



PERSPECTIVES

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Hamas Is an Abysmal Failure

by Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Mordechai Kedar

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Hamas has failed because it is caught between two irreconcilable principles: establishing a modern, functioning state that provides for its citizens while at the same time maintaining a perpetual state of war against the Jewish State. Neither the PLO's nationalist ideology nor Hamas's religious nationalism have served the interests of the Palestinian people. Only emirates based on local clans can operate legitimately in the Palestinian-controlled territories.

When the "Islamic Resistance Movement" – or Hamas, as it is better known by its Arabic acronym – took over Gaza in 2007, pundits theorized that once the group became responsible for drinking water, gasoline, electricity, employment, and food, it would have no choice but to become more moderate. These commentators predicted Hamas would soon prefer governing to jihad, exchange terror for state-running, develop political tools instead of tools of war, and adopt a political stance instead of one of armed conflict. They could not have been more wrong, because no Islamic terror organization abandons terror without being seen as abandoning Islam as well.

In fact, what has happened is a self-immolating process that can only occur in Islamic societies. This process is a function of the collective belief shared by Islamic leaders that it is a religious obligation to stick to their political principles – and that any deviation from total allegiance to those principles will result in their falling victim to criticism from others whose religious image is more vivid and faith-based.

Hamas wants to be considered a political organization, so it ran in the parliamentary elections in 2006, winning a majority of the seats. It is now gearing for presidential elections in which it hopes to take the seat of the president of the PA.

Hamas's problem is that it is caught between two contradictory roles. As a political organization it must adopt pragmatic patterns of behavior, including political negotiations with Israel. As a religious movement, it must adhere to the principle that forbids any deviation from the path dictated by Allah, who only allows his earthly representatives to talk to the Zionist infidels about technical issues such as transferring food, water, gasoline, electricity, and medical supplies.

From the standpoint of Hamas, it is not so bad if Gaza Muslims suffer, because that is considered "bla'a," one of the tests Allah presents to believers in order to determine whether or not they deserve a passport to Paradise. This explains why Hamas is so ready to sacrifice hundreds and even thousands of innocent civilians in every military encounter with Israel. It also explains why the Arab world media present – often successfully – such events as victories for Hamas and defeats for Israel.

The price for this kind of "victory" is paid by ordinary Gazans, whose family members are dead or wounded and who have to live with a shattered infrastructure. These people are not in the Hamas camp on this issue because they are much less extreme than those who have taken over their lives.

The religious conceptual framework prevents Hamas from giving in to the Jews or from doing anything that might be interpreted as giving in to them, including freeing prisoners or the bodies of fallen Israeli soldiers who are in Hamas hands or even providing information about them. It is understood that Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul are sadly not among the living, but Hamas spokesmen continue to refuse to divulge any details about the two, including providing confirmation of their deaths.

From a religious standpoint, Hamas is mired in a dark and dismal swamp. Over the 1,400 years since the dawn of Islamic history, there have been Muslim regimes that treated strangers with respect, refrained from attacking countries more powerful than they, and cared about the economic conditions of their subjects. Hamas is light years away from this type of rule. It is not only uninterested in improving the health, education, and living standards of the people of Gaza, but it takes step after step to create a picture of suffering and want in order to squeeze donations from the international community.

Another element that might spare Gaza further armed confrontation with Israel – which would come at the expense of ordinary citizens' lives, not those of Hamas leaders and their families, whose underground bunkers protect them – is the readiness of Hamas to conduct a prisoner exchange with Israel. Yihye Sinwar, the current Hamas leader freed in the Shalit deal, knows Israel will not free over 1,000 prisoners in exchange for corpses, but is under pressure from Hamas prisoners and their families. He is finding it almost

impossible to reach a deal that results in fewer prisoners being freed than were released during his exchange.

Hamas is making use of all kinds of mantras to justify its obstinate policy: “We will not cower to the Zionist entity on anything!” “We will not give the Zionists any free information!” “We will continue to struggle for a Palestine from the river to the sea!” No one on the Gaza street believes these mantras anymore. Nor do they put their faith in those who post them on the internet or on satellite stations.

Hamas does everything it can to publicize the “humanitarian catastrophe” in Gaza, but neglects to mention that the situation there is a direct result of the way it has governed over the past decade. The organization has been given billions of dollars by Qatar, by the donor states, and by international groups that do not follow up on what happens to their donations. It is also the recipient of taxes taken off salaries. What does it do with the money? Has it built schools? Hospitals? Factories? Infrastructure? None of the above.

Some of the money found its way into Hamas leaders’ private, hidden bank accounts in the Cayman Islands, the Virgin Islands, or other tax havens (as has also been the case with PLO leadership). Some was used to purchase homes and apartments for those leaders. But the bulk of those funds, by far, went to building underground tunnels, rockets, and other weapons of destruction intended for use in the war to “liberate” Palestine.

Because the Arab world has turned its back on Hamas, the organization is close to bankruptcy, a crisis that explains its new, warm relationship with Iran. Hamas leaders hope to obtain money, arms, and rockets from the mullahs in Tehran to help them break the stalemate with Israel. That is why they reconnected with Hezbollah and are ready to renew Hamas’s Iranian ties.

The Iranian leadership does not hide its joy at renewing ties with Hamas. The ayatollahs see the group as the long arm of the Iranian octopus extended towards southern Israel. The goal is to grasp it in a pincer between Hezbollah in the north and Hamas in the south. Will this strategy improve life in Gaza? Will Hamas succeed in convincing unemployed Gazans – 60% of the Strip’s employable breadwinners – that it is forging this alliance for their benefit? Hardly.

There is also the evergreen fiasco of Hamas’s relations with the PLO/PA. These organizations have been at loggerheads ever since Hamas burst onto the Israeli and international scene in 1988 with the outbreak of the first intifada. The rivalry, hatred, and jealousy running rampant between them and the insults they hurl at each other express much more than a political divide. They are proof of basic cultural differences between West Bank Arabs and those of Gaza. Even the Arabic spoken in the West Bank differs from that of Gaza.

Gaza's culture is that of desert-dwelling Bedouin, while the Arabic spoken by West Bankers is more urban.

The conflict between the PLO and Hamas is all-encompassing: it is over leadership positions, the treasury (the breeding ground of corruption), the police, and, most importantly, the armed forces. Notwithstanding the agreements both sides signed while smiling at international photographers, the inspired speeches made by spokesmen lauding the concept of sacred reconciliation – and despite the public demand to see the PLO and Hamas work together for their shared goal of establishing a Palestinian Arab state on the ruins of Israel, the two organizations have failed to rise above their conflicts and keep the promises that lie at the basis of those agreements. They continue to castigate, humiliate, and mock one another as the public looks on.

On the other side of the cultural and political equation are the salafist organizations modeled on al-Qaeda and ISIS. They have active delegations in Gaza, though most of their activists have moved to Sinai. Hamas is engaged in a fight to the death with organizations committed to doing to it exactly what it did to the PLO: “real” jihad in the name of Islam. Hamas has killed scores of Salafist activists, including over 30 cut down by machine gun fire on a street in Rafah after gas grenades were used to force them to exit their mosque.

Hamas, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, was supposed to create an alternative religious nationalist ethos in contrast to the secularist nationalism of various Arab organizations. It failed in its attempt to present an Arab nationalist model of a democratic, modern state that protects its citizens and provides for their welfare, health and employment – an ordinary, functioning state that earns the loyalty of citizens who had previously adhered to their tribal, ethnic, religious, and group identities.

The Arab nationalist movements have been long sunk in a morass of despotism. Not one has managed to establish and maintain a democratic nation-state along the lines of Israel. The Hamas movement was supposed to offer an alternative religious ethos that could unfurl its flag over all the tribal and religious groups living in “Falestin”: Muslims, Christians, Circassians, Ahmadis.

The failure of the religious movement is attributable in part to its inability to abandon the principle of jihad long enough to join with the PLO and establish a Palestinian Arab state alongside Israel until such time as it would be possible to destroy the Jewish State. Hamas does not see a way to accept Israel's existence, even on a temporary basis, and is obligated to maintain a constant state of war with it (as opposed to incessant active warfare). Waging an active war would destroy Gaza and topple the Hamas leadership; a constant state of war justifies the continuation of Gaza's dismal situation.

The situation in Gaza provides further proof, for anyone who still needs it, of the inability of an Islamic movement to establish and maintain a modern state that can live in peace with its neighbors and tolerate ideologies different from its own.

The schism dividing the PLO and Hamas is a cultural divide expressed through political conflict. There is simply no way for them to unify or establish a true, long-lasting reconciliation. Anyone counting on one unified Palestinian Arab state had better align his or her expectations with bitter Middle East reality.

The PLO failed because the secular nationalist ideology that does so well in Europe cannot succeed in the Middle East. It has failed in every country in the region that has tried it. Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Sudan are the exemplars.

The Hamas movement failed because fundamentalist Islam cannot maintain a modern state with Western democratic standards based on human laws. Turkey, which has been returning to Islam since the 1990s, is also distancing itself more and more from the accepted Western model of a constitutional democracy.

The conclusion is clear: there is neither a religious nor a secular basis for establishing a Palestinian Arab state. The only solution is a return to the natural basis of Middle Eastern society: the tribe. Only emirates in the West Bank based on local clans, like those in the Gulf emirates, can operate legitimately in the region.

An earlier version of this article was translated by Rochel Sylvetsky for Israel National News.

Dr. Mordechai Kedar is a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served for 25 years in IDF military intelligence specializing in Syria, Arab political discourse, Arab mass media, Islamic groups, and Israeli Arabs, and is an expert on the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.

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