The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

Paul B. Rich, Isabelle Duyvesteyn

Hezbollah and Hamas

Publication details
Judith Palmer Harik, Margaret Johannsen

Published online on: 11 Jan 2012

HEzbollah and Hamas
Islamic insurgents with nationalist causes

Judith Palmer Harik and Margaret Johannsen

The cases of Hezbollah and Hamas illustrate a regional trend that features the use of asymmetric warfare by sub-state actors against a conventional army of overwhelming military power. Through rapidly expanding armouries and fighting capacities these Arab actors have recently succeeded in nudging the strategic balance in the Arab–Israeli conflict arena off balance. As a result, mounting tensions between Israel and its neighbours have drawn increased attention from scholars and practitioners who seek formulae for containing or eliminating these insurgencies.

What is known about Hezbollah and Hamas? What are the accepted positions and where are the lacunae in the state of our knowledge about these organizations? After reviewing information about which there is little debate on the origins, structures, ideologies and practices of each organization, we then present the major points of disagreement concerning their intent and the questions that remain unanswered about the two organizations. Finally we outline what we see to be the challenges that lie ahead for Hezbollah and Hamas.

As Hezbollah preceded the development of Hamas and in several ways has served as the model to emulate for the Palestinian group, we begin with the Lebanese organization.

**Hezbollah in review**

An adequate understanding of Hezbollah’s emergence and growth must take as a point of departure Lebanon’s experience of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the weakness of the state and the plight of Lebanon’s Shiite community from which the sub-state actor emerged.

**Transnational intervention in a weak state**

Squeezed between warring neighbours Syria and Israel, Lebanon’s internal confessional problems left it open to intervention by both actors in the 1960s. The civil war (1975–90) well demonstrates how each fished in Lebanon’s troubled waters by training and arming clashing Lebanese militias as surrogate forces. To this day authentic Lebanese sovereignty has not been regained (El-Khazen 2001; Harik 2010).

While Beirut was sinking into chaos Syria and other Arab states were backing leftist-Muslim militias and PLO forces operating against Israel from within Lebanon’s southern border. When
the PLO was evacuated as a result of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon the individual yet concurring strategic calculations of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and ally Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran resulted in a replacement force for the Palestinian fighters. That replacement force was introduced later as Hezbollah (Byman 2005; Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 1997: 207–22).

In control of the Bekaa Valley where Hezbollah was materializing, Syria provided logistics and security for the fledgling movement and Iran handled organizational, training and financial details as well as supplying weapons for the insurgency. These arrangements remain unaltered despite efforts by Lebanese, regional and international actors to interrupt them.

**Shiite deprivation and alienation**

Concentrated in the South, the Bekaa and Beirut’s southern suburb, the Shiites rank lowest on Lebanon’s socio-economic scale (UNDP and CDR 1998: ES–2) Members of this deprived group joined leftist parties to express their discontent until communal mobilization occurred in the 1970s (Cobban 1986: 137–59). Led by Imam Musa Sadr, the Movement of the Dispossessed (al-Harakat al-mahrumin) eventually spun off a pool of militant young muslims who formed and led Hezbollah. Among them was General Secretary Hasan Nasrallah, a charismatic cleric who over the course of his tenure has won broad admiration for his role in the political setbacks handed Israel by his militants as well as for his personal reliability (Harik 2003: 25–6; 2004: 72–3).

The repeated Israeli attacks that led thousands to seek refuge in South Beirut, a squalid and densely populated area, provided impetus for recruitment into the fighting wing forming in the Bekaa Valley as did Hezbollah’s ideological appeal and the salaries and benefits provided by the organization through the good offices of Iran (Kramer 1993: 539–56).

Over the years, with Iran’s help, donations from expatriates, regional supporters and self-financing, Hezbollah has cemented its popularity by addressing the substandard living conditions and lack of public facilities in all areas of Shiite concentration (Harik 1994: 81–93). Among the institutions the organization has established are hospitals, clinics, agricultural stations, schools, a micro-credit institution (al-Qurd al-Hasan – ‘the Benevolent Gift’) and more than half dozen charitable associations (Harb forthcoming 2011: 106–36; Harik 2006). Hezbollah’s Jihad al-Binaa (Reconstruction Campaign) is credited with the construction and highly efficient management of some of these as well as other projects (el-Moubayed 1999: 23–8).

**Ideology and organization**

Hezbollah’s goals and beliefs were first publicly announced in an open letter published in Beirut’s as-Safir daily newspaper in February 1985. The letter contained a note of reassurance for Lebanese Christians who might fear an Islamic takeover of the state and stated that Hezbollah’s enemies were limited to those who furthered US and Israeli aims in Lebanon (Schapiro 1987).

Hezbollah professes the Twelver Shiite ideology and fully espouses Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision of Shiite activism as distinct from the passive role played by sect leaders over the centuries (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002: 69–78). It affirms that an individual is to resist injustice by whatever means he or she possesses. According to Hezbollah’s Under-Secretary Na’im Qassim ‘Resistance is a way of life’ (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002: 112; Qassim 2005: 58–69; Kramer 1990a). The Party of God applies the Islamic injunction to protect and serve the umma (Community of the Faithful) and to combat the usurpers of Islamic lands as the moral underpinning of its holistic concept of warfare.
Hezbollah is governed by the *majlis ash-Shura* – a consultative council of elected members headed by Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. Policy decisions are taken by discussion among members until consensus is reached. Hezbollah’s military and security branches are directly linked to this council. An Executive Council linked to the organization’s administrative and political apparatus oversees foreign, social, educational, financial unionist and parliamentary affairs (Hamzeh 2004: 46, 71–3; Rabil 2008: 5–12). There are reports of an overseas branch governing activities in the United States, Latin America and Africa (Farah 2006; Diaz and Newman 2006).

The three areas of Shiite concentration are administered in top-down fashion and on a street-by-street basis in Beirut’s southern suburb where tight security prevails (Harb 2011: 132–34).

**From guerrilla organization to Arab army**

**The 1982 Israeli invasion**

Hezbollah’s emergence during the Israeli invasion and, according to Israeli and US sources, its implication in a string of terrorist activities during that turbulent period, place it on the US State Department’s list of terrorist organizations. However, the 1985 withdrawal of Israeli forces to a so-called ‘Security Zone’ within Lebanon at the frontier afforded the Party of God a legitimate resistance persona that it capitalized on during its 17-year-long guerrilla campaign to oust the foreign troops and their South Lebanese Army (SLA) allies. The war of attrition drew major Israeli air and land incursions in 1993 and 1996 to drive out Hezbollah but increased Israeli casualties finally forced Israeli withdrawal behind a blue line designated by UN forces in May 2000 (see also Chapter 21 by Sergio Catignani in this volume). In full control of the frontier Hezbollah was now able to increase the range of its rockets and to fortify the area despite the presence of UN peacekeeping troops stationed there.

**The 2006 conflict and its political aftermath**

The 34-day battle unleashed after Hezbollah’s capture and killing of Israeli soldiers on 12 July 2006 resulted in the deaths of 159 Israeli and 1,019 Lebanese and massive displacement on both sides of the frontier (Harel et al. 2009). While Lebanon was subjected to intensive Israeli bombardment of infrastructure, dwellings and businesses, Israel’s ground offensive was nevertheless thwarted by well-trained Hezbollah cadres and village fighters (Exum 2006: 9–10). During the battle the Israeli state came under a relentless barrage of Katyusha rockets and medium range missiles that for the first time reached as far as Haifa (Makovsky and White 2006, Exum 12–13).

Military analysts noted Hezbollah’s new blend of conventional and guerrilla tactics (Biddle 2007: 29–45) and its effective use of weapons (Exum 2006: 3–4; Kulik 2006; Cordesman et al. 2007).

In the autumn of 2006 Hezbollah sought to protect its arms by pressuring the anti-Syrian authorities to form a national unity government in which its allies would have a blocking veto. The refusal by these authorities to cooperate led to a paralysis of the government by a massive sit-in spearheaded by Hezbollah that closed down Beirut’s commercial sector for close to two years. In 2007 opposition MPs also boycotted parliamentary sessions called to nominate a president whose election might jeopardize the resistance (Harik 2007: 123–5). A compromise candidate was finally endorsed in 2008. In May Hezbollah consolidated its political grasp by scotching a government move to close down its intelligence system and by forcibly disarming opposing militias. These acts together with its possession of increasingly powerful weaponry augmented the survivability of the Hezbollah power structure in Lebanon (Cordesman and Nerguizien 2010).
Outstanding issues

Hezbollah and the Lebanese state: hidden Islamic agenda or pragmatic politics?

Those who suggest Hezbollah has a pragmatic inclination (Hamzeh 1993; Norton 1998, 1999; Harik 2004: 47; Harb and Leenders 2005: 189–91) point to several factors that limit the scope of the movement’s future plans for Lebanon. Foremost is the impossibility of any one group’s capacity to overturn the well-entrenched, multi-confessional political system without engendering a bloodbath. In part the Lebanese civil war was fought to establish a more equitable representation of the Muslim portion of the population rather than to change the political formula of sectarian power sharing.

Moreover any plans to overturn the prevailing Lebanese political system have also been found to be impractical given Syria’s interest in keeping the various communities in Lebanon divided and thus manageable. Pragmatic Hezbollah leaders are therefore thought to be more intent on integrating into the existing political system, enabling them to build power and preserve and expand their resistance agenda; this will enable them to maintain their hegemony in the Shiite community rather than attempt to create an Islamic state.

On the other side of this debate are those who assert that Hezbollah’s commitment to an Islamic state for Lebanon is programmatic rather than ideological (Kramer 1990a; Sharara 1996; Badran 2009). Citing organic ties with Iran and the expansion of mosques and seminaries in Lebanon over the years, and underlining leaders’ insistence that resistance is Hezbollah’s raison d'être and that all of Lebanon should join it, Badran makes the case that the latter plans to engulf the Lebanese state rather than to integrate it.

All the way to Jerusalem – ideology or programme?

Hezbollah’s larger intent is the subject of considerable debate among analysts and scholars. Those who argue that the organization has fixed goals to destroy Israel refer to the Islamist premises that underpin its actions and Iran’s and the discourse of its leaders (Kramer 2006, 1990a; Harel et al. 2009: 259–60; Karman 2003: 15–16; Zisser 2002, 11). Others refute this position arguing that the Party of God’s limited agenda focuses on the recovery of Lebanese and Syrian occupied territories and on assistance to Hamas’ struggle rather than on plans to liberate Jerusalem through its own efforts (Hamzeh 2004: 80, 108–35; Harik 2004: 47–8; Byman 2003; Hajjar 2002: 16; Norton 1999: 3, 1998: 46). Nevertheless, Hezbollah’s expanding and more sophisticated weaponry makes a greater role for Hezbollah in the Palestine–Israel conflict arena more plausible than previously thought.

The challenges that lie ahead

Hezbollah faces two major challenges related to its survival as a resistance organization and both concern its capacity to retain the allegiance of domestic and foreign supporters in the face of US and Israeli efforts to erode its support.

Shiite and national solidarity vis-à-vis Israel’s strategy of ‘cumulative deterrence’

‘Cumulative deterrence’ attempts to elicit the compliance of a recalcitrant actor by repeated applications of force assuming that resistance will eventually become too costly to continue (Almog 2004–5). This strategy has guided Israel’s destruction of Lebanese infrastructure as a
means of coercing Beirut to rein in Hezbollah. Yet while it has caused grumbling about Hezbollah’s independent resistance agenda among officials the strategy has failed to elicit any effective government action against the Party of God.

This strategy was also applied to the Shiite community in 2006 in a drive to erode its continued support for the Party of God. Many Shiite villages as well as Shiite streets and homes in divided villages were targeted by Israeli aircraft and destroyed at that time. Most notable was the Israeli Air Force’s levelling of 200 high-rise residential buildings in the southern suburb.

Hezbollah was able to overcome the negative fallout of this strategy by the anger generated among Shiites and others at the extent of Israeli damage and pride in the Party of God’s resistance. The large amounts of cash distributed by Hezbollah to those who had suffered loss or damage to property immediately after the ceasefire also went a long way towards mollifying discontent. Property owners and renters in Beirut have since received new dwellings at Hezbollah’s expense as part of its al-Waad (The Promise) project. Despite these measures it is nevertheless uncertain how much the ‘resistance community’ can continue to take from the Israeli air force without abandoning Tel Aviv’s real target.

**Relationship with regional allies and institutional autonomy**

The durability of Hezbollah’s relationship with Iran and Syria under changing geopolitical conditions might be problematic for the Party of God in the future. For example a land for peace deal worked out between Israel, Lebanon and Syria could cause the redundancy of Hezbollah’s fighting wing. Abandoning Hezbollah might also be a part of a future Iranian deal struck with the United States. The challenge for the organization’s resistance agenda is therefore to work towards autonomy while at the same time maintaining positive relations with its allies. This brings up the question of whether what seems to have developed into a partnership with its allies rather than surrogacy will continue in another war with Israel that might feature an escalation of asymmetric warfare.

**Hamas: an overview**

Hamas’ emergence and growth originate from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, in particular the Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip since the War of 1967, and the internal rivalry between Hamas and Fatah for leadership in the occupied territories.

**The making of a national-religious resistance movement**

Hamas¹ was established in response to the outbreak of the first Intifada in December 1987 (Aronson 1990; Legrain 1990; Alimi 2006). It emerged out of the Society of the Muslim Brothers founded in Egypt in 1928 (El-Awaisi 1991). In 1945, the Brotherhood created a Palestinian offspring, which spread quickly until in 1948 its branches were severed by the results of the first Israeli–Arab war. Until the War of 1967, when both territories fell under Israeli occupation, the Palestinian Brotherhood was more or less marginalized, whereas the Palestinian secular nationalists flourished in exile. Under Israeli occupation, the Brotherhood re-emerged in the mid 1970s. They initially focused on institution-building as well as social, educational and welfare activities, turning the Gaza Strip with its large refugee population into its stronghold. By the late 1970s, they had established themselves as a notable civil society actor and competed successfully for representation in professional, student and trade union organizations – more so in the Gaza Strip, less so in the West Bank. In the first half of the 1980s, the Gaza branch under the guidance of its spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin established a military arm and began collecting
weapons and organizing weapon training. Early in 1988, the Palestinian Muslim Brothers joined the Intifada under the name of Hamas. Through its charitable programmes Hamas could establish a reputation for efficiency and integrity.

**Pinned against political compromise**

In the course of the uprising, Hamas developed into a formidable political rival to the secular nationalists (Schiff and Ya’ari 1991). In 1991, Hamas formally established as its military organization the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades. The Brigades were to support the goals of Hamas, which, after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 was determined to sabotage any progress towards Israeli–Palestinian agreement and conciliation through negotiations, doubting that they would achieve the Palestinians’ legitimate rights (Ghanem 2008: 473f.) and at the same time viewing the vision of compromise as an ideological and political threat (Kurz 2009: 76). Hamas carried out numerous attacks against both Israeli soldiers and civilians. In the mid 1990s, the attacks took the most violent form of suicide bombings (Ahmed 2005). These bombings served various purposes, including retaliation against Israeli assassinations of Hamas leaders, battling for popular support, undermining the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority, derailing the peace process and increasing Palestinian leverage over Israel (Bloom 2005: 19–44; Gunning 2007a: 213). Ten years later, these so-called martyr operations had practically been replaced by rocket and mortar-grenade fire emanating from the Gaza Strip (Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center 2009). These attacks are far less deadly than the suicide bombings, but Israel nevertheless sees them as a strategic threat, especially as the range of the rockets has increased over the years (Johannsen 2009a: 181). The value of the rockets was captured by Mahmoud az-Zahar, co-founder of Hamas and a member of the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip, when in 2007 he stated that

Rockets against Sderot will cause mass migration, greatly disrupt daily lives and government administration and can make a much huger impact on the government.

We are using the methods that convince the Israelis that their occupation is costing them too much.

*(Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2007)*

**Ideology and religion**

Unlike the PLO, Hamas rejects eventual partition of the land as a basis for resolving the conflict with Israel. Its charter of 1988 gives expression to this refusal in religious terms stating that ‘the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day. It, or any part of it, should not be squandered: it, or any part of it, should not be given up’.² According to the document, Hamas’ goal is to liberate all of Palestine, extending from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea, from Zionist occupation. However, while clothing this goal in religious term, Hamas has always ‘“Palestinianized” the universal claim of Islam and given the movement a national-religious-political profile’ (Klein 1997: 112f.), while limiting its military operations to Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

**Structure and decision-making**

Hamas is composed of three wings which engage in social welfare, political leadership and military activities. In principle, the political leadership oversees all activities of the movement. Strategic control of the military wing’s behaviour by the political leadership is of high significance, as the
focal points of the two can differ considerably. Gunning identifies the military wing’s concerns as focusing on operational efficiency and secrecy, whereas the political wing is predominantly aiming at popularity, legitimacy and visibility (Gunning 2004: 236). Hamas’ political body consists of the political bureau with its office residing in Damascus, a national council and regional councils, which are chaired by local leaders in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The national council and the political bureau include members of both Hamas’ internal and external leadership. A consultative council considered to be the movement’s overarching political and decision-making body supervises Hamas’ activities through a number of committees. It includes representatives from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, from abroad and from Israeli prisons.

In order to avoid detection, the Qassam Brigades are highly decentralized, providing individual cells with a high level of autonomy. This has enabled them to develop individual links with the external leadership and occasionally bypass both the Brigades’ own hierarchy and the internal leadership in the occupied territories (Gunning 2007b: 134). The external leadership exercises control over much of the military wing’s funding. It is generally considered to be more hawkish than the internal leadership as the latter has to cope with the situation on the ground and hence tends to be more pragmatic (International Crisis Group 2007: 24).

**External support**

Until the freeze on the transfer of money to Hamas through the global banking system in 2006, Hamas could rely on the generosity of the Muslim Brotherhood organizations in more than 80 countries. It received funding from Palestinians living abroad as well as private donors in the wealthy Arab oil states such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, as well as those in the West (Zuhur 2008: 56f.). The 1979 Iranian revolution was a source of inspiration to Hamas. Still, Sunni Hamas’ suspicion of Iranian ambitions to export a Shiite revolution precluded any close relationship until the drying up of its sources of capital in 2006 caused Hamas to turn to Iran for alternative funding (Schanzer 2008: 139). Iran supports the Gaza government financially and facilitates equipping Hamas with weapons that are employed against Israeli targets, including rockets with a longer range than the home-made Qassams (Ben-David 2009: 7).

However, Hamas has not become an Iranian surrogate, with Syria’s political and logistical support remaining crucial to balancing Iran’s influence. This support ranges from harbouring Hamas’ political bureau to approving weapons delivery to the Gaza Strip to tolerating Hezbollah’s providing military training to Hamas fighters (Congressional Research Service 2006). The security cooperation between Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah serves the perceived interests of all four members of the so-called ‘axis of resistance’, with Iran and Syria viewing Hamas as instrumental in antagonizing Israel, and Hezbollah occasionally strengthened its resistance credentials by emphasizing its solidarity with the embattled sister movement (International Crisis Group 2010: 8).

**From rebel movement to ruling party**

Within less than two decades, Hamas has developed from a rebel movement to the ruling party of an embattled would-be state. Following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994, Hamas boycotted the ensuing presidential and parliamentary elections, viewing them as part of ‘Oslo’ (Declaration of Principles 1993) and hence illegitimate. Acting as extra-parliamentary opposition, it was not held responsible for the failure of the peace process and was spared the charges of corruption and mismanagement that the Fatah-dominated PA had to face. It nevertheless participated in the political structures of the
ssemi-autonomous territories through its elected representatives in student bodies, trade unions and professional associations. Four years into the second Intifada, Hamas started out to attain a new role in Palestinian politics by translating the popularity accrued from armed struggle and welfare work into political power. In the municipal elections of 2004/2005 Hamas fared well even in a number of alleged Fatah strongholds (Litvak 2005). In the national elections of 2006, the Hamas list ‘Change and Reform’ successfully campaigned on an agenda with emphasis on good governance and managed to win a comfortable majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).

Governing a quasi-state under quarantine

In its new role as governing party, Hamas fared less well. Driven into bankruptcy through a financial boycott orchestrated by Israel and the Western donor states (Johannsen 2010: 181) and fearing to be ousted from power by Fatah-led militias equipped by the United States, Hamas seized control of the security apparatus in Gaza and has since June 2007 ruled as the Gaza Strip’s de facto government, albeit under an Israeli imposed blockade. Hamas survived the devastations of the 22-day war of December 2008/January 2009, has since consolidated its control over Gaza’s territory, political institutions and society, and has moved towards a defensive, rather than offensive, posture vis-à-vis Israel (ICG 2010: 14). The political opposition has been more or less silenced and governance has become increasingly authoritarian. By taxing the tunnel trade, Hamas has additional sources of revenue, which, however, due to the blockade it cannot use to rebuild the economy and infrastructure. Finally, power consolidation in the tiny territory with a population of 1.5 million has been achieved at the expense of Hamas’ profile as a resistance movement and has practically nullified the ambitious reform goals of its election campaign.

Outstanding issues

As long as Hamas was primarily perceived as a resistance movement, the better part of the discussion concerned its long-term goals in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Since Hamas has assumed control of the Gaza Strip, however, its domestic agenda has also sparked some debate.

Erasing Israel from the map of the Middle East?

Controversy over the goals of Hamas’ charter takes a prominent place in the academic and political debate on Hamas. In light of Hamas’ principled refusal to recognize Israel (Goerzig 2010: 16), some see Hamas’ charter as evidence that the destruction of Israel has remained a long-term goal of the movement to this very day (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America 2009). Others dismiss the text as more or less obsolete, merely reflecting Hamas’ involvement in the beginnings of the first Intifada (Hroub 2006). In the aftermath of the terror attacks of 9/11, Hamas commissioned a draft for a new charter in order to counter efforts to identify all Islamic movements and organizations with al-Qaeda. After Hamas’ electoral victory in 2006, however, the project was put on hold so as not to nourish speculation that Hamas was bowing to outside pressure (Tamimi 2007: 147–50).

Long-term ceasefire: ploy or strategic decision?

According to Hamas, the way to achieve a Palestinian state in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, is by a long-term truce (hudna), offered time and again by Hamas.
Hezbollah and Hamas

leaders (Amayreh 2004; The Palestinian Information Center 2008; Haaretz 2008). In the light of Hamas’ ambiguous behaviour on the ground, phases of frequent attacks alternating with phases of restraint, the offer can be read as a mere tactical move. In fact, as long as Hamas has not departed from its vision of a liberated Islamic state in all of Palestine and refuses to commit to a final status settlement, the offer actually reinforces Israel’s fears that the time of a truce will be used for military entrenchment and build-up not only in the Gaza Strip but also in the West Bank (Al-Hashimi 2009: 59). Others argue that the past ceasefires declared by Hamas served a number of purposes, namely to trigger a political process, to test Israeli intentions, to demonstrate political leadership as well as standing on equal ground with internal political rivals. As such they testify to the movement’s ability to respond to changes in political opportunity structures (McAdam 1996: 27) and develop a greater interest in shaping Palestinian society than in liberating all of Palestine (Gunning 2007a: 235).

Resistance and governance: complement or contradiction?
The participation of Hamas in local and national elections has met with a mixed response. On the one hand, it was seen as evidence that the organization was prepared to face up to the electorate, accept the challenge of democratic accountability and integrate into the political system (Baumgarten 2006). This process, it was argued, would exert a moderating influence on the organization, encouraging it to sharpen its profile as a conservative party with a societal agenda based on a religious outlook which in turn implied encouraging electoral participation (Gunning 2007a: 170f.). Others warned that democratic elections were fundamentally incompatible with the participation of an organization in arms. They doubted that integrating into the political system provided enough of an incentive for Hamas to discard its violent traits rooted in the armed resistance. In this view, admitting Hamas to the elections under these circumstances merely encouraged the movement to emulate the Lebanese Hezbollah and tap both sources of power: one emanating from the ballot box, the other one from the gun barrel.

Islamizing the Gaza Strip: long-term goal or default option?
In the election campaign of 2006, Hamas ran on a platform of good government, with only a few references to Islam (Hroub 2006), two of them of a very general character, the other two policy oriented but none in any way indicative that Hamas, if it were to govern, intended to forcefully Islamize the Palestinian society and institutions. After having assumed power in the Gaza Strip in June 2007, however, Hamas set out to Islamize society systematically, by introducing codes of conduct in the public sphere, controlling the courts, the media and the education system, and sustaining this process by introducing Islamic legislation (White 2009; McCarthy 2009).

It could be argued that by underplaying its religious planks (Malley 2006), Hamas had intentionally misled those of its voters who merely wanted to show their dissatisfaction with the Palestinian Authority. One could also make the case that for want of material resources to take care of the needs of the residents, Hamas saw streamlining society as a means of securing its power. Finally, Hamas could try to appease its own radicalized base and jihadi Islamist rivals, who had initially denounced Hamas for running in the parliamentary elections and later criticized it for not implementing the sharia on the ground (Amayreh 2007: 7; International Crisis Group 2008: 26; Cohen and Levitt 2010: 15).
The challenges that lie ahead

Hamas faces two major challenges related to its dual character as a resistance movement and a de facto government. Both of them concern its capacity to retain the allegiance of domestic and foreign supporters in the face of efforts by rivals and enemies to undermine its popularity and eventually marginalize it as a factor in Palestinian politics.

Resistance and good governance

While it may be tempting for Hamas to pose as a government in Gaza, its enduring capability to escape accountability for the well-being of the population under its rule is questionable. Moreover, its entrenchment in Gaza collides with its professed commitment to Palestinian unity, which a majority of the population wants to be restored (Schanzer 2008: 191f.; Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research 2010). If real progress in the renewed negotiations between the PA and Israel occurs, Hamas’ uncompromising stance will be more difficult to uphold. Short of overcoming the split, the challenge for the organization’s agenda is therefore to demonstrate to its rival Fatah that it can undermine progress towards accommodation with Israel and at the same time signal to Israel that it is able and willing to contain violence emanating from the Gaza Strip if it sees it in its interest to do so (Johannsen 2009b: 229f.).

Despite efforts by Hamas to calibrate its resistance operations so as to reconcile both aims, it is uncertain how much its popular support base is willing to sacrifice for not abandoning its rulers. Renewed efforts to crack down on Hamas’ network of social and charitable organizations (Zuhur 2008: 52) or build up competing charities (Levitt 2006) could aggravate this problem for Hamas. Faced with the risk of losing ground in Gaza, Hamas may seek to facilitate a normalization of life by going along with arrangements for opening and regulating the border crossings (Agreement on Movement and Access 2005). As this would include prevention of weapons smuggling, the organization would have to put up with a weakening of its military capabilities. The challenge Hamas faces under these circumstances is to take along the military wing in order to prevent fragmentation of the movement. At the same time, past excuses for bad governance can no longer be credibly upheld. Here the challenge for Hamas lies in proving its ability to enforce law and order with the welfare of the residents in mind. If it fails it may decide to return to its roots and escalate the struggle for the liberation of all of Palestine.

Easing of regional tensions

Syria’s and Iran’s support for Hamas is connected to the latter’s capability to involve Israel in military conflict without risking direct confrontation with the Jewish state. An easing of regional tensions will therefore decrease Hamas’ value for its state sponsors. Advances towards a settlement of the Israeli–Syrian conflict over the Golan might dry up Syria’s support for Hamas’ military posture. In the same vein, a solution to the crisis related to Iran’s nuclear programme could weaken Iran’s motivation to support Hamas financially. Without material and logistical support from its two external sponsors, Hamas will find it increasingly difficult to continue its policy of pinpricks vis-à-vis Israel and at the same time legitimize its rule in the Gaza Strip vis-à-vis its residents. The challenge for Hamas’ agenda as de facto government is therefore to seek cooperation with its rival Fatah in stabilizing the volatile situation in the Gaza area. However, such a turnaround could very well put the organization’s cohesion to a test that it may not pass.
Conclusions

In spite of several similarities, the Lebanese and Palestinian insurgencies differ considerably in a number of aspects, most notably in their origins, military strength and political clout.

Hezbollah, an insurgency by design, has monopolized violence in Lebanon for more than 30 years and is now in a position to call the political and security shots in that country. It appears to retain the solidarity of a majority of Shiites based in no small part on the uninterrupted delivery of public and social services and on strong allegiance to its leadership.

Moreover reports of advanced weaponry and more effective Katyusha rockets flowing to Hezbollah indicate continued firm support from its transnational allies. In fact, while Shiite/Sunni tensions remain high in the region, Israel poses a threat to the implementation of the Islamic Republic’s nuclear programme; as long as issues of occupied Arab land remain unresolved there is little question of serious disruptions in the Iranian–Syrian–Hezbollah alliance. The Party of God seems to have covered all bases to insure the durability and dynamism of its brand of asymmetrical warfare.

Compared to Hezbollah, Hamas’ ability to safeguard its status is doubtful. Yet since its inception at the early stages of the first Intifada more than 20 years ago, it has developed into a serious stakeholder in Palestinian society and politics. Part of the territory slashed for future Palestinian sovereignty has fallen under its control and its military capabilities enable it to manipulate the PA’s dealings with the occupying power. However, the durability of its reign in the Gaza Strip is by no means certain while in the West Bank its political representatives have been sidelined and its activists persecuted.

As long as the US–Iranian tension persists and the conflict over territory involving Israel, Syria and Lebanon remains unresolved, Hamas can expect continued support from its allies. However, Hamas’ fortunes stand and fall with the future of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Resolving this seemingly intractable conflict and securing the consent of the Palestinians at large to the agreed solution would call into question Hamas’ rejectionist raison d’être. In what way Hamas would adapt to the new reality is a function of the balance of power between military commanders, absolutists and pragmatists.

Notes

1 Hamas is the acronym of al-Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya, meaning Islamic Resistance Movement.


Recommended readings

Hamas


Hezbollah


References

Hamas


Hezbollah and Hamas


The Palestinian Information Center (2008) ‘Haniyeh to Reiterate that the Truce must be Mutual and Comprehensive’, 23 April. Available at: www.palestine-info.info/ar/default.aspx?xy2=U6Qg7k%2bcOd487MDH4m9rUxjEpMO%2bhi7ywWtgFXMRCLwX/txAxAry/aQnuZ7bZDMKnKRMzRUrG44hI186aQE9OZCmnn%2bYcYsblod6ggMGykz2llZte8dUnw657nXvC3hc1fyc=.


Hezbollah

Kulik, Amir (2006) ‘Hizbullah vs the IDF: The Operational Dimension’, *Strategic Assessment* 9, 3 Tel Aviv: Jafee Center for Strategic Studies, November.
Hezbollah and Hamas


