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Can Hamas, and does it Want to, “Lead” the Palestinian People?

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Within a four-week period, between the end of April and the end of May 2021, Hamas exchanged its former status as the leader of the “resistance” and the representative of the interests of the Gaza Strip to the leader of the resistance and the representative of all interests of the Palestinian people in its relations with the Israeli occupation. It did not do that through elections or control of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) or the Palestinian Authority (PA). Instead, it did it by taking advantage of a leadership vacuum left by the PA and by winning the battle over the hearts and minds of the Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, i.e., under the Israeli occupation. In a rare moment in the history of the Palestinian people, the majority of those living under in these occupied areas declared that Hamas is more deserving of representing and leading the Palestinian people. It is certain that the public meant to convey a mandate to Hamas to take the initiative in responding to and addressing Israeli threats to the interests of the Palestinian people living under the occupation. It is also certain that the public did that because it believed that Hamas own something that the PA did not: capacity, political will, and the readiness to take the initiative and lead. This development, if sustained and consolidated, could represent a paradigm shift in internal relations and in Palestinian-Israeli relations. But the big question arises: can Hamas do that, even in the limited sense of representation and leadership and does it really wish to do that?

Hamas does not have the required financial resources or the effective organizational and leadership presence on the ground in the West Bank or East Jerusalem. It does not have sufficient regional or international economic and political support and has no diplomatic recognition and presence in any of the world’s main capitals. To the contrary, the international community views it as a terrorist organization; Israel fights it fiercely financially, politically, and militarily; The PA seeks to punish it or at least contain it. Could Hamas, despite all that, take the greater responsibility for responding to Israeli policies and by doing so determine the nature of the daily relationship between the Palestinians and the state of Israel and take the conflict back to its original existential roots?

This critical brief seeks to analyze this important development in Palestinian politics in order to understand its origins and sustainability. It ends with a review of Hamas’ options and the options of the others in dealing with it.

Background:

The 2020 announcement of the Trump Plan, known as the deal of the century, and what followed it in Israeli measures and threats to annex large parts of the West Bank propelled Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah movement to search for a partnership with Hamas in the hope of formulating a unified strategy of confrontation directed against Israel in the West Bank. Thus, shared interests emerged between Fatah and Hamas at a moment of PA and Fatah weakness and lack of determination and confidence to lead alone a confrontation against the US and Israeli annexation plan.

Perhaps, it was this moment of Fatah and Abbas weakness that made possible the success of the efforts of Jibril al Rojoub, Fatah's secretary general, representing the two, and Salih al Arouri, the deputy head of Hamas, to reach a reconciliation agreement that promised to hold legislative, presidential, and PLO Palestine National Council (PNC) elections in a successive manner, one after the other. Based on that success, Abbas issued a decree in January 2021 to hold legislative elections on 22 May 2021 to be followed at the end of July by presidential elections and later PNC elections.

The decree and the practical measures taken immediately after that provided the Palestinians a rare opportunity to reunify the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, to ease the siege and blockage as well as the financial and administrative restrictions imposed on the Gaza Strip by Israel, Egypt, and the PA. It also created conditions that might have facilitated the reformation of the Palestinian political system by giving it legitimacy, reforming its basic constitutional and legal structures, and bringing back accountability and oversight in a manner that would allow a separation of powers, rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, the ending of the restrictions on freedom of speech and the activities of civil society. All these areas have witnessed serious deterioration in a gradual slide to authoritarianism and one-man rule during the past several years, particularly since 2015. The decree signaled, at last, the success of reconciliation and represented a great achievement for Hamas in its efforts to reintegrate into the formal Palestinian political system, including winning a political and organizational foothold in the West Bank.

Setting the stage for the fourth Hamas-Israel war:

By contrast, the decision in late April by Abbas and Fatah to indefinitely postpone the elections, because Israel refused to allow them in East Jerusalem, represented a serious blow to the efforts of reconciliation, reunification, and the reformation of the Palestinian political system. It is evident that president Abbas canceled the elections because he was afraid of their outcome, particularly the certainty of his defeat in the presidential elections and the likely inability of Fatah to form a new government after the elections without a coalition with the two Fatah defectors, Mohammad Dahlan and his Future electoral list and Marwan Barghouti and Naser al Qidwah, and their Freedom electoral list, a coalition Abbas almost certainly did not want to pay the required price for.

Abbas' use of the Israeli refusal to allow elections in East Jerusalem in order to postpone or cancel the elections, at a time when conditions on the ground in the city was characterized by daily popular non-violent confrontations against the Israeli army and police and extremist settlers, exposed bad judgement and lack of understanding of the significance of his measure on the place and role of the PA leadership at such moments. In the eyes of the public, Abbas' step showed an abandonment of leadership and lack of interest in directing the confrontation with Israel in East Jerusalem, thereby leaving it easy prey to the occupation and the Israeli extremist settlers. The overwhelming majority of the public opposed Abbas' decision to postpone the elections and two thirds believed the decision came because of fear of the outcome. Moreover, the majority demanding the holding of these elections without any delay or hesitation and without waiting for an Israel approval to hold them in East Jerusalem. The public wanted the PA to create facts on the ground in East Jerusalem and to lead the efforts that assert Palestinian

sovereignty in the city.¹ The variations in attitudes between those of the public and the leadership exposed a large gap between the two side that confirmed that the president lives in clear isolation from the environment around him and from the popular base that elected him in 2005. Abbas' decision to postpone or cancel the elections caused a breakdown in Fatah-Hamas's relations, one that might prove difficult to overcome, and forced Hamas to search for ways to confront the PA and its leadership to force it to come back to the previous understandings. But Hamas failed in its efforts to formulate a political alliance with other electoral lists outside Fatah that could force Fatah and Abbas to backdown.

Therefore, the popular confrontations in East Jerusalem presented Hamas with a great opportunity. It was Abbas who abandoned the electoral battle over Jerusalem, why should not Hamas turn Abbas's blunder into a political battle with Israel, one in which it would break Israel's will and force it to stop its hegemony over the Palestinian city and its holy places. To be able to do that, Hamas would have to risk engaging Israel in a fourth military confrontation, one in which Gaza would pay a huge price. Hamas has never before taken such a risk, even during the battle over the electronic gates to search worshippers at the entrances to al Aqsa Mosque. Therefore, neither the PA nor Israel expected Hamas to take such a gamble, particularly when the confrontation at that moment was mostly over a threat of expulsion to several Palestinian families or a threat to change the status quo at Al Haram al Sharif.

Hamas' decision to take the risk of triggering a fourth war with Israel, in defense of Jerusalem and its residents, by launching dozens of rockets toward the city and other major Israeli cities, reflected a significant shift in its policy. Now, it was no longer seeking to ease the conditions in the Gaza Strip in return for giving Israel security assurances; rather, it was now taking a risk in which Gaza and the its interests were being sacrificed for a matter that has not been traditionally under its responsibility. It was the PA, the PLO, and president Abbas who were responsible for the confrontation with Israel on such matters as Jerusalem and the West Bank. It was a failure on the part of the Palestinian leadership, its inability to take the initiative and mobilize the required resources to force Israel to respect the status quo at al Aqsa Mosque and to protect the residents of al Shaikh Jarrah, that created an apparent vacuum and an opportunity that Hamas could not miss to fill that vacuum. There is no doubt that Hamas' decision to initiate a military confrontation with Israel represented several developments, the most important of which was its perceived need to make the PA understand that Hamas, and Hamas alone, can embarrass it, deprive it from legitimacy, and demonstrate to the Palestinian public that the PA leadership is helpless when confronting Israel, or worse, that it conspired with Israel to prevent the elections. In all that, Hamas succeeded beyond expectations.

Hamas' gains in its fourth war with Israel:

While this was Hamas' fourth military confrontation with Israel, it was the first time that Hamas entered a war for reasons that had no direct relationship to the needs of the Gaza Strip; instead, this was a war in defense of al Aqsa and Jerusalem. Despite the fact that Hamas must have had multiple motives, and one of those was probably the desire to weaken president Abbas, the public was willing, without hesitation or reservation, to accept its full narrative regarding the reasons for and the outcome of the war. In the

¹ See the results of poll 80, issued by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in June 2021: <http://pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Poll%2080%20English%20full%20text%20June2021.pdf>

eyes of the public, this was a war for the sake of Jerusalem and the families of al Shaikh Jarrah that were threatened with expulsion or eviction. It was also a war that Hamas has won, not only politically, but militarily as well. Most consequentially however, when the public compared Hamas' capacity to take the initiative and assume responsibility with that of Fatah under the leadership of president Abbas, it came to a stunning conclusion: Hamas, an organization that took part in the armed struggle against Israeli only during the first intifada, is more deserving and capable of leading the Palestinian people than Fatah, the organization that long before initiated armed struggle and one that established the modern Palestinian national liberation movement.²

This development had an immediate impact on the ground, as we saw in the nature of the public response to the killing of the Palestinian opposition figure Nizar Banat. The public came out to demonstrate and to challenge the PA and demand regime change and an end to the rule of president Abbas. The public became less willing to turn a blind eye to PA behavior when that behavior was seen contrary to public consensus. Earlier, we witnessed a timid, indeed frightened, reaction of the PA to the unexpected public reaction to the deal it secretly made with Israel, with coordination with the Pfizer company, the manufacturer of the coronavirus vaccine, in which Israel delivered in June some 90,000 doses in return for receiving an equivalent number of doses later in the year when the company was ready to deliver the Palestinian-ordered shipment. Despite the fact that the Israeli-delivered doses were still valid for at least another two weeks, the PA decided to return the Israeli shipment rather than administer the vaccine to its own people who needed it the most. It did so because it had to make the deal in secrecy and because its own credibility had sunk to a new low and almost no one was ready to believe its statements. In fact, most people believed, incorrectly, that the date of expiration for the delivered shipment had already passed before it was delivered to the PA. Realizing its own inability to convince the public of the facts, the PA concluded that it would be better for the sake of the vaccination process if the shipment was sent back to Israel. Finally, it was probably the PA's realization that it had lost much of its legitimacy and credibility, along with its fear of internal criticism that constituted the greatest motivation behind the crackdown campaign it carried out against the opposition once the Hamas-Israel war ended. Indeed, the PA decision on how to handle the Nizar Banat headache might have also been the outcome of that same timid and freighted mind set.

Can Hamas play the role the public wants it to play?

Despite the public posture of Hamas' leadership³ that welcomes the new role for the movement, Hamas is almost certainly not ready to lead the Palestinian people, even if "leadership" is restricted to taking the initiative in responding to Israel's expansionist policies. More importantly, Fatah and president Abbas will most likely strive to deny it that role regardless of the cost, indeed even if the cost is risking civil war in the West Bank. Four reasons clarify Hamas' dilemma and why it might not be truly willing to play the requested role.

First, Hamas is not ready or able because it does not have the required resources to pressure Israel by means other than the risk of total war in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli measures might not be so threatening

² *Ibid.*

³ In an interview with al Arabia TV on 4 July 2021 on the last war with Israel, Khalid Mish'al, the head of Hamas' political bureau abroad, listed the various potential sources of armed conflict between Hamas and Israel. Mish'al listed these sources in which Gazan-related issues came last. He said: "The war might be forced upon the 'resistance' because of the behavior of the occupation, its aggression and the settlement activities, aggression against Jerusalem and holy places, and the Gaza siege." <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2021/07/04/1422088.html>

to deserve taking such a risk. What would Hamas do in such cases? It will realize that its hands are tight. But this would put Hamas in the same position as the PA finds itself today, i.e., without initiative or leverage except by dissolving itself and ending all types cooperation and coordination with Israel. It is true that Hamas enjoys much greater credibility among the Israelis than the PA. For example, Israeli leaders think that dissolving the PA and ending cooperation with Israel is a recipe for suicide for the PA's political elite in control of the West Bank. However, after four wars in 13 years, Hamas on the other hand has already demonstrated its willingness to take extreme risks, in order to achieve its political goals, including those that would entail an utterly destructive war in Gaza.

Second, Hamas is not ready to lead the Palestinian people because it lacks internal alliances and coalitions that unify groups from the various political spectrum as well as civil society from among those outside Fatah. Hamas' behavior since its election in 2006 prevented it from bringing a single domestic ally to stand with it, with the exception of Islamic Jihad and other minor armed groups in the Gaza Strip who do not enjoy an effective popular support. Perhaps the most glaring expression of a recent failure has been Hamas' inability to build an effective coalition with other likeminded electoral lists to oppose Abbas' decision, that cancelled the elections, despite the great common interest they all had. Without such coalitions in the future, Hamas will discover that its options are limited and hands tight in its dealings with the PA and Israel in the Gaza Strip and will not be, in this case, different than the PA and Fatah who failed miserably, because of lack of legitimacy and credibility, in mobilizing the public and in building a wide popular alliance able and willing to engage in a serious non-violent confrontation against the Israeli occupation despite the fact that they had no other realistic alternative.

Third, if Hamas assumed the leadership role the public seems to grant it, it will find itself much more battered by Israel than at any time in the past for two reasons. The first has to do with the role Hamas plays in domestic Palestinian politics and the direct impact of that role on Palestinian-Israeli relations. As long as Hamas' role remains restricted to the business of the Gaza Strip, it will be less attacked by Israel because in such a role Hamas contributes to the weakening and fragmentation of the Palestinian side. Moreover, a Hamas restricted role poses only a marginal threat to Israel compared to the role Hamas aspires to assume, which poses a serious threat to Israel's vital interests in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The second reason for the expected greater Israeli crackdown of Hamas has to do with the increased room for maneuver that Israel acquires when Hamas, not the PA and Fatah, is the enemy. It will be easier for Israel to win western public opinion when its conflict is with an organization accused of terrorism thereby gaining a greater western tolerance of its use of force against Hamas and its base in the Gaza Strip. It is true that the PA too has failed to effectively win western public opinion. This PA failure however has essentially been due to internal incompetence and loss of initiative on the part of the PA itself rather than due to the absence of a hospitable environment to deter Israel and contain its settlement expansion.

Fourth, the current popular shift, the one that views Hamas as more deserving of representing and leading the Palestinian people, might not last for long. It might be temporary, an emotional response reflecting the popular sentiments that while the PA has proven incompetent and absent at a time it was expected to play its most fundamental role in defending the Palestinian national interest, Hamas was willing to pay a heavy price in order to defend these interests. This shift in public attitudes could quickly turn against Hamas when the priorities of the public shift. It was the Netanyahu's government that created the ideal circumstances for Hamas' intervention in Jerusalem this past May. Netanyahu's behavior coincided with Abbas's decision to cancel the elections and thereby destroy public expectations of a better internal political future (one characterized by a return to democracy, liberties,

and rule of law) and a better economic future (one characterized by prosperity) if elections were to take place on time and in which Fatah would win and lead a ruling coalition. Given such priorities, generated by the public belief that the prospects for that future seemed realistic, most Palestinians preferred a future led by Fatah, not Hamas. However, when president Abbas cancelled the elections, he in effect destroyed that dream and forced the public to abandon it and look for other priorities. The new priority was made possible by the measures taken by Netanyahu in Jerusalem. Needless to say, a little wisdom and a more rational policy on the part of the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships can bring about another reversal in public attitudes. In other words, given the right circumstances, the public sees Hamas as the most appropriate leader to confront Israel and sees Fatah, assuming Fatah is willing, as the most fit to lead in the domestic and economic realms.

Hamas' choices:

Would these reasons convince Hamas to backtrack and abandon the confrontational role the public is asking it to undertake against Israel, not only because of its limited resources and the great challenges it would confront, but also in a search for alternative ways of escaping its current unilateral control over the Gaza Strip?

The backtracking option sounds convincing if Hamas' leadership came to the conclusion that despite all, a reconciliation deal with Fatah and president Abbas remains feasible and therefore a return to elections and reintegration into the formal political process should remain the goal. However, it probably will not be easy for Hamas' leadership, particularly the one that assumed that role in the Gaza Strip since 2017, to have trust in Abbas once again. That leadership, led by Yahya Sinwar, thinks it has granted Abbas all his wishes and accepted his conditions for reconciliation but that he deceived it and reneged on his promises more than once. Nonetheless, the calculation of other Hamas leaders might be different from those of the Gaza leadership and might therefore find itself forced to resume its dialogue with Abbas and Fatah in a search for an exit that would save the Palestinians the destiny of other Arabs, such as the Syrians, the Yemenis, and the Libyans. in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Hamas might also consider the backtracking option, by returning to its safer base in the Gaza Strip, if it believed in the feasibility of a long term *hudna*, or truce, with Israel. The prospects for this alternative seems more remote than the first one because Israel has various preconditions for such a deal involving Israeli prisoners and the bodies of two soldiers as well as Hamas' arms and its military activities in the West Bank in return for negotiating Hamas' conditions regarding the release of a large number of Palestinian prisoners, the removal of the restrictions on the movement of people and goods and international travel and transportation, access to greater quantities of water, electricity, and fuel, and the removal of obstacles in front of great economic investment and access to external markets.

By contrast, Hamas might want to play the role requested by the public if its leadership elite came to the conclusion that the prospects for reconciliation with Fatah and president Abbas are slim to non-existent and that the chances for reaching a long term *hudna* with Israel were low, not only because of the anticipated difficulties regarding the arrangements to be implemented in the Gaza Strip, but more so because the continued occupation of the West Bank entails an unavoidable clash sooner or later, which would lead to the collapse of any long term *hudna*.

Regardless of whether other options were available and even if public demand for a Hamas leadership of the conflict with Israel wanes, Hamas might decide to play the now publicly requested role if religious metaphysical motives were at play. For example, Hamas might insist on guarding its gains in the last

war if its political and religious elites were convinced that the timing of the current conflict, despite all the risks, is one dictated by a higher authority, that of God; that it is an essential component of the “the second of the warnings,” or *Wa’d al Akhirah*, and the “inevitability of Israel’s demise,” or *hatmiyyat zawal Isra’el*, two highly controversial issues within the circles of Islamist scholars and activists, particularly in Palestine. The change in Hamas’ language, and that of other Islamists, that accompanied the pursuing of the last war with Israel, compared to the language used in other Hamas-Israel wars since 2008, might be partially explained by this metaphysical belief regarding the existence of a so-called “Quranic prophecy” that would take place in 2022. The Palestinian Islamist movement witnessed during the past 30 years a debate around a so-called “numerical or digital miracle,” of which the timing of Israel’s demise is central, a debate that started in 1992 with a publication by a highly respected Islamist scholar of Quarn. The last confrontation between Hamas and Israel played an important role in confirming the believers’ view of the accuracy of the prophecy and its perceived timing in al Isra’ chapter (*soura* 17) in the Quran. It should be stated however, that these assertions have been met with vigorous rejection of this kind of use of Quranic verses from various Islamist scholars⁴.

Needless to say, an improved performance by the PA and Israel might slow down the current march toward a confrontation. A PA performance that acknowledges the place of Hamas in the Palestinian political system, puts that system back on the road to accountability, separation of powers, and rule of law, and restores hope in the viability of diplomacy and negotiations might bring about a new reality, one that could slow down or prevent a slide into a new paradigm shift in Palestinian-Israeli relations in which the conflict reverts to its existential nature under a Hamas leadership. Otherwise, a continuation of the current path provides Hamas a fertile ground to put in place a new basis for pursuing domestic and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts. Such conflict will most likely be characterized by the absence of internal trust and one in which popular confidence in the demise of Israel and the existential nature of the conflict, either us or them, prevails.

⁴ The original 1992 publication in Arabic has been written by Bassam Jarrar, Palestinian scholar, under the title “the demise of Israel, a prophecy or a numerical coincidence,” and published by the Ramallah-based Noon Center for Quranic Studies (issued on 5 August 1993). For an Islamist critique, see the following two YouTube examples. Mohammad al Mubayyed, under the title “numerical calculations and the question of Israel’s demise in the year 2022”: [الحسابات العددية ومسألة زوال إسرائيل](#): [YouTube](#) - سنة 2022م and Dr. Iyad al Qannibi under the title “Is the demise of Israel in the year 2022 a Quranic prophecy?”: [هل زوال دولة إسرائيل عام 2022 نبوءة قرآنية؟ د. إياد قنبي](#): [YouTube](#)

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