January 2012.

<sup>31</sup> The day after President Abbas met President Morsi on 18 July 2012, Khaled Meshal led a delegation of Hamas members to meet him as well. Reuters, 19 July 2012. Ismail Haniyeh met Morsi on 27 July. His spokesman, Taher Nunu, called the meeting "a real turning point in bilateral relations". Agence France-Presse, 28 July 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Beirut, 25 February 2012.

<sup>33</sup> "At al-Azhar mosque, struggle over Islam roils a revered Egyptian institution", *The Washington Post*, 4 March 2012.



photos, an adviser to Haniyeh said, encapsulated Hamas before and after the Arab uprisings.<sup>34</sup>

## B. A FUNERAL IN DAMASCUS

### 1. Balancing

The changes in the region have not been without costs for Hamas. Above all, the uprising in Syria, where its political bureau had been based for more than a decade, presented the movement with one of the greatest challenges it has faced, tearing it between competing demands.<sup>35</sup>

The movement had to weigh, on the one hand, its gratitude to a regime that had supported it strongly when nearly all other Arab countries had shunned it, and, on the other, its connection to fellow Sunni Muslims who were victims of violence perpetuated by predominantly Alawite security forces and other supporters of President Bashar Assad's regime. Likewise, it had to take into account ties to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, membership in which the regime had made punishable by death; obligations to Syria's hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, who could pay with their homes and lives for the decisions made by some of their political leaders; and indebtedness to the Syrian people, who had stood with the movement and even offered some \$20 million in aid to Gaza during the 2008-2009 war.<sup>36</sup>

From a strategic standpoint, Hamas had to choose between two risky options: severing a relationship with one of its only allies, whose fate was yet unclear; or damaging its credibility with the Syrian people to the extent that it would jeopardise the possibility of maintaining an alliance with the country if and when the revolution succeeded. Prominent in the minds of Hamas leaders was a desire to avoid repeating the mistake of Arafat, who in supporting Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait had isolated the PLO diplomatically and financially; caused Kuwait to expel

hundreds of thousands of Palestinians; and alienated Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.<sup>37</sup>

It was not always easy to determine where ethics ended and expediency began. Whatever the moral considerations, it was clear that standing as an Islamic national liberation movement beside a secular, authoritarian state slaughtering its citizens would have opened Hamas to charges of hypocrisy, undermining the esteem in which it is held not only by Palestinians but by wider regional publics at a time when popular attitudes were promising to play a much larger role in Arab nations' foreign affairs.<sup>38</sup> It could also have strained ties to its ascendant mother movement, the Muslim Brotherhood;<sup>39</sup> damaged its reputation among Palestinians, who overwhelmingly support demands by Syrians for regime change; alienated it from Syria's Sunni majority, whose conflict with the Alawite-dominated regime has become increasingly sectarian; and foreclosed the possibility of finding future support from Arab regional powers antagonistic to Syria and Iran.<sup>40</sup>

Yet no less important to Hamas were the practical consequences of failing to side with the Syrian regime: losing large portions of its assets, many of which are tied to Syria,<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24 February 2012.

<sup>35</sup> A member of Hamas's outside leadership said, "it's true we were in a very difficult situation. On one hand, we had to be loyal to the leadership that backed us. Syria is the only Arab country that received us and supported us. On the other hand, the Syrian people were also of great support and welcomed our presence among them". Citing a *hadith* (a saying or practice of the Prophet Muhammad), he continued: "You support your brother by telling him his mistakes. This is how we should show our loyalty to the Syrian leaders". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 15 September 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas senior leader, Beirut, 15 September 2011.

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<sup>37</sup> "Because of the position taken by Abu Ammar [Arafat] at the time of the first Gulf War, the Palestinians lost everything. Hamas is not going to make this mistake". Crisis Group interview, Bassem Naim, Gaza health minister, Gaza City, 11 September 2011. A political bureau member added: "You will not see any statement from Hamas about Tunisia or Egypt. We left it to the people to decide. This is our attitude: not to make the mistake of Arafat in Kuwait". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 11 September 2011. "Arafat, the survivor, now finds support vanishing", *The New York Times*, 13 February 1991.

<sup>38</sup> A Hamas leader said, "we are an Islamist movement, and our reference is the Sharia [Islamic law]. The Sharia doesn't tell you to be with the oppressor even if he's your ally". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 10 December 2011.

<sup>39</sup> A Hamas official who left Damascus in late summer 2011 said, "prior to the uprising in Syria, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood merely expressed fear or concern about our alliance with Assad. There was an embedded criticism of Hamas – really a warning – that Assad will turn against you like he did others; or that Assad will use you as a bargaining chip and give you up in the end, when he accedes to international demands". Crisis Group interview, Rafah, 10 September 2011.

<sup>40</sup> A Hamas leader noted that among the few states, aside from Iran, offering some level of support to Hamas were those calling for Assad to step down. "Khaled Meshal visited several countries in the region, including Qatar and Turkey, despite their tensions with Syria. These countries support Gaza. The Syrian regime has no friends left in the region, and if we were to boycott all the countries opposed to it, we'd be completely isolated". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 15 September 2011.

<sup>41</sup> In April 2012, a Hamas official said the movement's buildings, cars, camps, associations and other assets were still in the regime's possession. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, April 2012.

as well as damaging relations with Islamic Jihad, Hizbolah and, most importantly, Iran, the movement's largest supporter and supplier of money, weapons and training. The loss of Iranian backing, if it were to come to that, would be particularly costly at a moment of great monetary strain for the movement and could leave Hamas without a reliable arms procurer. Moreover, fleeing Damascus would leave the movement with no attractive alternative headquarters, forcing the outside leadership to disperse and rendering it vulnerable to political pressures from such possible supporters as Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, all allies to varying degrees of the U.S.

## 2. Mediation

Caught between two unattractive options, Hamas sought to choose neither.<sup>42</sup> "We want to have balanced relations; we don't want to be part of axes", a member of the outside leadership said.<sup>43</sup> To accomplish this, the movement attempted to mediate the crisis, encouraging Assad to undertake reforms that might have helped avoid bloodshed. On 12 February 2011, the day after Mubarak fell, Meshal met Assad, who inquired, according to a Hamas leader, about rumours that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had reached an agreement with the U.S.:

Meshal assured Assad that the uprising in Egypt was a popular revolt and not an American conspiracy. It may be true that the interest of the Muslim Brotherhood and the U.S. converged in the ousting of Mubarak. But the U.S. administration wanted [former Egyptian intelligence chief] Omar Suleiman as the alternative, and the Muslim Brotherhood was completely against it. In this meeting, Meshal told Assad, "your foreign policy is excellent. You are loved by your people. But this is not enough; people want reform". We told Assad, "Syria won't be spared by the Arab Spring. Nothing will stop this vogue of protest in the Arab world".<sup>44</sup>

Demonstrations in Syria began one month later. By the end of March 2011, Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, the most revered living Islamic scholar followed by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, harshly condemned the Syrian regime in a Friday sermon broadcast live on satellite television.<sup>45</sup> Qaradawi said that Assad was "held

prisoner by his entourage and [Alawite] sect"; that Syria was "even more in need of a revolution than other countries"; and that its regime "did not care about the sanctity of the mosques", in which Syrian citizens had been murdered.<sup>46</sup> The Syrian regime asked Hamas to condemn Qaradawi's sermon.<sup>47</sup> Several Syrian news websites then published articles stating that Meshal had done so, but the Hamas political bureau quickly dismissed the reports: "We definitely deny the claims by some electronic websites about our politburo chief addressing the current events in Syria, especially Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi's remarks".<sup>48</sup>

Pressure from the Syrian regime intensified. The movement was told that it was either with the regime or against it and was asked to issue a declaration of support.<sup>49</sup> Hamas produced a draft statement for the Syrians to review; the government deemed it insufficiently favourable.<sup>50</sup> The statement was then rephrased in a manner Hamas officials

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had acceded to the regime's requests to speak against Qaradawi and so lost a great deal of respect. Crisis Group interview, Rafah, September 2011. For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°109, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, 13 July 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Assad, Qaradawi said, "cannot get rid of them [the entourage and Alawite sect]. He sees with their eyes and hears with their ears". "Leading Sunni Scholar Sheikh Yousuf Al-Qaradawi Supports the Syrian Revolution and Slams President Al-Assad for Crackdown on Demonstrations", MEMRI, 31 March 2011. Alawites – who trace their roots to the ninth century and are named after Ali, the fourth caliph and Muhammad's son-in-law – have long struggled for recognition as Muslims, including from mainstream Sunnis and Shiites. "Is Syria", Qaradawi asked, "an estate that you inherited from your father or grandfather, so that you could steer the political activity and control the Emergency Law?" Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> A Hamas official in Damascus said, "Hamas was summoned by the security services and asked to clarify its position and respond to the statements of Qaradawi. The movement tried to finesse it. They can't speak against the regime, and they can't speak against Qaradawi. They managed to wiggle out of it". Crisis Group interview, Rafah, September 2011.

<sup>48</sup> The websites quoted Meshal as having said, "I call upon Sheikh Qaradawi to make his judgments out of conscience and to free himself from the pressures exerted on him by certain sides he believes to be trustworthy". "Hamas: Mash'al did not criticise Sheikh Qaradawi", Ma'an News Agency, 3 April 2011. "Hamas is 'backing protesters' says Syria", *The Los Angeles Times*, 2 October 2011.

<sup>49</sup> "They asked us to take a position. We refused. We said, 'It is a crisis. If you want us to speak, we'll have to say everything'. So they said, 'No, your silence is better'". Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Beirut, 10 December 2010. See also *The New York Times*, 2 May 2011.

<sup>50</sup> A Hamas official in Damascus recalled the Syrian response: "Their reaction was, 'we want a clear position. Are you with the regime or against it?'" Crisis Group interview, Rafah, 10 September 2011.

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<sup>42</sup> "We are caught between two fires: our attitude toward the regime and toward the people". Crisis Group interview, Hamas official based in Damascus, Rafah, 10 September 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 25 February 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Beirut, 15 September 2011.

<sup>45</sup> "Qaradawi condemns 'atrocities' against protesters in Syria", *Gulf Times*, 26 March 2011. A Hamas official in Damascus said that Sunni scholars like Damascus University Professor Said Ramadan Buti and Syrian Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassun

described as disliked but accepted by the regime.<sup>51</sup> The final, equivocal version published on Hamas's website stated: "We consider what's happening an internal matter concerning our Syrian brothers. Nevertheless, we in the Hamas movement, by virtue of our principles, respect the Arab and Islamic nations' will and aspirations", and "we hope the current circumstances are overcome in a way that fulfils the hopes and aspirations of the Syrian people and preserves Syria's stability and internal cohesion".<sup>52</sup>

Hamas meanwhile continued its efforts to mediate the crisis.<sup>53</sup> In April 2011, after consulting with Hizbollah and Iran, it reportedly proposed to Assad that he announce a package of reforms, while the movement would handle negotiations with the opposition.<sup>54</sup> But opposition figures Hamas had planned to meet were arrested, and the regime asked the movement to call off the initiative just days after it had been proposed.<sup>55</sup> On 15 April, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah purportedly travelled to Syria to persuade Assad of the plan's merits; the following day, in his second major speech since the uprising had begun, Assad promised a series of reforms, including abolishing the emergency law. "But again", a Hamas leader said, "structural problems, mismanagement, and a poor assessment of the

situation all stopped reform. The regime is digging its own grave".<sup>56</sup>

### 3. Confrontation

With no end in sight to the crisis, Hamas's conflict with the Syrian government came increasingly into public view. Early in the uprising, the movement had offered to send its top leaders to speak to *mukhtars* (headmen) in Deraa, where the protests had begun. The regime agreed at first and then, on the evening the meeting was to take place in late April 2011, retracted, citing security concerns. According to a movement official in Damascus, notables in Deraa awaited a visit from Hamas but were greeted by tanks instead; "this", he said, "put Hamas in a very awkward position". In an interview two weeks later, Meshal called the events in the Arab world "beautiful" and said freedom and democracy were needed in Syria.<sup>57</sup>

As the movement grew more distant from the Syrian regime, its officials travelling abroad with greater frequency, heightened pressure was applied on its leadership, not just by the government but by its allies, including Islamic Jihad, Hizbollah and Iran.<sup>58</sup> Hamas officials say they were mocked on Syrian radio stations; accused, in security reports created by regime-allied Palestinian factions such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), of having spoken against the government; summoned by security forces to defend themselves against such reports; questioned intensely at the airport by Syrian officials worried that the regime's credibility would be undermined if they did not return;<sup>59</sup> asked by government allies why they weren't supporting the re-

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<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, September 2011.

<sup>52</sup> "Hamas stands by Syrian 'brothers'", *Ahram* (online), 3 April 2011. A Hamas official based in Damascus said that members of Islamic Jihad and other factions lamented that Hamas had not consulted them on the statement, as they would have asked for their names to be added. Crisis Group interview, Rafah, September 2011.

<sup>53</sup> "We took lots of initiatives to stop the bloodbath. The regime didn't listen to us. We told them, 'why don't you stop the security option, and we'll help you reach a solution'. They said, 'this is not a security solution'. If it is not, what would a security solution look like? This is our stance; we can't say it out loud in the media". Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Beirut, 10 December 2011. For background, see Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Middle East Briefings N°31, *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, 24 November 2011; N°32, *Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria*, 5 March 2012; N°33, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, 10 April 2012; and Report N°128, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, 1 August 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Beirut, 10 December 2011.

<sup>55</sup> According to a Hamas leader, "the initiative was accepted by the political leadership, but it was hampered by the security authorities. In Syria, there is a difference between the security apparatus and the political leadership. The first is not happy with our position and is requesting communiqués in support of the regime and against the protesters; the latter understands our position and considers it balanced". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 15 September 2011.

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<sup>56</sup> "Syria's Assad vows to lift emergency law by next week", Reuters, 16 April 2011. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Beirut, 15 September 2011. Other initiatives were attempted in May 2011, when Meshal met Syrian Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa, advising the regime, in the words of a Hamas leader, "to stop the killing to be able to start mediation". In September 2011, a Hamas leader said, "Now, I don't think any initiative would work anymore. Hassan Nasrallah wants us to try, but I think it's too late". Ibid. Another failed initiative was launched in November 2011, during Eid al-Adha. Iran had also asked Hamas to help mediate the crisis. Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Beirut, 10 December 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas official, Rafah, Gaza City, September, December 2011. "Syria deploys tanks for first time", *Financial Times*, 26 April 2011; Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, op. cit., fn. 250, p. 25.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Rafah, 10 September 2011.

<sup>59</sup> "Everything we say is watched. At the airport they question Abu Walid [Meshal] about why he is leaving every time. Now relations with the regime are based solely on courtesy, because of our history together". Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Cairo, 24 November 2011.

gime;<sup>60</sup> and told to form security committees to suppress demonstrations.<sup>61</sup>

A Hamas official in Damascus described an “ambush” of Meshal as he arrived for what he thought was a meeting with a Syrian intelligence official only to find that his host had assembled leaders of the protests and asked him to deliver an impromptu, pro-regime speech.<sup>62</sup> Newspapers published unconfirmed reports that Meshal’s daughter and son-in-law had been arrested. And regime officials said Hamas leaders “have turned their back on Syria”, “sided with Syria’s opponents” and even “channel[ed] money to anti-regime groups”. “Within the Syrian security apparatus”, a movement leader said in December 2011, “there is anger and sometimes incitement against us. Some of them told us to beware”.<sup>63</sup>

#### 4. The crossfire

Escalating violence came to affect greater numbers of Palestinian refugees, making neutrality increasingly difficult for Hamas to maintain. In June 2011, the PFLP-GC, which together with other Palestinian factions had helped quell Syrian protests, organised a march of Palestinian refugees toward the heavily mined border with Israel, resulting in more than a dozen deaths.<sup>64</sup> When outraged mourners of the victims accused the faction of cynically using the march to draw attention away from Syria’s domestic troubles and threw stones at its offices in Yarmouk refugee camp, PFLP-GC guards shot at the crowd, killing at least eleven.<sup>65</sup> Two months later Syrian forces assaulted the

Palestinian refugee neighbourhood of Raml in Latakia, causing some 5,000 to 10,000 residents to flee.<sup>66</sup> Rebuffed by Hamas after requesting that it help contain demonstrations, the regime allegedly used men dressed in outfits bearing Hamas insignia to shoot at protesters in order to implicate the movement in the crackdowns.<sup>67</sup>

Relations with the opposition presented their own set of problems. Demonstrators expressed anger at Palestinians seen not to be supporting them,<sup>68</sup> causing more than one Hamas leader to say the movement had been “caught in the crossfire” between the opposition and the regime.<sup>69</sup> A Hamas official said the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had initially asked the movement to speak out against the government, but the leadership of the global Muslim Brotherhood intervened. “They may have resentment in their hearts”, he said of the Syrian branch, “but they will remain calm”.<sup>70</sup>

Though movement officials said efforts to explain their delicate predicament had “managed to appease both sides”, and one said the opposition had told Hamas it is “always welcome in Syria”, they continued to debate the costs and

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<sup>60</sup> “Another pressure was not from the regime but from Iran, Hizbollah, the PFLP-GC, all of whom asked, ‘Why don’t you stand with the regime?’” Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Gaza City, 10 September 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Rafah, 10 September 2011.

<sup>62</sup> “Meshal was not told that leaders of the protests would be at the meeting. He was asked to make a public speech against the demonstrations. He emphasised Hamas’s role in helping Syria out of the crisis. He said he supported demands for social and legal justice and also spoke of the benefits of the support for the resistance by both the Syrian people and the regime. He tried to make everyone look good”. Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Rafah, September 2011.

<sup>63</sup> “Hamas is ‘backing protesters’ says Syria”, *The National*, 2 October 2011. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 10 December 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Other Palestinian groups suppressing demonstrations included Saiqa and Fatah al-Intifada. Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Rafah, 10 September 2011. A prominent Palestinian intellectual said, “we have factions helping to oppress and kill people in Syria – this is our shame as Palestinians”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, February 2012. “Up to 12 killed as Palestinian refugees are drawn into Syria revolt”, *The National*, 8 June 2011.

<sup>65</sup> “Hamas is ‘backing protesters’ says Syria”, *The National*, 2 October 2011. Other reports say as many as fourteen were killed;

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see “Fighters shoot protesters at a Palestinian camp in Syria”, *The New York Times*, 7 June 2011.

<sup>66</sup> “Syrian enclave of Palestinians nearly deserted after assault”, *The New York Times*, 16 August 2011. By July 2012, Palestinians increasingly had been pulled into the conflict in Syria. More than a dozen members of the Palestinian Liberation Army were kidnapped and killed that month (according to unconfirmed reports by members of the opposition), thousands of Palestinians in Yarmouk refugee camp demonstrated in solidarity with eleven unarmed anti-regime protesters who had been killed, and fighting between the Free Syrian Army and the regime had spread to Palestinian refugee camps. See “Palestinian camps in Syria: Pulled into the fray”, *Al-Akhabar*, 17 July 2012. On 2 August 2012, the Syrian army bombarded the Yarmouk refugee camp, killing some twenty residents, and resumed shelling the camp two days later. “Syrian army resumes shelling Yarmouk camp”, Ma’an News Agency, 4 August 2012.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas cadres, Damascus, July 2011.

<sup>68</sup> Hamas tried to counter the negative effect of the support offered to the regime by Palestinian groups such as the PFLP-GC, al-Saiqa and Fatah al-Intifada: “In some demonstrations, people started chasing all the Palestinian factions, including Hamas, because they did not publicly support the demonstrations. Hamas started communicating with leaders of the Syrian community – *mukhtars*, scholars and other elements related to the revolution – in order to explain its point of view. This caused public criticism of Hamas to wane”. Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Rafah, 10 September 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, Beirut, Gaza City, September 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 10 September 2011.

benefits of leaving Damascus altogether.<sup>71</sup> In December 2011, a senior leader in Gaza said:

It's embarrassing to us. We talk about it. We have to go. But you have to understand that we have a sense of gratitude to this regime. They did a lot for us. And there are a lot of intimate relations, on a personal level. Politically, however, there is no reason to stay.<sup>72</sup>

Commenting on criticism of Hamas by the Syrian opposition, a leader of the movement said, "staying there is a kind of support to the regime, I acknowledge that". But he stressed that Hamas's resistance to intense pressure from its host and supporter was "an enormous credit" to the movement: "The only faction living in Damascus that took a position against the regime was Hamas. Only someone with a huge capital of support can do this; it's not easy to say 'no' to someone who supported you for fifteen years".<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Gaza City, 10 September 2011. "The Syrian people are very understanding of Hamas's position. They accept our silence. The fact that only we resisted Syrian pressures, whereas all the other factions sided with the regime, is appreciated. The Syrian people still back the resistance, and the opposition told us that we are always welcome in Syria". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 15 September 2011. In September 2011, a Palestinian analyst at a Hamas-affiliated institution in Gaza said, "the presence of Hamas's political leadership in Damascus, particularly in Damascus, where it has been forced to turn a blind eye to Syria's fight against Islamists since the Hama massacre in 1982, has taught it pragmatism. You won't see the same pragmatism from the inside leadership. Take the decision to leave or stay in Damascus. The inside leadership would have Hamas leave for moral or religious reasons; the outside leadership wants to stay for practical ones. Both have a valid argument". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 10 September 2011.

<sup>72</sup> He added: "If having offices in Syria stands in contradiction to popular attitudes, this is a mistake". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 14 December 2011. Ahmed Youssef, a former adviser to Prime Minister Haniyeh, encapsulated the movement's ambivalence: "Hamas can't be a genuine Islamic movement while siding with murderous regimes against the people. And it would be wrong to assume that the ostensible ambiguity and ambivalence connote or denote support for the regime in Damascus .... Occasionally, a free man must seek the friendship of an enemy for survival". See "Hamas's Iran connection", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 16-22 February 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 3 November 2011. He added: "We gave him [Assad] this card after supporting us for fifteen years. And we did it to ensure our freedom of movement. But our position is clear: we will not be involved in any internal conflict. Also, Hamas is playing a role in trying to reconcile the parties in Syria". Explaining why Hamas had not left Syria, a deputy minister in Gaza said, "we are a resistance movement and such movements always need protection. Until now, there has not been a huge loss in our being there. Many observers from the outside have trouble making accurate assessments.

Hamas leaders contrasted their position with that of Hizbollah, whose unyielding support for the regime they described as a "huge mistake",<sup>74</sup> one that caused Nasrallah to "los[e] the Arabs, not just the Syrian people".<sup>75</sup> A Hamas leader who had close contacts with Syria and Hizbollah said, "Hizbollah is upset with our position. We told them that as a resistance movement you, before anyone else, should have stood beside the people. They don't want to listen".<sup>76</sup> At the same time, he expressed understanding of Hizbollah's greater dependence on Syria and of Nasrallah's sense that "he owes Bashar – that without him he would have lost the war [with Israel in 2006]. For Hizbollah, Syria is the lung. Syria is the pillar of the resistance axis. It is where weapons come from. Its downfall is a strategic loss".<sup>77</sup>

Yet "the biggest loser", in Hamas's view, would be Iran. "Syria was its gate to the Arab world", a senior leader said. "For us, on the other hand, the loss of Syria was compen-

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As long as things still work in your favour, you stay. You slow things down, but you stay. Hamas is assessing its situation in Syria every day. If the Syrian revolution succeeds, then the situation there will be even better for Hamas". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 15 December 2011.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Cairo, Gaza City, Hebron, Nablus, September 2011, December 2011, February 2012. "Hizbollah lost a lot because of its positions. Photos of Hassan Nasrallah were raised everywhere in Syria together with those of Assad. Now they are being torn up and burnt with his". Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Beirut, 15 September 2011. A Hamas deputy minister in Gaza said, "we are the opposite of Hizbollah. Hizbollah fell in two senses: they became too loyal to Syria and Iran; and they supported the Syrian regime because they are Shiites [some consider Alawites to be a schismatic Shiite sect]. Hamas by contrast has balanced relations with everyone: Shiites, Sunnis, nationalists, liberals". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 15 December 2011.

<sup>75</sup> "In Egypt, they are very angry at him. We told him, 'Your photo used to be hanged in Al-Azhar. All that you've gained until now, you lost in the Syrian crisis'. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 10 December 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 10 December 2011. "I don't know what Hizbollah is thinking. Completely backing the regime and alienating the people is not in their interest. They bet everything on the regime. It's true that Bashar Assad offered them what nobody else did, not even Hafez [Assad, the former president and Bashar's father]. They considered the uprising a conspiracy against the resistance. We told them, 'we cannot accept the killing of innocent people. Maybe there is foreign interference, given Syria's strategic position, but you can't reduce the entire opposition to an American conspiracy. It is true that some in the opposition are armed, and some are even talking about a Libyan scenario [of foreign intervention]. But this was not the case at the beginning. This happened after six months of protests and killing". Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Beirut, 15 September 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 10 December 2011.

sated by the fall of Mubarak”.<sup>78</sup> Of the four members of the so-called “axis of resistance” – Hamas, Hizbollah, Iran and Syria – Hamas was the least dependent on the survival of the Syrian regime and had always appeared the axis’s least natural component, its sole Sunni member.<sup>79</sup> As conflicts throughout the region, not just in Syria but in Bahrain, Yemen, and Iraq, took on an increasingly sectarian hue, with Sunni states decrying Iran’s real or imaginary role in each, Hamas found its old alliances more difficult to sustain.<sup>80</sup> “We won’t be with Iran against the Arabs”, a leader of the movement said. “Hamas is a Sunni

movement with the resistance. We still see compatibility between the two”.<sup>81</sup>

## 5. Competing alliances

With Hamas’s Islamist allies gaining power, the movement faced intensified demands to choose sides in the escalating regional contest. As in the case of the Syrian conflict, Hamas could not fully please either Iran or its adversaries.<sup>82</sup> Tensions over the movement’s refusal to support the Syrian government reached a point at which Iran halted, then reduced funding to Hamas,<sup>83</sup> though those relations later apparently were repaired.<sup>84</sup> A senior Israeli security official said, “Hamas is trying to straddle the Sunni Islamist/Iranian Camp divide, which is only growing bigger with the crisis in Syria. I can imagine how their groin feels right now”.<sup>85</sup> Hamas leaders downplayed the consequences of losing Iranian support. “When one door closes, another one opens”, one said. “Iran closed, Egypt opened; pressure increased in Syria and was released in

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> A distancing from Syria and Iran would be a return to the movement’s posture in its early days when, as the scholar Matti Steinberg put it, “the only Arab ruler Hamas criticised personally and vigorously was Syria’s leader Hafez al-Assad”. In the 1980s Hamas had referred to the Lebanese Shiite party, Amal, as “Syria’s thumb” and, in 1989, Sheikh Yassin spoke out in sectarian terms against Hizbollah, saying “that the Muslims are Sunni and not Shia. ... I believe that the real Hizbollah [party of God] adheres to the precepts in the book of Allah [the *Quran*] and the Sunna of His Prophet”. “Interview with Sheikh Yassin”, *al-Nahar* (East Jerusalem), 30 April 1989, as cited in Matti Steinberg, *Facing their Fate*, op. cit. During the Iran-Iraq war, Hamas maintained an official position of neutrality but blamed Iran for prolonging it. In a veiled reference to Islamic Jihad, which has always had close ties to Iran and was inspired by the Iranian revolution, a senior Hamas leader said in 1988 that the “Khomeinistic current” would “pas[s] over Palestine like a gust of wind, with no particular influence”. “Interview with Sheikh Khalil al-Quqa”, *al-Siyasa* (Kuwait), 26 July 1988; “Interview with Sheikh Khalil al-Quqa”, *al-Qabas* (Kuwait), 19 August 1988; “Interview with Sheikh Khalil al-Quqa”, *al-Anba* (Kuwait), 8 October 1988, as cited in Steinberg, op. cit. Sunni-Shiite tensions weren’t far from the surface of Hamas’s alliance with Iran, even before the regional upheavals; in November 2010, a Hamas leader in Gaza said, “when it comes to Shiites, if we focus on the differences, there can only be war. In 2006, we refused Iran’s request to open a Gaza health clinic named after Khomeini”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza Health Minister Bassem Naim, Gaza City, 13 November 2010. See also Crisis Group Report, *Radical Islam in Gaza*, op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> In January 2012, local human rights groups in Gaza reported that Hamas security forces had beaten and interrogated a group of some twenty worshippers observing Arba’in, a Shiite day of commemoration, at a private residence in Beit Lahiya. See “PCHR Condemns Use of Force by Security Officers against a Number of Palestinians While Performing Shiite Rituals”, Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 16 January 2012; “Al Mezan Condemns Assault against Group of Palestinians in Beit Lahiya and Calls for Investigations”, Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, 16 January 2012. The Gaza interior ministry referred to the worshippers as “an illegal group with corrupted views that were planning to commit crimes”. “Shia group ‘attacked by police’ in Gaza”, Ma’an News Agency, 17 January 2012.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Beirut, 25 February 2012.

<sup>82</sup> “Iran is unhappy with our position on Syria, and the Sunni Arab states blame us for taking money from Iran. When [Saudi Foreign Minister] Saud al-Faisal met with Khaled Meshal, he didn’t say, ‘we’ll pay you’. Saudi Arabia is still upset with Hamas. They accuse us of a coup against the Mecca Agreement [between Fatah and Hamas in February 2007]”. Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Beirut, 25 February 2012. In January 2010, the Saudi foreign minister said he had asked Meshal whether Hamas stood with the Arabs or with Iran. “Saudi FM holds talks in Syria, Egypt”, Al Arabiya, 5 January 2010.

<sup>83</sup> A Hamas parliamentarian said, “the main problem with Iranian funding was our position on Syria”. A senior leader added: “Iran, maybe because of our political stance on Syria, reduced its funding”. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, Beirut, 3 November 2011, 10 December 2011. In late February 2012, Hamas deputy political bureau head Musa Abu Marzouk alluded to reduced support to Hamas: “The Iranians are not happy with our position on Syria, and when they are not happy they don’t deal with you in the same old way”. “Hamas out of Syria, leader says”, Associated Press, 27 February 2012. Hamas leader Salah Bardawil said Hamas was not dependent on Iranian funding, which he said had steadily decreased over the past three years. See “Hamas ties to Syria and Iran in flux as region shifts”, *The Washington Post*, 7 March 2012.

<sup>84</sup> In September 2011, when payment of Gaza government employee salaries repeatedly had been delayed, a Hamas official said Iran had promised to resume halted payments. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, September 2011. By January 2012, a senior leader in Gaza said, “Iran has resumed the funding”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 15 January 2012.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Israeli security official, Jerusalem, 23 February 2012. In August, he added: “Syria is the testing ground in the contest between the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. So far Hamas has to keep its feet in both camps – at the cost of flexibility and manoeuvrability”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 7 August 2012.

Jordan”.<sup>86</sup> Another pointed to a silver lining in the deterioration of relations with Iran, calling it “proof of our independence”.<sup>87</sup> A third said:

This Iranian pressure could be in Hamas’s interest. The new situation makes clear that we are not a simple follower or proxy of Iran. This has strengthened the position of Hamas in many countries, especially Gulf countries, in the Sunni world. Meshal said clearly in his speech in Iran in October [2011]: “We cannot support regimes against their people. We are for dialogue”. And he said it in Iran!<sup>88</sup>

That said, a March 2012 escalation in attacks between Israel and Gaza-based militants backed by Iran, primarily members of the Popular Resistance Committees and Islamic Jihad, reminded Hamas of how easily outside powers could undermine its control of Gaza. Three months before the escalation, a Hamas leader had described the risk:

Islamic Jihad is not a well-structured movement, nor is its military branch well organised. They are infiltrated by Iran and Hizbollah and Fatah. They sometimes act in accordance with what they believe their audience would like to hear. Someone from the outside asks them to launch rockets, so they do.<sup>89</sup>

Hamas officials publicly (though not always privately) denied reports<sup>90</sup> that on a regional tour in February 2012, Haniyeh was urged in several Gulf states to cancel his planned visit to Iran,<sup>91</sup> which, a Hamas leader explained,

“was scheduled a long time ago and postponed”.<sup>92</sup> The censure heaped upon the trip in the Arab press produced an impassioned defence from a spokesman in Gaza:

What do the critics want? The Arabs, or most of them, are squandering their billions on their lusts and vagaries, but Iran is helping us remain steadfast and resilient in the face of Israel. ... Look, Arab leaders are not even raising the matter [of Jerusalem] with foreign diplomats. So what do these people really want? Do they want us to tell the Iranians that our civilians will die of hunger and lack of medical care because we don’t accept Iranian aid?<sup>93</sup>

Tensions between Hamas’s competing alliances reached their peak when Haniyeh delivered a speech at Cairo’s Al-Azhar Mosque on 24 February 2012. Just days after his much criticised visit to Iran, he stood on the platform of the most influential institution in the Sunni world, declaring to a crowd of worshippers gathered for a protest of solidarity with Palestine and the Syrian uprising.<sup>94</sup>

With the victory of the (Egyptian) revolution, and with the victory of the Arab Spring, we saw ourselves closer to Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa [Mosque]. So I salute you, while saluting all the nations of the Arab Spring, which is also an Islamic Winter. And I salute the heroic Syrian people, who are striving for freedom, democracy and reform.<sup>95</sup>

Halfway through Haniyeh’s 35-minute oration the crowd yelled,<sup>96</sup> “No Iran, No Hizbollah. Syria, Syria is Islamic”;

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<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 10 December 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas political bureau member, Cairo, 25 November 2011.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, 3 November 2011. A senior Hamas leader said about Meshal’s speech in Iran, “it is no secret the Iranians punished us for this”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, November 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 10 December 2011. A senior Israeli security official concurred with much of this assessment: Hamas works *with* Iran; Islamic Jihad works *for* Iran. A different preposition that amounts to a different proposition”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 7 August 2012. In January 2012, Hamas leaders spoke of an initiative to unify Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but the talks are in a preliminary stage, far from yielding any concrete results. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, Gaza City, Cairo, January-April 2012.

<sup>90</sup> See “Hamas’s Iran connection”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 16-22 February 2012, and “Concern over Haniyeh’s planned visit to Iran”, Agence France-Presse, 10 February 2012.

<sup>91</sup> While Haniyeh’s political adviser, Youssef Rizqa, denied that Gulf states had urged Hamas to cancel its visit to Iran (see *Filistin*, 13 February 2012), a political bureau member said at least some had. He said that within the movement, too, there were divergent voices on the issue. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, February 2012. The day after Haniyeh arrived in Tehran, a Hamas leader in Gaza said, “Haniyeh didn’t really want to go.

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Some of the Gulf states had asked him not to go; he was advised to cancel, and this made for an uncomfortable situation. But the only reason Hamas goes to Tehran is that it pays without forcing an agenda on Hamas – it just wants Hamas active; it doesn’t dictate policy. If the Gulf states don’t want Hamas to go to Iran, then fine: replace the highly conditional money they give with unconditional funding”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 11 February, March 2012.

<sup>92</sup> He added: “Haniyeh visited Iran, but he also visited lots of other Arab countries”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 25 February 2012. A pro-Hamas publication stressed that the visit came in response to an “old invitation”. See “Pressures on Hamas and the Exit from Syria”, *Middle East Monitor*, 15 February 2012.

<sup>93</sup> See “Hamas’s Iran connection”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 16-22 February 2012.

<sup>94</sup> The event was billed as a protest to Save Al Aqsa [Mosque] and Help the Syrian People. “Friday Al-Azhar solidarity protest for Palestine and Syrian uprising”, *Ahram* (online), 23 February 2012.

<sup>95</sup> Video of the speech can be found at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWX8d9ln8tk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWX8d9ln8tk).

<sup>96</sup> Dr Salah Soltan, head of the Jerusalem Committee of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (chaired by Sheikh Qaradawi), stood below Haniyeh on the podium and led the crowd in these and other chants throughout the speech. In January

“Leave, leave Bashar. Leave, leave Butcher”; and “Revolution in Tunisia and Revolution in Egypt. Revolution in Sanaa and Revolution in Syria”.<sup>97</sup> The speech made international headlines, which proclaimed a Hamas break with Syria;<sup>98</sup> the accompanying articles noted that protests in support of the Syrian uprising had been permitted in Gaza in recent weeks and that Hamas’s leadership had left Damascus, scattering to Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey and Qatar, where Meshal had moved.<sup>99</sup>

But if the speech was meant to signal Hamas’s break with Syria or Iran, none of its leaders admitted it. A Hamas spokesman who attended said the headlines had greatly overstated the significance of Haniyeh’s words:

We have always said we support the rights of the Syrian people; the difference this time was that we didn’t follow the statement with an expression of gratitude to the regime. With the crowd and the atmosphere at Al-Azhar, and with all of the massacres taking place recently, it didn’t seem right to add the usual statements about not taking sides and not being against the regime.<sup>100</sup>

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2012, Soltan was summoned by Egyptian prosecutors over statements he had made against the military council (SCAF) after the August 2011 killing of Egyptian troops by the Israel army, and over calls he had made at the same time to reissue a 1994 *fatwa* urging the killing of Israelis in Egypt. “Brotherhood Imam questioned over statements against SCAF and Israelis”, *Ahram* (online), 18 January 2012.

<sup>97</sup> The crowd also chanted, “Allah, Syria and only Freedom. ... The one who killed his own tribe and people is villainous from head to toe”, and, in reference to Iran, “Syria’s revolution is Arabic”, video of speech at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWX8d9ln8tk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWX8d9ln8tk).

<sup>98</sup> See, eg, “Hamas ditches Assad, backs Syrian revolt”, Reuters, 24 February 2012; “Hamas breaks with Damascus”, CNN, 24 February 2012.

<sup>99</sup> In June 2012, several months after Hamas announced that most of its senior leaders had left Syria, a Hamas leader in Damascus, Kamal Ghannaja, was killed. Senior Hamas leader Khalil Hayya said Ghannaja was found with burn marks on his body. A member of the Local Coordination Committees in the Palestinian refugee camp Yarmouk in Damascus speculated that “the way the body was mutilated and the attempt to burn the house are all methods that point to the involvement of the [Syrian] security forces”. “Hamas official Ghannaja buried in Jordan”, Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades – Information Office, 30 June 2012; “Hamas member ‘killed in Syria’”, *The Telegraph*, 28 June 2012. Hamas officials later said that Ghannaja, who was reportedly found in a cupboard in his ransacked apartment, had died in an accident. Reuters, 6 July 2012.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24 February 2012. The Hamas political bureau had met in Cairo the week of Haniyeh’s speech. Many of the members’ hotel room televisions were tuned to Al Jazeera, which was providing a seemingly interminable stream of graphic coverage of civilian deaths in Syria. Crisis Group observations, Cairo, February 2012.

A Hamas leader explained: “During Haniyeh’s visit to Al-Azhar, people embarrassed him. He said, ‘we support the Syrian people’. The crowd chanted against Hizbollah, Iran and Assad. Haniyeh kept focusing on the Syrian people”.<sup>101</sup> Heads of the movement were unanimous in expressing disappointment in the speech; hours after it was delivered, a senior Gaza leader who had attended it said Haniyeh’s words were “not planned or agreed upon by the movement” and had been “a mistake”,<sup>102</sup> a sentiment repeated by two other political bureau members.<sup>103</sup> Meshal nevertheless strongly supported the opposition in his 15 July address to the Justice and Development Party in Morocco.<sup>104</sup>

Ultimately, tensions notwithstanding, the movement understood that its alliance with Iran was worth keeping. “Iran supports us financially”, a leader said bluntly. “We can’t boycott Iran”.<sup>105</sup> Weeks after Haniyeh’s speech, senior leader Mahmoud Zahar travelled to Tehran, where he praised Iran for its “limitless support”.<sup>106</sup> The same week a delegation led by Musa Abu Marzouk, deputy head of the political bureau, met Hizbollah leader Nasrallah in Lebanon, where, Hizbollah media reported, they formed a plan “to resolve the developments in Syria and [r]elations

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<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 25 February 2012.

<sup>102</sup> “Our position is not with the people or the regime. Our moral attitude is with the people, but we haven’t changed our position”. When asked why a “mistake” had been repeated in a speech delivered in Gaza the same day by Hamas leader Salah Bardawil, the senior leader said that Bardawil had made the same error as the press: he heard Haniyeh’s speech and wrongly assumed it was the product of a movement decision. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24 February 2012. Since then, mid-level Hamas officials and Hamas preachers in Gaza have positioned themselves clearly with the Syrian opposition, though Hamas’s senior leaders remain far more cautious.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders and officials, Cairo, February-April 2012.

<sup>104</sup> “I advised [the Syrian regime] in closed rooms and I advise them from this podium ... We don’t interfere in Arab internal affairs, but ... we care about the freedom and dignity of each and every Arab and Muslim. ... I will not let the moment pass without saying that we care about the blood of the Syrian people, every [spilled] drop of Syrian blood hurts us, just like the [spilled] blood of other Arabs and Muslims hurts us. Now is the time for the [spilling of] the Syrian people’s blood to stop. This *umma* [the world-wide Muslim community] has to wake up. We want a living *umma* that can take decisions. This *umma* has a right to freedom and to take decisions and to live in a democracy. The era of dictatorship in the Arab countries has ended for good”. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=iw6TYButeOQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iw6TYButeOQ).

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 25 February 2012.

<sup>106</sup> “Top Hamas official visits Tehran”, *The Daily Star*, 15 March 2012. Many Hamas officials have stressed that Iran’s support has been virtually unconditional: “The only time they have ever asked anything from us was in 1993, when they asked us to celebrate their Quds Day in Marj al-Zahur. We refused”. Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, 15 January 2012.



with the Muslim Brotherhood” and “find the right channels to improve Iran’s ties with [A]rab countries”.<sup>107</sup> A Hamas leader in Gaza said:

All of the speculation about Hamas abandoning Iran is silly. Who else is going to supply Hamas with weapons and training? Qatar? Turkey? Iran is the only option. And the Iranians understand that Hamas is a valuable bridgehead for them in the Sunni world, so they are not going to complain about Hamas having closer ties with other countries, even if they are in conflict with those countries concerning Syria. More important, Iran understands that Hamas is the most crucial element in the fight against Israel. Especially at this time of escalation with Israel, it knows that it cannot afford to lose Hamas.<sup>108</sup>

Repaired though the alliance may be, some discord is still evident.<sup>109</sup> Several Hamas officials announced that the movement would not take part in a war between Israel and Iran<sup>110</sup> (a prediction with which a senior Israeli security official concurred).<sup>111</sup> Hamas leaders made plain that

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<sup>107</sup> “Sayyed Nasrallah receives Hamas delegation: Syria, Gaza on table”, Al Manar, 14 March 2012.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, 22 March 2012.

<sup>109</sup> A senior Hamas leader in exile described differences between Hamas and Iran: “We have avoided holding the same positions as the Iranians. In the past, we did not support their policies against Iraq, and to this day there are many places and issues where our policies differ from those of Iran, such as Iranian support to Shiites in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Bahrain. We are also against the Iranian policy in Iraq and in Syria. We will try not to let this affect our relationship with Iran, focusing instead on our mutual interests. We succeeded in doing so in the past, and we will succeed in the future. I believe we will overcome their anger at our not supporting their position in Syria”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012.

<sup>110</sup> In March 2012, Hamas leader Salah Bardawil said, “if there is a war between two powers, Hamas will not be part of such a war”. See “Hamas rules out military support for Iran in any war with Israel”, *The Guardian*, 6 March 2012. Other leaders disagreed; see “Hamas rejects BBC claims, vows to give crushing response to Israeli aggression against Iran”, Fars News Agency, 7 March 2012. Bardawil’s stance was reiterated by Hamas’s official spokesmen. Gaza-based Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum, said, “Hamas weapons and the weapons of the Palestinian resistance, in general, are humble weapons that aim to defend and not to attack, and they are to defend the Palestinian people. That does not give us the ability to be part of any regional war”. “Hamas: We’ll stay out of any Israel-Iran war”, Associated Press, 7 March 2012. This contrasted with statements by Meshal less than two and a half years earlier: “All Islamist militant groups will form a united front with Iran against Israel if it attacks Iran”. Reuters, 15 December 2009.

<sup>111</sup> “If conflict with Iran erupts, the West Bank will remain quiet. The question in Gaza is how Hamas will handle Islamic Jihad. But I don’t think Hamas itself will attack us. Hamas is not

“Iran needs us more than we need them. They are not happy with our position on Syria, but we are their only bridge to the Muslim Brotherhood”,<sup>112</sup> and a senior leader predicted that Sunni states would “put a roadblock in front of Iran” by offering greater support to Hamas: “Why did Hamas put itself in the lap of Iran? No other lap accepted Hamas except that one. If anyone else opens their arms, Hamas will accept”.<sup>113</sup>

Thus far no Sunni state has offered to fill Iran’s shoes,<sup>114</sup> despite what Hamas views to be the obvious benefits. As a senior leader in Gaza explained:

If you don’t want Shiite expansion, you need to look at how Iran became popular: first, it supported Palestine; second, it supported resistance. And when did Iran lose? When it dealt in a sectarian way with Bahrain and Syria. The same is true of Hizbollah.<sup>115</sup>

### C. WHAT IMPACT ON HAMAS?

Over time, regional developments will have far-reaching implications for Hamas and for the Palestinian national question itself. They are likely to undermine Fatah and the PLO as they currently exist, both of which, in an environment moving toward the Islamists, increasingly will appear odd-men-out. But the impact on Hamas will not be straightforward. The Brotherhood almost certainly will not make a priority of the Palestine question for now; it likely will counsel its Palestinian offshoot to ensure quiet and maintain stability for the greater benefit of the organisation as a whole.

Already, there are signs of marginalisation of the Palestinians. The region in general and the Sunni world in particular are giving no indication they will throw their weight behind Hamas any time soon. To a large extent, Palestinians have become sidelined by the Arab uprisings, no long-

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willing to commit collective suicide for the sake of Iran”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 7 August 2012.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 25 February 2012. A senior leader in Gaza said the upheavals in the region only strengthened Iran’s and Syria’s desire for an alliance with Hamas: “If the Syrian regime survives, then Hizbollah, Syria, and Iran will need Hamas. [Because] there will be a new alliance in the region of Arab Sunni regimes”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, January 2012.

<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, January 2012.

<sup>114</sup> A senior Israeli security official said of funding to Hamas by Sunni states, “the real question now is the Turks. How far will [Prime Minister] Erdogan go and what will the U.S. reaction be? Will he change from supporting the people of Gaza to supporting Hamas?” Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, August 2012.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, January 2012.

er a priority amid regional turmoil.<sup>116</sup> “Now there is no interest in the Palestinian problem”, a senior Hamas leader from Damascus admitted. “Arabs are concerned with their own problems. The Arab spring has meant there is no more support in the Arab world for our movement and for our people”.<sup>117</sup> During an outburst of violence between Israel and Gaza-based militants in March 2012, Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri complained that in devoting less attention to Gaza than to Syria the satellite network Al Jazeera had demonstrated an unprecedented “lack of balance” and “bias against Palestinians”.<sup>118</sup>

With decreased attention has come dwindling financial support, causing acute stress to the movement. The Gaza government could not pay salaries in summer 2011 and was forced to step up its tax enforcement measures, causing tension with the public.<sup>119</sup>

Such a state of affairs might improve with time, though even then the Muslim Brotherhood’s strategy likely will not include defiance of Israel, for that would mean defiance of the West at a time when Islamists in power are eager for normalcy in their relations with the U.S. and Europe.

All of this will have implications – again, contradictory – for Hamas’s internal standing. On the one hand, its association with the new regional rising power will bolster its hand; the sense of discouragement within Fatah, of history passing it by, is a good indication. On the other hand, Hamas risks finding itself, even more than it does today, without a clear purpose – notably without the purpose of immediately confronting Israel. In the absence of a different Hamas strategy, this could both lead Palestinians to further question the movement’s *raison d’être* and erode its domestic popularity.

Already, financial duress, fuel and electricity shortages, charges of cronyism, widespread dissatisfaction with the division between Hamas and Fatah, a sense that the Palestinian leadership is without a coherent strategy and the inability to deliver on a range of issues have come at a cost to Hamas’s popularity in Gaza. In late August 2011, a Hamas preacher in a Gaza mosque was dismissed after

delivering a sermon in which he spoke harshly of the “ugliness of salaries, ranks, jobs and government, which have lessened our ethics, behaviour and discipline”. “Even Hamas does not now represent the people”, a former senior leader lamented. “Four or five years ago we did. But now many are against Hamas, especially in Gaza”.<sup>120</sup>

Had Hamas not participated in elections in 2006, it might have attempted to bring the Arab uprisings to Palestine, but now, in Gaza, it has stood awkwardly as a national liberation movement attempting to ensure protests would not erupt. A Hamas parliamentarian in Gaza said, “both violent and non-violent protests are forbidden in Gaza today”.<sup>121</sup> On 15 March 2011, Hamas forces broke up a demonstration of thousands of Gazans calling for an end to the then four-year-old division with the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority in the West Bank,<sup>122</sup> the same day, Haniyeh announced in a speech that he was inviting President Abbas to Gaza to “iron out an agreement”.<sup>123</sup>

Since then, the two sides have made repeated announcements of having settled their differences, none of which has resulted in elections or a unity government. Some Hamas leaders agree that the movement, especially at a time of regional upheaval, must not be viewed as standing in the way of this paramount Palestinian goal.<sup>124</sup> “With the changes in the region, we need to achieve reconciliation”, one said. “Not doing so will harm our image among the Arab publics. Hamas needs a new set of priorities, a new strategic vision about how to achieve Palestinian national goals”.<sup>125</sup> What that strategy might look like is a subject of contentious internal debate.

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<sup>116</sup> This sentiment was also expressed by Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad: “The biggest challenge we face – apart from occupation – is marginalisation”, he said. “This is a direct consequence of the Arab Spring, where people are preoccupied with their own domestic affairs. The United States is in an election year and has economic problems, Europe has its worries. We’re in a corner”. “Mideast Din Drowns Out Palestinians”, *The New York Times*, 8 March 2012.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 November 2011.

<sup>118</sup> “Hamas furious over lackluster Al Jazeera coverage”, Arutz Sheva, 12 March 2012.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza City, September-October 2011.

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<sup>120</sup> Video of Sheikh Wael Zard’s sermon is at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3wTXTpqqFo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3wTXTpqqFo). Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, November 2011.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza city, 3 November 2011.

<sup>122</sup> A parallel, smaller protest took place in Ramallah on the same day, as detailed in Crisis Group Report, *Palestinian Reconciliation: Plus Ça Change ...*, op. cit., p. 8. See also, “Hamas forces break up pro-unity protests in Gaza”, *The New York Times*, 15 March 2011. A Fatah leader in the West Bank said, “when the Arab Spring began, Palestinian protesters demanded only one thing: an end to the division. Because they knew that without it there is no hope of ending the occupation”. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, April 2012.

<sup>123</sup> “Will they succeed this time?”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 24-30 March 2011.

<sup>124</sup> “Now Palestinians are disappointed that we have signed a paper and nothing came of it”. Crisis Group interview, Hamas political bureau member, Cairo, 25 November 2011.

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 November 2011.

### III. INSIDE HAMAS

#### A. SHIFTING LINES

The Arab uprisings have forced upon Hamas two broad types of challenges. One, as discussed, is external: how to balance among shifting and competing regional alliances. But regional changes also brought to the surface and exacerbated internal contradictions and rifts among the movement's varied constituencies. In some respects, this was not unlike what other Arab Islamist groups have experienced in the wake of the uprisings and their own political gains: relative loss of discipline, more vocal rivalries and even, in some instances, splits.<sup>126</sup>

In the case of Hamas, at each of various stages – co-existing with and combating the newly formed Palestinian Authority (PA) and its security forces in the mid-1990s; abstaining from the PA's legislative elections in 1996;<sup>127</sup> competing and winning in those elections in 2006; governing; taking over Gaza; and negotiating an exchange of Palestinian prisoners for captive Israeli Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit – differences became more acute within a movement that historically has had to deal with diverse constituencies. These include Gazans and West Bankers; those on the inside and the outside; the military and political wings; prisoners; and the religious leadership.

To a large extent, the impasse at which Hamas had been stuck in the years before the Arab upheavals allowed it to keep its many differences below the surface; with few significant opportunities before it, no contest among visions needed take place. But once Hamas found itself in a dramatically altered environment with novel challenges and possibilities, longstanding tensions came to the fore, and new forms of friction emerged. Broadly speaking, these

tensions reflect several interrelated factors: the group's geographic dispersion and its leadership's varied calculations, caused by differing circumstances (in Gaza, prisons, the West Bank or outside); ideological distinctions, particularly albeit not exclusively related to varying assessments of the impact of the Arab upheavals; roles in the movement's political, military, religious and governance activities; and pre-existing personal rivalries.

In one way or another, Hamas officials have offered differing views on such questions as the conditions under which the movement should accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza; what kind of coexistence with Israel can be established and under what circumstances;<sup>128</sup> how strategies of non-violent resistance should be attempted; if and when violence in the West Bank should be resumed; the best means of integrating within the PLO and leading the Palestinian national movement; whether to participate in negotiations with Israel over a political settlement;<sup>129</sup> what concessions it should offer, particularly in Gaza, and what demands it should make, particularly regarding the situation in the West Bank, in order to reconcile with Fatah; how it should respond to Abbas's eventual departure from the political scene;<sup>130</sup> whether it should seek to change the functions or to facilitate the collapse of the PA;<sup>131</sup> whether to aim for a majority or a strong minority

<sup>126</sup> This has been the case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood since Mubarak's fall, notably in the aftermath of its parliamentary victory and the run-up to the presidential elections.

<sup>127</sup> A senior Hamas leader in Gaza described the tensions over deciding whether to participate in the 1996 elections: "In 1995 Abu Ammar [Arafat] asked for elections. And I was in favour of participating in the elections, in order to protect the movement and to give us a chance. And also to bypass this critical point when the majority of people were supporting Abu Ammar, were with the establishment of a state, with independence, with an end of occupation. You can't stand in front of that and carry the responsibility for failure. The West Bank agreed that we should participate in elections. But with pressure from the outside leadership, the West Bank changed its mind. So the outside won. I warned them. I asked them not to let happen precisely what happened: we suffered a terrible crackdown. The PA took our guns; they tortured us. Lack of information, lack of experience and the geopolitical atmosphere – all of these things affect the calculations of the outside leadership". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, December 2011.

<sup>128</sup> Hamas leaders are unanimous in stating they will never recognise Israel's right to exist, but numerous Hamas leaders, especially those in the West Bank, have made a distinction between this (which they see as tantamount to accepting Israel's moral claims, in particular the justness of the Jewish state's creation at the expense of native Arab inhabitants) and recognising Israel's existence. Several West Bank leaders have said they could recognise Israel's existence but only in exchange for something meaningful: "We are not going to make the mistake Arafat made in 1993, when in his exchange of letters with Rabin he accepted Israel's right to exist in exchange for the mere recognition that the PLO is the representative of the Palestinian people. There was no mention of a state. There was no mention of it being on the 1967 borders". Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Ramallah, 18 July 2012.

<sup>129</sup> Expressing a minority view within the movement, a Hamas government official in Gaza said, "personally, I think negotiations should not be only in Fatah's hands". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, January 2012.

<sup>130</sup> While many Hamas leaders think it prudent simply to await Abbas's departure, others believe that a strategy premised on short-term inaction is harmful to the movement's popularity. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, Gaza City, Hebron, Nablus, January-June 2012.

<sup>131</sup> Most Hamas leaders acknowledged that dismantling the PA was unrealistic because the livelihoods of many Palestinians depend on its existence. A senior leader in exile said, "we can't be in favour of dissolving the PA. 200,000 families now depend on it". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2012. Several PLC members, however, said the PA had become an instrument of

in future PA elections;<sup>132</sup> whether to run for the PA presidency; and how in the absence of reconciliation it should address its loss of popularity.

Other contentious questions include whether it should help create a new political party with some degree of separation from the rest of the movement, particularly its military wing;<sup>133</sup> how its limited resources should be divided between the Gaza government and the movement;<sup>134</sup> whether to change its charter;<sup>135</sup> how Gaza can gain more independence from Israel and deepen connections to Egypt without weakening ties to the West Bank;<sup>136</sup> and what, at this moment of the Muslim Brotherhood's ascendancy and rapprochement with the West, it should be willing to say or do in order to gain legitimacy and improve relations with the outside world.<sup>137</sup>

In assessing tensions within the movement, one runs the risk of oversimplification. For years now, observers have highlighted purported differences between Hamas's leadership in Gaza and outside the Palestinian territories, notably in Damascus, labelling one more pragmatic and the other more militant. The characterisations, though discussed

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Israeli control and should be eliminated. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, Gaza City, Hebron, February, May 2012.

<sup>132</sup> A number of Hamas officials and legislators, often those described as its more "dovish" members, have said it was a mistake to win the 2006 elections, and Hamas would do better to aim to be a strong opposition. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, November 2011.

<sup>133</sup> Debates on this are still at a very early phase. Some Hamas leaders have said it could be a means of circumventing Israeli opposition to their participation in elections in the West Bank; others have strongly rejected "sneaking past an Israeli veto over our participation in democratic elections". Crisis Group interview, Hamas political bureau member, Gaza City, June 2012.

<sup>134</sup> A senior leader in Gaza said this was among the issues future Hamas elections would address. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, November 2011.

<sup>135</sup> A senior figure during Hamas's early years said he believed the charter should be changed, arguing it had been written almost entirely by one founder, 'Abd al-Fattah Dukhan, and never approved by the movement's Shura. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, February 2012.

<sup>136</sup> While most of the leadership in Gaza is intent on eliminating Gaza's dependence on Israel and strengthening ties with Egypt, many leaders in the West Bank worry that doing so in the absence of Palestinian reconciliation would deepen the separation of the two territories. A West Banker said, "the strategy of focusing on improvements in Gaza will make the division permanent". Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, Gaza City, Nablus, June-July 2012. Hamas has denied reports in the Arab press that it planned to declare Gaza a liberated territory in order to deprive Egypt of any excuse not to fully open its borders to the Strip. "Report of possible Gaza independence stirs debate", Al Arabiya, 31 July 2012.

<sup>137</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, Gaza City, Nablus, Rafah, November 2011-February 2012.

openly by Hamas members themselves, often have been too facile. Some Gaza leaders have favoured the external leadership's initiatives, and within the external leadership there have been disagreements as large as those between the inside and the outside, often with members hailing originally from Gaza taking positions closer to the leadership there.<sup>138</sup> Within Gaza's military wing itself, prominent leaders are known to be close to, and have taken positions mirroring, those of the outside leadership.<sup>139</sup>

Moreover, there are several other important constituencies, including the West Bank leadership, historically the most flexible on strategic questions, and detainees in Israeli prisons. If more recently the debate primarily has been conducted between the Gaza and external leaderships,<sup>140</sup> it is because the weights of these other centres of power within the movement's political wing have been significantly reduced, the former because of suppression by Israeli and PA security forces,<sup>141</sup> the latter because their

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<sup>138</sup> Until recently, the two most prominent members of the outside leadership from Gaza were Musa Abu Marzouk, the deputy head of the political bureau, and Imad Alami, who has recently returned to Gaza and joined the leadership there.

<sup>139</sup> Members of the military wing in Gaza said that in the rift between the political leaderships in Gaza and the outside, the head of Gaza's military wing, Mohammed Deif, had sided with Gaza's leadership, while his (arguably more powerful) deputy, Ahmed Jaabari, had supported the exiled head of the politburo, Khaled Meshal. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, February 2012. A political bureau member deeply involved in security matters said the differences within the military wing were less about supporting or opposing Meshal than whether differences with Meshal should be aired publicly. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, June 2012.

<sup>140</sup> A Palestinian analyst said, "differences between the inside and outside leadership are particularly acute today. It was much harder to sense the differences between the two when the historical leadership of Hamas was still alive. Because at that time all disputes were settled by Sheikh Yassin. Whatever the differences among Hamas members, all agreed to defer to Yassin. In this way, by assassinating Yassin and [his successor] Dr Abdel Aziz Rantisi, Israel strengthened the outside leadership". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 10 September 2011. A former senior Shin Bet official commented: "The targeting of Sheikh Yassin in 2004 was a mistake, because he was more open-minded, and he weighed more heavily the practicalities of the well-being of his people than did the outside leadership. He gave priority to *daawa* [religious outreach] over *muqawama* [armed resistance], if there was a clash between them". Crisis Group interview, Matti Steinberg, 10 January 2012.

<sup>141</sup> A Hamas PLC member in the West Bank offered a widely shared view when he said, "Hamas in the West Bank has been neutralised". Crisis Group interview, Nablus, 6 February 2012. A senior leader in Gaza added: "In the West Bank, Hamas leaders have their mouths closed by force, by torture and by PA cooperation with the Israelis". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 11 September 2011. "In the West Bank", Khaled Meshal told Al Jazeera, "the resistance is crushed". "Interview with Khaled

numbers are fewer in the wake of the 2011 exchange of 1,027 Palestinian prisoners for Sergeant Shalit.

The ideological labelling itself is as misleading as it has been shifting. That the positions taken by the inside and outside leaderships were shaped, in part at least, by practical as opposed to ideological considerations – and that one is not intrinsically more “hardline” than the other – is illustrated by their changing views over time.

After Hamas’s electoral triumph in 2006, many were quick to describe the Damascus wing as radical and sensitive to pressures from Syria and Iran.<sup>142</sup> The 2007 takeover of Gaza (which reportedly surprised the outside leadership) was said to have been ordered by those in the Strip, suddenly characterised as more militant.<sup>143</sup> At times, the prisoner exchange purportedly was being promoted by Gazans (eager for a relaxation of the siege) and resisted by Damascenes; positions later flipped.<sup>144</sup> Likewise, reconciliation once was said to be encouraged by Gazans (thought to be more susceptible to Egyptian pressure) and later resisted by them (because they were determined to hold on to newly acquired perks and privileges of power potentially imperilled by the dissolution of the Gaza government

amid newfound unity with Fatah).<sup>145</sup> Today, the external leadership is the one pushing for a deal.<sup>146</sup>

In a similar vein, officials from the West Bank – long believed to hold more flexible positions on reconciliation, seeing it as a means of allowing Hamas to operate more freely there – somewhat altered their tune. Fearful that unity might come at their expense (for example by having Fatah and Hamas agree on perpetuating the status quo in both Gaza and the West Bank), they have voiced clear reservations.<sup>147</sup> In short, rather than a clear and immutable ideological divide, what emerges are changing attitudes, postures and assessments of external events driven to a large extent by the immediate interests of various constituencies. All that being said, tensions between the most influential constituencies today – the one in Gaza and the one outside – have risen to unfamiliar heights.<sup>148</sup>

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Meshal”, 26 December 2011. The Israeli military (IDF), however, still regards Hamas in the West Bank as a serious threat. In March, Major General Avi Mizrahi, the recently retired head of its Central Command, said Hamas was “trying to build itself up” in the West Bank and that “top figures in the Palestinian Authority’s security forces have told me that in every West Bank home there is at least one family member who belongs to Hamas”. *Haaretz*, 20 March 2012.

<sup>142</sup> Crisis Group interview, Fatah Central Committee member, Ramallah, November 2011. The common wisdom about divisions within Hamas has shifted radically from five years ago: “Of all the assumptions concerning Hamas, perhaps the most widespread is that the movement is divided between a radical, hardline and uncompromising external leadership and a more pragmatic and flexible internal one”. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°62, *After Mecca: Engaging Hamas*, 28 February 2007, p. 24.

<sup>143</sup> Several observers have claimed that during the takeover Hamas militants in Gaza told the political leadership to turn off their mobile phones to preclude receiving orders to halt the operation. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°68, *After Gaza*, 2 August 2007.

<sup>144</sup> For reports on differences between the Gaza and external leadership over the Shalit deal, see, for example, “An Israeli Prisoner in Gaza: German mediation in Shalit affair faces failure”, *Der Spiegel*, 11 April 2011. A Hamas senior leader involved in the prisoner exchange deal said that since its establishment, the outside leadership had been seen as more hardline than leaders in Gaza and the West Bank, and “now it is the reverse”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, December 2011.

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<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas senior leaders, Cairo, Gaza City, February 2012.

<sup>146</sup> An analyst in Gaza explained the concern of Hamas leaders there about Meshal moving to Qatar: “The role of Qatar and its ability to influence the movement’s decisions is dangerous. The only way to get rid of such an outside influence is to have the outside leadership move inside”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 10 February 2012.

<sup>147</sup> A strong proponent of reconciliation in the outside leadership conceded that a number of leaders in the West Bank had come to resist reconciliation: “There is also some reservation in the West Bank, and I must say what is happening in the West Bank is the dominant factor affecting reconciliation. There are prisoners, our civil institutions remain closed, Hamas cannot work there, security forces won’t allow even the popular resistance we agreed on with Abbas. Our brothers in the West Bank and Gaza say: ‘How does reconciliation relate to the realities we face on the ground?’ So they are not enthusiastic”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012. Relative to the leadership in Gaza, however, leaders in the West Bank on the whole were closer to the position of the outside leadership. Crisis Group interviews, Nablus, Ramallah, July 2012.

<sup>148</sup> Criticism at times became fierce. “The outside always feels weaker than the inside”, a Gaza leader said, “they can only work there because of the blood sacrifices made here”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, December 2011. Similarly, in an interview with the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, Hamas senior leader Mahmoud Zahar said, “the real centre of the Hamas movement is located in the occupied land, and its real weight is there. Blood was spilled there, the leadership is there, and the complementary part is outside”. “Interview with Mahmoud Zahar”, 24 May 2011. Some Gaza leaders attribute the difference in perspective to the external leadership’s detachment from the majority of Hamas supporters. A Gaza member of the political bureau went so far as to say, “those in exile live in isolation from refugee camps and refugees. We in Gaza have our hand on the pulse of the people. They are busy with meetings with the government in Damascus. When you are directly involved with issues on the ground, you see the outside’s vision is not correct”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 14 December 2011.

## B. RECONCILIATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The contest within Hamas has played out most vividly and publicly over the issue of Palestinian reconciliation, which touches on many of the most important strategic questions faced by the movement, including coexistence with Israel, conditions for accepting a state on the pre-1967 borders, nonviolence, integration within the PLO, the functions of the Palestinian Authority, the status of security forces in the West Bank and Gaza and the formation of a joint national strategy with Fatah. Reconciliation also is the matter over which the practical interests of the Gazan and external leaderships are most sharply at odds and the issue on which, at a time of popular uprisings throughout the region, the movement has faced greatest public pressure to change course. Finally, the way in which negotiations with Fatah evolved – and, in particular, the highly personalised talks between Abbas and Meshal – accentuated the competition among individual Hamas leaders and highlighted disagreements over the movement’s internal mode of functioning.

Indeed, developments with regard to reconciliation over this recent period are noteworthy less for illuminating disagreements with Fatah (those were known and well-entrenched) than for revealing competing visions for Hamas’s future and how these have been shaped by contrasting interests and by the distinct effects the Arab uprisings have had on various centres of power in the movement. Within Hamas, each dispute during this time has displayed the same dynamics: initiative is taken by the movement’s outside leadership – which has been far less insulated than Gaza’s leaders from regional changes – and prominent Gaza leaders then express reservations over both policy (that concessions were being made hastily or without adequate reciprocation) and process (that they were not sufficiently consulted).

The internal disagreements began with the signing of a reconciliation agreement in Cairo in May 2011, escalated with talks on implementing that agreement the following November and December and reached their peak with the signing of a new reconciliation agreement between Abbas and Meshal in Doha in February 2012. In May 2011, for instance, a Gaza leader complained that Meshal, at the ceremony for the reconciliation agreement signed that month, had given a prominent speech indicating that Hamas would accept a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders but had not added, in accordance with official movement policy, that any agreement producing such a state should be a truce of limited duration, subject to renewal.<sup>149</sup>

Another point of contention in the same speech was Meshal’s declaration that Hamas would agree to Abbas continuing to negotiate with Israel: “We have given peace, from Madrid to now, twenty years. I say: We are ready to agree as Palestinians, in the arms of the Arabs and with their support, to give an additional chance for agreement on how to manage it”.<sup>150</sup> The statement elicited a sharp rebuke from senior Gaza leader Mahmoud Zahar:

The position of the movement regarding the negotiations and the resistance has not changed. We’re in favour of the way of resistance, and the way of negotiations was and still contradicts the position of the majority of the Palestinian people, who voted for Hamas in the 2006 general elections. Today, there is someone [ie, Meshal] saying that we’re giving Abu Mazen [Abbas] the option to hold a new round of negotiations. We did not agree to the negotiations, and we did not encourage him to hold negotiations. On the contrary, we embarrassed him day and night on this issue of negotiations. Therefore, what happened on the day in which the reconciliation agreement was signed was not agreed upon [within Hamas]. We don’t recognise it, and I think that it does not express the position of the movement, whose platform is based on resistance, not negotiations.<sup>151</sup>

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overall terms, as Meshal had made similar statements, without qualifications concerning a truce, in the past. See fn. 166.

<sup>150</sup> Video is available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6zFDivGgCs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6zFDivGgCs).

<sup>151</sup> “Zahar to Al-Quds”, *Al-Quds*, 17 May 2011. The Hamas political bureau issued an official reproach of Zahar: “[The political bureau] discussed the issue that provoked interest in the media regarding statements and comments on the speech of brother Khaled Meshal, the head of the political bureau of the movement, at the reconciliation ceremony in Cairo. In this regard, the political bureau emphasises the following: First, the statements made by brother Khaled Mashaal ... reflect and represent the movement’s positions and its principles, and any other statement from any source contradicting them does not represent the movement and its institutions. Second, the statements made by the head of the political bureau and the members of the political bureau represent the movement and its positions. The political bureau is the only authorised body to interpret or amend the statements of the head of the political bureau and its members if there is a need”. See “Power Dynamics Inside Hamas: The Increasing Weight of the Gaza Leadership”, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 16 June 2011. A testy exchange then ensued between Zahar and external political bureau member Izzat Rishiq, who said: “[Zahar’s] statements toward Meshal are against the movement’s strategy, and as a leading figure he shouldn’t say that. Zahar knows that it is not his job to comment on Khaled Meshal, and the [Damascus-based] political office is the one that can deliver any clarifications or comments on any statement by Meshal”. Zahar replied by asking whether Rishiq’s comments were “issued in agreement between Gaza and the West Bank”. “Hamas in Gaza, Damascus spar over unity deal”,

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<sup>149</sup> As in many disputes surrounding reconciliation, the disagreement seemed less about Meshal’s words than the agreement’s

After a long hiatus that followed the signing of the May 2011 agreement, talks between Fatah and Hamas resumed in the wake of domestic victories that bolstered the position of the two movements – Abbas’s widely admired UN speech in September 2011, which Meshal praised in his remarks in Tehran,<sup>152</sup> and the Hamas-secured release of 1,027 Palestinian prisoners several weeks later. In November, Meshal and Abbas held a one-on-one meeting in Cairo. Following that meeting, and during further talks that month and the next, disputes emerged within Hamas over the outside leadership’s emphasis, deemed misleading by some Gaza leaders, on a joint strategy with Fatah of popular resistance. The significance of the joint approach that came out of the parley was unclear. Numerous commentators and even some Hamas members interpreted it to be a rejection of violence,<sup>153</sup> officials from Fatah and Egyptian intelligence, which brokered the talks, sought to portray it as a major step by Hamas.<sup>154</sup>

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Ma’an News Agency, 2 June 2011. Zahar did not attend a meeting of the political bureau in Damascus weeks after the May signing ceremony. He claimed that this was because of an official visit to Algeria. “Zahar: The difference with Meshal has passed”, *Al Riyadh*, 8 June 2011.

<sup>152</sup> Meshal was speaking at the Fifth International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada, where Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei strongly criticised Abbas and the PLO. Meshal, by contrast, said of Abbas’s speech: “We cannot deny that this action has had symbolic and moral achievements”. “Khaled Meshal praises Mahmoud Abbas from Tehran”, Radio Farda, 3 October 2011.

<sup>153</sup> A Hamas leader in Nablus said, “what do you think the outside leadership meant by popular resistance? That there will be a ceasefire in the West Bank and Gaza. Anyone in Gaza who says different is lying”. Crisis Group interview, Nablus, January 2012. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°122, *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Palestinians and the End of the Peace Process*, 7 May 2012. During these talks, little of substance was agreed. Abbas reportedly assured Washington the agreement would not lead anywhere. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, December 2011. A former Israeli negotiator said, “Abbas sent many messages to Israel after the meeting [in November with Meshal] that it shouldn’t be taken seriously. Of course he’s done that before, and after he engages in talks with Israel, he does it with the other side [Hamas] as well”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, December 2011.

<sup>154</sup> A Fatah negotiator said that the only new points arrived at in the November meeting were commitments to “a truce with Israel and popular resistance. The truce applies to the West Bank and Gaza”. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 29 November 2011. A senior Egyptian intelligence official said, “today for the first time Khaled Meshal speaks publicly about popular resistance. This is very important. Now they want to make popular resistance, in a sense, legal. They want to put it on the table with an official stamp. In order to get something for the non-violence they have been practising. For years they have stopped resistance and gotten nothing. Now they want to make it official and get something in return”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24

The external leadership denied this and stressed that popular resistance could go hand in hand with continuation of armed struggle.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, most Hamas officials in Gaza and the outside privately characterised the dispute as less about actions than words; senior members of both leaderships acknowledged several reasons why popular resistance was highly unlikely: the authorities in Gaza and the West Bank regard popular protests as potential threats to their rule; leaders of both Fatah and Hamas would risk ceding some of their power to a new generation; and, in the West Bank, where popular resistance would be focused, the Palestinian security forces would likely stop any protests or risk ending security cooperation with Israel.<sup>156</sup> Still, the leadership in Gaza seized on such talk and

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November 2011. He added: “During the last ten years, we succeeded in transforming Hamas from a resistance movement to a movement of peace and moderation. Khaled Meshal can’t say publicly that popular resistance is his only option. He can’t overnight tell all these people – the ones he raised on fighting Israel and on the idea that Israel is the enemy – that they will no longer fight. He has to say that he still holds to the right of armed resistance. It’s just like the Americans when they say, ‘All options are on the table’. But the truth is they have been refraining from resistance for several years without getting anything in return. Now they want to make it official and get credit for it”.<sup>155</sup> “We did not agree that popular resistance would be an alternative to armed resistance”, a member of the external leadership said. “Armed resistance is a right of every nation under occupation. Hamas still holds to this option. But we recognise that we as Palestinian factions have our differences in dealing with armed resistance. Everyone has his own position. What is new in Cairo is that we have agreed upon finding the common ground between us all. Everyone agrees to popular resistance”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24 November 2011. A political bureau member residing in Damascus at the time likewise downplayed the novelty: “We agreed on popular resistance in the [2006] National Conciliation document”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 November 2011. Article three of the document upholds “the right of the Palestinian people to resist and to uphold the option of resistance of occupation by various means and focusing resistance in territories occupied in 1967 in tandem with political action, negotiations and diplomacy whereby there is broad participation from all sectors in the popular resistance”. “National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners [Wathiqat al-Asra]”, Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, 28 June 2006.

<sup>156</sup> A large contingent of Hamas’s military wing attended the November meetings in Cairo. All who spoke with Crisis Group said they were committed to the decision to engage in popular resistance, though all were equally sceptical it would occur. A senior Qassam commander from Gaza said, “I wouldn’t make much of popular resistance. We’re committed to it, but we’re also confident that Israel will not allow it to stay non-militarised for long. And then we’ll be back to armed resistance”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24 November 2011. A prominent West Bank independent involved in demonstrations said Palestinian apathy and exhaustion were additional factors working against large-scale protest. “The West Bank security forces are a major ob-

denounced it, categorically denying that any ceasefire had been agreed.<sup>157</sup> Mahmoud Zahar dismissed popular resistance as a mere “slogan”,<sup>158</sup> after which a political bureau member there added:

Meshal uses terms that are not our terms. For instance, the term popular resistance. Every sort of resistance that our people participate in is popular resistance, including peaceful resistance, stones and armed struggle. If we have used misleading terms, we should correct that. I told Egyptian Intelligence that this tactic would not work.<sup>159</sup>

More broadly, Hamas leaders in Gaza expressed discomfort at suggestions – chiefly advanced by Egyptian officials

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stale to popular protest, but that’s not the whole explanation: there are few protests at Qalandiya, for example, where there are no Palestinian security forces to stop them”. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2011. A Hamas leader in the West Bank countered that protesting at Qalandiya and other areas where the PA is not allowed was not possible without the PA’s and Fatah’s consent: “It’s impossible. The people who participate in protests there have to return to their towns and villages, and they’ll be brought in for questioning and detained as soon as they return. You need agreement from Fatah. It’s a requirement”. Crisis Group interview, Nablus, July 2012. A Fatah leader acknowledged the point but said, “the only two movements that can mobilise people are Hamas and Fatah. Neither has tried to start popular resistance. I’m sure that you’d see tens of thousands in the streets if they did”. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, April 2012.

<sup>157</sup> “There is no ceasefire. We succeeded in pushing Israel outside of Gaza. It is now time to do the same in the West Bank”. Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza City, January 2012. Another senior leader said, “Khaled Meshal did not promise this and he cannot promise this. There is a natural law: occupation should be resisted; if you have a virus in your body, antibodies will form. Hamas has a strategy; it is bigger than Khaled Meshal and than people even bigger than Khaled Meshal. The strategy is that occupation should leave Palestine”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 13 February 2012. Officials from both Hamas and Fatah argued that Abbas would not allow popular protests, in part for fear they would quickly become militarised. A prominent Hamas figure in Gaza also worried about the political costs of such a strategy: “These guys [militants in Hamas and other factions] who sleep with RPGs at night – how long do you think they will allow Hamas to pursue popular resistance? We will lose our own constituency. Popular resistance doesn’t take two weeks or two months. It takes a long time, longer than is politically manageable to seriously pursue”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, December 2011.

<sup>158</sup> “We only discussed that as a slogan”. “Hamas: Peaceful resistance not applicable to Gaza”, Ma’an News Agency, 3 January 2012.

<sup>159</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 14 January 2012. A senior member of the exiled leadership said, “the problem is that Meshal does not understand that Abu Mazen will never commit to any form of resistance, including popular resistance”, Crisis Group interview, Cairo, February 2012.

in late 2011 – that the movement was walking back some of its principles and inching toward acceptance of the Quartet conditions.<sup>160</sup> Egyptian officials told their U.S. and Israeli interlocutors that they should support Palestinian reconciliation because Egypt had brought Hamas to accept these conditions in all but name.<sup>161</sup> recognition of Israel, they contended, was implicit in Hamas’s support for a Palestinian state on the pre-1967 borders (“What”, one Egyptian official asked, “do you think is on the other side of that Palestinian state?”),<sup>162</sup> renunciation of violence, they argued, was the meaning of Hamas’s agreeing to popular resistance; and acceptance of past PLO agreements, they claimed, had already been achieved when Hamas signed the 2006 National Conciliation Document<sup>163</sup> and agreed to the program of the national unity government formed in March 2007.<sup>164</sup>

Neither Israeli nor American officials found these arguments convincing.<sup>165</sup> Again, however, pushback from Gaza was prompt. Weeks after the November 2011 reconciliation talks in Cairo, and days before a second round of meetings was to take place there, Haniyeh delivered a thunderous

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<sup>160</sup> The Quartet on the Middle East was established in 2002 and is composed of the U.S., the EU, the UN Secretary-General and Russia. The Quartet principles, sometimes referred to as the Quartet conditions, were outlined in a statement issued after Hamas’s January 2006 electoral victory.

<sup>161</sup> An Egyptian official said of the Quartet principles, “we have answered them all. True, Hamas has not fulfilled them to the letter, but it’s up to Israel to deal positively with what we’ve achieved”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, December 2011. Egyptian foreign affairs and intelligence officials predicted that the Muslim Brotherhood would persuade Hamas to commit to past agreements. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, December 2011.

<sup>162</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24 November 2011.

<sup>163</sup> In order to accept this claim, one would have to agree that the reference in the National Conciliation Document’s first clause to “international law and legitimacy” includes past PLO agreements. The first clause states: “The Palestinian people in the homeland and in the Diaspora seek and struggle to liberate their land ... based on the UN Charter and international law and legitimacy in a way that does not affect the rights of our people”.

<sup>164</sup> Formed in the wake of a February 2007 reconciliation agreement signed in Mecca, the program of the March 2007 national unity government states: “The government shall respect the international legitimacy resolutions and the agreements that were signed by the PLO”. A vocal Hamas critic of the outside leadership dismissed the possibility of Hamas again agreeing to respect the PLO’s past agreements: “That was agreed to when we [Fatah and Hamas] were still shooting at each other”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, December 2011. But leaders in the West Bank said Hamas would have no problem committing again to respect past agreements. Crisis Group interviews, Nablus, Ramallah, January-July 2012.

<sup>165</sup> An Israeli defence official said, “the Egyptians who promoted the line that Hamas basically accepted the Quartet conditions did so because this is their file, and they want to deliver results”. Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 23 April 2012.



Gaza City speech before tens of thousands of Hamas supporters gathered for the movement's 24th anniversary. His words seemed to rebut, point by point, all that was emphasised by the external leadership after Meshal met with Abbas.

Whereas external leaders stressed their acceptance of popular resistance, Haniyeh declared, "Hamas will lead intifada after intifada until we liberate Palestine – all of Palestine"; external leaders spoke of reaching an agreement with Fatah based on the common ground between the two, yet Haniyeh said, "Palestinian reconciliation – and all sides must know this – cannot come at the expense of principles, at the expense of the resistance"; external leaders said they had given Abbas their blessing to continue negotiations in order to discover finally that he would not succeed, while Haniyeh pronounced: "We say today, explicitly, so it cannot be explained otherwise, that the armed resistance and the armed struggle are the path and the strategic choice for liberating the Palestinian land"; external leaders spoke of a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem,<sup>166</sup> whereas Haniyeh asserted, "I don't mean only East Jerusalem; Jerusalem, all of Jerusalem, is the capital of the state of Palestine"; and the outside leadership emphasised its acceptance of a Palestinian state on the pre-1967 borders, regarding which Haniyeh said:

We won't relinquish one inch of the land of Palestine. The involvement of Hamas at any stage with the interim objective of liberating Gaza, the West Bank or Jerusalem does not replace its strategic view concerning Palestine and the land of Palestine.<sup>167</sup>

The external leadership dismissed the speech as red meat for the masses. Asked to comment on the discrepancy between the messages, a Damascus-based member of the political bureau said, "do you know what the difference was between what we said in Cairo and what Haniyeh said in Gaza City? The audience".<sup>168</sup> But leaders in Gaza argued that the speech had offered a much-needed corrective to all the talk of a shift within Hamas. Hours after it

was delivered, a political bureau member from Gaza said with satisfaction, "one week ago, no one in Hamas was able to say two things: to criticise popular resistance and to talk about all of Palestine. But I spoke about them anyway. And today you hear the same words from Haniyeh".<sup>169</sup> The imminence of internal Hamas elections – the results of which are pending – likely exacerbated differences among movement leaders.<sup>170</sup>

Whatever tensions erupted in late 2011 paled in comparison to what happened two months later when, on 6 February 2012, Hamas leaders in the West Bank and Gaza were greeted by a surprise announcement that Meshal and Abbas had signed a new reconciliation deal in Qatar, the Doha Agreement.<sup>171</sup> Based on the reconciliation agreement signed in May 2011 in Cairo, it called for a second meeting of the temporary committee of the PLO in order to reform its legislative body, the Palestinian National Council; the initiation of work by the Central Elections Committee in preparation for legislative and presidential elections; and the formation of a government of independent technocrats, led by Abbas, who would add PA prime minister to his list of titles that includes PA president, chairman of the PLO and leader of Fatah.<sup>172</sup> The Abbas-led interim government

<sup>169</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 14 December 2011.

<sup>170</sup> Hamas has partially completed its internal elections, but parts of the diaspora have not finished voting. Because of suppression of Hamas activities in the West Bank, leadership positions there were selected without true elections. The most noteworthy developments thus far have been the results in Gaza, where more than one third of the seats in its political bureau went to militants or figures affiliated with the Shalit deal. Haniyeh was re-elected as its head. The three top candidates to lead the overall political bureau for the movement are the incumbent, Meshal, his deputy, Musa Abu Marzouk, and Haniyeh. The majority of leaders in Gaza were said to favour one of the latter two, while several West Bank leaders said the majority there appeared to favour Meshal. But even in Gaza most Hamas members said they believed Meshal would retain his position. Crisis Group interviews, leaders, Cairo, Gaza City, Hebron, Nablus, Ramallah, January-July 2012.

<sup>171</sup> The agreement was signed on 6 February 2012 after a meeting the previous day between Abbas, Meshal and the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. "Full text of the Doha Declaration signed between Hamas and Fatah", *Middle East Monitor*, 8 February 2012. Egyptian officials were livid that, after all their work, it was signed in Doha. Abbas and Meshal reportedly told them, unconvincingly, they were presented with the deal as a *fait accompli* by the Emir himself and had no choice. Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian official, Cairo, May-June 2012.

<sup>172</sup> In a comment met with scepticism by Hamas leaders in Gaza, Abbas said he did not intend to stay as prime minister for more than several months: "I have accepted to chair the cabinet for several months, not years. The talks to form the government should come within the framework of a specific date for holding the elections. Particularly, the main task of the new govern-

<sup>166</sup> Khaled Meshal said to a U.S. television interviewer, "so when the occupation comes to an end, the resistance will end. As simple as that. If Israel withdraws to the 1967 borders, so that will be the end of the Palestinian resistance . . . . If Israel withdraws to the borders of 1967, and from East Jerusalem, that will become the capital of the Palestinian state with the right of return for the refugees and with a Palestinian state with real sovereignty on the land and on the borders and on the checkpoints". "Hamas leader Khaled Meshal", "The Charlie Rose Show", 28 May 2010.

<sup>167</sup> Video available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqC-yvO5OHo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqC-yvO5OHo).

<sup>168</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24 December 2011. An analyst suggested upcoming Hamas internal elections had sharpened divisions between prominent leaders, notably Haniyeh and Meshal. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, December 2011.

would have only two tasks: starting the reconstruction of Gaza, to which Qatar would contribute \$1 billion,<sup>173</sup> and facilitating PA presidential and legislative elections.<sup>174</sup>

The reactions within different parts of Hamas offered a window into the impassioned debates about movement strategy that had until then taken place mostly behind the scenes. Leaders in the West Bank and Gaza expressed considerable anger at the agreement, as did some in the external leadership itself; Meshal reportedly ignored advice by a senior member of the political bureau to consult the rest of the decision-making body before signing.<sup>175</sup> Gaza leaders called Meshal a “buyer in a sellers’ market”,<sup>176</sup> spoke out publicly against it immediately after it was announced,<sup>177</sup> discussed among themselves resigning from

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ment is to oversee and prepare for the elections”. “Abbas: The government to stay for months and not years”, *Al-Quds*, 11 February 2012. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza City, February 2012.

<sup>173</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza City, February 2012; European diplomat, Jerusalem, 13 March 2012. Hamas officials said Qatar had also pledged “a financial safety net” for the Palestinian Authority in the event that Israel froze tax transfers and Western donors cut aid to the interim government.

<sup>174</sup> The agreement also called for reformation of the PLO’s legislative body, the Palestinian National Council, at the same time as PA presidential and legislative elections are held; continuation of work by the Freedoms Committee and the Social Reconciliation Committee to ease tension between the two movements; and implementation of what had previously been agreed concerning initiation of work by the Central Elections Committee. “Full text”, op. cit. Abbas specified that the government would be formed “only for a short interim period and tasked with preparing for elections”. A PLO Executive Committee member said Abbas would form the government only after he was certain elections could be held in three months: “He doesn’t want to end up prime minister for the next three years”. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, February 2012.

<sup>175</sup> There is little dispute that Meshal overstepped his bounds by not consulting the political bureau. His supporters offered two explanations: first, that he was put on the spot by the emir, who had proposed Abbas as prime minister and whom Meshal could not afford to disappoint, particularly as he was indebted to for allowing his relocation to Qatar and for helping broker a rapprochement with Jordan days earlier. Crisis Group interview, Hamas political bureau member, Cairo, February 2012. The second explanation was that the higher Palestinian national interest of reconciling required bold, controversial moves. In the words of a political bureau member close to Meshal, “brother Abu Walid [Meshal] knew this would be an unpopular move, and he knew there would be objections. But he also knows that we need a giant step like this to break the freeze and achieve reconciliation”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 February 2012.

<sup>176</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, February 2012.

<sup>177</sup> Hamas leader Ismail Ashqar said the agreement “contradicted basic Palestinian law and overstepped the Palestinian Legislative Council”. “Doha agreement divides political opinion”, Ma’an News Agency, 7 February 2012. Hamas senior leader

the political bureau<sup>178</sup> and directed members of the PLC [Palestinian Legislative Council] Legal Committee to issue a memorandum stating that it was unconstitutional for a single person to be both president and prime minister and that such an arrangement flew in the face of the very purpose for which the position of prime minister had been created (ironically, for Abbas, to limit President Arafat’s powers in 2003).<sup>179</sup>

Numerous Hamas leaders argued that agreeing to Abbas as prime minister violated both the long-term understanding that the cabinet head should be an independent figure and the views of the Shura (council), a key leadership body, in this regard.<sup>180</sup> A supporter of the agreement defended Meshal’s decision:

In the last Shura meeting in Khartoum [late December 2011], we agreed on the need to speed up reconciliation. So when Khaled Meshal signed the Doha Agreement he did so in harmony with the movement’s interests. The only veto placed by the movement was on Salam Fayyad remaining as prime minister. Meshal respected

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Mahmoud Zahar said, “Hamas leaders inside or outside Gaza were not consulted about a cabinet headed by President Abbas”, adding that “strategically, it is a highly unacceptable and wrong decision to put full authority in Abbas’s hands”. “Abbas: The government to stay for months and not years”, *Al-Quds*, 11 February 2012.

<sup>178</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, Gaza City, February 2012.

<sup>179</sup> “The legality of combining the presidency of the National Authority and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers”, Palestinian Legislative Council, 7 February 2012, Arabic text at [www.plc.ps/ar/news\\_details.aspx?id=830](http://www.plc.ps/ar/news_details.aspx?id=830). On this issue as well there was fairly widespread agreement that having the president serve simultaneously as prime minister contravened at the very least the spirit of the Palestinian Basic Law. The counter-argument presented by supporters of the agreement was that Palestinians have been living in contravention of the Basic Law since the division began. “The Cairo Agreement also has many articles that violate the Basic Law”, a Meshal supporter in the external leadership said, “but it was concluded in consensus between the factions, and we have agreed that consensus is a higher authority than the law. In any event, the Basic Law is not the *Qur’an*”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, February 2012.

<sup>180</sup> The difficulty in finding a suitable prime minister has been one of the obstacles hampering reconciliation. With the West and Israel insisting on keeping Fayyad, Abbas has hesitated to replace him, despite consensus on that between Hamas and Fatah. Egyptian mediators say they first suggested Abbas combine the two positions as a way around the problem, that Abbas had agreed and that Meshal seemed receptive. As noted, they were taken aback when the two leaders finally accepted this outcome during their Doha meeting. Crisis Group interview, Egyptian official, Cairo, June 2012.

that veto. What he did was *ijtihad* [interpretation of Islamic law] within the limits permitted.<sup>181</sup>

By contrast, leaders in Gaza opposed to the deal said it was obvious that the movement had not been prepared to have the government led by the head of Fatah, as was clear from the fact that in the months Fatah and Hamas had spent haggling over who might replace Salam Fayyad as prime minister only technocrats and political independents had been considered. “The very idea”, an exasperated Hamas PLC member in the West Bank said, “was to have a government that is non-factional!”<sup>182</sup> A Hamas leader in Gaza added: “If we wanted to agree that the interim government would be the government of Abu Mazen, with Abu Mazen’s political program, we would have done so years ago”.<sup>183</sup>

Less than two weeks after the agreement was signed, members of the Gaza and external leaderships confronted Meshal about the deal at a lengthy political bureau meeting in Cairo. In the interest of preserving movement unity, his detractors opted in the days before to forgo directly opposing the agreement, trying instead to derail it by attaching onerous conditions: that the Palestinian Legislative Council first be reactivated; that it amend the Basic Law to remove legal obstacles to the prime minister and president being the same person; and that the PLC approve the government and Abbas as its head.<sup>184</sup>

A political bureau member from Gaza described the central decision before the body as “a choice between frank rejection and pointing out the drawbacks in order not to embarrass Meshal publicly”. He added: “We found no one in Gaza and no one outside – except those close to him – who accepted Doha. The majority voted against outright rejection because it would affect our relations with many countries who support the deal”.<sup>185</sup> The agreement’s oppo-

nents presented the dispute as one centring on both lack of consultation and breach of the movement’s foundational principles. “Where is this person taking us?”, a Gaza political bureau member complained of Meshal:

Four times now he has taken strategic decisions without consulting us: saying in May [2011] that Abu Mazen could continue negotiations; declaring in the same speech that we agree to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza without mentioning that this would be for a limited period of truce; proclaiming our commitment to popular resistance; and now accepting Abbas as prime minister at Doha.<sup>186</sup>

Supporters of the Doha agreement in the political bureau presented the views of those opposing it as equally lacking. One member in exile said, “some who objected to Doha said our interest is in continuing the division, without explaining it. There’s no convincing some of these people”. He added that much of the opposition to the deal derived less from principle than from Gaza’s parochialism:

We don’t want an emirate in Gaza. There is a higher interest. We are stuck and getting accustomed to the division. Not just Hamas but all Palestinians. In our meeting with Abu Mazen yesterday we said that we are ashamed in front of our people and the world and God himself that all the factions are talking only about these small details.<sup>187</sup>

As it has done with other strategic choices since the Arab uprisings began, Hamas postponed, for the sake of unity, any decision about an alternative path to the one laid out in the Doha Agreement. The sense that the movement’s disputes had become too public helped dissuade leaders from ending the debate more definitively. A government official from Gaza said Hamas’s opponents were hoping to create a rift: “They want to force us either to reject reconciliation, in which case we will be blamed for the division, or to have a rupture in the movement between those who favour reconciliation and those who don’t”.<sup>188</sup> The

<sup>181</sup> Crisis Group interview, external member of the political bureau, Cairo, 25 February 2012.

<sup>182</sup> Crisis Group interview, Nablus, February 2012. A political bureau member from Gaza added: “No one understands what happened in Doha, not even Meshal. He thought we were against Fayyad. He didn’t understand that we rejected Fayyad because he represents a regime”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24 February 2012.

<sup>183</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, January 2012.

<sup>184</sup> In past negotiations, Fatah has opposed reactivating the PLC, as it could undo all presidential decrees and laws since 2007, because the Palestinian Basic Law mandates parliamentary review of all emergency legislation upon reconvening. It would also allow the Hamas-led PLC to bring down the government on a no-confidence vote, an unacceptable threat for Fatah leaders. Crisis Group interview, Fatah Central Committee and Fatah PLC members, Ramallah, February 2012.

<sup>185</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, 25-26 February 2012. Asked how proponents of the agreement had defended it at the meet-

ing, a political bureau member in exile said, “Meshal had no answer. He didn’t convince us”.

<sup>186</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 23 February 2012. Another Hamas leader commented on Meshal’s increasing unilateralism: “Hamas does everything by SMS now. Someone recently joked that we used to be ‘HMS’ [the root of ‘Hamas’ in Arabic] but have now become ‘SMS’. We used to sit and discuss, but now Meshal sends an SMS to inform us of a decision, and we send back an SMS with our reservations. There’s a lot less listening to one another”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 11 February 2012. Another said, “negotiations are Abu Mazen’s project that he tries to run solo; for Meshal the solo project is reconciliation”. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, February 2012.

<sup>187</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 February 2012.

<sup>188</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24 February 2012.

political bureau's solution was to issue a statement that affirmed its commitment not only to Doha but also to "accurately and honestly" implementing the Cairo Agreement,<sup>189</sup> which calls for many of the onerous conditions that had been insisted upon by critics of the deal.

Efforts regarding reconciliation were suspended for weeks after the Doha Agreement. Nearly three months after the signing of the deal, lead Fatah negotiator Azzam al-Ahmed said the parties had not discussed reconciliation in over two months and had no plans for further talks, while Gaza senior leader Mahmoud Zahar reportedly described the agreement as "dead".<sup>190</sup> But no one in the political bureau had changed his position, the regional conditions that brought about Doha still pertained, and many expected the issue to return. Then, in May 2012, Fatah and Hamas signed a new accord in Cairo that, although quite similar to the Doha Agreement, differed in two respects.

First, it was signed not in Doha but in Cairo, thereby appeasing Egyptian displeasure at having brokered reconciliation talks for years and then been sidelined by Qatar.<sup>191</sup> Second, it clarified some points that the Gaza leadership claimed were among the Doha Agreement's defects: the new accord ensured that Abbas would not remain prime minister indefinitely if elections were not held (his term would be limited to no more than six months, after which the government would be replaced),<sup>192</sup> and it stated that PNC, presidential and PLC elections would have to take place simultaneously or not at all, thereby eliminating the possibility that Hamas could agree to PA elections without getting a foothold in the PLO.

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<sup>189</sup> The statement begins: "The political bureau of Hamas affirmed after a meeting in Cairo the importance of accurately and honestly implementing the Doha declaration and the Cairo agreement". "Political bureau of Hamas affirms importance of implementing Doha declaration", *The Palestinian Information Center*, 23 February 2012.

<sup>190</sup> "Fatah: No talks with Hamas since February", Ma'an News Agency, 28 April 2012. Khaled Amayreh, "Palestinian polls unlikely this year", *Al-Ahram Weekly* (online), 12-18 April 2012.

<sup>191</sup> In the words of a political bureau member in Gaza, "Doha had less to do with internal Palestinian matters than pressure from Arab countries. Doha was signed because Qatar wanted it. The agreement signed three months later in Cairo doesn't have any political significance. It's only adding a few details to the May 2011 Cairo Agreement. Why did we sign it? Just to give an answer to Doha, and sign it in Cairo". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, June 2012.

<sup>192</sup> Abbas had repeatedly insisted that he did not wish to stay prime minister for more than several months, though this did little to appease the fears of numerous Hamas leaders in Gaza and the West Bank. Fatah leaders emphasised that Abbas had little interest in remaining prime minister for long, since he would not be able to deflect criticism of the PA onto the holder of that position while he occupied it. Crisis Group interviews, Fatah leaders, Ramallah, February 2012.

In early July 2012, in a new sign of Gazan hostility toward the reconciliation agreement, the Hamas leadership in the Strip suspended the work of the Central Elections Commission (CEC) the day before it was to begin registering voters there.<sup>193</sup> Insofar as its ability to function in Gaza was an essential part of the Cairo deal (which stipulated that a date for elections would be set when it had completed its work),<sup>194</sup> this put on indefinite hold any progress toward unity.

It also appeared to validate the view of those who held the Gaza leadership primarily responsible for the failure of reconciliation and who claimed that it feared elections. Even Hamas officials in Gaza acknowledged that the move had been mishandled, since the stated reasons for halting the CEC's work – repression of Hamas members in the West Bank,<sup>195</sup> fears that Fatah might commit electoral fraud,<sup>196</sup> the absence of parallel voter registration in the West Bank and the failure to register voters for PNC (rather than only for PA) elections<sup>197</sup> – could, they say, legitimately have been raised after registering voters in Gaza, thereby forestalling elections until Hamas's concerns were addressed but without bolstering the feeling that the move-

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<sup>193</sup> One month earlier, after Hamas had pledged to let the CEC work in Gaza, a bomb was purportedly discovered at the CEC's Gaza headquarters. Hamas announced that it had arrested the perpetrator, who, the government claimed, had been working for someone in Ramallah. "Haniyeh: Bomb plot targeted election HQ", Ma'an News Agency, 8 June 2012.

<sup>194</sup> Gaza's leaders could have argued that the Cairo Agreement had already been violated at the time they suspended voter registration. The agreement called for consultations on the formation of a new government to commence on the day the CEC began working in Gaza, but this had not happened, though the CEC had been operating (if not yet registering voters) in Gaza for over a month. This, however, was not among the rationales offered by the Gaza leadership. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza City, July 2012.

<sup>195</sup> "Hamas calls off election registration in Gaza", Ma'an News Agency, 2 July 2012.

<sup>196</sup> "Hamas leader: Fatah plans electoral fraud", Ma'an News Agency, 2 July 2012.

<sup>197</sup> Hamas leaders in the West Bank complained that preparations for PNC elections should have started in parallel with the CEC beginning to operate in Gaza. One said, "if it takes the CEC six weeks to register voters for PA elections in territories where there were free and fair PA elections six years ago, how long do you suppose it will take to prepare for PNC elections in territories here and in the diaspora that have never had PNC elections? So Gaza's leaders looked on the ground, saw that they were the only ones helping to move toward elections, that there was no reciprocation on the PNC, and that in the absence of preparations for PNC elections Abbas was still saying he would soon announce a date for elections". Crisis Group interview, Nablus, 19 July 2012.

ment was opposed to elections in principle.<sup>198</sup> A local Palestinian analyst said that the Gaza leadership had suspended the CEC's work because it had "prioritised the battle with Meshal over Palestinian public opinion".<sup>199</sup>

As with Palestinian reconciliation itself, the differences within Hamas – whether of a tactical, substantive or personal nature – remain unresolved. There is no reason at this stage to believe the movement will break up; indeed, one of its remarkable features is how well it has withstood tensions and geographic separation for so long and still succeeded in reaching consensus positions. Still, for the first time since the movement's founding, some officials have felt little compunction about airing their differences in public, and others have felt the need to offer repeated assurances that they do not believe a split will occur.<sup>200</sup> Likewise of significance is that, at each stage of the recent internal rows, Gazans have tended to take the less compromising positions and the external leadership – notably Meshal – the more pragmatic ones.

### C. WHAT LIES BEHIND THE DISCORD?

It is tempting to dismiss the more substantive divisions about Hamas's program as largely beside the point. As seen, neither wing of the movement appears likely to launch popular protests, believes such protests will soon occur or is prepared to forego the principle of armed resistance.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza City, July 2012.

<sup>199</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, July 2012. Several, albeit not all, Hamas leaders in the West Bank acknowledged that, although the Gaza leadership's demands for political freedoms in the West Bank and for parallel progress in preparations for PNC elections were legitimate, the manner in which it suspended voter registration in Gaza and thereby derailed the latest reconciliation agreement was self-defeating. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, Nablus, 19 July 2012.

<sup>200</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, Gaza City, Hebron, Nablus, Ramallah, September 2011-March 2012. A senior leader put it as follows: "Within Hamas, we have a variety of views, thoughts and convictions. And, at times, some voices speak out of turn and breach the consensus". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012.

<sup>201</sup> A member of the external leadership who insisted that Hamas needs to retain all options, said, "I personally think popular resistance is the most noble among all other forms of resistance because it gets the whole population involved. Armed resistance, by contrast, involves only a small minority of the population, although it is true that it can be more effective at certain times and can achieve quicker results, albeit at a much higher cost. All in all, I think popular resistance is the best way to achieve our goals – most successful revolutions prove that, whether in Iran, Tunisia or Egypt". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012. That said, several Hamas leaders insisted the movement had not recently undertaken attacks in the West Bank chiefly because doing so had been prevented. Crisis Group interviews,

Likewise, differences regarding armed struggle are less pertinent than at first glance.<sup>202</sup> Recent rocket fire from Gaza<sup>203</sup> can be interpreted as a message to Israel – signalling that Hamas will not countenance being targeted in retaliation for attacks perpetrated by another Palestinian group – or even to Egypt.<sup>204</sup> What it almost certainly does

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Cairo, January-February 2012. A senior leader in Gaza said, "as soon as we find an opportunity to attack in the West Bank, we'll take it". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, January 2012. Other Hamas officials said there had been no recent attacks from the West Bank because of a strategic calculation that the current period was not opportune. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, February 2012.

<sup>202</sup> A senior member of the external leadership said, "when Fatah signed the Oslo agreements, it rejected all forms of resistance. That was a fatal mistake because they gave up their strong cards which can help them pressure Israel to make concessions". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2012.

<sup>203</sup> On 17 June 2012, militants crossed from Sinai to Israel, detonated a roadside bomb, fired anti-tank rockets at two Israeli vehicles, and killed an Israeli worker constructing a barrier separating Israel from Egypt. "Terrorists Attack Israeli Civilians in Cross-Border Attack from Egypt", Israel Defence Forces Blog, 17 June 2012. Israel retaliated for this, and for rockets launched from Gaza, with strikes against Gaza targets, including against Hamas's military wing. Hamas then retaliated, seemingly in an effort to deter Israel from holding the movement responsible for rockets launched by other groups as well as by attackers coming from Sinai. During the week-long escalation that followed, in which the Israeli Security Agency says 197 rockets and 23 mortal shells were launched at Israel, some fourteen Gazans were killed and 73 Gazans and five Israelis injured. "Monthly Summary-June 2012", Israel Security Agency, June 2012; "Protection of Civilians Weekly Report", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 20-26 June 2012.

<sup>204</sup> The escalation coincided with the Muslim Brotherhood's announcement that its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, had won the presidential run-off, leading to speculation about Hamas's motives for participating directly in the exchange of fire. One explanation of Hamas's participation is that Israel's retaliation against Hamas targets and killing of Hamas members for attacks Hamas did not orchestrate had crossed a red line; that the movement did not feel it could afford to lose standing in the public eye by ceding the lead in retaliation against Israel to Islamic Jihad, as it had done during an escalation the previous March; and that Israel's concerns about the situation in Egypt – general instability, widespread anti-Israeli sentiment and uncertainty over Morsi's possible victory – would make a major operation against Hamas unlikely. An Egyptian diplomat, however, said he believed more was at play: "The escalation was a message from Hamas. First, to Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood, that despite the presence of its big brother, Hamas is still a major player: 'If you want to talk, you are going to have to do it with Hamas, not just the Muslim Brotherhood'. Second, it was a message to Israel: 'There is now a new regime in Egypt, and Hamas has a new ally'". He claimed Hamas knew of the attack from Sinai militants that precipitated the escalation and had turned a blind eye toward the travel of the militants through Gaza, where, he claimed, the plan was hatched. "Remember",

not signify is a strategic decision to end the period of relative calm and engage in a sustained violent campaign to force Israeli concessions,<sup>205</sup> particularly at a time when Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is eager to focus on domestic affairs; on this, both Gazans (who in addition would risk devastating Israeli retaliation) and the external leadership appear to agree.

As for accepting a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, despite important differences in emphasis and tone, no Hamas leader is prepared to recognise Israel's right to exist.<sup>206</sup> Some prefer ambiguity, refusing to say what would happen the day after such a state came into existence;<sup>207</sup>

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he added, "the Sinai attack came during the period when it had seemed that [the presidential candidate favoured by Egypt's military, Ahmed] Shafiq might win. After it was announced that Morsi won [following the Sinai attack], Hamas reached out to contacts in Sinai to calm the situation". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, July 2012.

<sup>205</sup> A senior Israeli security official said, "this isn't a unanimous view in the government, but I and several others believe Hamas joined the last escalation so it can control the next one. The purpose of joining was to put an end to it, so that it would have the credibility to assert control. Will Hamas now learn that it cannot be a government and let militias run around shooting rockets at its neighbours? In the short run, I think we'll see restraint from Hamas, as it holds out hope for good things from Egypt". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, 7 August 2012.

<sup>206</sup> Several West Bank Hamas leaders offered a contrasting view, saying Hamas had accepted a "two-state solution". However, they acknowledged that the official position remained acceptance of a Palestinian state on the pre-1967 borders, not acceptance of two states. They tried to downplay the significance of the distinction. Crisis Group interviews, Nablus, January-February 2012. Other West Bank Hamas leaders, as noted, have said that in exchange for meaningful Israeli steps, Hamas would be willing to recognise not Israel's right to exist but its existence. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, Nablus, Ramallah, July 2012. In 2010, Hamas leader Mahmoud Ramahi told an interviewer: "We have already stated repeatedly that we accept the existence of Israel within the 1967 borders as a political reality even if we do not approve its moral legitimacy. Israel on the other hand has never recognised the right of a Palestinian state to exist even under the PA, despite the PA recognising Israel's right to exist. All Israel has recognised is the legitimacy of the Palestine Liberation Organisation as the sole representative of the Palestinian people". "Hamas parliamentarian: 'We accept existence of Israel within 1967 borders'", ElectronicIntifada.net, 1 February 2010.

<sup>207</sup> Asked whether Hamas would accept Israel's right to exist if it withdrew to the 1967 lines, a senior leader from the outside said, "if Israel were to withdraw, it would create a new circumstance on the ground that would allow the Palestinian people to decide freely, and whatever they decide we will respect. But if I were to give free gifts to Israel in exchange for a future promise, I would lose all credibility. Nobody would respect me". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012. The view was echoed by another member of the outside leadership: "If an agreement is reached between Fatah and Israel, we will respect the results

others openly profess that they will continue the struggle against Israel.<sup>208</sup> Moreover, as noted, "militant" and "moderate" positions historically have applied interchangeably to one or another of Hamas's wings.

That said, the decision to adopt certain postures and stress certain views is more than merely cosmetic. It reflects conflicting appreciations of the impact of the Arab uprisings, divergent assessments of the benefits of reconciliation and competing parochial, even personal interests.

## 1. What to make of the Arab uprisings?

To a large degree, differences within Hamas over national strategy, particularly over how far to go in reconciliation negotiations, stem from contrasting perceptions of what near-term effects the Arab uprisings will have on the movement.<sup>209</sup> These in turn have been shaped by the distinct first-hand experiences of the leaderships in Gaza and, until recently, Damascus. Broadly speaking, the strategic divide corresponds to two views, themselves related to two different sets of interests: that, on one hand, because regional changes are playing largely to Hamas's favour, the movement should do little other than hold fast to its positions as it waits for the PA to weaken, economic conditions in Gaza to improve and its allies to grow in strength; and that, on the other, Hamas should take this rare opportunity to

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of a popular referendum. We won't change our position of opposition to a peace agreement, but will respect popular will and offer a *hudna* (long-term truce)". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2012.

<sup>208</sup> "It would be good if Israel signed an agreement with Abbas. It would put us in a better position to continue the fight, having established the first stage of ending the occupation". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2012. He added, "an agreement with Israel will lead to a truce between two peoples, not the end of the conflict. The position of Palestinian negotiators is not practical, because they cannot solve the main problem, which is the refugees. Historically, unjust agreements have led to conflict; none of the solutions people evoke will be permanent, because they are unjust to the Palestinians insofar as they neglect those in the diaspora".

<sup>209</sup> "The ones in Hamas who support the [Doha] deal say it is going to take years before we as Palestinians benefit from the Arab Spring. Hamas is saying to its brothers in the Arab Spring: 'Take your time. We are not asking you to make sacrifices today. Take care of your own problems now, until you are strong'. And until this day comes, they argue, why have Palestinians suffer? Better to reconcile and diminish our hardships. Those opposing the deal say the last five years were the worst, and we've already made it through. Why should we make a deal now when things are changing? Haniyeh is on a world tour. The siege is melting. Why make concessions now?" Crisis Group interview, Hamas PLC member, Gaza City, February 2012.

make several tough decisions that might bring about significant long-term gains.<sup>210</sup>

To the Gaza and outside leaderships, the Arab uprisings presented an enormous shift entailing real losses but also the prospect of enormous gains. For both, regional events meant the prospect of a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Egypt and, more broadly, Islamist gains (and concomitant Fatah losses) throughout the Arab world. But they also meant increased financial strain as Arab states became more inward-looking;<sup>211</sup> loss of Syria as an ally; and related tensions with Iran.

In addition, gains by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had a potential, short-term flipside: focused on domestic politics and eager to improve relations with the West, the Islamist organisation was unlikely to make the Palestinian question a priority, at least in the foreseeable future; for the same reasons, it probably would favour calm in the Israeli-Palestinian arena.<sup>212</sup> Hamas leaders, sensitive to these concerns, acknowledged Palestinian interests might have to wait, and they would have to show some restraint. Overall, a consensus exists within the movement over the fact that a distinction should be made between the expected long-term strategic shift in regional policies and the interim period of instability and uncertainty through which the Arab world is now passing.<sup>213</sup>

Still, there are differences in appreciation. The Gaza leadership looks to a region that, over time, should be moving even more clearly in its direction, thereby weakening Fatah and its leadership. As a result, it argues, it makes little sense to compromise and agree to the types of political concessions (regarding substantive positions or the identity of the prime minister) to which the external leadership acquiesced. This is particularly true at a moment when in

their view Fatah's program had reached a dead end; its chairman was announcing his failure; dissent, including protests against Abbas's policies, was on the rise in the West Bank;<sup>214</sup> Fatah leaders were speaking nervously of being swept aside by the "green wave" coursing through the region;<sup>215</sup> Israel's relations were deteriorating with Turkey and Egypt; Europe and the U.S. were displaying new openness to the Muslim Brotherhood; and, in the halls of power in Egypt, the most important country to Gazans and to much of the Arab world, an enemy was being replaced by the closest of allies.<sup>216</sup>

The Arab world's current lack of focus on Palestinian affairs is, in this view, an argument not to move now but rather to wait for the region to mobilise behind the cause. After the May 2012 Cairo Accord was brokered by Egypt's General Intelligence Service, a political bureau member in Gaza said, "sure, we could sign a deal made by the remnants of the old [Egyptian] regime, but we'd much rather wait a bit to sign one made by [newly elected Egyptian President Mohamed] Morsi".<sup>217</sup>

Two other related factors encourage Hamas's leadership in Gaza to adopt a patient strategy and hold back on reconciliation. First, it believes Gaza's economic and diplomatic isolation is on the verge of being reversed by a change in Egyptian policy at the Rafah crossing<sup>218</sup> (a belief it has

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<sup>210</sup> "Chances pass as swiftly as horses. Hamas needs to grab this one while it still can". Crisis Group interview, Gaza analyst, September 2011.

<sup>211</sup> "In terms of funding from the Arab world, practically, we get nothing. Because they themselves need help. So Hamas is preparing itself for the future". Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Nablus, 6 February 2012.

<sup>212</sup> A senior Hamas leader said, "the priority for the Islamists in Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Egypt is the success of their internal experience, and they are not yet thinking about what their external policy should be. That will happen in the next stage". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012. A senior member of the external leadership added: "In the short term, the area needs some time to settle down and reorganise itself. Most Arab countries have their hands full with their own problems. But this is temporary. Sooner or later, they will jump on the central issue, which remains Palestine". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2012.

<sup>213</sup> An adviser to Prime Minister Haniyeh said, "no one is confusing this short interim period for the major strategic one". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 23 February 2012.

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<sup>214</sup> Two protests on successive days against an announced meeting (eventually cancelled) between President Abbas and then-Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz were violently suppressed by Palestinian police outside Abbas's presidential compound. "PA police crush new Ramallah demo", Ma'an News Agency, 1 July 2012.

<sup>215</sup> Crisis Group interview, Fatah Central Committee member, Cairo, December 2011.

<sup>216</sup> "Hamas is gaining throughout the region. Look at the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia and in Egypt and the Islamists in Libya. All of them are now the main powers on the ground. Hamas is gaining support from the Arab Spring. You cannot compare the position of Hamas in Tunisia four years ago to the position of Hamas with the An-Nahda government. After the weakening of the U.S., the Arab Spring, the failure of Abu Mazen, the internal dilemma of the Israelis, Hamas is only getting stronger and also gaining more internal support". Crisis Group interview, Hamas senior leader, Gaza City, November 2011.

<sup>217</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, June 2012.

<sup>218</sup> The number of persons travelling through the Rafah crossing in both directions has increased considerably since Mubarak's fall but remains well below the levels preceding the capture of Israeli Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit in June 2006 and Hamas's takeover of Gaza in June 2007. Between November 2005 and June 2006, an average of 40,000 persons per month travelled through the crossing in both directions; Rafah was closed much of the time between June 2006 and May 2010, when international outcry over Israel's deadly confrontation with a flotilla of Gaza-bound ships resulted in an easing of restrictions on its use. For the last six months of 2010, an average of roughly 19,800 per-

maintained even in the wake of the closure of the crossing following the 5 August 2012 militant attack that killed sixteen Egyptian soldiers near the Gaza border),<sup>219</sup> Hamas leaders hope that increased trade with and aid to Gaza might negate in the minds of Palestinian voters the notion that electing them necessarily would prompt financial sacrifice. Secondly, by forming a unity government with Abbas today, much of the credit for any improvement in conditions in Gaza would, in Hamas's view, go to Abbas, whereas by waiting Hamas might demonstrate that Gaza's fortunes had changed because of the movement's close ties to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>220</sup>

As months elapsed and the hoped-for radical change in relations with Egypt failed to materialise, a member of the political bureau in Gaza acknowledged that "our expectations for this interim period were too high". Nevertheless, he asked why the external leadership was "in a rush", saying, "in twenty months, many things will change for the Palestinians: there will be a new President and constitution in Egypt; the stability of the West Bank regime and Jordan are not guaranteed. The present situation is not an eternal one. Let's wait and see".<sup>221</sup> A senior leader in Gaza added: "Do you think in Hamas's mentality, in Hamas's psychology, we will give up now, while Turkey, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and other big countries are moving toward us? They're all moving toward Hamas!"<sup>222</sup> Summing up

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sons per month travelled through Rafah in both directions. In the first five months of 2012, the monthly average has increased to roughly 31,600. "Movement of people through Rafah crossing", Gisha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, May 2012.

<sup>219</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza City, August 2012.

<sup>220</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas official, Gaza City, June 2012.

<sup>221</sup> He added: "Within a maximum of two months, there will be a new government in Egypt. And in six months, there will be a new constitution and president. So let us freeze the situation for six months and then see. We will lose nothing by waiting. Tunisia is not the same Tunisia, Libya is not the same Libya, Egypt is not the same Egypt". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 14 December 2012. Another said, "we are ready to stay in prison for ten years if it means an end to the Arab regimes. If it brings governments that are representing their people – that are transparent – in the end it will be to the advantage of the Palestinians". Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, 3 November 2011.

<sup>222</sup> "This is not an Arab Spring. It is an Islamic Spring. Strategically it will pull the carpet from beneath the feet of the PLO and Abu Mazen. In a few years, all the conditions of the game will be changed. We won't be able to talk about the PA, PLO, Fatah, and Hamas as the main players in the game. Turkey now speaks of Jerusalem no less than do the Palestinians. Turkey is promising to send naval support to future flotillas to Gaza. In Egypt, we're talking about a total shift in their internal position toward Israel. Before the conditions of the game changed, Israel had a golden opportunity to sign an agreement with Abu Mazen.

this worldview, a Gaza political bureau member explained: "The whole Arab world is in turmoil. People often ask, 'How should Hamas respond to the Arab revolutions?' But I say that the Arab revolutions need to finish before there is a response. Otherwise it is like fishing in rough waters".<sup>223</sup>

The outside leadership engaged in a different cost-benefit calculation. It has tended to call attention to the significant benefits Hamas may accrue by demonstrating flexibility at a time when the Brotherhood is making gains and seeking to assure the outside world that it will promote inclusive power-sharing and regional stability. By reaching an agreement with Fatah and showing a spirit of pragmatism on several substantive issues, it might ride the same wave as the Brotherhood and help normalise relations with the outside world. A senior member of the external leadership put it as follows:

We need to integrate two important changes that have occurred in the recent past. First, the fact that Netanyahu has completely shut the door on Abu Mazen, who is the greatest possible peace-monger. Second, the Arab spring. We need a new approach that takes advantage of these two events, a strategy that is formulated in concert with Egypt, others in the region and a unified Palestinian movement.<sup>224</sup>

The Arab world will be preoccupied with its own upheaval for some time to come; Hamas's Islamist allies, especially in Egypt, will not be in a position to offer much financial or even political support to the movement in the foreseeable future. Contrary to those who view this as a reason to stand still, however, Meshal and others argue that this means Palestinians need to take care of themselves first, and that begins with reunification.<sup>225</sup> A member of the ex-

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But the chance has already passed. They will not get it again". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 11 September 2011.

<sup>223</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, June 2012.

<sup>224</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012.

<sup>225</sup> Speaking of the May 2011 reconciliation agreement, Khaled Meshal told an interviewer: "All the national circumstances around us, together with the Zionist enemy's intransigence, the efforts to achieve settlement, U.S. bias, the impotence of the international community, the Arabs' preoccupation with their spring – and may Palestine continue to be present in the Arab mind and conscience – and the division with all its wretched weight that has exhausted us in the past years, as well as our mistakes and also our merits which we all put into practice, have all led us to make a strategic decision". "Interview with Khaled Meshal", op. cit. Another senior leader from outside replied to those who took issue with the decision to "rush" reconciliation: "We are asked why we are in a hurry, shouldn't we wait for the Brotherhood to consolidate power in Egypt. But, assuming Morsi were to become president, he would have enough internal problems to deal with. We should help them before they help us. Maybe he can talk about Rafah and supply some more electricity and fuel, but he won't be able to do anything politi-



iled leadership pointed to the practical benefits of reconciliation – from easing the life of members in the West Bank and rebuilding their closed institutions and charities to facilitating trade with Gaza and helping its people to receive necessary quantities of fuel, natural gas, electricity, and materials to reconstruct homes destroyed in the 2008-2009 war,<sup>226</sup> a position summarised by a senior leader in the West Bank as, “we need to help Morsi help us”.<sup>227</sup>

Finally, at least one prominent proponent of this view purported to see another message in the Arab uprisings: that popular opinion had to be taken into account and that movements or regimes that stuck to their parochial interests sooner or later would incur its wrath. A senior leader in exile said, “all of us are now living in the shadow of the Arab Spring. If we fail to respond to the will of our people, we will go the way of others”.<sup>228</sup> Other Hamas leaders were

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cal to help us for maybe two to three years”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012. A Hamas PLC member from the West Bank added: “The Arab Spring is the major reason Hamas is moving toward reconciliation. In front of the Arab world, Hamas should help Palestinians to become unified. This will encourage Arabs to fund and support Palestinians more and more”. Crisis Group interview, Nablus, 7 February 2012.

<sup>226</sup> “First of all we want to improve our situation in the West Bank. We as Hamas and as Palestinians in the West Bank have very, very severe problems. We have to normalise life in the West Bank for our people and to rebuild our institutions there. Second, we have to break the siege on the Gaza Strip and reconstruct 4,000 homes destroyed in the Gaza War. Thirdly, people in Gaza have enough problems, from their standard of living to gas, fuel, electricity and materials to rebuild their homes, and we want to provide them with the ability to solve these problems”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012.

<sup>227</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 18 July 2012.

<sup>228</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Cairo, November 2012. Another leader from Damascus added: “Palestinians are disappointed that we have signed a reconciliation paper, and nothing has come of it”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 November 2011. In Gaza, however, Hamas spoke as though the threat that dissatisfaction with the division could lead to unrest was present only in the West Bank: “Rafah is more open, rebuilding is taking place all over Gaza, the markets are full. So I don’t think there will be pressure for reconciliation here. In the West Bank, it’s different. There it’s not just about reconciliation but about the PA’s cooperation with Israel; you have two occupations in the West Bank”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, November 2011. Fatah leaders did not think Gaza would be immune: “The minute Hamas allows popular resistance in Gaza, the protesters will move to overthrow Hamas. The same is true of Fatah in Ramallah”. Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, April 2012. A senior Israeli security official said he thought there would not be an Arab uprising against Palestinian leaders because of the memory of fighting between Hamas and Fatah in 2006-2007: “The West Bank and Gaza, like Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon, fall into the category some like to call the ‘already bled’”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, August 2012.

quick to comment on the fact that Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, which had attracted over a third of the vote in the first post-Mubarak parliamentary elections, saw its tally reduced to roughly 25 per cent several months later during the first round of the presidential contest:<sup>229</sup> “When a movement is rigid and narrow-minded as opposed to flexible and inclusive, it will pay the price. That should be a lesson for us – and for those who govern Gaza”.<sup>230</sup>

## 2. The costs and benefits of reconciliation

As members of the leadership in Gaza view things, reconciliation at this stage would be akin to a one-way street, with advantages accruing to Fatah and sacrifices incurred by Hamas. On one side, Abbas would be thrown a lifeline at a time when his strategy (whether in terms of negotiations or internationalisation) is in serious jeopardy;<sup>231</sup> he could use the prospect of unity as leverage to extract Israeli or U.S. concessions;<sup>232</sup> he would take credit for improvements in Gaza; his movement would gain a foothold in Gaza by virtue of the establishment of a unified government under the president’s control,<sup>233</sup> and Hamas would lose the advantages of exercising power.

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<sup>229</sup> In elections for the People’s Assembly, the lower house of Egypt’s bicameral parliament, voters selected both individual candidates and parties. In the party vote, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) won some 36 per cent of the votes. In the first round of the presidential contest, in May 2012, the FJP candidate had a slim plurality, with 24.8 per cent of the vote. Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) Election Guide, <http://electionguide.org/election.php?ID=2213>; also Crisis Group calculations, based on the Election Commission’s website, [www.elections2011.eg](http://www.elections2011.eg).

<sup>230</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Cairo, June 2012.

<sup>231</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas PLC member, Gaza City, February 2012. Another Gaza leader likened reconciliation to “giving a shot of oxygen to Abu Mazen and the PA”. Crisis Group interview, Hamas PLC member, Gaza City, February 2012. That said, this is contradicted by widespread belief that reconciliation would be followed by financial sanctions against the PA and a crisis in relations with Israel. A Hamas PLC member said, “there are some who say the agreement increases Abbas’s ability to pursue his negotiations program, and others who say it diminishes it, by tying him more closely to Hamas. If the one who signed the agreement did so in order to help Abbas pursue his program, that is a crime, and it should be punished. But if he did it to make this program sink, that is okay”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, February 2012.

<sup>232</sup> A senior leader commented, “I think Abu Mazen is using reconciliation to pressure Israel, and the minute he will get something from [Prime Minister] Bibi [Netanyahu], he will run away from us”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2012.

<sup>233</sup> A PLC member in Gaza said, “Abu Mazen will not come to Gaza. He will send someone to run Gaza. If we manage to get out of this mess without losing Gaza to Abu Mazen’s emissaries, that will be the minimum loss we can hope for. If he takes

On the other side, what? Elections for the Palestine National Council – the PLO’s parliament and, for Hamas, a key prize, since it offers a way to participate in national decision-making – face innumerable obstacles, leading many to doubt they can occur anytime soon. There are multiple reasons: Palestinians living in Jordan (the largest constituency by far) and Syria almost certainly could not vote;<sup>234</sup> impediments likewise would exist in Gulf Arab countries and, potentially, in the West,<sup>235</sup> and the two sides have still not overcome their differences about whether Hamas would have to accept (rather than merely “respect”) the PLO’s past agreements before Fatah would allow it to join.<sup>236</sup>

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over, no one will accept our taking it back, because that would involve another round of violence. He’ll have legitimacy on his side because we signed the agreement. We’ll have to live with it”. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, February 2012.

<sup>234</sup> Violence would make voting in Syria impossible at this time. In Jordan, voting would raise the taboo question of what percentage of the population is of Palestinian origin and could put at risk the rights of Palestinians. UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) figures, [www.unrwa.org/userfiles/20120317152850.pdf](http://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/20120317152850.pdf), say there are two million registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan, but the total of Palestinians is far greater. A Hamas political bureau member in exile said that in 1994, at the time of Jordan’s most recent census (never published), a census official told him that 76 per cent of the population was Palestinian. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, February 2012. If that figure was accurate, it is likely to be lower today, as the UN Refugee Agency estimates there are currently some 450,000 Iraqi refugees there (as well as a rapidly growing number of Syrian refugees), [www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486566.html](http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486566.html).

<sup>235</sup> A proponent of the agreement with Fatah recognised these hurdles. “We can conduct elections in the West Bank and Gaza, probably in Europe (where there are some 300,000 diaspora members), maybe in the U.S. (home to roughly the same number). Lebanon would be harder but doable; in Egypt it would depend on the internal situation. But the hardest cases are Jordan (three million) and Syria (485,000). Perhaps we could allocate seats proportionally to the outcomes in other places. But we also have yet to agree with Fatah on a proper electoral law”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2012. As mentioned above, the number of Palestinians in Jordan is unknown. Estimates for Europe vary widely. In 2002, the BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights put that number at over 200,000.

<sup>236</sup> Hamas demands that a national program be formed through a vote in a reconstructed PLO. Fatah insists that before the PLO is reconstructed, Hamas must essentially adopt the PLO’s existing program by accepting its past agreements. It is unclear whether a compromise can be found. Fatah fears that admitting Hamas into the PLO would put at risk the organisation’s primary asset, its international legitimacy. Hamas is unwilling to renounce violence and recognise Israel’s right to exist, as the PLO did in a letter from its chairman to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1993, and it does not believe it should be singled out in the demand to forswear violence, which Fatah, unlike the PLO, has refused to do. (Fatah’s political program, as confirmed by its Revolutionary Council in 2009, states: “the right of the Pales-

The situation in the West Bank almost certainly would remain static, with Israel controlling the area and cooperating with PA security forces in suppressing Hamas. Israel might well prevent Hamas from participating in elections there; if Hamas could participate, it would be difficult to ensure free and fair elections given the security situation; and if free and fair elections occurred and Hamas won, what if anything would change in the West Bank? Would most donors to the PA halt funding or again seek to circumvent the newly elected government by directing aid to the PA president? Indeed, given that even supporters of reconciliation within Hamas did not expect elections to bring significant changes in the West Bank, opponents in Gaza and also the West Bank appeared somewhat perplexed at news of the Doha accord.<sup>237</sup>

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tinian people to exercise armed struggle against the armed occupation of its land remains an immutable right that legitimacy and international law confers”). A U.S. official said, “Fatah has been lucky all these years that the attention of the world was focused on the PLO charter. It’s not in anyone’s interest for the Fatah program to become a topic of controversy”. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°91, *Palestine: Salvaging Fatah*, 12 November 2009, p. 19.

<sup>237</sup> A Hamas leader in Nablus said, “if there is an election and Hamas wins, will the international community deal with the results? If the only point of the elections is to get rid of Hamas, then forget it. Yesterday Abu Mazen told us that some representatives of foreign countries ask, ‘what if Hamas wins the elections’. Abu Mazen tells them, ‘this is democracy’. They don’t like the answer. That’s why Hamas in Gaza doesn’t accept this [Doha] agreement. Their view is, ‘we came through the door, and now they want to kick us out the window’”. Crisis Group interview, Nablus, 21 February 2012. Though many European diplomats express discomfort with the Quartet conditions and their governments’ actions in the wake of Hamas’s 2006 victory, many find it hard to imagine their governments giving aid to a PA government of which Hamas is a member unless the latter were to accept Quartet conditions. Others argued that, notably in light of the Arab uprisings and Western support for democratic transitions, the EU would not want to repeat what it did in 2006. A European diplomat said there were large disparities among EU member states in the interpretation of the EU Council Conclusions issued weeks after Hamas and Fatah announced in May 2011 that they had reconciled and would jointly form a government of independent technocrats: “If you read the Council Conclusions of May 2011, they are as clear as mud”. He said some EU member states view the Conclusions as a rebuke of the Quartet conditions, pointing to the words, “the EU welcomes the agreement signed in Cairo on [4] May”, despite the reconciliation agreement not entailing acceptance of Quartet conditions. The Conclusions, moreover, specify that in key ways, a reconciliation government will be evaluated on its actions not words. Yet others interpret the text as little more than a restatement of those conditions: “The EU looks forward to continuing its support, including through direct financial support for a new Palestinian government composed of independent figures that commits to the principles set

Among Hamas leaders in Gaza, fears about reconciliation are exacerbated by deep suspicions of Abbas himself,<sup>238</sup> whom they blame for Gaza's suffering since 2007, most notably for what they consider his complicity in Israel's Operation Cast Lead (the 2008-2009 war).<sup>239</sup> Most importantly, they worry that Fatah, and particularly PA security forces, might return to Gaza, with dire consequences for the Islamist movement.<sup>240</sup> Senior members of Hamas's

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out in President Abbas'[s] speech on 4 May. Such a government should uphold the principle of non-violence, and remain committed to achieving a two-state solution and to a negotiated peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict accepting previous agreements and obligations, including Israel's legitimate right to exist. The EU's ongoing engagement with a new Palestinian government will be based on its adherence to these policies and commitments". For now, the diplomat said, Europe is not even discussing the issue of revisiting the Quartet conditions. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, June 2012. A Fatah Central Committee member put Hamas's conundrum as follows: "Hamas is being asked to give up Gaza while having no chance of winning the West Bank. That's why they're thinking of a future connected not to the West Bank but to Egypt. Hamas has three essential fears that they need addressed in order to go to elections: that they won't be allowed to win; that they won't be allowed to rule if they win; and that they won't escape being wiped out if they lose. They have no guarantees – no answers – to any of the three". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, April 2012.

<sup>238</sup> A strong critic of the Doha agreement within Hamas said, "we wouldn't be angry if Meshal had proposed *anyone* else besides Abu Mazen. Negotiations are Abu Mazen's faith". Crisis Group interview, Hamas PLC member, Gaza City, February 2012.

<sup>239</sup> A senior member of the external leadership said, "Abu Mazen did the war against Gaza. In our jails in Gaza we have seventeen or eighteen Fatah members who participated directly in helping Israel plan and select targets during the war. We have concrete evidence of this". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 26 February 2012. A U.S. State Department cable summarises the statement of Mike Herzog, then chief of staff to Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak, to American officials regarding Ramallah's position toward the Gaza War: "The PA leadership had requested Israel to destroy Hamas in Gaza and had been disappointed when Israel stopped short". "Staffelds Makovsky and Benaim's Meeting with MOD Chief of Staff Herzog", from U.S. embassy Tel Aviv cable, 8 July 2009, as reported by WikiLeaks. Similarly, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has said, "Mahmoud Abbas himself called and asked us, pressured us to continue the military campaign and overthrow Hamas". "Lieberman: Israel's gestures to Palestinians met with 'slaps in the face'", *Haaretz*, 13 May 2010.

<sup>240</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas leaders, Gaza City, February 2012. Several Hamas senior leaders in Gaza said disputes over security – and fears of a resumption of fighting between Hamas and Fatah – were the most important reasons reconciliation had not occurred. A leader deeply involved in reconciliation negotiations pertaining to security said, "if some new ministers [in an Abbas-led government] come to Gaza, it will cause a big problem of the same kind as in 2006, when Hamas ministers were ignored by Fatah security personnel. People in Gaza are terrified of security chaos returning. Internally, the focus of discussion

military wing in Gaza, the head of a local human rights organisation said, "fear that if the PA comes back there will be blood revenge for the fighting in 2006 and 2007. We are still a tribal society".<sup>241</sup> A Hamas political bureau member in Gaza echoed this view: "Security is the first and the last reason there is no reconciliation. No one can accept that we will go back to the situation we had in 2006 and 2007".<sup>242</sup>

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For many Hamas leaders in Gaza, the notion that they would have to compromise in the Strip while security cooperation continued between Israel and the PA is particularly unacceptable.<sup>243</sup> As they put it, the PA's unwillingness to

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in Hamas has been how to prevent this". Crisis Group interview, Hamas political bureau member, Gaza City, June 2012.

<sup>241</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, November 2011.

<sup>242</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, June 2012. Hamas leaders in Gaza also express concern that they could be subjected to harsh treatment by PA forces, pointing to alleged torture in the West Bank against their brethren. After Hamas won legislative elections in 2006 and before it took over Gaza's security forces, Fatah supporters chanted a threatening rhyme that promised a return to the practice of sodomising Hamas leaders with soda bottles: "*Ya Zahar baligh Haniyeh sayerjah ahd al-janiyeh* [Hey Zahar, inform Haniyeh of the return of the era of the bottle]". Crisis Group observations, Gaza City, 2006. The quasi-official PA human rights ombudsman, the Independent Commission for Human Rights reported: "During 2011, ICHR received (214) complaints in this category, including allegations of torture and/or ill-treatment. There were (112) in the West Bank against the security services, and (102) in Gaza Strip against the security services. ICHR found, through its periodic visits to the detention centres and following up citizens' complaints, that some detainees have been exposed to torture or ill-treatment, according to affidavits, noting here that ICHR is still banned from visits in the Gaza Strip". "The Status of Human Rights in Palestine", 1 January-31 December 2011.

<sup>243</sup> A political bureau member said, "if they continue security coordination, it will destroy reconciliation". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 November 2011. Another member of the political bureau offered more flexibility, saying that PA coordination with Israel on civil issues could continue, but any coordination involving informing on or detaining Palestinians could not: "To give information about the Palestinian people is against the law. It is not part of Oslo. Fatah leaders say security coordination is illegal, only civil coordination is okay. That can come back". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, January 2012. In January 2012, a Hamas official heavily involved in reconciliation negotiations over security with Fatah, said, "we're not even touching the security file anymore, because if we did the entire reconciliation process would explode". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, January 2012. A Hamas PLC member from the West Bank agreed that reconciliation would fall apart if security arrangements were discussed but offered a more optimistic assessment of the decision to delay such talks: "Once Khaled Meshal said of security cooperation, 'let's not discuss it now. Let's deal with social and economic problems, bring back dismissed employees to their old jobs, let people move freely, and then, if we

consider any change in coordination with Israel is incompatible with reconciliation<sup>244</sup> and in particular with the text of the primary reconciliation agreement, the so-called Egyptian Document drafted in 2009 and amended and signed by both Hamas and Fatah in 2011.<sup>245</sup>

Defenders of Meshal's approach acknowledge many of the shortcomings of any reconciliation deal under present circumstances.<sup>246</sup> Asked whether some Hamas members in Gaza opposed the May 2012 Cairo Agreement, one of its key negotiators said, "not some, many! Maybe even most. What they say is true and then some – that we would be losing a Hamas government, they would get one headed by Abu Mazen, and all that for what?" But, he added:

My opinion is that we nonetheless must push for reconciliation because it can help us both in Gaza – where we face very difficult circumstances – and in the West

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deal with all of this smoothly, security cooperation will decrease". Crisis Group interview, Nablus, 6 February 2012.

<sup>244</sup> "The whole reason there is no reconciliation", a political bureau member involved in security affairs said, "is that Fatah agreed in the Egyptian document to end security cooperation and protect the resistance, and now it wants to undo those two things". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, July 2012. Hamas leaders in the West Bank, by contrast, display more flexibility, at times indicating a willingness to return the security situation in the West Bank to its state before Hamas won elections in 2006. They believe that Israel could be forced to accept such a situation if Abbas were willing to force its hand. Hamas can accept some compromises in the West Bank. "Our major demands are not unreasonable: the PA should respect human rights; end torture, political arrests, and firing of employees for political reasons; stop harassment by the security forces; cease using 'security clearance' as a pretext to discriminate in hiring and granting permission to form associations; and allow our institutions to reopen. We have been living with security coordination for two decades and continue to do so, but not in its current form. After reconciliation occurs, we can accept some security coordination if all of the other conditions are met, but it has to be under the table, not out in the open like it is today". Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Ramallah, July 2012.

<sup>245</sup> The Egyptian document, formally known as the "Palestinian National Conciliation Accord – Cairo 2009 [ittifaqiyat al-wifaq al-watani al-filastini – al-qahira 2009]", states: "Every transfer of information to the enemy that harms the homeland, the Palestinian residents, or the resistance will be considered high treason. ... The resistance and its weapons must be preserved in dealing with the occupation". For an English version, see [www.mesi.org.uk/ViewNews.aspx?ArticleId=3577](http://www.mesi.org.uk/ViewNews.aspx?ArticleId=3577).

<sup>246</sup> A senior member of this group said, "there are voices in Hamas that are reluctant for a variety of reasons: because of the negative effects of the long years of division; because some worry that the security situation in Gaza will revert to what it once was; and because some are convinced that the fruits of reconciliation will not materialise. Then there are some, very few, who have no interest in reconciliation". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012.

Bank, where Hamas is under pressure. Reconciliation might help their situation, if only to some extent. And unity of all Palestinians is essential to achieve our national objectives.<sup>247</sup>

Moreover, proponents of this view argue that in any conceivable agreement Hamas would retain security control over Gaza; elections are unlikely to take place for any number of reasons (including possible Israeli objection to holding them in East Jerusalem or to the Islamist movement's participation), meaning the agreement would not tangibly reduce the power each movement holds in the territories they control; Hamas would gain regional and perhaps wider international legitimacy; and it might get a foothold in the PLO. A unity deal arguably could also compel Abbas to cease his endless balancing act between negotiations, internationalisation and reconciliation,<sup>248</sup> forcing him to choose more decisively and ultimately making the Palestinians more independent of both Israel and Western donors.<sup>249</sup> Later, once the dust settles – and the West comes to terms with the new reality – a unified Palestinian entity would be in a far better position to ask for and receive political support from the outside world.<sup>250</sup>

By alleviating the suffering the division causes in each territory and improving living conditions in Gaza, reconciliation could help Hamas recoup some of what its leaders admit to be its lost popularity.<sup>251</sup> Finally, an argument made

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<sup>247</sup> Expanding, he added: "A new unified government won't solve all the problems faced by people in Gaza (fuel and electricity shortages; thousands of homes destroyed in the 2008-2009 war) and the West Bank, where Hamas needs to rebuild itself completely. But it can help improve the situation". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2012. A member of the external leadership explained: "We are interested in reconciliation, full stop. If it brings us to elections, that is even better. Living under reconciliation is much better than living under division. People in the West Bank want to breathe. This will only happen if we have a natural relationship with Fatah. Look at the model in Tunis: there is no monopoly. Even if I am in power, I share it with all the people". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 February 2012.

<sup>248</sup> On this, see Crisis Group Report, *The Emperor Has No Clothes*, op. cit.

<sup>249</sup> A political bureau member who supported the agreement explained that its implementation could very well prompt a crisis between Abbas and his traditional benefactors; in the most extreme case, it could accelerate the collapse of the PA if the U.S. and the West were to end funding. But, he added, Hamas could not say this publicly. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 February 2012.

<sup>250</sup> A Hamas spokesman explained: "We have to be ready for a new era in which we make achievements for our people. This requires us to be united. Without that, we won't be respected by the world". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 24 February 2011.

<sup>251</sup> Several Hamas leaders acknowledged that they have suffered in public opinion in Gaza, though they believe they have gained in the West Bank – in each case, those in power paying

more quietly than publicly is that showing some flexibility now serves the Muslim Brotherhood's broader interest and would come at little long-term cost, since in Hamas's view Fatah, its leader and what it represents in any event face an historic decline.<sup>252</sup>

Of all the arguments marshalled against the deals signed in Doha and then in Cairo, the one that leaders in exile found most difficult to counter was that conditions in the West Bank were unlikely to improve – security forces there would not end arrests of Hamas members, discriminatory hiring practices, limits on political freedoms or closure of the movement's institutions – and that, once an agreement was reached, the movement would lose all leverage in that respect. Most Gazan objections, many felt, could be dismissed as essentially a reflection of aversion to giving up power; not so those of West Bankers, traditionally more supportive of reconciliation and more ideologically flexible. A senior member of the external leadership said:

Our brothers in the leadership of Hamas in the West Bank also became negative toward reconciliation because there is no change there. There are prisoners, our institutions remain closed, Hamas cannot work there, security forces won't allow even the popular resistance we agreed to with Abu Mazen. If the situation were to change in the West Bank, we will be able to force people both inside and outside to commit to reconciliation. Indeed, some Hamas leaders in Gaza use the situation in the West Bank as an excuse to oppose reconciliation, and I want to deprive them of that excuse. Ultimately,

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the price for failing to deliver. "One of our priorities must be to regain the trust of the people in Gaza for the next elections. If we stay divided, and Hamas controls Gaza, and Gaza remains at least partly under siege, that is not a good situation for the movement. Maybe if we no longer control the government but there is a technocratic cabinet we can work as a party and an organisation. In the past, when we did so, we accomplished great things. As a government, we accomplished practically nothing". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012.

<sup>252</sup> Crisis Group interview, Palestinian close to Hamas, July 2012. Responding to a Hamas member who compared reconciliation talks to two parties battling over the helm of a sinking ship called the PA, a Hamas leader in Gaza who supported the exiled leadership's strategy said, "we are not boarding the ship with Abu Mazen. Some of our leaders are sitting on a lifeboat within the ship, preparing for it to go down. In the future, either the PA will collapse or Abu Mazen will be gone or the Arab regimes will be successful. Hamas is aware of what it is doing. It will not board Abu Mazen's sinking ship. It will ride carefully. Most of Hamas will be on land. And those with Abu Mazen know how to swim well". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 13 February 2012.

I must say that what is happening in the West Bank is the dominant factor hampering reconciliation.<sup>253</sup>

### 3. Where you sit determines where you stand: the weight of parochial interests

Critics of each position make the case that, substantive arguments about the impact of the Arab uprising or the pros and cons of reconciliation aside, their rivals chiefly are motivated by more narrow self-interest, a view widely shared by Egyptian and Fatah officials.<sup>254</sup> As Hamas officials in Gaza tend to see it, external leaders have comparatively little to lose from reconciliation, would gain most from an increase in Hamas's regional legitimacy and are most in need of regional compensation for the loss of Syria. Having strained its ties with Iran, left its headquarters in Damascus and found no suitable replacement for either, the external leadership, under this view, is more willing to make concessions in order to find a new sponsor and home.

Gaza leaders express resentment at what they interpret as their external counterparts' excessive deference to their *sponsor-du-jour*, as well as what they see as the external leadership's outsize influence within the movement; as one put it, "Hamas has always depended on its presence in the Palestinian territories. Not on an office here and there. Okay, there are offices outside and leadership outside, but at the end of the day the weight of Hamas is here". Commenting on what he described as the external leadership's shift from an overly rigid to excessively compromising position, a political bureau member in Gaza said, "first we paid the price of them sitting in Syria. Now we're going to pay the price of them sitting in Qatar".<sup>255</sup>

The external wing's motivation, critics allege, was heightened by the relative decline of its influence within the movement. Eased travel restrictions at the Rafah crossing

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<sup>253</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012. He added that whenever Abu Mazen heard of this, he committed to improving the situation in the West Bank, "but then things simply remain the same on the ground". A lead Fatah negotiator in reconciliation talks denied that the West Bank situation was the principal obstacle to reconciliation: "The most important of Meshal's allies in the outside leadership said in my presence, 'whoever wants to end the division should not talk about minor issues like releasing prisoners and 'the freedoms' or any other issue except forming the government, because it is the government that should deal with all the unsolved issues'. This group around Meshal is honest, but when it comes to implementing the agreement, they can do nothing. Reconciliation in reality lies with Hamas in Gaza". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, June 2012.

<sup>254</sup> An Arab diplomat said, "all of these battles within Hamas have nothing to do with ideology. It's power, pure and simple". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, February 2012.

<sup>255</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, November 2011; Cairo, February 2012.

bolstered Gaza leaders' ability to raise funds and conduct diplomacy on their own, even as the loss of a headquarters in Damascus reduced the external leadership's ability to do the same, and the release and return to Gaza of senior military figures with less connection to the outside leadership as part of the Shalit prisoner exchange purportedly lessened its control over the military wing.<sup>256</sup>

Some in Gaza do not hesitate to personalise the debate, placing the bulk of the blame on Meshal himself. According to this narrative, the head of the political bureau – detached from realities in Gaza and fearful of its growing influence;<sup>257</sup> overly sensitive to pressures from certain states; and harbouring the personal ambition to emerge as a national leader – is pursuing reconciliation against the movement's better interests and with the aim of undercutting Gaza's leadership. Under this view, Meshal's priority is to gain a leadership position within the PLO; hence the importance of moving forward with an agreement that would give Hamas a foothold in the national movement. A Hamas leader in the West Bank said, "Meshal has his eyes on the PLO. This is the target".<sup>258</sup>

In mirror image, some leaders outside Gaza resent what an analyst close to them described as "Gaza holding the national movement hostage to its interests"; "the Palestinian issue is not Gaza", in the words of a leader in exile.<sup>259</sup> The logic is straightforward: Gaza leaders have accrued significant local power and stand materially to lose the most from reconciliation as well as from Fatah's and the PA's eventual return to Gaza.

The list of potential losses is long. Some \$500-\$700 million in goods are estimated to pass through Egypt-Gaza tunnels every year and since early 2012 have been charged by the Hamas government with import duties of at least 14.5 per cent;<sup>260</sup> Hamas has invested in new Gaza supermarkets, land sales, fish farms, and sea resorts; millions of olive tree and date palm seedlings have been planted, many on evacuated Israeli settlements; import duties of some 40 per cent are collected on cars brought through Egypt; the military wing has dozens of new four-wheel-drive Toyota trucks; government officials now dress in smart suits and ties, have several bodyguards (though their

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<sup>256</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas official from Damascus, 10 September 2011; Palestinian analyst, Gaza City, 8 September 2011; Hamas official, Cairo, July 2012. According to several analysts, mid-level militants and Arab diplomats, the return to Gaza of two senior figures in the military wing who were released to Gaza in the Shalit deal, Yehyia Sinwar and Rawhi Mushtaha, dispersed the concentration of power within the military wing and lessened the outside leadership's control over it. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, Gaza City, November 2011-July 2012.

<sup>257</sup> An Egyptian official involved in the mediation efforts between Fatah and Hamas argued that Meshal's overriding goal was "to get rid of Haniyeh, other leaders in Gaza, as well as those who have grown powerful as a result of the tunnel economy. He also wants to reassert control over the military wing. What once was a relatively unified wing under Jaabari, with whom Meshal had close relations, has become more disparate and less loyal. This is a result of the prisoner release, which led to the return to Gaza of members of the military branch with poor relations with both Jaabari and Meshal and of the growing role of the interior ministry which controls the Qassam forces in the north and is allied with Haniyeh against Meshal. Meshal needs to restore his position in Gaza or he risks marginalisation". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2012.

<sup>258</sup> Crisis Group interview, Nablus, 21 February 2012. After the meeting of the PLO's temporary leadership committee, attended by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Meshal said, "22 December 2011 is the date of the third birth of the PLO. The first birth was in 1964, the first emergence. The second birth was in 1969, when all the organisations and movements of the Palestinian revolution joined it. Last Thursday, 22 December 2011, witnessed its third birth. I hope, God willing, that it will be a real birth". "Interview with Khaled Meshal", op. cit. Others, including in Gaza, denied that Meshal's ambition had played a role. Crisis Group interview, Hamas senior leader, Gaza City, 13 February

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2012. Instead, they expressed considerable scepticism that such a strategy could work, given expected strong resistance within Fatah. A West Bank leader said, "to have a single Hamas representative in the PLO, fine, they can grant this. But to give Hamas a real percentage? No way". Crisis Group interview, Nablus, 21 February 2012. In part because of the obstacles to holding them in the diaspora, elections to the Palestinian National Council have never occurred, and few in Fatah or Hamas believe they are likely soon. The first point outlined in the Doha Agreement "affirms the need to continue the steps of activating and developing the Palestinian Liberation Organisation through the reformation of the Palestinian National Council simultaneously with the presidential and legislative elections". "Full text", op. cit. A political bureau member defended use of "reformation" rather than "election": "There are some areas you can do elections and some you cannot. We want PNC elections where they can be held, but they can't be held in Jordan, for example, and Jordan has three million Palestinians. There should be a way to represent them". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 25 February 2012. Other obstacles to Hamas's joining the PLO include Fatah's insistence that it first accept the organisation's program. A senior Fatah leader said, "if Hamas does not recognise Israel, condemn violence, and accept international agreements, it will never be part of the PLO". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, November 2011. That said, a Fatah Central Committee member, active in reconciliation talks, explained that PLO admittance procedures have varied, and factions previously have never been asked to commit to prior PLO agreements before joining. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 23 December 2011. Hamas insists that "we need to run elections for the PLO. If you get the majority, then you set the program". Crisis Group interview, senior Hamas leader, Gaza, January 2012.

<sup>259</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, May 2012; Cairo, 25 February 2012.

<sup>260</sup> Crisis Group interview, Dr Mouin Rajab, economics professor, Gaza's Al-Azhar University, Gaza City, 17 May 2012.

numbers have recently been halved), and are transported in new Hyundai Elantras and Kia Fortes.

Additionally, construction is booming, with tens of new housing towers being erected; Arab and Islamic development aid is filling the void left by Western donors; and hundreds of millions of dollars have been allocated by such states as Turkey and Qatar to new development projects in the Strip, from the rebuilding of roads and properties destroyed during the 2008-2009 war to the construction of a Turkish-financed hospital on what was once the Israeli settlement of Netzarim.<sup>261</sup>

In a barely veiled reference to the benefits accrued in Gaza, a senior member in exile warned: "Like wars, divisions always create their entrenched interests".<sup>262</sup> An Egyptian official close to the reconciliation talks described these more specifically:

Hamas in Gaza has many interests in maintaining the current situation. Hamas divided and resold [evacuated Jewish] settlement lands and made millions. When the PA comes back to Gaza, it might say, "this is bullshit: we're taking it back; it belongs to the people". A Qassam guy [member of Hamas's military wing] who used to be arrested by PA intelligence now has several cars and everything he wants. You're going to take that from him? There are many interests in the status quo; I remember when those involved in fuel smuggling through the Rafah tunnels arranged for mortar attacks against the Nahal Oz fuel terminal bordering Israel because they didn't want competition.<sup>263</sup>

Members of the external leadership complain of Gaza's parochialism and call for a broader view: "Some people say, 'we have no problems in Gaza; we have security and control'. But this is against our broader interests and our philosophy as a movement". A colleague added: "We should be ready to sacrifice some personal interests and rights to be in a government in order to achieve national unity. The most important thing is not that we lose a ministry here or there".<sup>264</sup> And, rather than denying the charge that they are willing to pay a high price for the PLO, some openly admit it, arguing that as the Palestinian national policy-making body it is indeed a prize far more valuable than the PA.<sup>265</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION: HAMAS'S FUTURE

Amid momentous changes affecting the region, Hamas has sought to postpone critical decisions, largely adopting a wait-and-see posture. The internal tensions that have arisen and expressed themselves more visibly than in the past reflect the interplay between dramatic regional transformations and divergent experiences and vantage points of the Palestinian Islamist movement's various constituencies. Over time, an impact is likely to be felt on Hamas's outlook and strategic choices on such critical issues as reconciliation, relations between Gaza and Egypt, regional alliances, approach toward Israel and armed struggle, though it would be premature to predict an outcome. For now, several important elements are worth noting:

##### **Regional developments have been largely advantageous to the movement and stand to benefit it further still.**

The success of Islamist organisations region-wide cannot but bolster Palestinian Islamists, boost their standing and heighten their influence. Gaza enjoys a strategic depth, and Hamas a political one, that both lacked not long ago. Relations have improved with a vast array of countries, and more progress is expected.

One of the more immediate manifestations of these developments will be on the quality of relations with Egypt and thus on Cairo's stance toward intra-Palestinian relations. Another will be on the status of the Rafah crossing.<sup>266</sup> Some Egyptian officials predict far-reaching changes, including a free-trade zone, for which plans have been drawn up and require only official approval to implement; Cairo would prefer to make such adjustments under the legal

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where the majority of Palestinians are. We will be the majority in the PLO, no question. The PLO is the final destination. And then, once we are inside, we will put the people back on the track of fighting for their liberation". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 13 February 2012.

<sup>266</sup> Following a 26 July meeting with Morsi, Haniyeh announced they had agreed to such improvements at Rafah as increasing the number of travellers from Gaza to 1,500 per day; increasing the operating hours and number of Egyptian employees at the crossing; increasing the supply of Qatari fuel from six to ten trucks per day; removing 60 per cent of the Gazan names black-listed from entry to Egypt; providing 72-hour-visas to all Palestinians arriving in Egypt from other countries; and implementing a three-phase plan to solve Gaza's power crisis: first, increasing the amount of fuel brought into Gaza, coupled with increasing the power supplied by Egypt from 22 to 30 megawatts; secondly, building a natural gas pipeline from Egypt to Gaza; thirdly, connecting Gaza to a joint Arab power grid. "Haniyeh: Rafah to open 12 hrs daily", Ma'an News Agency, 28 July 2012.

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<sup>261</sup> Crisis Group observations, Beit Lahiya, Gaza City, Khan Younis, Rafah, 2010-2012.

<sup>262</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012.

<sup>263</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 21 February 2012.

<sup>264</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, 24, 25 February 2012.

<sup>265</sup> An official from Gaza concurred: "The PLO, not the PA, is the referee for the whole Palestinian people. We don't have any greed over the PA. Maybe Hamas lost popularity because of being in government. But we remain very strong on the outside,

umbrella of Palestinian unity but will likely make certain changes even in its absence.<sup>267</sup>

**Amid change, there will be significant continuity, at least for a while.** Hamas is finding that many of the old rules still apply, even – indeed, notably – with regard to Egypt. Thus, when a fuel crisis hit Gaza due to a cut in supply from Egypt that occurred after Mubarak’s fall, Gaza leaders saw this as a form of blackmail to pressure them to move forward on reconciliation and help alleviate the concurrent financial crisis in Ramallah.<sup>268</sup> Egyptian views on changes at Rafah are not unanimous; some – whose positions, depending on developments within the country, could well prevail – maintain that the costs of changing policy toward Gaza are too high.<sup>269</sup> Since Morsi’s investi-

ture, fuel and electricity shortages have continued, leading a Gazan analyst to conclude that while the situation had not deteriorated in objective terms, “it certainly feels like it” given the expectations.<sup>270</sup> Similarly, on the diplomatic level, Morsi received President Abbas before he met Khaled Meshal, and after the latter’s meeting with King Abdullah, a Jordanian official emphasised that “Abbas still remains our official address, the address of Palestinian legitimacy”.<sup>271</sup>

**In the longer term, Hamas will be bolstered by the Islamic wave but it also could be deeply changed by it.**

The Egyptian Brotherhood’s current priority is not Palestine, and its interest lies in maintaining good relations with the West.<sup>272</sup> The Palestinian movement could find itself pressured to further shed the mantle of resistance and, like Islamist organisations across the region, move further toward becoming a strictly political organisation. Even before the Arab uprisings, it had sought by and large to maintain calm in Gaza; that arguably will become more important if Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood is intent on maintaining good relations with the West. A change in the situation at Rafah likewise could have varied consequences. It would improve living conditions in the Strip, but it also could accelerate Gaza’s drift toward Egypt, away from Israel and the West Bank. What that would mean for the fate of a united Palestinian entity is unclear – as are its consequences for the fate of reconciliation.

Questions potentially go beyond that. For some in the movement, regional changes should be read in the context

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<sup>267</sup> Crisis Group interview, Egyptian diplomat, Cairo, July 2012. An Egyptian diplomat envisioned a package deal wherein Gaza received a full opening of Rafah to people and goods, the creation of a free trade zone between Gaza and Egypt and the import of millions of dollars of development aid from Qatar and Turkey in exchange for forming a unity government led by Abbas and a more formal truce with Israel. He predicted that with or without Palestinian unity, there would be “major changes” at Rafah within a year. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, July 2012. Other Egyptian officials were far more cautious, saying that even a Muslim Brotherhood-led Egypt would have higher priorities than Gaza. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, July 2012. Egyptian officials do not know what changes in policy toward Gaza will occur, as they do not yet know what power Morsi will have in deciding that policy and what he will do with it.

<sup>268</sup> Gaza Interior Minister Fathi Hammad made an impassioned plea on Egyptian television, saying, “we have blood ties. So where is your affection and mercy? ... We are Egyptians. We are Arabs. We are Muslims. We are a part of you ... How can you keep silent, oh Muslims, when the people of Gaza are dying? You watch from the sidelines without providing them with the simplest thing, which you give to the West for the most meagre price”. Al-Hekma TV, 23 March 2012. Gaza bakeries shut down, bread lines formed, cars waited in hours-long lines at the pump, demonstrators protested against daily eighteen-hour blackouts, public transportation operated at 60 per cent capacity, more than half the ambulances stopped running, and hospitals faced fuel shortages. Crisis Group interviews and observations, Gaza City, Rafah, March 2012. Gaza’s predicament was met with near total silence from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. A senior Hamas leader from Gaza travelled to Cairo to speak with senior members of the group and was told the Brotherhood could not do anything to pressure Egypt’s military rulers unless Hamas committed to implementing the Doha Agreement. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza City, March 2012. Senior leaders in Gaza said they were devastated, one calling the Brotherhood’s stance an “unacceptable act”. Crisis Group interview, Hamas senior leader, 22 March 2012.

<sup>269</sup> An Egyptian diplomat said, “I can understand if we are opening Rafah for Egypt, but not if it is to help the Palestinians. Opening Rafah to goods will mean: having to pay the price with the U.S.; having to pay the price with Israel; opening ourselves to international criticism for allowing the tunnel trade while

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dealing with Hamas (since tunnels won’t disappear completely); opening ourselves to related legal battles; being accused of sabotaging the [U.S.-Quartet-Israel-PA] 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access for Rafah; ending totally our relationship with Abbas; deepening the division between the West Bank and Gaza; and being remembered in history as the ones who connected Gaza to Egypt, thereby ending once and for all the notion of a Palestinian state”. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, 10 August 2012.

<sup>270</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 25 July 2012.

<sup>271</sup> Crisis Group interview, Amman, July 2012. Fatah officials, though frightened of what a new Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government in Egypt might bring, have taken satisfaction in what they perceive to be a hard slap at Hamas. An Abbas adviser said, “Hamas believed Egypt is changing. Now Hamas realises five things will never change in Egypt: the army, the intelligence services, the foreign ministry, the pyramids and the Nile”. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, November 2011.

<sup>272</sup> Indeed, a letter allegedly sent by Morsi to Israeli President Shimon Peres – which spoke of “getting the Middle East Peace Process back to its right track” – suggests the Muslim Brotherhood might not be as far from engaging Israel as many had thought. Though confusion still surrounds the letter – which Morsi’s spokesman denounced as a fabrication, an Egyptian diplomat involved in the affair said that it was authentic. Crisis Group interview, August 2012.



of the impending victory of the Islamic project, which would mean far more consequential changes for the Palestinian question as a whole. A Hamas minister in Gaza said:

Sixty years ago Palestinians were part of the *umma* [the world-wide Muslim community], then they became part of the Arab region, then the Palestinian question, then the Palestinian Authority. But everything has changed after the Arab Spring, or, in my opinion, the Islamic Spring. In Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, even in Europe, we're talking about a strategic, historic shift in the world. Not merely a social or economic one, but rather a big change in the balance of power in the world. After ten years, you will see that the Palestinians are part of this world. Abu Mazen and his project will be part of history.<sup>273</sup>

Even for its partisans, this vision is a long-term one, and for the time being, most Hamas leaders are focusing on more immediate demands. As one put it, "once I have electricity more than seven hours a day, maybe I will be able to think about how to advance an Islamist agenda".<sup>274</sup>

In the face of these vicissitudes and question marks, the movement has chosen not to choose. Whether Morsi is dragging his feet because he wants to be seen as a responsible steward of the Egyptian polity, because he lacks strength internally to push changes in policy toward Gaza on a reluctant military-security establishment or because Palestine simply is not a Brotherhood priority, Hamas continues to proclaim that it will wait for him to get his house in order and that a strong Egypt (not to mention a strong Morsi) is a Palestinian national interest. Should Egypt's posture remain essentially static, Hamas will have to decide how to react and whether it will respond to domestic frustration by heightening pressure on Cairo.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 11 September 2011.

<sup>274</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Gaza City, 25 July 2012. An employee in the Hamas media office in Gaza said regional events have encouraged those within the movement with a proclivity for Islamic discourse to intensify their rhetoric, but that overall, it is too early to determine how the Muslim Brotherhood's new prominence might influence movement ideology. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 25 July 2012.

<sup>275</sup> A Gaza analyst pointed out that while Hamas continues to profess patience and understanding of Morsi's constraints, it has also requested specific ameliorations from Cairo almost from the outset of his tenure. Gaza leader Mahmoud Zahar, who attended Meshal's meeting with Morsi, said they agreed in principle to lift the blockade of Gaza, and he believed restrictions on the movement of people across the Rafah crossing would be eliminated by year's end. "Hamas: Egypt delegation to visit Gaza, West Bank to discuss reconciliation", *Egypt Independent*, 23 July 2012. Following Morsi's meeting with Haniyeh, his spokesman said the two had discussed "solutions relating to lifting the siege and alleviating the suffering of Gazans". "Egypt's Morsi and Hamas's Haniyeh discuss Gaza", Agence France-Presse,

So too has Hamas demonstrated a measure of caution in dealing with regional disputes and in particular the intensifying regional cold war between Iran and the Qatar-Turkey-Saudi axis supporting the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime. Pushed to take sides, Hamas has for now sought to maintain correct relations with both; whether that stance can survive heightened tensions is unclear. Likewise, it has adopted a fence-sitting approach to reconciliation. The movement faces a choice between a strategy of waiting for regional changes to bring benefits, particularly in Gaza, from which links to the West Bank are being weakened by the day, and a strategy of national unity that would bridge differences between Hamas and Fatah at some cost to the former's internal harmony. It has not definitively rebuffed nor embraced either, but rather played for time.

Hamas's choice about which way to turn – toward Cairo or Ramallah; fully into the Arab fold or with a foot still on Iran's side – is not being considered in a vacuum. It is being debated against the backdrop of its experiences over the last six years, since it won the legislative elections in 2006. It also will be influenced, to a degree, by future steps taken by the West.

## A. LESSONS LEARNED

Hamas's future choices will be partly a function of the lessons it has learned over the past six years. First, many leaders in the movement have come to appreciate that Western countries, despite their about-face with other branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region, will likely be slow to change course and adopt a more flexible attitude toward Hamas.<sup>276</sup>

Senior members were optimistic in the wake of the 2006 legislative elections that their democratic victory would be recognised and their relations with the world normalised.<sup>277</sup> Nearly three years later, Obama's 2008 victory instilled hope that the incoming president could free himself from the shackles of the Washington consensus to cut a new path in Palestine.<sup>278</sup> Both hopes were dashed.<sup>279</sup> The European Union (EU) has been an even bigger disappoint-

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26 July 2012. A senior Israeli security official said, "Hamas's direction depends on the collapse of the hopes it has pinned on Morsi". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, August 2012.

<sup>276</sup> A Hamas senior leader in exile said, "in the end, the world will have to deal with Hamas. The Palestinian issue cannot be resolved without us. But we understand that even with the U.S. and others now dealing with the Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere, because of Israel we will remain the exception for some time". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, November 2011.

<sup>277</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas senior leader, Ramallah, July 2012.

<sup>278</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, November 2008.

<sup>279</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Nablus, February, July 2012.

ment to the movement. Despite the realisation in Brussels and other capitals that Gaza's isolation has been counter-productive, and after no shortage of backchannel conversations, Europe's political engagement with Hamas has not yielded results. As a result, Hamas today is almost entirely focused on its Arab hinterland.

Secondly, Hamas as a movement has decided against a version of reconciliation that potentially could accrue regional good-will but that also could cement its disadvantage in the West Bank or weaken its position in Gaza. Its leaders in the Strip seem determined to protect their turf from encroachment and believe that Abbas is either unwilling or unable to make the changes – in the West Bank or the PLO – considered necessary for reconciliation. For the time being, a reconciliation process predicated on continued restrictions in the West Bank, a quick move to elections and Fatah's regaining a foothold in Gaza is a non-starter.

All in all, as many in Hamas see it, the past six years have demonstrated that the movement's willingness to compromise – however qualified and contingent – will not be reciprocated in Ramallah or abroad, leaving internal advocates of political engagement with little to show for their efforts. In contrast, those who adopted uncompromising positions can claim vindication.<sup>280</sup>

The question with which Hamas needs to grapple today is whether it might in fact have learned the lessons of the past six years too well and convinced itself that if it sticks to its guns and does not compromise its principles, it can outlast its rivals. Hamas has been a movement with a democratic mandate that keeps its ear keenly attuned to public opinion. Today that public opinion is overwhelming in support of reconciliation and elections. Have the past five years convinced Hamas that it can escape the fate of its undemocratic neighbours who deny their people's aspirations?<sup>281</sup> Does it believe that the mistakes it made after 2006 – overestimating both its own power and Arab willingness to come to its rescue, as well as underestimating Gaza's economic vulnerability – can still be overcome by steadfastness? Gaza's economy remains utterly dependent on Egypt and Israel, and there is little reason to assume that the surrounding states – their new ideological orientations notwithstanding – will be significantly more sup-

portive of the Palestinian national movement than they have been in the past.

The choices Hamas will make remain unclear, in no small part because of the unprecedentedly patent and deep divisions that have come about following the first of the Arab uprisings. While divisions in the movement are nothing new and predate the self-immolation of the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, today's disagreements relate to how best to profit from the regional upheaval and what to sacrifice in doing so. For the moment, unity within the movement has prevailed – but only by putting both tactical and strategic choices on hold and falling back on the default position of inaction.

The question before the international community, and particularly the U.S. and Europe, is the opposite of that which confronts Hamas: Have they learned the lessons of the past six years well enough? They made the mistake of believing that they could undo the 2006 legislative elections, leading to the division of the West Bank from Gaza the following year, after which they compounded their error by imagining that the division of the occupied territories provided an opportunity for Ramallah to make peace with Israel and for the international community to force Hamas, in a besieged and stagnant Gaza, to cede power.<sup>282</sup> Today there is broad recognition that both pillars of this policy – peacemaking and the weakening of Hamas – were illusory.<sup>283</sup> Yet no alternative has emerged. The quite dramatic change in U.S. and EU policies toward the Muslim Brotherhood might offer an opportunity.

## B. WESTERN POLICY

As previously described by Crisis Group, even judged by its own standards and objectives, Western policy toward Hamas has failed. Far from losing power in Gaza, the movement has consolidated its control. It has not accepted the Quartet conditions. Neither Fatah nor its leadership has been strengthened. In the absence of reconciliation, the division between Gaza and the West Bank has hardened, elections have been indefinitely postponed, and dem-

<sup>280</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas senior leaders, Cairo, Gaza City, December 2011, February 2012.

<sup>281</sup> Before the fuel crisis, senior leaders in Gaza dismissed the possibility of popular protest against their rule. By contrast, a senior member of the exiled leadership was solicitous of information on sentiment toward Haniyeh and Hamas in the wake of the fuel crisis. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas senior leaders, Cairo, Gaza City, September 2011-March 2012.

<sup>282</sup> For an overview of events, see Nathan Thrall, "Our Man in Palestine", *The New York Review of Books*, 14 October 2010.

<sup>283</sup> A senior Israeli security official said, "even before the flotilla, this government ceased to believe, as [former Prime Minister Olmert had, that it could bring Hamas down by economic means. The [May 2010] flotilla accelerated this policy shift. The result is that we have a de facto working relationship with the de facto power on the ground. The prime minister is comfortable with limited economic growth in Gaza, particularly as a way to modify Hamas's urge to get into trouble. We still want there to be a discrepancy between economic life in Gaza and the West Bank, but we no longer feel it needs to be so large". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, August 2012.

ocratic life in both parts of the territory has withered. Divided, Palestinians have found it more difficult to engage with Israel. Meanwhile, flare-ups in Gaza occur every few months, with painful consequences for those killed and wounded and with the ever-present possibility of a broader conflagration just one deadly rocket attack away.

With changes throughout the region, a chance might exist to start anew and for the West to address the issue of the Palestinian Islamist movement differently. Several relevant developments have occurred. The Muslim Brotherhood is now in power in Egypt. It is eager for calm, yearns for outside assistance and is developing entirely new relations with the West. It also happens to be Hamas's mother organisation. No party will be more important to Hamas than the Brotherhood, whose future relations with Israel and Gaza could take any number of forms. More broadly, in this nascent environment, other important U.S. and European regional allies – Turkey and Qatar – enjoy ever closer relations with the Palestinian movement. They are in a position to seek to influence Hamas, counselling patience and pragmatism. As a senior Hamas member said:

On their own, the Egyptian Brotherhood cannot and will not try to force us to change our positions. What I fear is a combination of Egypt, Qatar and Turkey – three countries that are close to us, enjoy close ties to the U.S. but also, in one form or another, entertain or have entertained relations with Israel. If all three ask us to do something, to move in a certain direction, now that will be much harder to resist.<sup>284</sup>

Another leader, perhaps seeking to pre-empt such a move and sensing the winds shifting, volunteered that Hamas should work with its Islamist allies in the region to come up with a new peace initiative.<sup>285</sup>

Moreover, and as extensively illustrated in this report, Hamas is a movement in flux, more divided than in the past and more uncertain about its future course. That potentially makes it more open to outside proposals, which could help push the movement in one direction or another. All this suggests that the U.S. and/or EU could reach out to Egypt, but also to Turkey and Qatar, with concrete ideas about what Hamas might do – and what Hamas might expect in response.

In so doing, the West should be mindful not to overreach. Just as Hamas ought not exaggerate its power, so too ought the U.S. and EU not mistake the size of their influence. The movement might be unsure about how to adapt to the current era, but that does not make it desperate. Indeed, as discussed, it feels the wind at its sails and, increasingly, is

focused on its regional environment at the expense of a Western community it sees as both unreliable and less and less relevant. Many in the leadership still would prefer some form of engagement with the West, but Hamas will not suddenly abandon its principles nor will it endorse the Quartet conditions to the letter, at the risk of becoming, in their own words, a Fatah “carbon copy”.<sup>286</sup> A senior leader in exile who has argued that the movement needs to moderate its stance was categorical: “Forget about asking us about the Quartet conditions or accepting the Arab Peace Initiative. Those are things of the past, and the region has moved on. We need something new”.<sup>287</sup>

In other words, rather than focus on strict adherence to the declaratory conditions imposed by the Quartet, which are both highly difficult for Hamas to meet and less meaningful than potential deeds in practice, Western nations should concentrate on more realistic but also more tangible steps. These in turn should relate to their priorities – a sustained cessation of violence and the possibility of productive negotiations between Israel and the PLO<sup>288</sup> – while seeking to capitalise on new regional realities. Intriguing areas of convergence exist between Muslim Brotherhood-ruled Egypt and Israel in which Hamas might lend an important hand.

**Ensuring calm in Gaza.** Both Jerusalem and Cairo favour a period of sustained quiet in Gaza, the former for obvious reasons, the latter because instability at its borders would interfere with its domestic priorities; force it to sharpen its stance toward Israel; and complicate its relations with the West. Hamas, too, at this point appears to prefer to consolidate its rule rather than incur Israeli attacks. Long overdue, a more solid arrangement, involving mutual commitments to a ceasefire and improvements to Gaza's economic status, could be mediated by Egypt.

**Providing security and stability to Sinai.** The situation in Sinai has become a top concern for the Israeli government, which sees it as a no-man's-land to which various militant groups – and advanced weaponry – find their way.<sup>289</sup> Egypt also has an interest in stabilising Sinai, where

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<sup>286</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas leaders, Nablus, Ramallah, July 2012.

<sup>287</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012.

<sup>288</sup> Crisis Group interview, EU officials, Jerusalem, 25 July 2012.

<sup>289</sup> U.S. and Egyptian officials have also said that Sinai is a large concern. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Washington, March–July 2012. An Israeli defence official said, “Sinai is a no-man's land. The Bedouin are in control. After the attack in August [2011], we permitted six [Egyptian] battalions to enter Sinai. Not all six came. And they have done some small things, but basically they have had no effect. In the past couple of months, there have been some moves by the Egyptian military to reassert control. They told me they arrested twenty Bedouin recently. And they found some arms caches. But what they

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<sup>284</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, June 2012.

<sup>285</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012.

turmoil is fuelled by an illicit economy created in part to circumvent the limited access to the Strip.

The 5 August attack that killed sixteen Egyptian soldiers – after which the militants stormed the Israeli border in a stolen truck and armoured vehicle – brought into stark relief the urgency of working to reduce militancy and criminality alongside Gaza. Egypt responded with a military campaign that included the first helicopter airstrikes in Sinai since Israel withdrew from the peninsula in 1982, together with destruction of a number of Sinai-Gaza tunnels, closure of the Rafah crossing and restrictions on Palestinian travel to Egypt.<sup>290</sup> Though the attackers' identity remains unclear, Israeli and Egyptian officials noted that public opinion in Egypt turned against Hamas and Gaza in the wake of the incident.<sup>291</sup> Hamas officials say they are optimistic their relations with Egypt will not be harmed but they understand Egypt under Morsi likely will have less tolerance for instability on Gaza's southern border.<sup>292</sup> Hamas could thus see benefit in a stable Sinai that prevents the strengthening of Islamist challengers, bolsters Morsi and facilitates legal passage of goods and other commodities, such as fuel, between Egypt and the Strip.<sup>293</sup>

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have arrested and what they have confiscated, it is a drop in the sea. Hamas knows they have more freedom of manoeuvre now than they did under [former Egyptian intelligence chief] Suleiman and Mubarak. Tunnels are operating without restrictions, weapons are flowing in, Hamas can operate in Sinai. They know they can't launch attacks from Gaza, because of the retaliation from Israel, so they can try to operate in Sinai instead". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 8 March 2012.

<sup>290</sup> "After Sinai attack, U.S. and Egypt step up talks on security", *The New York Times*, 12 August 2012. "Egypt Air to prevent Palestinian travel to Cairo", *Sama News*, 12 August 2012. Senior Hamas leader Musa Abu Marzouk denounced these steps: "The Egyptian public is being misinformed about the situation in Gaza, and the end result is the collective punishment of Gaza's population". "Gaza pays the price for Rafah attack", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 9-15 August 2012.

<sup>291</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian diplomat, senior Israeli security official, Cairo, Jerusalem, August 2012.

<sup>292</sup> A Hamas official went so far as to say that he believed relations between Gaza and Egypt would be improved in the wake of the attack. Three days before Morsi sacked Egypt's top two generals, the Hamas official said, "the attack will benefit both Hamas and Morsi. It benefits Morsi by giving him an opportunity to get rid of some of the generals of the old regime [in the wake of the attack, Morsi fired the governor of North Sinai and replaced the head of Egyptian intelligence with Mohamed Raafat Shehata, a broker of the Shalit deal whom Hamas officials say they respect]. And it allows Morsi to take action in Sinai, showing he is a doer. The attack benefits Hamas by helping accelerate Egypt's realisation that they need to shut down the tunnels and open up a free trade zone at Rafah". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 9 August 2012.

<sup>293</sup> Indeed, one week after the Sinai attack, a Hamas spokesman in Gaza, Salah Bardawil, said, "Hamas is ready to close the

**Facilitating peace negotiations led by Abbas.** Arguably least likely and most counter-intuitive, the Muslim Brotherhood nonetheless might see it as being in its interest for negotiations to resume between Israelis and Palestinians and for them to succeed.<sup>294</sup> This, the Islamists know, is an important U.S. objective; moreover, progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front would contribute to improving the overall regional climate, remove a possible irritant in U.S.-Egyptian relations and facilitate contacts between Cairo and Jerusalem. Having Abbas lead the talks means that Islamists would not be tainted by what, inevitably, would be difficult concessions.

In the past, Hamas has signalled its preparedness to agree to Abbas-led negotiations in the context of a Fatah-Hamas unity deal, as long as any agreement that resulted was subject to a popular referendum by Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and the diaspora. Hamas would not have to formally endorse the deal, merely defer to the expression of the Palestinian people's will, thus remaining true to its principles without directly obstructing the agreement. Egypt (and, possibly, Turkey as well as Qatar) could encourage Hamas to clearly reiterate this position – to which most Hamas leaders (although not all)<sup>295</sup> have agreed in the past – while simultaneously intensifying efforts at producing some form of reconciliation agreement. Were it to resume its work in the context of such an agreement, the Hamas-dominated PLC could even pass a law committing all Palestinian factions to abide by a peace deal approved in a referendum.<sup>296</sup>

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tunnels in return for opening the Rafah crossing permanently for persons and goods. My movement is not only ready to approve the closure of the tunnels but also to help close them". *Sama News*, 12 August 2012. Two days before Bardawil's statement, an Egyptian diplomat expressed scepticism that Hamas would ever close the tunnels completely: "If Hamas says they will close all the tunnels in exchange for opening Rafah to goods, do you think anyone in the Egyptian government will believe them for one second? Do you really think that if we open Rafah to goods the tunnels will disappear? Of course they will keep the tunnels open, at least for smuggling weapons and Tramadol [a popular, illicitly-trafficked painkiller]". Crisis Group interview, 10 August 2012.

<sup>294</sup> As noted, President Morsi's letter to President Peres, if authentic, may be a sign that this is more likely than many had thought.

<sup>295</sup> A senior member of the exiled leadership described a frequently repeated Hamas position when he said, "whatever the Palestinian people decide, we'll respect. If the Palestinian people approve of a particular peace plan, we will accept and respect their will". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2012. Though the majority of movement leaders say they would abide by the outcome of a referendum, some senior leaders have suggested that a Palestinian state could be a launching point for continuing to fight for all of Palestine. Crisis Group interviews, Cairo, Gaza City, February-June 2012.

<sup>296</sup> Something several Hamas leaders have suggested they would do. Crisis Group interviews, Nablus, January, July 2012.

In time, restrictions on direct dealings with Hamas likely will relax – on the part of the EU, the U.S. but also, and arguably first in line, on the part of Israel itself, which more than any other party must cope with realities on the ground and the ascent of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region.<sup>297</sup> Indeed, as Hamas leaders are quick to point out, all three have had no problem engaging with Egypt under the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, even though it has not changed any of its stated – and vehemently hostile – positions toward Israel.<sup>298</sup>

How soon that might happen is a matter of some debate. A former Israeli official asserted that no matter what Hamas said or did, it would remain the exception to any rapprochement the Muslim Brotherhood was enjoying with the West and perhaps also with Israel: “They can sing *Hatikvah* [Israel’s national anthem] and it still wouldn’t matter”.<sup>299</sup> In contrast, a European diplomat with close ties to Ramallah said, “give it a couple of years. As the Muslim Brotherhood buddies up with the United States, things will be very different. Even Israel is taking a fresh look at the Muslim Brotherhood, so what is the difference?”<sup>300</sup>

As detailed in this report, Palestinian reconciliation – the absence of which has caused such tremendous collective harm – faces enough domestic obstacles. External ones should not be added. For now, with both the region and Hamas at a strategic crossroad, the minimum the U.S. and EU should do in exchange for the above-mentioned commitments by the Islamist movement – a genuine ceasefire in Gaza, contributing to stabilising Sinai, giving Abbas a “mandate” to negotiate with Israel and agreeing to abide by the results of a popular referendum – is to make clear they will deal with a unity government whose platform and actions are in harmony with these principles.

**Gaza City/Cairo/Jerusalem/Ramallah/Brussels,  
14 August 2012**

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<sup>297</sup> A senior Israeli security official said, “Israel never said that it will never talk to Hamas. Not like the U.S. with al-Qaeda – that they are beyond the pale”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, August 2012.

<sup>298</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamas leader, Cairo, June 2012. Hamas leaders argue that the policy of isolating the movement is hypocritical, as Europe has relations with Hizbollah, a group that, unlike Hamas, has launched attacks on European soil. The U.S., they add, has held talks with the Taliban while being attacked by it. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, Nablus, January, July 2012.

<sup>299</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, December 2011.

<sup>300</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Jerusalem, December 2011, January 2012.

APPENDIX A

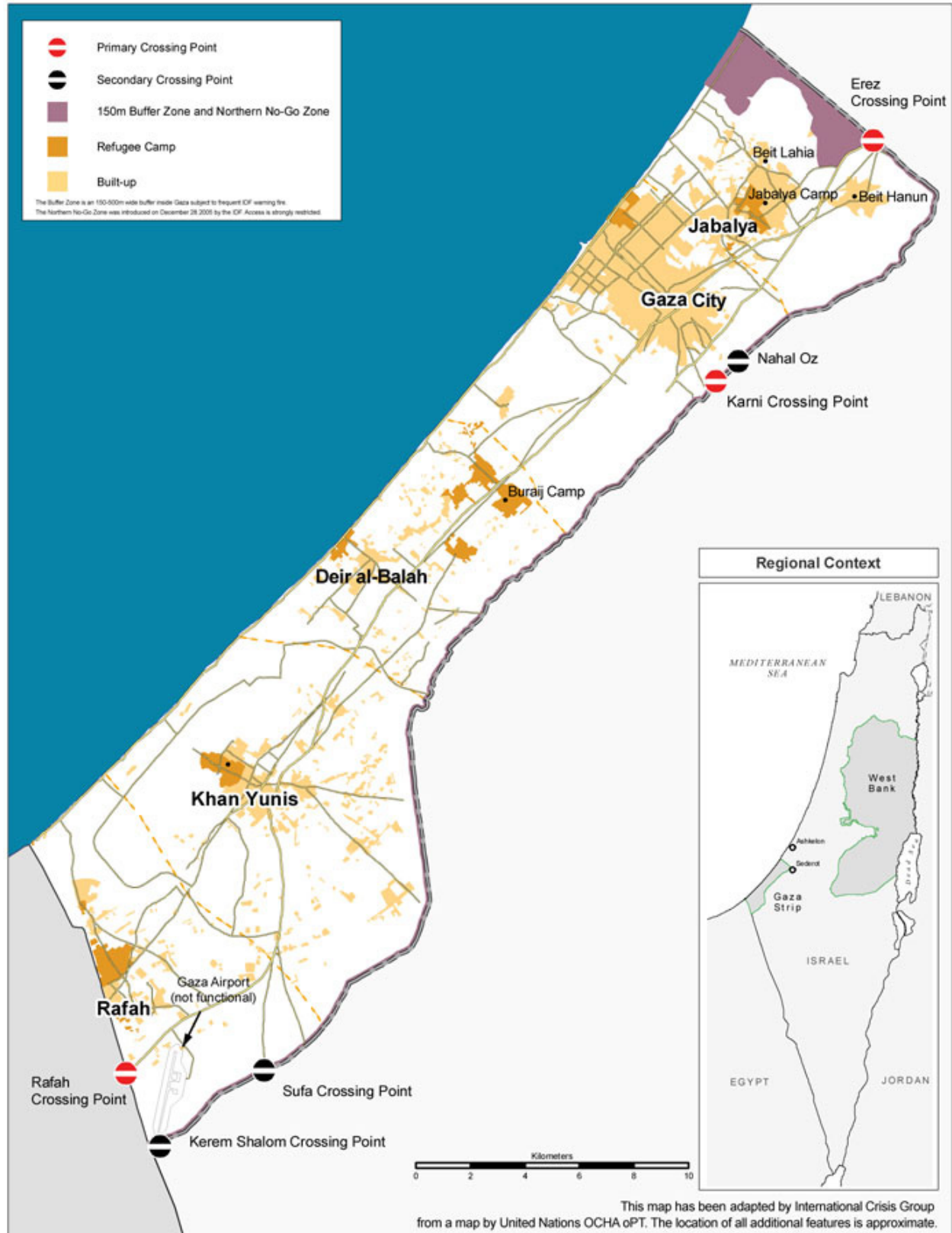
MAP OF ISRAEL/WEST BANK/GAZA





## APPENDIX B

### MAP OF GAZA STRIP



## APPENDIX C

### ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former U.S. Undersecretary of State and Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

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Europe, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, North Caucasus, Serbia and Turkey; in the Middle East and North Africa, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Western Sahara and Yemen; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, Colombia, Guatemala, Haiti and Venezuela.

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**August 2012**



## APPENDIX D

### CRISIS GROUP REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA SINCE 2009

#### Israel/Palestine

- Ending the War in Gaza*, Middle East Briefing N°26, 5 January 2009 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
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*Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle Over Nahr al-Bared*, Middle East Report N°117, 1 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria*, Middle East Briefing N°32, 5 March 2012 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

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- U.S.-Iranian Engagement: The View from Tehran*, Middle East Briefing N°28, 2 June 2009 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).

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