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HAMAS

After the Arab Spring

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The Arab Spring has inaugurated a new reality in MENA¹ since it affected, more or less, all the states of the region. Palestine did not witness any dramatic political change such as those of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya but its political establishment has definitely felt the recent wind of change and tries to adapt to the new regional balance of power. Indeed, Hamas appears to adopt a new strategy concerning both its internal and external policies since the rise of moderate Islamists across the Middle East gives to the rulers of Gaza a clear model of tolerance and legitimacy.

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The aftermath of the Arab Spring has put certain past strategic choices of Hamas under question². Fellow Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood are on the rise and their modest rhetoric and practices might push Hamas towards less radical activism. In addition, the reconciliation process with Fatah and the probable membership to the PLO before the upcoming 2012 elections seem to drag Hamas away from armed struggle against Israel even though that change might cause serious disagreements among its cadres. The obvious effort to disengage from Bassar Al Assad's regime is another major strategic change for Hamas since the Syrian government used to be one of its closest supporters along with Iran. However, such an important policy shift might force Hamas out of Damascus. Hence, the group would need to find another willing ally to relocate its headquarters and support its agenda.

The "Islamic Resistance Movement" which was formed as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood could not remain unaffected by the empowerment of Islamist parties after the Arab Spring (e.g. Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco). Hamas does not feel isolated anymore since Mubarak is history and its old allies are in power through democratic elections³. The old days of the Egyptian blockade and even support⁴ for Israel's 2008 - 2009 attack against Gaza are gone. The Rafah border crossing between Egypt and Gaza is permanently open for Palestinians⁵ while the smuggling of goods and arms⁶ through tunnels has been increasing after the Egyptian Revolution. However, most of the rising Islamist movements compromise with democratic values in order to assume power and gain international legitimacy. Their moderate policy programs as well as their denunciation of violence might inspire Hamas to imitate them. Actually the Muslim Brotherhood seems willing to respect past agreements with other states, including even the peace agreement with Israel⁷. In addition, it has given up its armed branch decades ago and appears to adopt a more democratic program concerning the Egyptian society than its past rhetoric. Thus, it could be suggested that Hamas might call for a ceasefire against Israel and its internal opposition in order to gain legitimacy and time to regroup as well as support from abroad.

Nonetheless, even the idea for an important change of the major strategy of Hamas, armed struggle against Israel, has already provoked heated debates within the group that might escalate. Indeed, the exiled Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, Khaled Meshaal, as well as the deputy foreign minister of Gaza, Ghazi Hamad, have given signs that the organization might put down its guns and endorse non-violent popular protest against Israel. However, Ismail Haniya, Gaza's Prime Minister, and Mahmoud Zahar, one of the most senior members of Hamas in Gaza, appeared much less prone to these changes and prefer the continuation of a radical line⁸. On the one hand the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and other moderate Islamists have an increasing influence on the exiled leadership of Hamas but on the other hand the government of Gaza is obliged to weight their options carefully ahead of the elections in order to secure their power. Thus, Hamas continues its informal ceasefire towards Israel and tries to prevent other groups from firing rockets against the Jewish state but at the same time refuses to denounce its right for military strikes. Actually, the recent conflict in Gaza and the quick informal agreement reached among Israel, Egypt, Hamas and the smaller groups proves the growing influence of Egypt as well as the control which Hamas has over the smaller groups in Gaza⁹. The new effort for reconciliation with Fatah, under the Egyptian mediation, requires bold decisions and drags Hamas towards a more moderate path as well.

In May 2011, the Palestinian Authority's President, Mahmoud Abbas, and Hamas' leader, Khaled Meshaal, met in Cairo and signed an agreement to establish a unity government in order to prepare smooth elections in 2012¹⁰. Furthermore, the agreement gave to Hamas the option to join the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)¹¹. These

developments did not occur in a political vacuum since the Palestinian public opinion appears to be fed up and disappointed by the ongoing hostility between the two factions and demands their reconciliation. Indeed, a recent poll showed that an impressive 79,7% of the Palestinian public opinion supported the Fatah – Hamas reconciliation agreement¹². Fatah hopes to portray itself as the representative of most of the Palestinians and Hamas feels much closer to Cairo after the Arab Spring¹³. There are analysts that, rather prematurely, suggest that if Hamas joined the PLO it might go as far as to recognize Israel in the long term since the PLO has already done that¹⁴. Moreover, the probable shift from armed struggle or even terrorism to popular protest is reinforced by the negotiations with Fatah, the public opinion's opposition to the launching of Al-Qassam rockets¹⁵ and the urge of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the Arab Spring brought up another pressing matter for Hamas as well.

When the Arab Spring reached Syria and started shaking Assad's regime, Hamas refused to publicly support its ally much to the frustration of the Syrian government and Iran¹⁶. Apparently, the leaders of the Islamic Resistance Movement were wise enough to study the cases of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosny Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi before choosing sides. The Syrian regime appeared ruthless against the Sunni protestors and the more their casualties increased, the more Hamas diverged from Assad¹⁷. One by one Hamas' senior members leave Syria, while other countries such as Qatar and Jordan appear ready and willing to play a role in the Palestinian conflict¹⁸ by hosting the organization's headquarters as long as Hamas denounces terrorism. However, leaving their base in Damascus and refusing to back neither Assad's struggle for survival nor Iran's defence in the event of an attack against it were neither easy nor clear strategic decisions by Hamas¹⁹. Those two used to be their only direct allies in the region that were funding and arming Hamas. Time will show if the rift among them is deep and permanent as well as if Hamas' turn to modest Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and states, such as Qatar and Jordan, for support and assistance, will lead to its own moderation²⁰.

The Arab Spring has significantly influenced the MENA region and Hamas could not be an exception. The organization faces pressing internal and external calls to take decisions on important issues that might change its character²¹. The rise of a moderate Muslim Brotherhood, from which Hamas originates, appearing increasingly ready to comply with democratic rules in Egypt, pushes the Islamic Resistance Movement to put down its arms and denounce terrorism. In addition, the Palestinian public opinion seems to support reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah but that requires the group to show further moderation and pragmatism as well. Finally, the option of not siding by Assad in Syria's civil war might cost Hamas' place in the Iran – Syria – Hezbollah axis in the future. However, that scenario appears to be less costly after the Arab revolutions since other governments seem ready to let Hamas build not only its headquarters in their soil but close ties with their states as well.

NOTES

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