



PERSPECTIVES

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The New Hamas Policy Document: Same Old Same Old (Mostly)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The new Hamas policy document, which is meant to complement, rather than replace, the Hamas Covenant of 1988, does not in any way depart from what the movement believes to be the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to a state "from the river to the sea". The document declares both the Balfour Declaration and the UN Partition Resolution of 1947 "null and void", and makes clear that the Palestinian state – to be achieved piecemeal if necessary – is to be created at the expense of the very existence of the Jewish State. While the text is not by any means a breakthrough, it does contain a few indications that pressure on Hamas can eventually bear fruit.

The new Hamas policy document is not, as it is claimed to be, the equivalent of the Fatah transformation in 1988. That shift, however fraudulent, included recognition of the UN plan and of Israel's right to exist, as well as a renunciation of terrorism. Hamas does neither: it continues to totally negate Israel's right to exist, and to extol the armed struggle.

The document does introduce some minor changes, however: mainly the substitution of attacks on Jews and Judaism with attacks on Zionists and Zionism. Though hardly cause for celebration, this semantic change suggests that pressure on Hamas can slowly bear fruit. It should be kept up, so as to induce changes in the future that are more substantive and less cosmetic.

The document indicates that in some respects, the burden of responsibility for governance in Gaza now on the shoulders of Hamas – as well as the ambition to take over the PLO and replace Fatah as the predominant force in Palestinian

political life – has forced Mashal and his colleagues to offer a few nods to regional and international norms. There is also an apologetic undertone aimed at explaining away the fact that since 2014, Hamas has been increasingly deterred, and has opted for "maintaining the calm (*tahdi'ah*)" along the Gaza border line.

There is no sign of "moderation" here, despite Hamas's description of Islam as a religion of "the middle way (*wasatiyyah*) and of moderation". The document aggressively repeats the familiar themes of Hamas ideology – Palestine in its entirety is indivisible, and the rights of the Palestinian people are eternally inalienable. No facts created on the ground by the "Zionist Project" are to be allowed to survive.

While not explicitly stated, it is clearly implied that the undoing of all that Zionism has wrought must also mean that the land, once fully liberated, will be cleansed of the physical presence of the Zionist invaders. The rejection is also spiritual. The effacement of any spiritual link between Israel and the Jews can be seen in the treatment of Jerusalem, where only Muslim and Christian Holy Places are mentioned.

Taking a page out of the by now infamous 1964 and 1968 PLO covenants, the new Hamas document asserts that Israel – "a tool in the hands of the Zionist project" – is a threat not only to the Palestinians and to the entire Arab and Islamic *Ummah* (the Arab and Muslim nation), but to all humanity. All should unite to destroy it. Any attempt to offer the Palestinians anything short of the full right of return must be rejected. A compensation package for damages and suffering must be provided, but only after the right of return has been exercised, not instead of it. No room for compromise is offered whatsoever.

Still, there are signs of an acknowledgement that the world has changed, as Hamas has learned the hard way ("this document deepens our experience and shares our understandings"). The blunt language of Islamic totalitarianism is a political liability, and Hamas needs to disavow it. So too the rehash, in the original Hamas Covenant, of Nazi tropes about vast Jewish conspiracies, in language that goes back to the days of Hitler as delivered by the Mufti of Jerusalem and his ilk from Berlin on "Radio Zeissen" during World War II.

It is now being asserted that the Zionist project, not the Jews as such, is the enemy, and that Hamas "opposes any oppression on the basis of nation, race or religion" (despite persistent evidence of anti-Christian depredations in Gaza). Years of harping on this point by Israel advocates finally led to some reckoning.

The events of 2011 left their mark as well. Hamas had already learned how to use democratic procedures as a way to power (as in 2006, when they won the

Palestinian parliamentary elections). Now they spout slogans about pluralism and tolerance. There is also a new tone towards women, who were mainly assigned the duty of giving birth to jihad fighters in the 1988 text.

As for Palestinian politics, which may well be the true reason for the formulation of this text, the document allows for an agreement with Fatah based on the partial goal of a Palestinian state within the 1967 lines. But it demands the right of return of the refugees "to the homes from which they were ousted", and states the caveat that this must not and cannot constitute recognition of Israel or acceptance of permanent partition. "There can be no concession over any part of the land of Palestine, for whatever reason and under any circumstances and pressures, and no matter how long the occupation," the document reads. " Hamas rejects any alternative to the total liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea".

Notwithstanding this persistently hard line, other language in the text suggests that Hamas is bowing to considerable regional and international pressure. Several sections speak to the need to keep Egypt's door open and distance Hamas from IS and other "radicals". In paragraph 1, Hamas defines itself as a "national Islamic Palestinian movement", a clear break with the explicit affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood in Paragraph 2 of the 1988 text. A rejection of all extremism is probably meant to draw a distinction between Hamas and IS, for the benefit of "moderate" Sunni Arab ears. The references to the need for "balance" and openness towards all supportive nations, and the rejection of "hegemony", are likely meant to tell the Saudis that Hamas is not becoming an Iranian proxy or stooge. Attention is also given to "world opinion", which is expected to recognize that Zionists are the enemies of all humanity.

Ultimately, despite the shift in terms of anti-Semitic virulence, this text does not give reason for hope. None of the three conditions spelled out by the international Quartet – conditions that have held up remarkably well for the past ten years – has been met. Israel and her right to exist are never to be recognized; Oslo and all other agreements – even UNGAR 181, which the PLO accepted (more or less) back in 1988 – are null and void; and the armed struggle is elevated to a sacred right. (While refusing to accept any disarming of the "resistance", the document offers a somewhat lame apology for the prolonged "*tahdi'ah*", or calm with Israel, as just one more way of "managing" the struggle). The operational sting in the tail of this effort is in paragraph 21, which not only rejects Oslo but delegitimizes the PA's security cooperation/"collaboration" with Israel.

Still, the nod to new norms tells us that Hamas has learned that the responsibilities of governance come with a price, even if what they are willing

to pay – in word, not deed – is way below the low bar set by the international community when the group usurped power in Gaza in 2007. Clearly, the lesson for the world – and for Israel and her partners in the regional equation – is that this is not the time to relent. This is a time to keep a steady but reasonable level of pressure (no one wants a humanitarian crisis in Gaza) so as to drive home to Hamas's ambitious leaders, as well as to their Qatari and Turkish sponsors, that what has been done falls far short of what still needs to be done.

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