

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE EVOLUTION OF HAMAS IN THE CONTEXT OF
THE SYRIAN CRISIS

by
CHRISTOPHER NICOLAOS SIDIROPOULOS

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by
CHRISTOPHER NICOLAOS SIDIROPOULOS

Approved by:



Dr. Tariq Moraiwed Tell, Assistant Professor
Dean's Office

First Reader



Dr. Tarif Khalidi, Professor
Dean's Office

Second Reader

Date of project presentation: January 3, 2014

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

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This project discusses the evolution of the ideology of Hamas within the context of the current Syrian crisis (or civil war). After a brief overview of the founding of the movement and its function as an outgrowth of the Muslim Brotherhood, it examines Hamas' relationship with the Syrian regime (pre-crisis) and its stance on the Syrian civil war.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The events of the Tunisian revolution have brought about much upheaval throughout the region, leading to the seeming domino effect of the Arab Spring throughout the region. Some Arab countries witnessed the overthrow of authoritarian rule which was followed by the euphoria and hope for the installation of democratically elected governments as seen in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt¹. Protests have erupted in other Arab countries such as Jordan, Kuwait, Algeria and Morocco. These momentous events have given the previously suppressed partisans of Islamist movements the impetus to come to power in key countries: The Ennahda Party in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The countries of Syria and Bahrain have witnessed uprisings, the former developing into an all-out civil war that has pitted its regime against a popular and Islamist opposition². In all these cases, Islamist groups have played a major role in challenging their respective regimes. This project will focus on one particular Islamist movement within this context: Hamas.

The purpose of this project is to examine the ideology of an Islamist movement, Hamas, in the context of the current Syrian crisis (or civil war) as an extension of the Arab Spring, giving particular attention to its relationship with it and with the regime of

¹ In the case of Egypt, the first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, was removed from power by the military establishment on July 3, 2013. A crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood ensued and is the current situation in Egypt.

² Recently conflict among opposition groups has risen, especially between the more secular Free Syrian Army and the various Islamist and Jihadist groups such as Al-Nusra Front (which announced its allegiance to Al-Qaeda in April 2013) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Clashes among Islamist groups have also occurred, where the aforementioned groups have competed to control key rebel posts in Syria.

Bashar al-Assad. The project will: 1. Give an overview of Hamas as an Islamist movement, looking at its founding and beginnings, its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, and its ideological platform, 2. Review its function as a movement of national resistance, 3. Examine its relationship with the Syrian (Bashar al-Assad) regime before the onset of the civil war in 2011, and 4. Examine its relationship and stance on Bashar al-Assad's regime vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war.

CHAPTER II

HAMAS AS AN ISLAMIST MOVEMENT

A. Founding and Beginnings

Israel and the Occupied Territories were witnessing an escalation of clashes and tensions between the Israelis and the Palestinians. This rise in tensions culminated into the *First Palestinian Intifada*. Many point to a particular incident on the night of December 8, 1987, which resulted in the deaths of a number of Palestinians, as the launch-pad of the *First Intifada*. On that night in Gaza, an Israeli military tractor ran through two vans carrying Palestinian workers heading home from work, killing three and injuring seven.³

The heightened tensions, clashes, and the outbreak of the *First Intifada* prompted the top leaders of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood—Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, Abdul ‘Aziz al-Rantisi, Salah Shehadeh, Muhammad Sham’ah, ‘Isa al-Nashar, ‘Abdul Fattah Dukhan, and Ibrahim al-Yazuri—to meet and establish the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) in an official announcement on December 14, 1987.⁴ At the time, the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood was facing pressing issues that had to be dealt with: a debate within the organization regarding the passiveness with which it had been dealing with Israeli occupation, ever hardening of Palestinian living conditions and rise of poverty in Gaza, and its tensions with the rival Islamic Jihad Movement.⁵

³Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2007), 10.

⁴Khaled Hroub, *HAMAS: A Beginner’s Guide* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), 11-12.

⁵Hroub, 12.

The discussions within the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood on how to deal with Israeli occupation brought about two opposing views in the group. One group had a more classical approach to the issue where Palestinian society would first be Islamized in preparation for a “battle” with the occupiers at an undetermined date in the future⁶. The other group held a confrontational stance on the issue where action would be taken before the Islamization of Palestinian society. Support for the latter was bolstered by the outburst of the *First Intifada*, giving the confrontationists within the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood a momentous chance to lead (at least seemingly) the uprising against the occupation. This leadership was galvanized by their creation of the Hamas.

Recognizing the importance of bearing the flag of the *Intifada*, *Hamas* declared December 8, 1987 as the official date of its emergence⁷ (although, as seen above, its official announcement came on December 14). Upon its creation, Hamas claimed that it was a continuation of the Palestinian national struggle against Zionism, stressing that the “Islamic dimension ‘was characteristic of the struggle of the Palestinian people throughout, although it was overshadowed during the 1960s and 1970s by leftist attitudes that dominated the activities of the Palestinian *fida’yeen*.⁸”⁹ As such, Hamas adopted its parent organization the Muslim Brotherhood’s religious ideology: “Allah is its aim, the messenger is its ideal, the Qur’an is its constitution, *jihad* is its way, and death for the sake of God is

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Khaled Hroub, *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice* (Washington, D.C: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2010), 36.

⁸ *Fida’yeen*: those who were part of groups that fought against the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

⁹ Khaled Hroub, *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice*, 11.

its extreme wish.”¹⁰ The general goals of Hamas—establishing an Islamic society and state—are also in sync with those of the Muslim Brotherhood, as revealed by Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi’s comment in an on establishing an Islamic society:

Islam is Islam. There is a rift between Muslims and their religion. They understand their religion in the wrong way. There was a period of ignorance before the establishment of the new Islamic movements, which are reforming Islam with a view to getting people to understand their religion as it is. The fault lies not in Islam, but in Muslims’ understanding of it.¹¹

B. Ideology

The difference in goals between the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas appears in the latter’s specific goal of ending Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands (these goals are by no means contrary to the ideals of the Muslim Brotherhood, but Hamas also focused on specific aims rather than the Brotherhood’s broad, general objective in creating an Islamic state). In terms of reaching its specific goal, Hamas began to employ short-term and long-term aims, the former consisting of “the release of Palestinian prisoners, and opposing the further construction of settlements, deportation, and Israeli taxes” and the latter of “rejecting the idea of the international peace conference and the autonomy plan, continuing to resist the occupation, and liberating ‘believers’ and their homeland.”¹² These specific goals can be summed up in the group’s statement of purpose in the late 1990s: “The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) is a Palestinian national liberation movement that struggles for the liberation

¹⁰Iyad Barghouti, “The Islamists in Jordan and the Palestinian Occupied Territories,” in *The Islamist Dilemma: The Political Role of Islamist Movements in the Contemporary Arab World*, ed. Laura Guazzone (Berkshire: Garnet Publishing Limited, 1995), 133.

¹¹Michael Irving Jensen, *The Political Ideology of Hamas: A Grassroots Perspective* (New York: I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd., 2009), 49.

¹² *Ibid.*

of the Palestinian occupied lands and for the recognition of Palestinian legitimate rights.”¹³

There have been many accusations against Hamas, because of its denial of the right of Israel to exist and its inherent enmity to Zionism, that it is an anti-Semitic movement seeking the destruction of the Jews. Hamas has used Qur’anic teaching in confronting these accusations. As Jews are *People of the Book*, they are entitled to protection and freedom of practicing their religion, with the condition that they do not threaten the community of Muslims, or the *Ummah*. Hence, Hamas distinguishes their fight against the Israeli occupation, saying that their fight is with Jews’ offenses against Palestine, and not against Jews as an ethnic/religious group. This argument is demonstrated by one of the founding fathers and spiritual leaders of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin:

I want to proclaim loudly to the world that we are not fighting Jews because they are Jews! We are fighting them because they assaulted us, they killed us, they took our land and our homes; they attacked our children and our women; they scattered us. All we want is our rights. We don’t want more.¹⁴

In confronting the enemy (the Israeli occupation), Hamas lays out a concrete strategy:

1. The Palestinian people are the direct target of the Zionist settler occupation. Therefore, they must bear the main burden of resisting the unjust occupation. This is why Hamas seeks to mobilize the full potential of the Palestinian people and channel it into steadfast resistance against the usurper.
2. Palestine is the terrain for confrontation with the enemy. The Arab and Islamic countries are regions from which our Palestinian people can draw
3. support, particularly political, informational, and financial support; but the bloody confrontation with our Zionist enemy must take place on the sacred soil of Palestine...

¹³Tamimi, 147.

¹⁴Tamimi, 147.

4. There must be incessant resistance to and confrontation with the enemy in Palestine until we achieve victory and liberation. Jihad for the cause of God is our objective in that confrontation. The best method of resistance is to do battle with the soldiers of the enemy and destroy their armor.
5. It is our view that political action is one of the means for pursuing jihad against the Zionist enemy. Its objective should be to strengthen the endurance of our people in their jihad against the occupation; to mobilize the forces of our people and our *umma* in defense of our cause; to defend the rights of our people; and to present their just cause to the international community.¹⁵

The religious tone of the outline of Hamas' goal of national resistance is undeniable. Again, as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas' goal is establishing an Islamic society in Palestine which will help to lead to the overall ultimate goal of the establishment of a universal Islamic State. In the first chapter of its Charter, Hamas declares itself a "branch of the Muslim Brotherhood" where Islam is the "origin of the movement and where its geography 'extends to wherever Muslims are found.'"¹⁶ Thus the movement presents a dual goal: that of creating an Islamic society and liberating Palestine.

The dual goal of Hamas attracts a wider range of potential members than other movements; it attracts those who seek to liberate Palestine and those who seek to serve Islam. What Hamas emphasizes is that the two are linked and mutually serve and bolster one another, though the degree felt by individual members for the two may not necessarily be equal.¹⁷ This link is crucial and the importance of this link is demonstrated in the rise in popularity of the movement. This duality is further demonstrated in Hamas emphasis on educating its members based on Islamic ideals,

¹⁵Khaled Hroub, *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice*, 48 and 49.

¹⁶Khaled Hroub, *HAMAS: A Beginner's Guide*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 and 30.

usually through mosques. The idea is that “the more devout the individual is, the more self-sacrificing on the battlefield he or she will be.”¹⁸ Where Hamas breaks with other Islamist movements is its linkage of both goals in time; in other words, both Islamization of society *and* Palestinian liberation can be worked on side-by-side rather than achieving one before the other. In realizing these goals, Hamas has engaged in national resistance through both violent and non-violent means.

¹⁸Ibid., 31.

CHAPTER III

HAMAS AS A MOVEMENT OF NATIONAL RESISTANCE

Hamas has engaged in national resistance in a number of ways including: strikes, uprisings (the *First* and *Second Intifadas*), operations against the Israeli military, and suicide bombings (or martyr missions). These activities are to continue until the ultimate national aim is achieved: to coerce Israel to withdraw from Palestinian territory. Many of Hamas' methods of fighting the national resistance have been met with international (including Muslim countries) criticism and condemnation, particularly with respect to martyrdom missions. Most countries in the West deem these missions as merely suicidal acts of terror, aimed at killing innocents and invoking fear in a population. Religiously, Muslim scholars who are against these missions denounce them as acts of desperation and loss of the will to live, which is a sin and punishable by an eternity in Hell.¹⁹ However, other Muslim scholars do not consider these missions as mere acts of desperation, but rather acts of sacrifice for the greater good a noble cause. The influential Egyptian Muslim scholar Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi condoned the use of martyrdom missions by issuing the following *fatwa*²⁰:

Martyrdom operations are of the greatest types of Jihad in the cause of Allah whereby a person sacrifices his soul in the cause of Allah in full compliance with the Qur'anic verse 'Among the people there are those who trade themselves in pursuit of the Pleasure of Allah.' A person who commits suicide does so out of desperation because of some kind of failure: he is one who seeks to rid himself of his life. In contrast, to give oneself to martyrdom is an act of heroism, and an act deemed by the majority of Muslim scholars to be the greatest form of jihad.²¹

¹⁹Tamimi, 180 and 181.

²⁰Islamic religious decree.

²¹Tamimi, 183.

Other scholars from various Muslim countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, Iran, and Malaysia²² have similarly drawn differences between suicide and martyr missions based on these characteristics:

1. The operations are not suicide, as they involve sacrifice of the highest kind for the noblest of causes.
2. Israel is a military outpost in which none count as civilians except the children. All men and women in Israel serve in the army. So long as attackers take every precaution to avoid children, all other targets in Israel are legitimate. If children are inadvertently hit, this is because it is unavoidable.
3. The Palestinians have been given no other choice since their enemy is heavily armed while they lack even the basic means of self-defense. As long as this situation continues, the Palestinians are not culpable for engaging in such attacks. Therefore, the Palestinians are exempt from the Islamic code of war.
4. If the Israelis wish such operations end, they should accept the offers of truce made to them repeatedly by Hamas and other Palestinian factions. However, to expect the Palestinians to unilaterally stop all resistance in the hope that the Israelis will stop attacking them is unfair and unacceptable.²³

Hamas' ideological standpoint was one of no compromise, the refusal of recognizing Israel a state, and the complete withdrawal of Israel from the Palestinian territories. This, however, is not to say that Hamas did not adopt a more practical stance on the ground. Keeping the international situation in mind Hamas, in a memorandum issued in the 1990s in Amman, stated that they could reach an agreement and ceasefire if Israel conceded to these conditions:

1. The withdrawal of Israeli occupation troops from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.
2. The evacuation of all Jewish settlement illegally erected and populated by Jewish immigrants on Palestinian lands seized by force in both the West Bank and Gaza.

²² This by no means points to a general consensus. It only points out scholars within the mentioned countries that have drawn a distinction between suicide and martyr missions in Palestine. They are among scholars within the same countries that have denounced such missions.

²³ Tamimi, 184.

3. The release of all Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention.
4. The recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.²⁴

To engage in the parallel struggle of creating an Islamic society and leading the national resistance against Israeli occupation, Hamas realized the importance of international support, particularly from friendly Arab regimes. In this case, Syria would present itself as one of those regimes.

²⁴Ibid., 251.

CHAPTER IV

HAMAS AND THE SYRIAN REGIME PRE-CRISIS

Hamas from the beginning sought to deal with Arab regimes practically. It left theories on political systems to the side, and its pragmatism allowed it to receive support from regimes that saw it in their interest to do so, notably the Syrian regime. As Daniel Byman puts it, Syria has had a long history of supporting Palestinian radical groups.²⁵

In the 1960s, Syria supported militant Palestinian groups because of ideology; secular Arab nationalism had risen as the region's dominant ideology, and their contemporaries in Palestine at the time were more or less like-minded. Support for such groups, according to Byman, gave Syria leverage against Israel that it otherwise would not have because of its military inferiority.²⁶ Moreover, its support of militant groups in Palestine served its own domestic interests, where its perception of being the "champion of Arab steadfastness" was vital to its legitimacy at home.²⁷ Therefore, the regime's relationship with various militant groups in Palestine was based on how it could best serve and maintain its power. In other words, Palestinian groups would receive support from the regime, but would be thwarted if there was any sign those groups threatened its power and legitimacy.

Hamas was adamant in reaching out to Arab regimes from the onset of the *First Intifada*. It emphasized the need for solidarity, support, and [sic] provision of moral

²⁵Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 117.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 118.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 118 and 119.

and material aid to ‘the jihad of the Palestinian people inside [the occupied land].’²⁸In dealing with Arab regimes, and in this case with the regimes of both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, Hamas had been careful to not cross the line in harsh, radical rhetoric against the prevailing political systems in the Arab world. Hamas avoided slogans that would alienate it from Arab regimes, such as “the liberation train passes through ‘this or that Arab capital’”²⁹.³⁰ Hamas also learned this from the mistakes of the PLO, as the head of its Political Bureau, Abu Marzouq demonstrated:

Contrary to Fateh’s policy of dragging Arab regimes into the battle for the liberation of Palestine, we believe that one must be fully aware of what one is doing when one gets involved in battle. The absence of adequate awareness leads to defeat, which has been the outcome of our wars with Israel.³¹

As stated above, the Syrian regime (under both Assads) sought to support militant Palestinian groups like Hamas in order to solidify its legitimacy on the domestic level. Because the regime came to power through a military coup, it lacked popular support. Support for groups like Hamas in Palestine would create for the regime a rallying point to garner the popular support that it lacked and to avert the people’s attention from domestic problems such as economic hardship and corruption.³²

The Syrian regime’s support of Hamas varied. The support ranged from moral to material support, but of course no support ideologically. The regime’s ideology was a secular, authoritarian one, and an Islamist ideology of creating a united Islamic state

²⁸Hroub, *Political Thought and Practice*, 155.

²⁹Ibid., 153.

³⁰ Other Palestinian national groups adopted such similar slogans, bringing them at loggerheads with Arab regimes and straining their relationship with them.

³¹Hroub, 153.

³²Byman, 121.

was a threat to its power. Nevertheless, in order to gain more leverage in the region and keep a stake in negotiations considering lands that Israel seized in 1967 (the Golan Heights), the Syrian regime pressured Hamas to increase their militancy against Israel.³³ A successful occasion that gave leverage to Syria is the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. With its continued support of Hamas during that conflict, Syria managed to show that militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah could help give Syria a regional advantage; the inability of Israel to defeat these groups was seen as a victory for the groups as well as the regime, thus garnering popular support at home and throughout the region.³⁴

Its support of Hamas has not given the regime complete control over the group, however it has given it considerable influence over it. It has pressured Hamas to not attack the United States, for instance, as confirmed by the Special Coordinator for Counterterrorism Philip Wilcox in 1996: “Syria has had a restraining effect in that respect.”³⁵

Though material and political support are key forms of aid that Hamas received from the Syrian regime, they are not the most important. The most important kind of support that the regime gave to Hamas, according to Byman, is providing a refuge for members of the group.³⁶ For Hamas, the Political Bureau operated from Damascus. The safe haven that the Syrian regime insulated (mostly) Hamas from Israeli attacks and also allowed it to “coordinate [sic] activities, organize, and otherwise operate with

³³Ibid., 130. In August 2002 Hamas urged Palestinians to disregard the ceasefire with Israel, under pressure from the Assad regime.

³⁴ David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 25.

³⁵Ibid., 131.

³⁶Ibid., 132.

little interference.”³⁷ In sum, Syria provided support that helped Hamas sustain itself and organize its operations.

Not only did the Syrian regime seek legitimacy at home through its support of Hamas, but Hamas also sought its own legitimacy through its relationship with Syria. Syria refused to condemn a number of Hamas attacks on Israel that were criticized by other Arab regimes.³⁸ This bolstered support for Hamas’ attacks at the domestic level. This legitimacy, however, would be disregarded in the wake of the events that swept Syria in 2011.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 140.

CHAPTER V

HAMAS, THE SYRIAN REGIME, AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

When the Syrian regime's violent crackdown on protesters began in 2011, few could have predicted that it would turn to an all-out civil war that, to this day, has not been resolved and that has so far killed more than 130,000³⁹ people. What began as a peaceful movement composed of non-violent protests has turned into a brutal conflict pitting Bashar al-Assad's regime against the Syrian rebels. The opposition, mostly comprised of Sunnis, is made up of various anti-regime groups. These groups include the Free Syrian Army⁴⁰ and various Islamist groups⁴¹. Bashar al-Assad's regime, like him and his family, is dominated by Alawites (an offshoot of Shiite Islam), a minority religious group comprising 12 percent of Syrian population.⁴² Sectarian conflict has

³⁹Agence Presse France, "More than 130,000 Dead Since Start of Syria Conflict," *NOW*, December 31, 2013, accessed December 31, 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/nowsyrialatestnews/528069-more-than-130000-dead-since-start-of-syria-conflict>.

⁴⁰ The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was created by defected Syrian Army officers to fight Bashar al-Assad's government forces and to remove him and his party from power.

⁴¹ Islamic militant groups have become a major fighting force for the opposition. The two major Islamist groups are Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). The former constitutes the biggest Islamist opposition group in Syria and has come to control areas of Syria. Tension and clashes have arisen between the Free Syrian Army and these Islamist groups because of the latter's strict interpretation of Islam and their application of Islamic law (Sharia) in areas under their control. The FSA has a more moderate and secular membership.

⁴²Tom Heneghan, "Syria's Alawites are secretive, unorthodox sect", *Reuters*, December 23, 2011, accessed December 18, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/23/ussyria-religion-alawites-idUSTRE7BM1J220111223>.

spread through Syria, and many Islamist (Sunni) groups throughout the region and the world have condemned the regime for carrying out atrocities against their co-religionists. Islamist groups who had previously enjoyed the support of Bashar al-Assad have become disillusioned with the regime, namely Hamas.

Hamas, in reaction to the intensifying crackdown on protesters and rebel fighter, removed all its members and their families from Syria.⁴³ Hamas had a dilemma concerning their position on Syria: The Syrian regime for years had supported it, but the regime was killing its fellow Sunni brethren, who comprised most of the protesters and now comprise most of the rebel fighters. Adhering to its Sunni Muslim ideology, the group in 2012 decided to end its support for the regime and officially support the protesters in a statement issued by Prime Minister Ismail Haniya⁴⁴. Haniya, in a sermon after Friday prayers (February 24, 2013) in Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo announced the severance of ties with Bashar al-Assad's regime: "I salute all the nations of the Arab Spring and I salute the heroic people of Syria who are striving for freedom, democracy and reform."⁴⁵ Another factor for this position is that the Palestinian refugees in Syria are mostly Sunni and a number of them had joined in the protests against the regime. One Hamas official explained the group's decision to end its support of the Syrian regime:

Hamas has a different position than [Hezbollah]. We are Sunni, we have support of the people... If we lose the support of Iran and Syria, it will affect us deeply—but it's not a strategic loss. This is different from

⁴³Lesch, 132.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Omar Fahmy and Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Hamas Ditches Assad, Backs Syrian Revolt," *Reuters*, February 24, 2012, accessed December 18, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/24/us-syria-palestinians-idUSTRE81N1CC20120224>

[Hezbollah]. If [Hezbollah] loses the support of Syria it might be the end of [Hezbollah]. From the first day we declared that we were thankful to the regime—which supported the [Hamas] resistance during some very difficult periods we went through—and at the same time we admire people getting their freedom, reform and prosperity. Hamas' Khalid Meshaal tried to advise Bashar al-Assad to reform... offering to mediate between the regime and its people. He also met Hassan Nasrallah of [Hezbollah] to ask him to take his plan to Assad. But these mediation attempts failed.⁴⁶

Furthermore, demonstrating the seriousness of severing ties with the regime, Hamas forbade all pro-Assad rallies in the Gaza strip in 2011.⁴⁷ In an interview with RT, Hamas spokesperson Ali Baraka said that the group blamed the regime completely for the events that are unfolding in Syria: “the regime is fully responsible for allowing these events that are called so many different things – some call them a revolution, or an uprising, or protests – to evolve into a military standoff.”⁴⁸ It seems as though Hamas was indeed keen on adhering to its ideology despite the consequences of losing major support from Syria (and by extension Iran⁴⁹).

Hamas has officially stated that it supports the Syrian people's will to achieve freedom and reform. This support, however, is only ideological; Hamas does not support the opposition militarily. The group's leader, Khaled Meshaal, stated that “[p]eoples have the right to rise up for their rights, but this must be done through

⁴⁶Lesch, 134.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ RT, “ Hamas: Syrian regime is ‘fully responsible’ for internal conflict escalation,” September 27, 2013, accessed December 28, 2013, <http://rt.com/op-edge/assad-responsible-conflict-escalation-hamas-441/>.

⁴⁹Lesch, 135.

peaceful means.”⁵⁰ He also said that Hamas support a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis and opposes all sectarian conflict, “regardless of its source.”⁵¹ The statements and stance adopted by Hamas has created tension between it and Islamist groups fighting in Syria. One of the main Islamist militant groups fighting in the countryside of Damascus issued a statement condemning Khaled Meshaal’s announcement, saying “[h]e who performs jihad out of his office should not offer advice to those in the trenches.”⁵²

Bashar al-Assad reacted angrily over Hamas’ decision, claiming that Hamas had deceived the regime a number of times in the past: “This wasn’t the first time that [Hamas] deceived us. This happened before in 2007 and 2009.”⁵³ He went on to say that Hamas had a “a history of treachery and treason” and claimed that the group had abandoned its identity as a resistance group to join the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁴ He also denied Hamas’ claims that they offered to mediate between the regime and its opponents by offering a plan, saying:

When the crisis began, [Hamas officials] claimed that they gave us advice. This is a lie. Who are they to give Syria advice? Then they said

⁵⁰ Asharq Al-Awsat, “Syria: Tensions escalate between Islamist rebels and Hamas,” October 19, 2013, accessed December 28, 2013, <http://www.aawsat.net/2013/10/article55319727>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The Daily Star, “Assad lambasts Hamas for deception,” *Al-Akhbar*, October 14, 2013, accessed December 23, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Oct-14/234614-assad-lambasts-hamas-for-deception.ashx>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

that we asked for their help, which is also not true. What business do they have in internal Syrian affairs?⁵⁵

Obviously, Assad feels that Hamas betrayed the regime after years of its support for the group. However, if it comes to serve Syrian interests in the future, Assad believes a rapprochement is possible with Hamas.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Elie Chalhoub, “Assad: Hamas Has Betrayed Us Repeatedly, But...” *Al-Akhbar*, October 14, 2013, accessed December 29, 2013, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17324>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Hamas was created as a national resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of Palestine which shares a common goal with its parent group, the Muslim Brotherhood. The group has linked the ultimate goal of creating an Islamic society and that of fighting the resistance and ideologically strives to achieve both by education its members and community and through armed confrontation with its enemy, Israel. From its beginnings Hamas has enjoyed the support of Syria, from financial aid to having a base of political operations in Damascus. This support was given by the Syrian regime (Hafez and then Bashar al-Assad) in order to achieve leverage in any negotiations on the return of its seized territory in the Golan Heights by Israel in 1967. Hamas' relationship with Syria was severed at the onset of the crisis which began in the country during peaceful protests in 2011. Bashar al-Assad's violent crackdown on protesters in 2011 prompted Hamas to condemn the regime's actions and support the opposition despite the political consequences. Hamas' decision to support the opposition led the group to leave Damascus and end all pro-Assad rallies in the Gaza Strip. Assad condemned Hamas' decision, stating that the group had betrayed the regime after years of support. In the end, however, Assad said that reconciliation could be possible in the future if it served Syria's best interests.

APPENDIX

Hamas' Political Context Pre-Syrian Civil War

2006 Elections

Hamas' overwhelming victory (winning an absolute majority of 74 seats in the legislative council against Fatah's 45⁵⁷) in the elections of 2006 put the spotlight on its members' adherence to its Islamist ideology and ultimate goal. Now that Hamas had come to political power through democratic elections, its no-compromise stance on the withdrawal of the Israelis from all Palestinian land came into question. Ismail Haniya, the head of the newly elected government in Gaza, said in an interview that if Israel returned to the 1967 borders, then a "‘peace in stages’ would be possible."⁵⁸ It seemed as though by entering the political arena in 2006, Hamas began to follow a more pragmatic approach towards politics more akin to state behavior rather than that of a radical, revolutionary group. Its victory in Gaza coerced the group into attempting to gain international legitimacy.

⁵⁷ Nathan Shachar, *The Gaza Strip: Its History and Politics* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 169.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Gaza War 2008-2009

After a six month lull, tensions heightened in the latter part of 2008, resulting in Israel invading the Gaza strip in an operation dubbed “Operation Cast Lead”. The war was far from unexpected, but surprises did surface. Hamas was surprised at Egypt’s reaction to the Gaza war. Beyond the veil of the common courtesy of denouncing the Israeli attacks, Egypt’s foreign minister at the time, Abu el-Gheit, blamed Hamas for starting the war by breaking the ceasefire with Israel and simultaneously accused Iran for “plotting against Egypt”.⁵⁹ Basem Eid, a Palestinian human rights activist, claimed that “[the war was] only superficially about Gaza. It [was] really about defending the Egyptian regime against its internal and foreign enemies, about sending a message to Iran.”⁶⁰ This claim was supported, according to Shachar, by the “concerted Israeli-Egyptian-American effort all through the war to block any ceasefire initiatives or mediation efforts led by countries not hostile towards Iran, such as Syria, Qatar, and Turkey.”⁶¹

⁵⁹Ibid., 183.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

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