

II. Research Notes

Hamas in Dire Straits

by Ely Karmon

Abstract

This Research Note analyses Hamas's standing after it deserted the "Axis of Resistance" and Damascus, positioning itself in the Sunni coalition against the Assad regime in Syria. The unfulfilled promises of the short Muslim Brotherhood reign in Egypt and the enmity of the new military regime in Cairo have seriously hurt Hamas's political, economic and military interests in the Gaza Strip and isolated it regionally. Hamas leaders lately began negotiations to mend fences with Iran, its former sponsor and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah. The situation endangers Hamas's internal cohesion, can push it to a violent outburst against Israel or in support of the embattled Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. However, it also possibly offers a window of opportunity to exploit its weakness, Egypt's good will and Tehran's present restraint in order to advance the laborious Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

Background

In mid-July 2013, it was reported that a high-level Hamas delegation headed by Musa Abu-Marzuq, Deputy Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, met with a high-level Iranian delegation and Hezbollah officials in Beirut. The meeting's goal was to mend fences between the three parties since Hamas abandoned the "axis of resistance" and positioned itself in the Sunni coalition against the Assad regime in Syria. *Asharq al-Awsat* quoted Hamas official, Ahmed Yusuf, as saying that Tehran still viewed Hamas as a "strategic partner" and that he anticipated ties with Iran would be restored soon.[1]

In a 2008 monograph I defined the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Hamas "axis of resistance" a "coalition against nature." [2] It was strange that the Palestinian Hamas, a branch of the Egyptian Sunni Muslim Brotherhood (MB), decided to ally with Iran's Shia theocratic regime, the radical Shia Hezbollah, and Syria's Ba'athist secular regime, which killed some 20.000 Syrian MB members in 1982.

Hamas joined the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance quite late, in 1992, when Israeli PM Itzhak Rabin expelled 415 of its leaders and terrorists to South Lebanon after a series of attacks in Israel. The direct contacts between Hamas, Iranian and Hezbollah leadership led to a strategic coalition which involved political and financial support and terrorist and military training.

The 1993 Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO presented the leadership of Hamas with its most difficult strategic challenge: the choice between faithfulness to ideology, and the need

to take pragmatic measures aimed at preventing loss of its hold on Palestinian society. The dilemma was further aggravated by the establishment of the autonomous Palestinian Authority (PA), dominated by the rival secular Fatah movement. Hamas's response to the Oslo process has been to attempt the establishment of a broad rejectionist front together with other Palestinian groups and the intensification of terrorist acts or - in Hamas terminology - jihad against Israel. The coalition with Iran and Hezbollah allowed Hamas to sabotage the nascent peace process through a campaign of suicide bombings, beginning just months after the signing of the Oslo agreements.

The close relations between Hamas and Iran and Hezbollah backfired. At one point during the peak of the Second Intifada, Hamas was even accused of being a Shia movement. The Gaza Salafist group Jaysh Al-Umma condemned Hamas for accepting support from "the Persians, who are Shia." [3] The "axis of resistance", or "the axis of destabilization," as I called it, survived until the beginning of the uprising in Syria. By December 2011, with the civil war in Syria expanding, Hamas had to balance the movement's interests, its ideological identity and worsening external pressures. Hamas's leadership and military operatives left Damascus and relocated to the Gaza Strip, Egypt, Qatar and Sudan.

Great Expectations from the Events in Egypt

The fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's regime in February 2011 presented Hamas with the opportunity to return to the natural embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood, the nascent power in post-revolutionary Egypt. Hamas used its relationship with the Brotherhood to successfully challenge both the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority and Israel. At the same time it found a place in the new Sunni coalition of Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia against the Assad regime and its Iranian benefactor.

The estrangement from Iran and Syria came with a price. Military aid from Iran, which for years had funneled heavy weapons through Sudan and Sinai, came to a full halt. Ghazi Hamad, the Hamas deputy foreign minister, stated in late May 2013 that relations with Iran were "bad" and that, "for supporting the Syrian revolution, [Hamas] lost very much" in the field of military cooperation. [4]

Some relief on the economic front came from Qatar. During the Emir of Qatar, Hamad bin Thani's visit to Gaza in October 2012, Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh proclaimed that "the political and economic blockade on the Gaza Strip has ended," after the emir decided to increase its funding of various projects in the Gaza Strip from \$245 million to \$400m. [5]

Politically, it seemed that the Egyptian MB regime strongly supported Hamas and its stance in the conflict. Although President Mohamed Morsi did not end the peace accords with Israel, he refused to deal directly with Israelis and left the task to the military and intelligence

authorities. Addressing the United Nations General Assembly on September 27, 2012, Morsi did not mention Israel by name once.

Khairat al-Shater, the MB's financier and one of its top leaders made significant financial donations to the Gaza government. Hamas was allowed to open offices in Cairo and several of its leaders established residency in Cairo.

During the IDF Operation "Pillar of Defense" in Gaza in November 2012, Morsi sent Prime Minister Hesham Kandil to publically embrace Hamas officials. "The cause of Palestinians is the cause of all Arabs and Muslims", Kandil stated during the visit. "Palestinians are heroes." [6] President Morsi helped broker the cease-fire ending Operation Pillar of Defense, which seemed to leave Hamas with greater access to the outside world and allowed Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal to declare victory over Israel at a press conference in Cairo. "Everyone knew that the previous regime was biased and supporting Israel," asserted Muslim Brotherhood party spokesman Murad Ali. "The new regime ... is standing beside the Palestinians." [7]

It was a pleasant surprise for Hamas when the Muslim Brotherhood's Supreme Guide, Sheikh Mohammed Badie, called for "Jihad to liberate Jerusalem from the Israeli occupation" during his weekly address to members of the movement. With this call the Supreme Guide "designs the Egyptian policy for the next period and resets the compass so that it points in the direction of the real enemy of the nation and the religion," thus the evaluation of Abdel Bari Atwan, Editor in Chief of the London *Alquds Alarabi*, and staunch supporter of Hamas. [8]

The Muslim Brothers Don't Deliver the Goods

Relations between Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood began to turn for the worse in March 2012, when Hamas PM Ismail Haniyeh put the blame for the power crisis in Gaza on Egypt, which is in control of the flow of fuel into the Strip. "Is it reasonable that Gaza remains without electricity a year after the revolution in Egypt?" asked Haniyeh, accusing Cairo of trying to force Gazans to accept the energy supplies via Israel. [9]

Paradoxically, the November 2012 confrontation between Israel and Hamas during the Operation Pillar of Defense had its roots in Egypt. After sixteen Egyptian soldiers were killed in Sinai by jihadist militants crossing from Gaza on August 5, 2012, Egypt closed down much of the tunnels described as "an artery of [economic] life for the Gaza Strip" on which much of Hamas's political capital depends. "Without a normal trade route, Gaza will never accept the closure of the tunnels," warned Yusuf Rizqah, an adviser to PM Ismail Haniyeh. [10] By the end of September 2012 there were large protests in Gaza in response to the rising prices of construction materials and fuel, directed at Egypt just as much as at Israel.

At the same time Gaza-based salafi-jihadi groups increasingly challenged Hamas's authority. They stepped up their attacks against Israel during the last two weeks of October by firing rockets against the civilian population and by staging increasingly bold ground operations against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Hamas's double-game - attempting to satisfy its Egyptian patrons by rhetorically cracking down on Gaza's salafi-jihadis, but at the same time permitting them to attack Israel - backfired.

Apart from symbolic support, Morsi was careful not to provide Hamas with any material aid or to threaten Israel with active Egyptian involvement in the conflict. President Morsi, working in cooperation with the United States, brokered the ceasefire that prevented an Israeli ground invasion.[11]

Hamas against Syria and Hezbollah

The Iranian leadership and media expressed their irritation and worry over Hamas's abandonment of the "axis of resistance." Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei publicly warned Hamas to purge from the movement all those willing to compromise on the issue of resistance, hinting at the head of Hamas political bureau Khaled Mashaal's rapprochement with Fatah. Khamenei warned that those Hamas leaders who would emulate Arafat, who had abandoned the path of resistance, might also share Arafat's fate.[12]

The Syrian government and Hezbollah claimed that Hamas had trained Syrian rebels in the manufacture and use of homemade rockets and even in battlefield skills learned from Hezbollah fighters. Some Hezbollah supporters complained of Hamas's provocative declarations, such as in June 2013 when Musa Abu-Marzuq, Deputy Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, called on Hezbollah to direct its firepower at Israel and demanded it withdraw from Syria.[13] As a consequence, it was reported that Hezbollah had ordered Hamas's representative in Beirut, Ali Baraka, to leave the country. Baraka denied the report and claimed that there was no change in the relationship between the two organizations.

According to Israeli analyst Ehud Yaari, Hamas commanders in charge of military cooperation between the two organizations were ordered to leave Beirut and weapons supplies, training, and all intelligence exchanges were suspended. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah rejected all Hamas requests to meet with him.[14] Ahmad Youssef, former Foreign Ministry undersecretary in the Gaza government, reacted to these decisions by stressing that Hamas still needs Iran and Hezbollah. "However, the movement's position is that this behaviour had damaged the relations which we wanted to be close and strong with the party," he stated.[15]

Internal Divisions inside Hamas

The split from the "axis of resistance" did not occur without internal opposition inside the Hamas leadership. According to a report in *al-Quds al-Arabi* senior members of the Hamas military wing wrote to Khaled Mashaal that "Palestine will be liberated with arms and not with money," and called for a rehabilitation of ties with Hezbollah and Iran, criticizing Hamas's ties to Qatar and its \$400-million gift to Gaza.[16] The "Change and Reform" bloc in Gaza led by Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud Zahar challenged the February 2012 reconciliation agreement reached in Qatar by Mashaal and PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

Haniyeh went on a tour in February 2012 of both the Gulf states and Iran, in spite of the dispute over Hamas's opposition to the Assad regime. In his speech in Tehran, Haniyeh proclaimed that Hamas "will never recognize Israel.... The fight will continue for the liberation of the entire land of Palestine and Jerusalem and the return of all Palestinian refugees." [17]

In June 2013 the Hamas Palestinian Security Forces in Gaza prevented Mahmoud Zahar from traveling to Lebanon to congratulate Iran's new president-elect Hasan Rouhani.[18] Al-Zahar has always called for maintaining relations with Iran, even if at a minimal level. According to Palestinian sources, Hamas did not accept the invitation by the General Union of Muslim Scholars to attend an international conference in mid-June 2013 in Cairo. The conference was organized to support the Syrian revolution and Hamas declined to attend because it wanted to mend its relationship with Iran.[19]

Although Hamas leaders understood the importance of the ceasefire brokered by Egypt's president that prevented an Israeli ground invasion during Operation Pillar of Defense, Haniyeh and Mashaal praised Iran's role in helping to provide weapons, which permitted their "victory" over Israel while at the same time sending veiled threats to Cairo that they will need to rearm in order to challenge Israel.

Musa Abu-Marzuq stated that the organization would continue to seek weapons even as an Israeli delegation arrived in Cairo to begin talks over the second stage of the cease-fire agreement. He also said Hamas would not rule out renewed rocket attacks if Israel decided to attack Iran.[20] Iran's then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called Haniyeh to congratulate him on the "resistance's victory following the Israeli aggression" and asked him to send his condolences to the families of those killed during Operation Pillar of Defense. Haniyeh thanked him and told him that the "victory" belongs to Muslims worldwide.[21]

After the August 2013 car bomb attacks on the southern Shia suburbs of Beirut, media reports claimed that Hezbollah accused members of Hamas of involvement, including in the rocket attacks that targeted the Dahya several months ago. Notwithstanding these serious accusations, a source close to Hezbollah confirmed that communication between Hezbollah

and Hamas continues to be "good," despite the persistence "of some disagreements on certain political issues, particularly the Syrian crisis." [22]

The Impact of the Military Takeover in Egypt

During President Morsi's regime, the Egyptian army began to take action against Hamas in the wake of the August 2012 killing of sixteen Egyptian soldiers by jihadist militants from Gaza. Hamas was increasingly perceived by the military and intelligence establishment as an ally of the jihadist groups in Sinai and partly responsible for the instability in the Peninsula Sinai. The Sinai has recently seen a major intrusion by salafist and jihadist elements, many of them Egyptians escaped from prison after the fall of the Mubarak regime.

The events in Egypt after the June 30, 2013 popular demonstrations against the Muslim Brotherhood government, which led to the military take-over on July 3, left Hamas "in a state of shock," as one journalist put it. [23] The campaign against Hamas by the new military-backed government, the state media and much of the public opinion, intensified parallel with the growing violence provoked by the Muslim Brotherhood demonstrations across Egypt.

By mid-July 2013, prosecutors began questioning Egypt's ousted president Mohammed Morsi and dozens of members of the MB over their escape from Wadi Natrun prison during the 2011 uprising. A court claimed that the Hamas rulers of Gaza and Lebanon's Hezbollah had aided in the prisoners' escape. [24]

Egyptian state television accused Hamas of training "several people to undertake car-bombing operations and trained various others to make explosives. The military wing of the Hamas movement provided various Salafi jihadists and also other religious currents with 400 landmines. The security apparatus documented this and they will be arrested." The largest Egyptian state newspaper, al-Ahram, cited high-ranking security sources as saying Hamas was also involved in the failed assassination attempt against the interior minister on September 5, 2013. Gaza preachers, in fiery sermons, have accused Egypt's army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of waging war on Islam. At Gaza street rallies, Hamas fighters have flashed a four-finger salute - a show of support for Morsi, reported the paper. [25]

Over the past three months the Egyptian army has destroyed most of the smuggling tunnels underneath the border area between the Gaza Strip and Egypt's Sinai. The destruction of the tunnels caused both direct and indirect losses to Hamas.

Ala al-Rafati, the Hamas-appointed minister of the economy, said up to 90 percent of the tunnels had been destroyed and those still open were not operating at full capacity. He put the losses to the Gaza economy since June at \$460 million. The closure of the tunnels has caused prices to spike and production to drop at factories dependent on raw materials from Egypt. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Qatar provides Hamas with cash assistance, although private donors

in the Gulf are still helping. Much of the financial aid came from Iran in suitcases via the tunnels. That lifeline has been now obstructed.[26]

Practically, the Egyptian army has set up a buffer zone between its territory and the Gaza Strip by clearing buildings deemed a security threat at a distance of up to one km from the border. A senior Egyptian security official has threatened that if the security situation in the northern Sinai continues to deteriorate, the Egyptian army has planned air attacks in Gaza on specific targets of hostile extremist groups. According to Egyptian assessments some of the attacks in northern Sinai, especially in El Arish and Rafah, were carried out by armed Palestinians based in Gaza.[27]

The military, economic and media pressure by Egypt has also impacted Hamas's political standing in Gaza. In August 2013 a new organization, the Tamarod ("Rebel") Movement in Gaza, inspired by the success of the popular Egyptian Tamarod Movement (which led the popular protests against Mohammed Morsi in the run up to his removal by the military) began preparations for mass demonstrations against Hamas on November 11, 2013, the date of Yasser Arafat's death. Four youth Tamarod members issued a video statement urging Gazans to take to the streets "bare-chested" without carrying weapons.[28] In a September video, the Tamarod movement published its first public announcement by the movement spokesman, Eyad Abu Ruk. The movement stressed that it was an independent body with no political affiliation, and it vowed to topple Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip.[29] In the last two months, Hamas security agencies arrested dozens of Fatah activists and journalists and charged them with belonging to the "Tamarod". Most of the arrested denied any affiliation with the movement.[30]

Hamas authorities have felt the need to close foreign bureaus of two independent news outlets, Ma'an News and Al Arabiya, for alleged bias against Hamas.[31]

Emboldened by the crisis between Egypt and Hamas, and support from the Egyptian authorities and in view of Hamas's internal troubles, PA President Mahmoud Abbas has called for elections in the West Bank and Gaza. The PA ambassador in Cairo, Barakat Al-Farra, claimed that the Rafah crossing will be kept closed until the "legitimate" Palestinian Authority is back in control in Gaza and Mahmoud Abbas's guard can be posted on the border. "Hamas is requested to reconsider its account with Egypt and the will of the people after the movement has lost its Syrian ally," added Al-Farra.[32] According to Palestinian political analyst Atef Abu Seif, both parties are "caught in Egypt's predicament": Hamas awaits the return of the Muslim Brotherhood to power, while the Palestinian Authority leader believes that the victory of the Egyptian army will bring him political gains and put an end to Hamas rule.[33]

Regional Isolation

Pushed in a corner by an angry Egyptian military and public opinion and a watchful Israel, Hamas is in a position of regional isolation. The prominent Palestinian historian Yezid Sayigh has emphasized that "Egypt's Morsi never lived up to Hamas's hopes for breaking the siege of Gaza," which is now even tighter since his ouster, and the break with Syria is "proving more costly since the damage to Hamas's financial and military ties with Iran is no longer balanced by gains in access and material support from Arab countries." [34]

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates are supporting the Egyptian military campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood and are clearly not inclined to help its Palestinian branch in Gaza.

Jordan. In 2012, with the rise of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and a desire to appease the Jordanian MB protests demanding governmental reform, relations between Jordan and Hamas improved and Khaled Mashaal was permitted to visit Amman to speak with the King. However, in September 2013 King Abdullah denied Hamas's request to re-open its offices in Amman. [35]

Qatar. Qatar played host to Hamas both after its expulsion from Jordan in 1999, before the movement moved its headquarters to Damascus, and after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. Qatar financially supported Hamas with donations, grants and field projects (not cash) to compensate for the cessation of Iranian support. Qatar was considered Hamas's "godmother" in regional and international forums, but as host to the most important U.S. military bases in the region, Qatar could not support Hamas's needs for "military resistance." [36]

In June 24, 2013, Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani of Qatar abdicated his post to his son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. The new ruler, who seems more likely to emphasize domestic issues, will probably be more careful in formulating Qatar's regional policies, especially after the PM and FM Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, responsible for Qatar's aggressive foreign policy, lost his positions in the first cabinet reshuffle. [37] "Qatar is likely to move more slowly on regional issues, and less likely to grab headlines by making bold moves," evaluates Shadi Hamid, director of research for the Brookings Doha Center. [38]

In August 2013, 24 U.S. House lawmakers petitioned the Qatari ambassador to explain his government's "expanding diplomatic and economic ties" with Hamas. "In the interest of maintaining strong U.S.-Qatari relations," they urged Qatar "to promptly address these serious allegations" and warned the new Emir "to take this letter very seriously," as continuing to support Hamas "could quickly sour the general goodwill that exists in Congress towards the bilateral relationship." [39] These changes probably engendered the reports that Hamas's relations with Qatar have been brought to a low level. Khaled Mashaal has complained of a

"siege" around him in Doha preventing him from talking freely to the press.[40] Izzat Al-Reshq, a member of Hamas's politburo, denied these reports and claimed that "Qatar provides Hamas with all facilities it asks for." Some sources speculated that Mashaal planned leaving the city in favor of Khartoum, Beirut or Tehran. Some claim that the Hamas search for new host countries is based on its desire to remain geographically close to the Palestinian territories. [41]

According to an unidentified Hamas official, the organization's resumption of relations with Iran will not be conditioned upon the group's leadership leaving Qatar. Iran has not demanded this, but on the other hand, Hamas does not enjoy a "surplus" of political capital "that affords it the luxury of absolute certainty, so it must keep its options open regarding bases for its leadership." [42]

Turkey. Turkey remains Hamas's staunchest supporter. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has always been an enthusiastic proponent of the Palestinian Islamist organisation, advocating for an end to the naval blockade on the Gaza Strip. Unfortunately for PM Erdoğan, the new Egyptian rulers have banned his long-planned visit to Gaza. Moreover, the military coup in Egypt is seen in Ankara as a direct threat to the Justice and Development Party's and Erdoğan's rule, as an example which could be imitated by the Turkish military.

Khaled Mashaal and PM Erdoğan met in Ankara on October 8, 2013 at a time when rumors suggested that Mashaal was searching for another base for Hamas leadership. The meeting lasted for three hours, was closed to the press and no statement was made afterward. [43] Mashaal and Erdoğan were expected to discuss the current situation in Gaza, the Syrian conflict and the issue of national reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. Mashaal said the issue of Palestinian reconciliation was discussed but not in detail because "circumstances were not ripe" for reconciliation efforts.[44] It is considered unrealistic that Turkey can achieve what Egypt (during the Morsi era) and Qatar have thus far failed to do.

Quo Vadis Hamas?

Hamas's strategy currently depends on the shifting political developments in Egypt, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other hand.

Egypt and the Palestinian Authority

If the military regime in Egypt, supported by a large portion of the Egyptian people, succeeds in crushing the Muslim Brotherhood and minimizing its influence in the domestic arena, then Egypt will likely ramp up pressure on Hamas in order to deter it from providing material or military support to the MB and jihadists in the Sinai.

If the Egyptian MB will decide to increase the level of violence against the regime or a split will occur in the ranks of the MB and major radical terrorist factions will emerge, as happened in the 1970s and 1980s, Hamas could be tempted to provide assistance in challenging the military, despite all the risks this involves for the security and economic situation in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas is challenged also in the Palestinian arena by the strengthening of Mahmoud Abbas' standing and the possible advance in the PA's peace negotiations with Israel. This could lead it to sabotage the peace process by major terrorist attacks, either in the West Bank or Israel itself, a quite difficult venture as long as there is good security cooperation between the PA and Israel; or by a campaign of missile and rocket fire from the Gaza strip. One advantage of such a scenario could be to induce the Egyptian people to press the regime to support Hamas in case of a major Israeli retaliation.

Speaking on October 9 in Ankara on the issue of Jerusalem, Khaled Mashaal called for an "urgent national meeting" with the Palestinian Authority and Fatah to agree on a unified Palestinian strategy to confront Israeli "schemes" of Judaisation in Jerusalem and the supposed demolition of the al-Aqsa Mosque. He said that building an Arab, Islamic and Palestinian military capability is the only way to restore Jerusalem and the holy sites, and the first step in this unified strategy should be an all-out popular uprising that would daily drain Israel.[45]

Hamas keeps open the option of renewed fighting against Israel also by strengthening its alliance with the Gaza Salafist groups. However, following the ouster of President Morsi, Hamas continued its crackdown against Salafist groups in Gaza, pledging to eradicate them from the Strip "by the roots." Nevertheless, according to leading Palestinian Salafist Jihadist figure, Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi, contacts between Hamas and the Gaza's Salafist-Jihadist front over the past months, mediated by clerics from Kuwait and the well-known Egyptian MB religious leader Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, led to an agreement following years of bloody confrontations.[46]

The 8-point proposed agreement, to be announced soon, reportedly grants the Salafists "freedom to operate in politics, the military, religious advocacy, and civil and social organizations" and stipulates the formation of a joint committee to deal with any disputes between the two groups. In return for this, the Salafist factions "will commit to the ceasefire and other decisions made by the ruling Hamas movement." A Gaza source confirmed that the arrest and harassment of Salafists have ceased recently and that many Salafist detainees have been released by Hamas.[47]

The Iranian Option

Ali Baraka, Hamas representative in Lebanon, has recently summarized in a frank and comprehensive interview the organization's strategy concerning relations with its former allies:[48]

- Hamas considers Syria, which has always supported the Palestinian people and Palestinian resistance, a source of its power. Hamas had no disagreements with the Syrian regime on the key issues, particularly the problems of Palestinian resistance, but disagreed about the use of force to solve the Syrian crisis. It tried to stay neutral and left Syria almost 11 months after the crisis started, when it was asked to take sides in the conflict.
- Hamas is not fighting in Syria and does not have any of its military units present there. The Syrian Air Force conducts raids on camps like al-Husseini, Siniya, Homs, al-Nayrab and Hindarat which house many Palestinian refugees, many of whom support Hamas and other Palestinian organisations.[49]
- Relations with Hezbollah were never severed and there are constant contacts. The Hamas office is located in Hezbollah's stronghold in Beirut. There is coordination of "activities in terms of ongoing confrontation with the Zionist enemy."
- The fact that Hamas and Iran differ in opinions about how best to achieve a peaceful settlement in Syria does not mean they differ on everything else. Hamas shares the same position with Iran on a number of important issues, both standing "against Israel and Zionist actions in the Middle East." The relations and consultations with Iran were maintained throughout the entire Syrian crisis "in pursuit of the peaceful political settlement that [they] unfortunately failed to achieve." This does not mean that the two sides differ on other issues.
- Hamas hopes that the Syrian crisis will come to an end and allow the restoration of "the Axis of Resistance" which "was seriously damaged by the Arab Spring."

It was reported that Mashaal plans to travel to Iran in October of 2013 and meet with Iranian government officials for talks.[50] According to Adnan Abu Amer, dean of the Faculty of Arts at the Gaza Al Ummah University Open Education, "Tehran may try to exploit the Muslim Brotherhood's decline in Egypt to convince Hamas that it would be better off with a strong relationship with Iran, given the prevailing geopolitical situation." He assumes that the coup in Egypt has convinced both sides they have no choice but "to overcome past mistakes and resume their relationship." [51]

A more dramatic and dangerous outcome of the new strategic setting could be a coalition between Iran, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, in which the Gaza organisation would be the "military" spearhead to support a destabilization effort of the new Egyptian regime by the Brotherhood. Historic and more recent examples show this scenario is viable.

The Brotherhood was initially enthusiastic about the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, a model of a popular Islamic movement that toppled a pro-Western secular regime and founded an Islamic state enjoying popular political legitimacy. Brotherhood activists were in close contact with exiled Iranian colleagues who were active in the overthrow of the Shah's regime. However, by mid 1980s, the Brotherhood relations with Iran soured significantly as the Khomeinist revolution was increasingly perceived as Persian nationalist, distinctly Shiite, and allied with the Syrian regime, responsible for the massacre of 20,000 MB members. [52]

The strategic circumstances of the years before the Arab uprisings: the pressure of the Mubarak regime against the Brotherhood in Egypt since its success in the 2005 elections, the rise of Hamas rule in Gaza since 2006, the Second Lebanon War provoked by Hezbollah, and the Israeli operation *Cast Lead* in Gaza, have marked a new *rapprochement* between the two main Islamist streams in the region.[53]

During Hezbollah-Israel confrontation in 2006, Muslim Brotherhood groups in Jordan, Palestine and Egypt supported Hezbollah for strategic and ideological reasons in its struggle against Israel. The leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Mahdi Akef, severely criticized religious figures who label Shias as *takfiris* (i.e. extremists who believe they are the only true Muslims) and asked Shia and Sunni Muslims to join hands to prevent sectarian strife in Iraq.[54] The International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUMS) reached an agreement with Iranian officials "on a number of constructive steps to extinguish the fire of sedition between Sunnis and Shiites", especially in war-torn Iraq.[55]

According to Ahmed Yousef, Foreign Ministry director-general in Gaza's Hamas government, the historically lukewarm relations between Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood have improved in recent years because Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood both oppose the U.S. military presence in the Middle East, and have similar positions on the Palestinian issue and Muslim causes elsewhere. His 2010 booklet titled "The Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Revolution in Iran" represents, according to Ehud Yaari, "the most important attempt to connect the growing cooperation between Hamas and its Iranian mentors to religious affinities, rather than political expediency." The Muslim Brotherhood and its Palestinian branch Hamas are natural partners of Iran, sharing common values and "a joint vision of the revival of the caliphate," despite the historic Sunni-Shia divides.[56]

In August 2012, Egyptian President Morsi visited Iran to attend the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit, an unprecedented event in the recent history of these two enemy countries. During his 7 February 2013 visit to Cairo to attend the Organization of Islamic

Cooperation (OIC) Summit, the first visit by an Iranian President to Egypt in 33 years, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had called on Egypt to form a strategic alliance with Iran. He expressed optimism about the visit and relations with Egypt by saying: “The political geography of the region will undergo a major change if Egypt and Iran take a common stance on the Palestinian cause”. The rapprochement between Iran and Egypt has, however, been obstructed by their differences over the Syrian crisis. Former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi had called on Assad to resign while saying that Iran was not the enemy of Egypt and that it should be consulted on the fate of Syria.[57]

Since the demise of the Muslim Brotherhood government, the military regime is allied with and supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, that is, Iran's (and MB's) enemies - another good reason for cooperation between the two. However, since the changes provoked by the election of Hassan Rouhani as President of Iran and his campaign of détente with the West, it can be assumed that Tehran will be much more cautious in its regional policies, at least as long as it assesses that there are good chances to achieve an agreement according to its interests and parameters.

Relating specifically to these Iranian constraints, Bassem Naim, a Hamas leader in Gaza, evaluated that Hamas would not be greatly affected by any changes that might occur because it never relied on Iran as a sole source of support. “Reconciliation between the two sides might lead to a decline in Iranian support for Palestinian resistance movements in the region. But there won't be any radical changes to the political stances vis-à-vis the Palestinian cause,” said Naim. He pointed out that Iran still needed the Palestinian factions “as regional proxies in the region, and that continued relations fell within the scope of purely Iranian interests, not just Palestinian ones.” Mukhaimar Abu Saada, a university professor in Gaza and political commentator, did not rule out such changes taking place, but placed these in the mid- to long term, if relations between the United States and Iran continued to develop.[58]

Renewed Hope for Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks

This author has considered that the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations have few chances to succeed, if at all, as long as the Palestinian Authority is not ruling in Gaza and Hamas has the capability to sabotage the implementation of any reached agreement which does not involve the Gaza Strip. There is now a window of opportunity to exploit Hamas's weakness, Egypt's good will and Tehran's restraint in order to advance the peace negotiations.

The main strategy should be to aid the PA in imposing its authority on the Gaza Strip, dividing the Hamas movement by giving incentives to the most pragmatic Hamas leaders, and by promising the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza better economic and territorial conditions on the short-term and a clear acceptable compromise on the long term.

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Notes

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