



Brandeis University

Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

Middle East Brief

*Judith and Sidney Swartz Director
and Professor of Politics*
Shai Feldman

Associate Director
Kristina Cherniahivsky

*Charles (Corky) Goodman Professor
of Middle East History and
Associate Director for Research*
Naghmeb Sohrabi

Senior Fellow
Abdel Monem Said Aly, PhD

Goldman Senior Fellow
Khalil Shikaki, PhD

*Myra and Robert Kraft Professor
of Arab Politics*
Eva Bellin

*Henry J. Leir Professor of the
Economics of the Middle East*
Nader Habibi

*Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor
of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies*
Kanan Makiya

Neubauer Junior Research Fellow
Sarah El-Kazaz, PhD

Junior Research Fellows
Hikmet Kocamaner, PhD
Asher Orkaby, PhD
David Siddhartha Patel, PhD
Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux

Can Hamas Moderate? Insights from Palestinian Politics during 2005-2011

Khalil Shikaki

On April 23, 2014, a Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement was signed in Gaza that led five weeks later to the formation of a government of technocrats headed by Rami al-Hamdallah.¹ This development represented the most meaningful step taken toward West Bank–Gaza Strip reunification since Hamas’s violent takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, which in turn occurred eighteen months after Hamas’s surprising, indeed striking, victory in the January 2006 Palestinian elections.

The reconciliation agreement revived the debate regarding the means, costs, and consequences of the integration of Islamists into the Palestinian political system. The debate has focused on the consequences of such integration, and of Islamists’ participation in the formal political process, for the direction of Palestinian state-building and peacemaking. The core question has been whether the integration of Hamas would help moderate its views in three main areas: *political governance*, *social agenda*, and *the peace process*.

The Arab Spring has provided two contradictory models of Islamist integration: the example of Tunisia and that of Egypt. In Tunisia, the Al Nahda Party demonstrated adaptability and openness, and the integration process was relatively smooth and unconstrained, enabling a successful transition to more democratic governance by December 2014. In Egypt, exclusion of others along with authoritarian tendencies among the Muslim Brotherhood and a much more constrained process of integration, assured failure by June 2013. What about the Brotherhood’s sister organization, Hamas? What direction did it take during the period of its integration into the formal Palestinian political

Khalil Shikaki is the Director of the Palestinian Center for Political and Survey Research in Ramallah and the Goldman Senior Fellow at the Crown Center.

The opinions and findings expressed in this Brief belong to the author exclusively and do not reflect those of the Crown Center or Brandeis University.

system, and what kind of integration process and other challenges was it forced to confront?

This Brief addresses the question by summarizing the findings of research conducted by the author at the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in Ramallah. The research, covering the period between 2005 and 2011, aimed at testing the “moderation thesis”—a hypothesis that argues that Hamas would most likely show moderation in the three areas under consideration, owing to the movement’s need to gain a local and international stamp of approval, to forge coalitions within the political system to advance important elements of its agenda, and to remain sensitive to Palestinian public opinion, which has been moving over the years toward moderation with respect to most of the components of these issue areas.

In other words, the proposition tested by the research is that politics necessarily involves debate, give-and-take, and, in the end, compromise. If the moderation thesis is correct, Palestinians and the Palestinian political system would ultimately stand to benefit from Hamas’s integration. If the thesis proves wrong, they are likely to pay a cost. Moderation was measured in our research by the extent to which Hamas’s behavior has moved closer to or farther from the center or the “Palestinian street”—bearing in mind that the latter was revealing, at the time of Hamas’s integration, a tendency to embrace democratic and liberal values and practices and to support the peace process.

Our research findings show that although Hamas did behave in some respects in ways predicted by the moderation thesis, in many other areas its behavior did not accord with the expectations of that thesis. This Brief seeks to explain both Hamas behavior that has conformed to the expectations of the thesis and that which has not. Hamas—its ideology, its elite, and its internal dynamics—is responsible for both outcomes. But the political context of integration provides an additional explanation. The Brief begins with a description of that context, followed by a summary of findings and a discussion of factors driving change, or the lack of it. It ends with a few conclusions.

The Political Context of Hamas Integration

Since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, Palestinian Islamists—specifically, Hamas and Islamic Jihad—had refused to recognize, let alone participate in, the formal institutions of Palestinian government. On both ideological and pragmatic grounds, Islamists found it counterproductive to take part in the formal political process, which they considered illegitimate. Instead, they opted for playing a role outside the formal structures of governance, using violence and street mobilization to advance their aims.

The death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004 changed this. Under Arafat, Hamas was convinced that the Fatah-dominated system would always remain authoritarian and that Islamists would never be able to influence public policy through the ballot. With Arafat gone, however, Hamas expected the political system to open up and Fatah, the dominant political player, to weaken.

Fatah’s twin failures in peacemaking and state-building had already more than doubled Hamas’s strength among Palestinians between 2000 and 2005. Throughout 2003 and 2004, polls conducted by PSR showed Islamists becoming the most popular political faction, with Fatah coming in second. Capitalizing

on this increased public support and relying on existing support for armed resistance to Israeli occupation, Hamas sought to translate that popularity into parliamentary seats without having to give up its armed capacity. It therefore agreed to take part in the Palestinian legislative elections scheduled for July 2005 and later rescheduled for January 2006.²

The official decision to participate in the formal PA political system came in March 2005, when nationalist and Islamist parties signed the Cairo Declaration. The new PA president, Mahmoud Abbas, who had been elected only two months earlier, lacked the capacity to force Hamas to agree to end the second Intifada and cease violent attacks on Israel. He therefore offered the group a deal: Hamas would cease violence against Israel in return for integration into the formal political process. Throughout the Intifada, Hamas had rejected the slogan “one authority, one gun” and claimed that “under occupation, no law is above the law of resistance.” But in the 2005 Cairo Declaration, Hamas agreed to a trade-off: a cease-fire in return for political participation in elections to be held by the PA.

But Hamas never agreed to give up its arms. While PA laws prohibited the formation of armed groups, the legacy of the PLO, as an umbrella organization of armed groups fighting for an end to occupation, enjoyed a public and institutional legitimacy that allowed Hamas, and indeed almost all other Palestinian factions, to participate in the political process without having to dissolve their armed militias. A weak Palestinian Authority, public opposition to disarming Hamas before the occupation was ended, and continued Palestinian-Israeli violence made it impossible for Abbas and Fatah to condition Hamas’s participation in the political process on prior disarmament. Having thus assured its ability to maintain its armed wing—the al-Qassam Brigades—Hamas was now ready to become part of the formal political system.

Hamas’s decision brought the group significant electoral gains. With the peace process perceived by the Palestinian public as futile and with Hamas capitalizing on Fatah’s fragmentation and on perceived PA corruption and mismanagement, the group did relatively well in local elections and even better in national elections, managing in January 2006 to win 44 percent of the popular vote and 56 percent of the seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).³

Hamas’s electoral victory was immediately followed, however, by the statement on the part of the international Quartet conditioning recognition of the Hamas government and continued financial support on Hamas’s meeting three requirements: recognition of Israel, acceptance of previous agreements signed by the PA and

the PLO, and renunciation of violence. Hamas was quick to reject all three. Consequently, once the Hamas government was sworn in, the international community refused to grant it recognition and stopped all financial support to the PA—and Israel likewise stopped all revenue transfers to the Palestinians. That Israeli decision alone cost the PA 60 percent of its domestic revenues, amounting to about \$55 million per month. As a result of these international and Israeli sanctions, Hamas’s first government was unable to govern effectively, to enforce law and order, or to deliver much of the basic and social services that the Palestinian public had come to expect from its government.

With help from Saudi Arabia, which brokered the Mecca Agreement in February 2007, a national unity government (NUG) was formed in March 2007, made up of the two largest political factions, Fatah and Hamas, as well as several smaller ones. This was the first time that a broad nationalist-Islamist coalition had come to rule the PA since its establishment in 1994. The Israeli government refused to recognize the unity government and saw no point in entering into negotiations with Abbas so long as the NUG failed to endorse the Quartet’s three conditions—and the second Bush administration (George W.) supported the Israeli position. While the response of the international community has not been uniform, very few countries agreed to establish high-level diplomatic contacts with the Hamas members of the newly created unity government.

In June 2007, an internal Hamas coalition of hardliners led by the al-Qassam Brigades took the radical step of using military force to defeat Fatah and PA forces loyal to President Abbas and take control of all PA headquarters and military bases in the Gaza Strip. This in turn led to the dissolution of the three-month-old National Unity Government created by the Mecca Agreement and to President Abbas’s formation instead of an emergency government headed by Salam Fayyad whose authority was limited to the West Bank. The result was the creation of two political entities, one in the Gaza Strip controlled by the Islamist Hamas and one in the West Bank controlled by the nationalist Fatah.

Research Methodology

The research conducted by the author and his team has focused on Hamas’s positions and behavior in three issue areas: political governance, social agenda, and the peace process. We compared Hamas positions and behavior before and after its integration into the political process and sought to explain any perceived change, or lack of it, by examining three possible propelling factors: the political context in which integration unfolded, the nature

of Hamas's elite and its decision-making, and shifts in the attitudes of Hamas's constituency. When the link was evident, we documented how change in one issue area affected change in others.

In documenting change in Hamas positions, formal statements as well as informal attitudes of Hamas leaders and its popular base were reviewed. In examining behavior, official acts of Hamas and its government as well as acts that Hamas tolerated unofficially were explored. In addition, documents deemed relevant, including Hamas's charter and election campaign platform, (as well as the NUG platform), Hamas government decisions and statements, and Hamas parliamentary statements and legislative proposals were examined. Content analysis of the main Hamas media and Internet outlets was also conducted, including a systematic review of Hamas's al Khalas Party's newspaper, *al Risalah*,⁴ comparing Hamas's statements and media coverage before and after integration. Interviews were conducted with dozens of senior Hamas leaders, ministers, and elected officials in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Outcomes of Track II meetings involving Hamas and Fatah as well as Hamas and Fatah along with American and Israeli researchers and former political officials were utilized to assess possible routes a pragmatic Hamas might pursue under certain conditions.

Our research also benefited from public opinion surveys among Palestinians, as they helped us assess changes in public attitudes during the period under examination. Surveys were also critical for our understanding of Hamas's base and electoral constituency. Finally, data was collected from various open sources on Hamas's social infrastructure, organizational hierarchy, internal election methods and results, and decision-making processes.

Research Findings

Governance

With respect to governance and on the domestic political front, the main question we asked concerned the way Hamas interacted with formal and informal political institutions of governance. The most important themes we examined were: Hamas's willingness to accept the 'rules of the game' by respecting the Basic Law (the most important PA constitutional document) and other laws passed by the earlier PLC; its willingness to form coalitions with other groups in the government and in Parliament; the way it related (in the cabinet and in Parliament) to other actors in the political system, such as the PLO, the armed militias of various groups, the security services, the presidency, and the judiciary; and its acceptance of decisions made by the courts or the president.

Hamas's use of military force in June 2007 was a glaring indication of a failure to moderate—an example of Hamas acting in a manner clearly in contradiction to the moderation thesis. This observation was confirmed by other findings, including many examples of violations of the Basic Law: Hamas disregarded the principle of separation of powers and placed the judiciary under the control of the executive; it transferred the power of the presidency to its prime minister; and it created new public institutions not sanctioned by the Basic Law.

Hamas also established a Hamas-only security service (the Executive Force) in total disregard of existing laws. It rejected major court rulings and denied the legitimacy of certain other security forces and in some instances used force against them. It frequently denied the constitutional powers of the presidency. It maintained its own militia even after Fatah dissolved and disarmed its own. Furthermore, Hamas showed reluctance to engage in coalition building with smaller factions or to establish normal relations with the PLO.

Social Agenda

On the social agenda front, our research focused on how Hamas approached the legislative process and what kind of gender-related and education-related agenda it formulated. The central question we raised was: Was Hamas seeking to Islamize Palestinian society from the top down, or was it showing a willingness to respect existing secular/liberal tendencies in Palestinian society, including the rights of women and minorities? The most important themes we examined were: the social content of the movement's legislative agenda and of parliamentary debates, the role played by Hamas's female members in the parliament, the management of PA ministries and other agencies, and the implementation of government priorities at the social level, focusing on the extent to which women's issues were affected.

Our findings reveal that at the formal level, Hamas was highly sensitive to criticism of its intentions regarding a social agenda; it accordingly sought to reach consensus rather than impose its own preferences. If consensus was not attainable, the movement sought to postpone decision-making rather than confront dissension. But in the meanwhile, it allowed its ministries, along with groups and individuals affiliated with it—such as its Dawa branch—to promote, and at times insist on, the respecting of traditional religious values, mostly in relation to women's dress and gender mixing.

According to our research, Hamas's elite was divided on most of the social issues, while its constituency tended in general to be more conservative than its elite. While some of the movement's leading religious scholars, particularly in

its Dawa branch, advocated a conservative interpretation of Sharia rules regarding women, the formal and official behavior of the Hamas government remained relatively liberal. Nonetheless, the government of Hamas in the Gaza Strip informally and unofficially demonstrated a willingness to allow a more conservative approach to coexist side by side with a more liberal one.

When it came to political matters, Hamas interpreted Sharia as prohibiting the election or appointment of women as presidents or judges. It did, however, encourage the full participation of women in voting and demonstrations. With regard to personal status matters of marriage and divorce, the movement seemed to insist on fully implementing Sharia rules. But it left dress code matters to be resolved by individuals and Palestinian society, while making it clear that it preferred the more conservative interpretation. It encouraged women's participation in the workplace, reflecting a tendency highly supported by its popular constituency, while informally discouraging gender mixing.

Despite its declared wish to introduce a more conservative social order, Hamas was willing on at least three occasions to crack down on militant *non*-Hamas conservative groups that sought to take matters into their own hands and enforce a more extreme code of Islamic conduct on the population.⁵ The crackdowns were motivated in part by a rejection of these more extreme practices, but they were also intended to assure Hamas's monopoly over the use of coercive force in the Gaza Strip. Other non-Hamas conservative groups were allowed to operate openly as long as they did not take the law into their own hands. Indeed, in some cases, it is believed that the more conservative Hamas leaders sought to use such groups to implement their own social agenda.

Hamas endorsed the principle of equality for all citizens—meaning, Muslims and Christians—but maintained that certain public offices, such as the presidency, the top leadership of the army, and the head of the judiciary, could not be occupied by Christians. Hamas's constituency seems to agree with respect to at least some of those offices. Hamas's behavior reflected acceptance of Christians as potential coalition partners in parliamentary and municipal elections, and Hamas has often condemned attacks on Christians by extreme religious groups in the Gaza Strip. But some human rights organizations criticized the group's lack of vigor in investigating those attacks. Hamas has avoided any discussion of constitutional or legal changes regarding the status of Palestinian Christians.

Our research found concern among secularists about Hamas's intentions to "Islamize" textbooks and school curricula. Two indications of those intentions were an

increase in classes allocated to religious education in Palestinian schools and the hiring by Hamas's government of a large number of religious education teachers. While Hamas informally encouraged separation of the sexes in schools and universities, its official position was to maintain the status quo. But Hamas's constituency tended to agree on the need to separate the sexes, even if it was inclined to be more liberal in other areas. Hamas has shown little tolerance for mixed attendance at cultural activities, especially those involving music, singing, and dancing.

The Peace Process

On the peace process front, our focus was on Hamas's position on the two-state solution, on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and on the role of violence. The most important themes examined were Hamas's willingness to disarm and disband its militia, to participate in negotiations with Israel, to respect and implement existing peace agreements, and to recognize the state of Israel within the context of a two-state solution and mutual recognition.

During the period under investigation, Hamas adopted a declared position that advocated a *hudna*, rather than the permanent peace and end of conflict usually advocated by Fatah. As understood by Hamas, a *hudna* is an armistice that does not resolve all the underlying causes of conflict but articulates terms for temporary peace, thereby creating conditions of quiet and coexistence for a limited period of time; once that period is over, violence could be resumed. The length of the *hudna* period envisioned by Hamas has varied, with some Hamas leaders talking about ten years while others have spoken of several decades. After the 2006 elections, Hamas's discourse focused on the movement's willingness to extend the *hudna* period rather than on the inevitable return to violence when it ended. Indeed, some of the movement's leaders have not ruled out conducting negotiations for a permanent peace once a *hudna* was put in place.

Our findings also show that Hamas was willing to moderate its rhetoric on other aspects of the peace process. For example, while it has consistently denied the legitimate right of Israel to exist, Hamas has not rejected the acceptance of Israel as a reality, a fact on the ground; and it was willing, under conditions of a *hudna*, to allow a Palestinian state to engage in normal relations with the state of Israel. Finally, while rejecting a permanent peace, Hamas did not rule out the possibility that the severity of conflict would diminish over time.

Hamas's first government offered in 2006 to negotiate with its Israeli counterparts on matters of living conditions and the daily needs of the two sides. But it delegated

responsibility for peace negotiations to PA president, Mahmoud Abbas. The platform of the unity government of 2007 indicated, however, that any peace agreement signed with Israel would have to be ratified by the PLO National Council or by a referendum.

The movement has also made changes in its position regarding Palestinian statehood and recognition of Israel, indicating a willingness to accept language that comes close to a two-state solution formula. For example, in the so-called Prisoners Document, Hamas explicitly agreed to accept the establishment of a Palestinian state in the areas occupied by Israel in 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital.⁶ It declared its willingness to accept Israel as a de facto reality, without formal recognition of its statehood or acceptance of its legitimacy. And in Track II meetings, pragmatists within the Hamas leadership agreed not only to sit down with Israelis around a negotiating table but also to endorse a two-state solution and the principle of permanent peace. Indeed, at one such meeting in 2007, Hamas leaders were able to formulate two-state language acceptable to their Israeli counterparts. Other Hamas pragmatists, though not willing to go that far, saw *hudna* as a first step toward permanent peace, rather than as a temporary cease-fire to be followed by violence once its period ended. It is notable, however, that during the period under investigation, even the most pragmatic Hamas leaders continued publicly to deny Israel's legitimacy and to reject the notion of permanent peace.

Hamas has steadfastly refused to accept and implement agreements, such as Oslo, signed by the PLO with Israel. But our findings show differing approaches within the group to those agreements. Many rejected them, considering them unjust and unsatisfactory or based on their belief that Israel had not honored its own commitments. A few argued that the group should go further and fight against those agreements, by violence if necessary. But a third view argued that the group should accept those agreements, even if it did not find them fair. The Mecca Agreement, indicating a willingness to “respect” the agreements, represented a middle ground between the first and third approaches. By “respect,” Hamas meant that it would not abrogate such agreements but would be selective in implementing them based on various considerations, including their own reading of Israel's record of implementation and the extent to which the agreements, in Hamas's view, annulled historical Palestinian rights.

On the question of violence, the group made a dramatic shift in its declared position and, most importantly, in its behavior. While it remained solidly attached to the notion that only violence would force Israel to accept a Palestinian state along the 1967 boundaries, Hamas was willing to

abandon violence and impose a cease-fire in the areas under its control. Once in office, Hamas significantly reduced its armed attacks against Israelis and sought a *tahdia*, or quiet that would allow it to consolidate its position within the Palestinian political system and the regional Arab order.

In an additional significant shift, the group accepted responsibility for imposing an undeclared cease-fire with Israel on all non-Hamas factions as well. In fact, at times Hamas cracked down not only on small militant Salafi groups, such as *Jaish al Islam*, *Ansar al Sunna*, and *Jaish al Umma*, but also on established militias like *Saraya al Quds*, Islamic Jihad's armed wing. Occasionally, Hamas leaders such as Mahmoud al Zahar openly attacked those who broke the cease-fire by launching rockets against Israel, accusing them of serving Israel's interests.

Explaining the Findings

Our overall findings regarding Hamas's behavior since 2005 indicate that despite important examples of moderation, the group has essentially failed to moderate its position and behavior. Insights gained from the research indicate that some of the reasons for the failure have to do with factors internal to Hamas and its constituency, but that the failure was also driven by constraints imposed on the process of integration of Islamists into the Palestinian political system. Both domestic and external impediments, including those stemming from the nature of Hamas's relationship with Fatah, made it extremely difficult for the group to fully integrate into the formal political system. Hamas failed to cope with the challenges imposed by the political context—and this failure was one of the reasons it failed to moderate. By early 2006, contrary to its earlier expectations, Hamas had come to see the PA's political system as inhospitable, with Fatah treating it as a “foreign” actor.

But the main impediment to moderation came from within Hamas itself. For most of the period under examination, ideologues enjoyed the upper hand within the movement, while pragmatists remained marginal. Our findings made clear that Hamas's ideologues tend to view the political system produced by the Oslo peace process as illegitimate and therefore doubt the benefits of formal political integration. They also tend to have conservative political and social values and to adhere to a more literal interpretation of Islamic doctrine, and as a result sometimes question the compatibility of democratic and Islamic values.

More than anything else, it has been Hamas's views and behavior regarding the peace process that have been

influenced by its religious and ideological convictions. For example, Hamas's original declared position on relations with Israel (as reflected in its 1987 charter, which stipulated rejection of any solution that would allow ceding part of Palestine to non-Muslims) was grounded in religious terms. While pragmatists have sought to modify this position, ideologues have sought to affirm it.

Pragmatist Hamas leaders, particularly those with ties to Fatah's 'young guard,'⁷ tend to support integration into the formal political system, to espouse liberal democratic values, and to embrace a more nuanced interpretation of Islamic doctrine, norms, and rules. They seek allies outside Hamas in order to encourage pragmatic and moderate trends within their own organization in the hope of making it more appealing to the larger public. Indeed, content analysis of Hamas's newspaper, *al Risalah*, indicates that the group tended to moderate its views on the peace process—for example, on the recognition of Israel—when the process of political integration seemed to be making progress and to harden its views when integration was constrained or failing.

Hamas ideologues are for the most part found in the Gaza Strip and in Jordan.⁸ Pragmatists, on the other hand, are concentrated in the West Bank and in Israeli jails;⁹ few are to be found in the Gaza Strip. The tendency to advocate hard-line views was clearly more evident among Hamas leaders in the Gaza Strip and their constituency there.

The nature of the domestic Palestinian political environment posed other impediments to Hamas's successful moderation. Five factors were found to be critical.

- The wide ideological gap between the systems controlled by Fatah and Hamas, as expressed in major differences between the two with respect to both secular and liberal social values and relations with Israel, greatly complicated the process of integration.
- Hamas's exaggerated concern about perceived Fatah plans to deny it the fruits of its electoral victory heightened the Islamists's threat perception and encouraged a more militant and violent response to domestic opposition.
- Hamas's fear of losing the support of its local constituency led it at times to reject compromise both with its domestic opposition and with Israel.
- For its part, owing to the PLO's legacy and the hegemony of its old guard with respect to decision-making in the organization, Fatah was unable to respect peaceful competition. And the reluctance of Hamas's elite to fully and publicly endorse

liberal democratic values only exacerbated Fatah's own lack of democratic commitment.

- Hamas's culture of secrecy, and its refusal to allow transparency regarding its internal structures and decision-making, heightened Fatah's suspicions regarding its commitment to democracy and its longer-term ambitions.

There were, finally, external impediments as well to Hamas moderation. For one thing, conflict and peace-making with Israel dominated the domestic Palestinian environment and conditioned integration with respect to the political and social issue areas on Hamas's willingness to moderate its views on the peace process. Hamas made things worse by allowing its position on the peace process to influence its position on and behavior in the other issue areas—for example, by refusing to fully acknowledge the legitimacy of all aspects of the political regime created by the peace process.

Additionally, Hamas's external relations and allies, such as Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria, put it in coalition with forces that have traditionally questioned the legitimacy not only of the peace process but also of the Palestinian political system. This alignment negatively affected Hamas's ability to moderate its views—not only on matters related to the peace process, but also on domestic political and social matters. By contrast, the PA relied on the West for financial support and on the U.S., Europe, Egypt, and Jordan for political support for the peace process and for state-building, and these PA allies tended to be suspicious of, if not hostile to, political Islam.

Conclusions

Why did the Palestinian experiment with political integration of Islamists fail? In other words, why did Hamas fail to moderate? Analysis of our findings and explanations leads to six conclusions. While these conclusions might apply equally to other Islamist groups, they do not necessarily apply to all. Indeed, when we look at the two models of Egyptian and Tunisian Islamist integration mentioned earlier, Hamas and its integration process and context seem to closely mirror the Egyptian rather than the Tunisian experience in two respects. First, Hamas itself—its ideology and value system, its elite and its practices—seems much more similar to the Muslim Brotherhood than to al-Nahda. Second, the environment of integration was greatly constrained in the Palestinian context, and in this respect it was similar to the Egyptian rather than the Tunisian model.

Hamas might not have been ready for its electoral victory. While seeking to encourage Hamas's participation in and integration into the political order might have been the best means available to the PA to moderate Hamas behavior, the integration process itself needed a more hospitable environment than the one that was possible during the 2005–6 period. The process might have been more successful if it had been slower and more gradual, enabling Islamists to gain experience and practical insight into politics at various levels of local and national government, executive and legislative, before taking on the burdens of full power, with its inherent dangerous temptations. In a sense, Hamas's electoral success may have highlighted its own organizational, political, and ideological deficiencies and contributed to its failure to moderate and to the ultimate failure of integration.

Hamas's internal structures are not democratic. Hamas could not or would not address the issue of internal reform and the democratization of its own structures and mechanisms for decision-making. While the group had a successful process of internal consultation, matters of internal hierarchy, nomination and election, and decision-making remained hidden from public view. Lack of transparency and accountability, dictated in part by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, reduced the capacity of the movement's institutions and leaders to show sufficient sensitivity to public concerns and demands. This lack of sensitivity to public opinion in turn reduced its ability to moderate.

A long history of nationalist-Islamist distrust fueled Hamas's paranoid security concerns. Those who opposed integrating Islamists saw Hamas's hidden agenda as the transformation of the domestic political system, fearing that its end goal amounted to nothing less than Islamic authoritarianism. In this respect, Hamas's resort to domestic violence in order to resolve differences with Fatah and the president provided integration skeptics with ammunition to limit Islamists' participation in politics. But although Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip confirmed the worst nightmares of the skeptics, it should be understood in the context of the long history of Islamist distrust of nationalists and the prevailing circumstances under which Hamas perceived grave and present danger to its survival from its partners in government. Further studies should examine those circumstances with the goal of better understanding Hamas's motivations in June 2007.

But Hamas's survival instinct also pushed it toward moderation. Paradoxically, Hamas's formal integration into the political process has done more to limit its room for maneuver in its relations with Israel than any other development since 1993. After 2005–6, Hamas and its government often refrained from using violence, preferring immediate

political survival over "resistance." Indeed, Hamas's commitment to its declared and undeclared cease-fire arrangements with Israel has been relatively stable even when they failed to force public concessions, or exact the intended price, from the Israelis. But in carrying out this balancing act between resistance and state-building, Hamas has risked losing some of its foot soldiers to more extreme groups. Indeed, several Salafist and jihadist groups emerged during the period of Hamas governance, even though they never threatened its control.

Hamas's moderate interpretation of Islam and Sharia and its traditional reform philosophy contributed to its relative success in avoiding making too many big mistakes in the social management of the Gaza Strip. Hamas has been willing to underplay its religious convictions and conservative social agenda and forgo large-scale Islamization of Palestinian society for the sake of gaining public support and international acceptance. Hamas's socialization in the traditional Muslim Brotherhood values and its belief in the importance of reforming the individual contributed to this relative success. Yet in doing so, Hamas encouraged its own more conservative party apparatus to seek to "impose" Islamization via informal means.

Finally, based on our findings and conclusions, we believe that *the relationship between Palestinian Islamist participation and moderation is best explained by the strength of push-and-pull factors:* the push of power politics (the struggle for power and the lure of control) vis-à-vis the pull of ideology (as represented by the challenges of secularism and of recognition of the legitimacy of Israel). These push-and-pull factors cannot be observed directly; rather, they are mediated by three dynamics, constraints, and opportunities:

- the internal make-up and structures of the main players involved in the political competition, such as the nature of the party elite and its internal decision-making process;
- the domestic political setup, such as the extent of democratization and pluralism already achieved, the nature and extent of political and ideological polarization, and the state of normative public opinion regarding the major questions of the day; and
- the nature of the regional alignment system, such as the number of competing blocs, their ideological and political positions, and their international support systems.

Endnotes

- 1 Before heading the new conciliation government, al Hamdallah served as prime minister of the Palestinian government in Ramallah, reporting to the president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Mahmoud Abbas.
- 2 All polling data referred to in this piece are from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. PSR polls have been conducted regularly every three months among a representative sample of 1,270 Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including East Jerusalem. The margin of error in all polls was 3%. For details on PSR's methodology, see <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/153>; for details on all PSR polls, see <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/154>.*
- 3 For details, see Khalil Shikaki, "The Palestinian Elections: Sweeping Victory, Uncertain Mandate," *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 3 (July 2006), pp. 116–30.
- 4 Issued in the Gaza Strip; the paper did have a limited circulation in the West Bank until June 2007, when it was banned by the PA. Content analysis of the newspaper covered two periods: one year before the January 2006 elections (representing the pre-integration period) and two years after the elections (representing the post-elections period).
- 5 For example, Hamas cracked down on extreme Salafist groups that on various occasions bombed women hair salons. Hamas's own policy was to ban men from working in these salons. These extreme groups also bombed internet cafes and restaurants.
- 6 The document, which calls itself the "National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners" and was also signed by Fatah and (with stated reservations) Islamic Jihad, among others, talks about "the right to establish [an] independent state with al-Quds al-Shareef [East Jerusalem] as its capital on all territories occupied in 1967." The full text is available at, "[The Full Text of the National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners](#)," *Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre*, May 26, 2006.*
- 7 For details on Fatah's young guard, see Khalil Shikaki, "Palestinians Divided," *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 2002).
- 8 Among them: Mushir al Masri, Sami Abu Zuhri, Fathi Hammad, Atif Udwan, Younis al Astal, and Mohammad Nazzal
- 9 Among them: Ismail Hanieh, Ahmad Yusuf, Hasan Yousuf, Omar Abdel Raziq, Nasir al Din al Sha'ir, Samir Abu Aishah, and Musa Abu Marzouk.

*Weblinks are available in the online version at
www.brandeis.edu/crown



Brandeis University Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

Middle East Brief

Can Hamas Moderate? Insights from Palestinian Politics during 2005-2011

Khalil Shikaki

Recent Middle East Briefs:

Available on the Crown Center website: www.brandeis.edu/crown

David Siddhartha Patel, "ISIS in Iraq: What We Get Wrong and Why 2015 Is Not 2007 Redux," No. 87

Abdel Monem Said Aly, "Post-Revolution Egyptian Foreign Policy," No. 86

Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi, "A Comprehensive Nuclear Deal with Iran: Not Mission Impossible," No. 85

Eva Bellin, "The Road to Rule of Law in the Arab World: Comparative Insights," No. 84

Shai Feldman and Khalil Shikaki, "Stabilizing Gaza-Israel Relations: What Would It Take?" No. 83

