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What Lies Beneath Hamas' Rhetoric: What the West Needs to Hear

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The West's current "conditions-led" approach to Hamas may be undermining the best chance for establishing a stable Palestinian society and a path towards peace and democracy in the region. However unpalatable it may seem, the West needs to engage in "conditions-free" dialogue with the Hamas leadership in order to discover common ground which will build the foundations for a long-term disengagement from violence on both sides. Oxford Research Group has participated in two of a series of meetings that have been organised by Conflicts Forum in order to bring the US and Europeans together with leading Islamist movements from across the Middle East and the Muslim World.

Western governments seem frightened and perplexed in equal amounts by the Hamas victory in the Palestinian legislature. They did not see this landslide victory coming and were ill-prepared for it. Analysts of the conflict highlight the lack of any meaningful dialogue between the influential Islamic movements in the region and Western governments to account for the level of misunderstanding and misreading on both sides.

It has been clearly stated by Western governments that they will not talk with these groups until they fulfil certain preconditions. On the surface such demands sound entirely reasonable. They are that Hamas renounces violence, recognises Israel and rewrites its Charter. All this is more likely to happen if the West can support the transformation Hamas is going through, and read the cues they are giving for engagement.

However, the conditions being established by the West will not lead to positive change. What we see as perfectly reasonable demands on our part misses the point. Hamas has made it clear that it will not, and **cannot metamorphose** overnight as Israel would wish and behave in a way the West would hope. **That would clearly negate the basis on which it has been elected.**

In practice, the current mood for most Palestinians is one of strong identification with the Hamas government. Any attempts to undermine or displace Hamas will lead to more hardline positions both by people on the ground and among Palestinian institutions. As highlighted by Hussein Agha and Robert Malley in the *New York Review of Books*, "Hamas's performance was made possible, evidently, by acute dissatisfaction with the Palestinians' material situation, but its roots lay deeper, in their psychological condition. Voting for Hamas was not merely an act of rejection. It was, in the only way many Palestinians knew how, an act of self-determination."¹ The psychological factors should not be under-estimated, not least the cumulative effect of the traumatic events after years of conflict.

There is much evidence that Hamas is undergoing a process of transformation from a paramilitary organisation with a social wing to becoming a political player. It is in the interest of the West to support this progression, not obstruct it. In the words of Avi Dichter, the former Israeli internal security chief, "We should remember that they were not born with a lust for murdering Israelis."² This demands that the West reads the cues and signals that suggest such transition.

¹ Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "Hamas: The Perils of Power", *New York Review of Books*, 9 March 2006.

² Peter Beaumont, "The Hamas revolution", *The Observer*, 29 January 2006.

Hamas Continues to call for the Continuation of the Armed Struggle

There are demands from the West that Hamas must renounce the use of violence. Hamas calls for the right to resist whilst under occupation, justifying this by reference to international law. From their perspective, any immediate end of resistance will be seen as a betrayal of the communities who have elected them into power. Strategically, Hamas leaders need to show they are more potent than Fateh, who were seen as unable to protect the needs of the Palestinian people in the conflict with Israel.

This conflict is not taking place on a level playing field. Israel still dominates every facet of Palestinian life. It commands its borders, its airspace, its movement of people and goods. Hamas has been elected into power to talk tough and restore a sense of dignity to rectify earlier humiliations which they see to be predicated on this unequal balance of power. In an attempt to equalise matters **Hamas calls for the continuation of the “resistance”, but we need to differentiate within this umbrella term between past terrorist actions and future strategies.**

As Agha and Malley note, “The calm and quiet that Israel once requested has become a necessity for Hamas: if it is to consolidate and maintain its popularity, it will have to live up to the promise of reform and good governance. Renewed violence would lead to swift, devastating, and unrestrained Israeli attacks, thwarting any chance for the Islamists to have a successful domestic policy. **Paradoxically, Hamas’s electoral sweep has curbed its freedom of action far more than defeat would have done.**”³

Success in the Elections

In the eyes of the Palestinian people they have conducted a legitimate democratic process. The Islamic movement has demonstrated enormous popularity and thus feel they deserve recognition for their self-disciplined campaign and their political success. Hamas now holds 74 of the 132 seats in Parliament.

It is not the first time that an Islamic political party has shown such success. The Islamic Liberation Front in Algeria showed success in the early 1990s before external intervention. The consequence of external intervention in the electoral results led to years of bloody conflict that still drag on. Alastair Crooke, former adviser to Javier Solana, points out that there is “a faint aroma of Algeria in the air: ‘Algeria Two’ is not to be a repeat of the military overthrow of a newly elected Islamist Government in Algeria; but an attempt, it seems to them, to undermine this repeat Islamist election victory through isolation and economic sanctions.”⁴

Hamas’ electoral victory has sparked widespread hope among the Arab masses that they have another chance to find out if an Islamic party can rule better than the current regimes in the Arab world. Hamas, in this sense, carries the hopes of millions of Arabs and Muslims all over the world.

Hamas now offers the opportunity of demonstrating what a modern Islamic society could look like if it succeeds. It provides the possibility for the Palestinians to show that they can govern themselves with more transparency and for the benefit of the people on the ground whilst at the same time potentially managing tough negotiations with Israel. If successful, the experience will encourage other Islamic groups in the Arab world to use this as a model to convince their citizens that Islamic political movements are a viable alternative.

³ Agha and Malley, *ibid.*

⁴ Alastair Crooke, “Leaning on Hamas?”

The Myth of Moderating Hamas by Punishment

The prevailing view in the United States is that attempts to destabilise the new regime will deliver a more moderate reformed Fateh government back in power. This would seem to be a misreading and likely to lead to more hard line positions. The lead is coming from Washington to demand Hamas changes its behaviour. This would involve it giving up its ideological base before receiving any economic or diplomatic benefits.

Any belief that a policy of punishing the Palestinian people will encourage moderate behaviour is misplaced. It is more likely to be counterproductive and have more extreme consequences, especially the withdrawal of funds. Washington has demanded that the PA repay \$50 million in aid that could fall under Hamas control. Israel's Cabinet decided to halt the transfer of funds, mostly about \$50 million a month in tax and customs receipts to the PA and appealed to foreign governments to do the same until Hamas renounces violence and recognises Israel's right to exist. Such actions will serve to further exacerbate the situation.

It will be ordinary citizens who will suffer, nurses, policemen, social workers and government officials. Such a policy of punishing private citizens who have elected Hamas into power is predicated on the belief that these citizens, as a result of their suffering, will put pressure on Hamas, their elected representatives, to moderate their policies. This is a misunderstanding of the psychology of the situation. Such pressure from the West is likely to cause the opposite reaction and consolidate the power of the more extreme groups.

The Weapon of Democracy

The main driving force of Hamas as an Islamic party will be to differentiate itself from the previous Fateh government which was impotent and corrupt. It is essentially committed to improving the conditions of the people on the ground and developing a self-disciplined society which is conscientious, enlightened and observant. They see this as a way of strengthening the Palestinian people to be in a stronger position to negotiate a fairer deal with the Israelis, in terms of protecting the rights of their citizens.

The first priority of Hamas, in their new leadership role, is to turn inward and look at domestic issues. Its leaders are concerned with good governance, state-building, establishing law and order and an appropriate judicial system. The lack of a legitimate judicial system prevents the reform of the security forces which are necessary to stabilise Palestinian society. The need is for neutral and objective judicial system. Crooke highlights the difference between Fateh and Hamas when he says, "The "revolutionary" element that risks being overlooked is Hamas' inversion of the old Arafat injunction that Palestinian institutions can only be built after the State has been established."⁵

They are interested in creating an Islamic society. Whilst this will be based on some of the principles of Shari'ah law, in terms of a self-disciplined society which is interested in welfare and protecting the most vulnerable members of its community, it has no intention of imposing Shari'ah law under an authoritarian model. For example, it is said that women will choose whether they wear the *hijab* and religious observance will be one of choice. They recognise that there is still a strong secular presence. Whilst Hamas got 45% of the vote, 55% did not vote for them. Even many of those who did, when asked, would not prefer an Islamic state.

Hamas are now committed to securing reforms against corruption and imposing the rule of law. The model will be one of inclusivity wherever possible, in which the aim is to work with Fateh and keep most appointees in their jobs. Hamas will not ask a wave of officials to leave current government positions

⁵ Alastair Crooke, "Leaning on Hamas?"

based on their party allegiance. They aim to create a more efficient organisation than Fateh, which had many people on the payroll without clear jobs.

They are also concerned to implement an economic model which is not based simply on a form of capitalism in which small elites are the beneficiaries of the material rewards. They are interested in a system that will improve the conditions of people on the ground at a bottom-up level, and they see the Islamic economic model – for instance, as implemented in Malaysia – as potentially offering this.

Relationship with Israel

In the first instance, Hamas is less concerned about entering into a political dialogue with the Israelis because it recognises that at this point it would be negotiating from a position of weakness. It intends in the immediate future to focus on the domestic agenda and it recognises stability is unlikely without improvement in the conditions of the people on the ground.

Both sides have enormous anxieties about their own survival, and issues of **recognition** run very deep in the psychic structure of both Palestinians and Israelis. For Israel, there is a particular sensitivity, not least because of the sense of existential vulnerability. Its very existence was established in response to the survival of the Jewish people. Palestinians too have profound existential anxieties about such issues as ethnic cleansing, population transfer, the wall and the policy of cantonment strategies.⁶ Hamas however states that **before it will consider recognising Israel, they must first recognise the rights of the Palestinian people.**

Mr Haniyeh, the newly appointed prime minister recently said that “everything was on the table”, including demands that Hamas effectively recognise Israel by accepting previous accords.⁷ Addressing the press in Tehran on 21 February, one of the Hamas leaders, Khaled Mashaal, said that his movement will hold talks with Tel Aviv if the Jewish State recognises the rights of the Palestinian people.

Long-term Ceasefire

Hamas is now calling for a long-term reciprocal armistice, potentially for a period of thirty or more years, on lines based on the 1967 borders. This initiative deserves serious consideration, and deserves examination by the international community. If approached through the right means, it could lead to future negotiations and create space to find an accommodation based on co-existence. As in Northern Ireland, rather than demanding that they be abandoned, it could allow for the **aspirations and hopes of both sides to be separated from the practical realities** and enable certain thorny questions to be left to the next generation. Some issues in this conflict – such as refugee return – are so doused in suspicion and mistrust as to be better left to another, less traumatised generation.

Previously, Hamas had called for a long-term *hudna* (truce). This was originally proposed by Sheikh Yassin over a decade ago. Israel saw this as a cynical move on the part of the Palestinians to re-arm, and has historically dismissed this proposal. However, over the last year, there has been a unilateral *tah`dia* (calming) by the Palestinians. What is needed now is a mechanism to reward restraint, to prove it can pay dividends in political engagement and a preparedness to listen seriously to the organisation's point of view. It is necessary to have a more nuanced exploration of these new and evolving agendas, rather than dismissing them because of the history of mistrust. This could offer an opportunity of framing a long-term armistice and territorial arrangements. Both sides would suspend some of their more

⁶ Paul Hilder, “Towards a Phased Peace? Palestinian, Israeli and international concepts after the Gaza disengagement”, unpublished paper for the Middle East Policy Initiative Forum, November 2005.

⁷ Simon Tisdall, “Reaction to Hamas victory is gift to Iran's leaders”, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,,1715092,00.html>.

intractable claims. Henry Kissinger in a recent article talks about “**an interim agreement of indefinite duration**”.⁸

Interlocutors with connections to the senior Hamas leadership have made it clear privately that the **process of reviewing the Hamas charter is underway**. Hamas leaders often say that “**the charter is not the Quran**”: it was written by one individual without broad consultation, and many of them (reportedly including Sheikh Yassin) have avoided quoting from it. Anti-Semitic elements are likely to be replaced by a more positive, if nationalist agenda. A new charter is unlikely completely to surrender the dream of a Greater Palestine; but it may place that dream on a more distant and voluntary footing, and enshrine the possibility of co-existence based on 1967 borders. This process is only in its early stages. The leadership is presently more focused on pressing short-term challenges. Indeed, the final document will be more serious and solid if it emerges at the appropriate time from a process of internal evolution, rather than being used as a rushed exercise in public diplomacy.

Conclusion

Hamas's campaign of suicide bombing has caused deep disturbances in Israeli society and as a result of this she is in no mood to listen. Moreover in spite of Israel's military dominance she carries the fears about her own survival which is compounded by Hamas's refusal to recognise her. The belligerent rhetoric and threats of men in balaclavas on the Palestinian streets brandishing Kalashnikovs further raises anxiety. These are disturbing images that cement in the mind.

But there are deep fears on both sides and whilst avoiding arguments around moral equivalence, the Palestinians have suffered the brutalities of a military occupation, a severe deterioration in their living conditions and hopes that have been shattered that have led to rage and hardening of attitudes.

In spite of all of this, the very crisis presented by the election results may offer an opportunity to find a different kind of engagement. One of the oldest truisms of peacemaking is that every crisis contains an opportunity; this indeed is a crisis

Meanwhile, Hamas is saying loud and clear they are willing to talk. In the first place this may be via a third party, in time face to face. At this stage we need to engage **in listening without preconditions**, later there will be negotiation and compromise. It is in our interest to have a deeper understanding of this group's motivations, and get beyond the visual images, the rhetoric, and the fears on both sides, and start listening. We will see that their primary agenda is to improve the conditions and protection for their communities. A common starting point can be, **the reciprocal security and rights for both Palestinians and Israelis**. Only this is likely to reduce the violence both in the immediate and long-term.

Lessons

- At present there is no substantive dialogue with Hamas on the part of Western governments, not even of a discreet and confidential nature. This is dangerous: the belligerent rhetoric which is mostly for domestic consumption hides some of the more responsible aspects of the Hamas programme. It is only through real engagement that we get beyond the platitudes.
- Recent responses demonstrate how governments are viewing the Islamic victory entirely through a Western optic. An opportunity may be being missed to deepen understanding of how these groups think and why they are so popular, and to engage with the evolution of their opinions. The only way to do this will be through contact. This may involve listening to ideas that we do not like or agree with, but it will be necessary if we are to make a real contribution to the peace process.

⁸ Henry Kissinger, “Israel and Hamas: A Plan for Peace”, *Tribune Media Service*, 23 February 2006, <http://www.tmsfeatures.com/tmsfeatures/subcategory.jsp?custid=67&catid=1592>.

- Given parallel developments in Israel, there may be a prospect of folding the Hamas proposal of a long-term armistice into a wider political initiative that leads to a re-affirmation of Palestinian rights. This could take the form of signposting the outcome of this process as a State based on Israeli withdrawal from lands occupied in 1967 and with Jerusalem as its Capital – rather as President Clinton tentatively attempted to sketch out the possible destination for such talks in his 10 point plan for a settlement of the conflict. The international community should attempt to play a constructive role in shepherding the armistice idea into a more substantive process. If this possibility is to be explored, it will require signs of interest and engagement.
- Engaging with these groups will be tough and exacting. It demands we suspend some of our expectations, which are shaped by our experience of living in stable societies. Societies that have been exposed to continuous conflict are not going to operate according to the same code of conduct as we do. But if we are to engage in serious dialogue with groups such as Hamas, mediators need to work to win their trust and confidence – even when this may be antithetical to our instincts, particularly if they have been men of violence.
- The price of not finding a way to engage with these groups may be too great. At this moment they have chosen a politically pragmatic agenda of engagement. But they need to show results to their communities if they are to turn decisively toward co-existence. Other actors are at work in the Middle East. The price of non-engagement could mean that these groups begin to identify with 'al Qaida-like' groups who have revolutionary agendas with no room for a political dialogue. This is neither in the interest of Israel or the West.

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