

Hamas' New Policy Document

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Hamas' new policy document does not cancel or supersede the organization's charter. Rather, its goal is to enable Hamas to maintain control over the Gaza Strip and to improve relations with Sunni-Arab states. In its new document, Hamas is expected to present itself as an Islamist-nationalist organization, agree to the concept of a temporary Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, and avoid using the anti-Semitic language that is included in its charter. However, it will still reject Israel's right to exist and support an armed struggle against it.

Introduction

The publishing of Hamas' new policy document follows a long and complex process of elections to the Hamas institutions, which recently brought new blood into Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Israeli prisons, and the Palestinian diaspora.

The new document is a policy plan, and not a new charter, which introduces Hamas in an updated manner to the Palestinian public and the international community. The document outlines Hamas' policy approaches, in light of geo-political developments in the Middle East and the organization's changing needs. It sidelines the Hamas Charter, but it definitely does not cancel or replace it.

From an Israeli standpoint, the document is not a game-changer. Despite an evident effort by Hamas to amend its political rhetoric and to align it with the modern era, Hamas sticks with its traditional positions regarding Israel. It refuses to acknowledge Israel as a legitimate state and denies its right to exist. Hamas continues to regard armed struggle, the *jihad*, as the right way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the establishment of a Palestinian state from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. Until that happens, Hamas is willing to accept short-term solutions, which can ease the lives of Palestinians.

Over the last decade, Hamas shifted from being an Islamist opposition group to establishing itself as the ruling party in the Gaza Strip. This led to a reassessment of policies and approaches. Hamas is currently not limited by the thinking of a specific spiritual leader, as it was in the days of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. Therefore, it seeks religious guidance in the Muslim Brotherhood and in the rulings of senior religious scholars like Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi.

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In its new policy document, Hamas defines itself as an Islamist-nationalist organization. As such, its members and supporters expect religious justifications and explanations for Hamas actions. This self-definition prevents Hamas from detaching itself from the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the new document is an attempt by the Hamas leadership, headed by Khaled Mashel, to put forth a more pragmatic platform for action. The decision by Hamas to do so was influenced by recent changes in the organization's leadership, inter-generational as well as geographic (West Bank vs. Gaza Strip) competition within the organization, and tensions between Hamas' political and military wings.

When phrasing the new document, Hamas took into account the limitations of the Islamist rhetoric and the weariness it invokes among the Palestinian public and the Arab world. Hamas had to use a more moderate language, in order to get closer to Egypt that serves as its main external gate to the world. Hamas is also seeking a path to join the PLO, as a first step towards assuming the leadership of the Palestinian national movement. The new document highlights the historic as well as the current significance of the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people. But, in parallel, the document criticizes the Palestinian Authority (PA) for being established through an agreement with Israel.

The Hamas document calls on the PA to fulfill the needs of the Palestinian people, also through ceasing its security cooperation with Israel. This is in line with Hamas' previous positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The new dimension in the document is Hamas' willingness to accept a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital, still without recognizing Israel. This is mostly a lip-service that Hamas is willing to pay Fatah, in order to increase its chances of being admitted to the PLO.

The establishment of a Palestinian state without recognition of Israel is not a feasible scenario, as the basis of negotiations between Israel and the PLO is the principle of mutual recognition. Should the Palestinians refuse to recognize Israel, no progress is likely to be made in the peace process. Moreover, managing daily lives in the Palestinian territories requires close cooperation between the Palestinian and Israel, which will be impossible without mutual recognition. Israel and the Palestinians also have some shared interests, which can only be fulfilled by working together. Mutual recognition is therefore a must, even within the asymmetric power balance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The new language introduced in the Hamas document regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reflects the organization's current political distress, rather than a genuine willingness to moderate its positions. Hamas continues to insist on structuring the Palestinian system according to religious principles, as an alternative to policies promoted by the PLO. This is not compatible with a formal acceptance of the two state solution.

The Need for Regional Support

Whenever Hamas projects signs of pragmatism, it does so to consolidate and prolong its control over the Gaza Strip. To rule Gaza effectively, Hamas needs a continuous cease-fire with Israel, while keeping the option of another round of low-intensity conflict with it. Hamas also needs to manage de facto ties with Israel, in order to enable imports and humanitarian aid to flow into Gaza. Extremist religious fractions in Gaza – like the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and *al-Salafiya al-Jihadiya* – criticize Hamas for such conduct. They put forth more radical alternatives, which pose a challenge to Hamas

Through its new policy document, Hamas reaches out to regional Arab and Muslim actors that can assist the organization in maintain its rule in Gaza. Hamas understands that the Gaza Strip's main lifeline is through the Rafah border crossing with Egypt. However, in order to be capable of cooperating with Egypt as necessary and possible, Hamas needs to differentiate itself from the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the enemy of the Egyptian regime.

It is not by chance that Hamas' new document does not refer to the Muslim Brotherhood as the organization's ideological base. While this omission may be a source of tensions for Hamas with Turkey and Qatar (unless the document's wording was coordinated with them), it will enable Hamas to strengthen its political dialogue with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. From Egypt's perspective, Hamas has the potential to play an instrumental role in confronting the threat posed by the Islamic State in Sinai.

The new document's insistence on the concept of *jihad* will help Hamas maintain its practical relationship with Iran, which is a major strategic and military ally of Hamas.

The Image of the Enemy

The image of the enemy, as presented in Hamas' new document, represents an interesting change from the past. In it, unlike in its original charter, Hamas defines the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in national terms, as a conflict against the Zionist movement. The document excludes from enemy circles the Jews as a collective and Judaism. This is reminiscent of the nationalistic rhetoric of the PLO, anchored in its 1968 charter, which makes a distinction between Zionism as a national movement and Judaism as a Semitic religion. The change in Hamas rhetoric stems from its desire to stave off charges of anti-Semitism. In its charter (from 1988), Hamas adopts claims taken from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which accuse the Jews of promoting global instability through control of media and bank systems.

Hamas is currently trying to adopt a different political language; one of a national liberation movement. The new document stipulates that the Palestinian struggle is against the "Zionists" and "occupiers" only, and sidelines the religious dimension of the conflict, which is still central to the organization's ideology. Hamas' charter, which is not replaced by the new document, regards the entire land of Palestine as Muslim property (*waqf* land). It therefore clearly rejects the concept of a two state solution.

Through its new document and the dropping of old anti-Semitic language, Hamas seeks to gain recognition from the BDS movement and the European radical left, and to develop collaboration with them. From Hamas' point of view this can be a step towards enhancing the organization's international legitimacy and towards increased engagement with it by more mainstream actors in Europe.

Conclusion

Hamas has been undergoing substantial changes since it entered the political field in 2005. Nonetheless, it has yet to meet the requirements that will allow it to become a legitimate political actor in the eyes of the international community. At the end of the day, Hamas aspires to win over the leadership of the Palestinian national movement from the PLO. But, it has to operate within a political reality that was created by the PLO and that fundamentally contradicts Hamas' own worldview.

After ten years of direct Hamas control and of developing independent sub-state institutes in the Gaza Strip, the new document is supposed to serve as a springboard to Hamas' quest for increased power. It blurs the difference between the national and the religious discourses, and promotes a Palestinian struggle that combines Islamic and national values, as well as anti-colonial undertones.

While Hamas is doing so, significant contradictions emerge. The new document agrees to a temporary Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, but it is clear that such a state cannot be established without negotiation and agreement with Israel, which Hamas refuses to recognize. There is also a major contradiction between the readiness for some territorial compromise and the claim that the entire land of Palestine is Muslim property.

The new document is not intended to replace the Hamas charter nor cancel it. It is a tool meant to enable Hamas' leadership, which is currently in crisis mode, to maneuver between three fields: Palestinian politics, where Hamas is struggling to maintain the upper hand over Fatah; inter-Arab politics, where Hamas is trying to gain legitimacy (also for its rule in Gaza) at the expense of the PLO; the international community, to which Hamas wants to appear more moderate (exactly as the PLO did in 1974, when it adopted its [Ten Point Plan](#)).

Unlike the PLO, which used the motif of national unity as a tool to bridge between its different factions, the Hamas has firm religious ideological pillars on which it can stand. They give the organization internal power, but also limit its flexibility and room for political maneuvers. Even if Hamas does not explicitly declare itself as a part of the larger Muslim Brotherhood movement, it does not detach itself from it. The Muslim Brotherhood framework is important to Hamas in its efforts to develop its foreign relations and to achieve international legitimacy. Nevertheless, Hamas softens the Muslim Brotherhood's slogan that "Islam is the answer", and limits it to an affirmation that Islam encompasses all aspects of life and is appropriate for any time and place.

The publication of Hamas' new document is part of a process intended to expand the organization's policy options. However, the document does not include game-changing messages. Hamas is not discarding old principles nor is it forsaking *jihad* as a fundamental value and a core stepping stone in the liberation of Palestine. Hamas' leadership understands the implications of renouncing the armed struggle. If Hamas were to abandon the principle of *jihad*, it would not be the same Hamas anymore. *Jihad* is the glue that binds Hamas activists, and abandoning it would also cause Hamas to lose military and financial resources, which are vital to its survival within the fractured Palestinian system.

Nevertheless, the changes that Hamas is going through and the crisis that it currently faces could create opportunities for Israel. The temporary relegation of the *jihad* idea in Hamas' priorities and the organization's desire to get closer to moderate Arab-Sunni states provide new leverage over Hamas. Regional actors can make it clear to Hamas that in order to maintain its rule in Gaza, it must disavow violence. In such a situation, Hamas may agree to a long-term ceasefire with Israel (*hudna*) as an interim situation that could force it to give up *jihad* as a tool for changing the political situation.