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Hamas Today: An Assessment of Alliances and Capabilities

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Summary

- While pursuing certain pragmatic objectives in the short-term, Hamas remains unequivocally committed to its founding ideological principles. These root it in an extreme Islamist worldview that is fiercely hostile to Western influences and that is profoundly anti-Semitic, with its hostility to Jews extending far beyond Israel and Zionism. Hamas imbues its Jew-hatred with a theological mandate and gives violent political expression to these beliefs.
- Hamas has a complicated leadership and organisational structure, with decisions being reached through discussion and consensus between the various wings of Hamas. As well as the military and political leaderships in Gaza, decision making within Hamas also has to take into account the views of Hamas in the West Bank, and most importantly of the Hamas leadership in Qatar.
- There is no meaningful distinction that can be drawn between the political and military sides of Hamas. The organisation's political leaders often encourage and praise military action, while Hamas' military leaders also take part in decision making regarding the organisation's overall policies and strategy. As such, efforts to seek out "moderate" or pragmatic elements within Hamas that might be divisible from the extremist and terrorist elements are unlikely to prove successful.
- In previous conflicts with Israel, including the most recent in the summer of 2014, Hamas has been frustrated in its efforts to achieve its primary military objectives. Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system has prevented Hamas' rocket attacks from inflicting very great damage on its population centres. Similarly, Israel was able to locate and destroy the majority of Hamas' cross-border tunnel network, which appear to have been intended to have been part of large scale attack and kidnapping operation. Finally, Israel has so far avoided being lured into a long-term ground offensive in the well defended areas of Gaza's city centre.
- While Hamas' efforts to smuggle weapons into Gaza are now being hampered by Egypt's destruction of tunnels on the Rafah border, Hamas is increasingly shifting toward manufacturing its own rockets from within Gaza and has been holding regular trials of these self-produced rockets. Hamas is also reported to have resumed the construction of its tunnel network, but with Israel monitoring the border closely, it is not yet believed that Hamas has expanded these tunnels beyond Gaza. Alongside these efforts Hamas is also currently running a large recruitment and training drive for its fighting force.
- The toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has left Hamas particularly isolated. President Sisi's administration views Hamas as part of the same Islamist problem that it is fighting in its own country, particularly in the Sinai. As such Egypt is going to great lengths to destroy smuggling tunnels between Gaza and Egypt and is effectively enforcing a blockade by keeping the Rafah crossing for the most part closed. Further moves have also been taken to outlaw and shutdown Hamas within Egypt itself.

Introduction

During the summer 2014 war in Gaza, Hamas was hit hard and suffered some significant setbacks as a result of the Israeli operations. As well losing many combatants, Hamas' military infrastructure was also severely damaged, with both its rocket manufacturing facilities and system of offensive tunnels being for the most part wiped out by the Israeli military. Nevertheless, since the Israelis never attempted to overthrow Hamas, the organisation remains in control of Gaza with no real rivals to its authority from within the strip, and for the moment there is no serious suggestion that it will be overthrown by an outside force.

As such Hamas views itself as undefeated and still positioned to continue its war against Israel. This despite the fact that Hamas appears to be in the process of becoming far more isolated than it has been in the recent past. Indeed, there has been no noticeable sign of softening in Hamas' rhetoric or policy. Marwan Issa, the current leader of Hamas' Izz ad-din al-Qassam Brigades, has boasted that preparations are well underway for the next conflict with Israel¹, and it is clear that Hamas has already started significant work on tunnel building, rocket manufacturing and the recruitment and training of new combatants.

Israel and Hamas clashed three times in recent years (in 2008, 2012 and 2014; there were also some smaller military conflicts). Following past rounds of conflict, Hamas has generally managed to recover quite quickly. The organisation has managed to build a better organised military apparatus and improved its defensive and offensive capabilities in the wake of two previous wars with Israel. This time, although Hamas has suffered considerable blows, it also appeared to achieve at least de-facto recognition from all sides as a major player in the conflict. Since Hamas places considerable import on its image and standing in the Arab world, the fact that it did not surrender to the Israeli army after 51 days of fighting is significant. It remains to be seen whether this time better international supervision could prevent the organisation from rearming its forces. But experience shows that Hamas has been extremely astute when walking the fine line between its two major goals - preserving its Islamist regime in Gaza and maintaining an image of successful military resistance (Muqawama) against Israel.

As well as its extremist and violent ideology, Hamas is also influenced by certain pragmatic considerations which it accommodates as part an effort to achieve more far reaching and long-term ideological objectives. This has been particularly apparent when it comes to the alliances that Hamas has made; the fact that Hamas as a Sunni Islamist organisation has been open to allying itself with Shia Iran. Most recently Hamas has built an alliance with Qatar, yet despite this support, the organisation has found itself particularly isolated since the last war as the administration in Egypt clearly sided against it. That conflict was affected, from Hamas' point of view, by this sense that it was facing a coordinated Israeli-Egyptian opposition to its activities in Gaza. The destruction of the smuggling tunnels by Egypt meant that Hamas was losing both huge amounts of tax revenue that it had been collecting from smuggled goods, as well as its life-line of military support. Israeli intelligence experts are still debating whether the last outburst of fighting

¹ "Head of Hamas' Military Wing Makes Rare Appearance" *Ynet News*, 3 January 2015, available at: <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4632278,00.html>

was a well prepared plan to improve Hamas' situation through a conflict or, rather, simply the result of an unpremeditated series of events.

Over the years, Israel has purposely avoided any attempt to remove the Hamas regime in Gaza or to re-occupy the whole Strip. In the latest round of fighting, both the IDF's top brass and the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency supported Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's decision not to remove the Hamas regime and advised against a wider operation, fearing heavy military losses. Similarly, they have also both suggested that Israel would not object to the Gaza reconstruction efforts, as long as it maintained strict supervision of building materials supplied to the Strip. During all three wars in Gaza, Hamas has suffered significant losses and the number of casualties on the Palestinian side (both military and civilian) has been much higher than on the Israeli side. Senior Hamas officials were assassinated, the organisation's headquarters and military camps were struck, its weapons arsenal destroyed and civilian neighbourhoods were severely damaged during the fighting. Yet Israel only ever initiated ground incursions on a limited level, never reaching the Gaza City centre and Hamas' major military compounds. As such, Israel achieved only short-term deterrence, meaning that each time a new conflict has always appeared shortly on the horizon.

1. The Ideological and Historical Origins of Hamas

Hamas was founded in the Gaza Strip in December 1987, in the opening weeks of the first Palestinian Intifada (uprising). The organisation's name is an acronym (in Arabic - "The Islamic Resistance Movement"), but can also mean enthusiasm or courage. Its first written proclamation was published on December 14th, 1987 by a small group of Islamist activists led by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin².

Hamas' ideological origins lie in the Muslim Brotherhood, established in Egypt in 1928 by an Islamic teacher, Hassan al-Banna. The movement's goals were to campaign against "negative" Western influence in the Arab world, to lead a massive religious awakening among the Arab people and to establish an Islamic state which would be based on Sharia law and in which the Koran would serve as the constitution³. The Muslim Brotherhood hoped to reach these goals by educating the youth according to Islamic values and by building a large system of institutions which would deal with education, health and welfare. This social action was thought of as a necessary step before the announcement of a Jihad to free the Arab nation from the burden of foreign occupation. The Brotherhood realised that this would mean a long process requiring patience, careful planning and confidential activity.

Ties between the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Palestinians had already begun by the 1930's, during the Palestinian revolt against the British mandate. Hamas' military division, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, is named after Sheikh Qassam, a prominent religious leader from the time of the Palestinian revolt of the thirties⁴. But for many decades Islamists generally played only a minor role in the Palestinian national movement, which has primarily been led by the more secular Fatah and PLO. In 1968, Sheikh Yassin was appointed the leader of the Muslim

² Schanzer, J, *Hamas Vs. Fatah: the struggle for Palestine*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. p. 24.

³ Telephone Interview with Amos Harel of *Haaretz*, 24 February 2015.

⁴ Schanzer, J, *Hamas Vs. Fatah: the struggle for Palestine*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. p. 52.

Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip⁵. Yassin led widespread religious and social activity, but only at the outbreak of the first Intifada did he decide that the movement should take part in the military struggle – establishing Hamas for this purpose. A similar branch was soon founded in the West Bank also.

The Hamas Charter, written and affirmed in 1988 by Yassin and his students, defined the movement as a branch of the worldwide Muslim Brotherhood at the forefront of the struggle against Zionism⁶. The movement has two major goals: a struggle to free all Palestine “until the last grain of sand” and an attempt to remake Palestinian society from within, in accordance with Islamic values. Hamas sees the battle for Palestine as an ancient struggle between Islam and Judaism, which should not end in compromise. Palestine is considered holy Muslim land (Wakf) that will not be conceded under any circumstances. In this view, Jihad is the only solution to the Palestinian problem⁷ and therefore a personal duty for every Palestinian⁸.

The charter uses explicitly anti-Semitic language, describing the Jews as having only negative traits and accusing them of disbelieving in Allah and planning to take over the world. Although Hamas has agreed over the years to cease-fires with Israel and Yassin even acknowledged, for a while, the possibility of a longer cease-fire (Hudna), these options were always stressed to be temporary necessities, supposed to be corrected when the organisation would be strong enough to defeat Israel. Hamas consistently rejects any possibility for recognition of the State of Israel, even when that meant a similar refusal to recognise its regime in Gaza by the International Quartet.

During the period since its founding, Hamas rapidly became the most violent Palestinian organisation, taking part in numerous attacks against IDF forces as well as Israeli civilians. Salah Shada, Yassin's closest follower, became the head of the organisation's military wing⁹. By the mid-nineties, Hamas was responsible for horrendous suicide bombing attacks on buses, cafes and shopping malls all over Israel, which largely contributed to the collapse of the Oslo Accords¹⁰. During the second Intifada, between 2000 and 2006, Hamas played a leading role in the Palestinian terror campaign against Israel, murdering hundreds of Israelis.

In 2006, Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections. One year later, in June 2007, Hamas members violently drove out all Fatah forces from Gaza, taking full control of the Strip¹¹ and establishing the outlines of a de-facto Islamic state there. The organisation still maintains a political and also a low-key military presence in the West Bank, but its relationship with the Palestinian Authority there, still governed by Fatah, remains tense.

⁵ Telephone Interview with Amos Harel of *Haaretz*, 24 February 2015.

⁶ *The Hamas Charter 1988*, Yale Avalon Project Translation.

⁷ ‘Article 13’, *The Hamas Charter 1988*, Yale Avalon Project Translation.

⁸ ‘Article 15’, *The Hamas Charter 1988*, Yale Avalon Project Translation.

⁹ Telephone Interview with Amos Harel of *Haaretz*, 24 February 2015

¹⁰ Schanzer, J, *Hamas Vs. Fatah: the struggle for Palestine*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

2. Organisational Structure

Hamas' organisational structure relies upon a complicated but well-established practice of shared decision making (Shura), between the organisation's religious, political and military leaderships. Additionally, policy and strategy has to be devised through consultation between the organisation's various geographic centres; Gaza, the West Bank and the leadership abroad (previously in Damascus and now in Qatar).

Crucially, there is no meaningful distinction that can be drawn between the political and military sides of Hamas. The group's political leaders often encourage and praise military action, although for the most part this will not involve the issuing of specific orders, and on the whole it is the military leadership that answers to the political one. However, Hamas' military leaders also take part in decision making regarding the organisation's policies and strategy. While the leaders of both wings generally refrain from appearing together in public (partly out of fear of assassination attempts) political leaders are still frequently present at funerals for the military wing's "martyrs", killed in action against Israel¹².

This insistence on shared decisions sometimes leads to long delays in resolutions, especially in wartime when communication is difficult. The results of this disparate decision making process were clearly visible during the events of summer 2014. For instance, with the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teens in the West Bank in June, the political wing decided on the directive (kidnappings could help with more successful prisoner swap deals as seen with the Shalit deal of 2011) but it was the military cell in Hebron which decided where and when to act, without consulting either the military or political leadership in Gaza. Similarly, during the summer 2014 war in Gaza, Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, who is based in Qatar, kept frequent phone and mail contact with both the political and military leaderships in Gaza¹³. It is assumed that objections from Mashal and the leadership abroad were the primary obstacle that delayed an agreement on a cease-fire with Israel, while the Gaza leadership was reportedly inclined toward agreeing to a ceasefire earlier.

Hamas' internal structure has in many respects become more multifaceted in recent years. Prior to his assassination by Israel in 2004, Sheikh Yassin acted as both the organisation's undisputed spiritual and political leader. His successor, Khaled Mashal, has no prestigious religious background and Mashal is considered first among equals. Number two in the hierarchy is arguably Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of the political wing in Gaza (and formerly Hamas' prime minister in Gaza, until the government officially disbanded in spring 2014). The Hamas leadership in the West Bank is rather weak, on account of being continuously undermined by both the Palestinian Authority and the Israelis, with both carrying out regular arrests of Hamas operatives there.

The relationship between the PA and Hamas remains tense and efforts toward reconciliation have repeatedly broken down, with the most recent attempt having been a reconciliation agreement

¹² Telephone Interview with Amos Harel of *Haaretz*, 24 February 2015.

¹³ *Ibid.*

signed in April 2014¹⁴. In practice, however, the unity government that was supposed to have come out of that agreement now appears essentially symbolic and the PA continues take measures against Hamas in the West Bank. Hamas has restricted many of Fatah's political activities in Gaza, however, it has increasingly permitted the activities of Fatah's military wing. During this summer's conflict with Israel, Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades in Gaza joined Hamas in firing rockets on Israeli population centres. Similarly, Hamas has recently permitted Fatah's brigades in Gaza to hold training exercises and to undertake rocket firing trials from within the Strip¹⁵.

3. The Military Dimension

Following Ahmed Yassin's assassination there was a strengthening of the power and influence of the military wing within Hamas' internal politics. The Qassam Brigades were seen as the vanguard, leading the struggle against Israel and making significant achievements, such as the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2005 and the removal of Fatah from the Strip two years later. The military wing does not hand-out orders to the political one, but Hamas' political leaders are increasingly obliged to take the views of the military commanders into consideration.

Until November 2012, the military wing had been led by Ahmed Jabary, who was assassinated by Israel on the opening day of the previous military conflagration, operation "Pillar of Defence". Jabary, who some militants accused of being "softened" and corrupted by his close relationship with Egyptian intelligence officials, was replaced by Muhammad Deif, a veteran hard-core member of the organisation's military wing, who had been wounded four times in Israeli assassination attempts during the previous decade. Although reportedly suffering from partial blindness, trouble of hearing and having difficulties moving around, Deif's mind remained lucid¹⁶. He is widely believed to have been the mastermind behind the organisation's operational plans against Israel. Deif is thought of as having a status with equivalent importance to that of the political leaders, his positions are carefully considered and he was also responsible for directing most of Hamas' campaigns against Israel during the Gaza War in summer 2014¹⁷.

The number two in the military wing is Marwan Issa, another veteran of the battle against Israel who functions as the primary point of contact between the political and military branches of the organisation. Beneath Deif and Issa exist a number of field commanders, including Ahmed Randour (who commands the Northern part of the Strip) and Muhammad Abu-Shamlah, who was in charge of the Southern area, along with regional brigade commanders such as Muhammad Sinwar and Raed al-Attar. During the war, on August 19th, Israel once again tried to assassinate Deif¹⁸. Since then, his whereabouts remain unknown. Hamas has claimed that he was not hurt in the Israeli air strike but as yet failed to show proof that he survived. Israeli intelligence officials believe that he has at least been wounded in the attack and it is reported that Marwan Issa now

¹⁴ "Hamas and Fatah Unveil Palestinian Reconciliation Deal", *BBC News*, 23 April 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27128902>

¹⁵ "In Gaza, Abbas's Fatah Practices Attacking IDF Positions", *Times of Israel*, 8 March 2015, available at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/in-gaza-abbass-fatah-practices-attacking-idf-positions/>

¹⁶ Telephone Interview with Amos Harel of *Haaretz*, 24 February 2015.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ "Israeli Officials Acknowledge Assassination Attempt on Hamas Military Wing Chief Deif", *The Jerusalem Post*, 20 August 2014, available at: <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israel-accused-of-trying-to-assassinate-Hamas-military-wing-chief-Deif-371595>

serves as Deif's replacement. Two days after the attempt on Deif, Israel killed both Abu-Shamlah and al-Attar in a similar strike¹⁹.

Hamas' brigade commanders are described as both experienced and charismatic figures, enjoying considerable room for independent operational decisions²⁰. The political and military leadership issues general directives and policies, but local commanders are usually free to decide implementation according to developments on the ground. This is especially true during wartime when Hamas is under attack by the Israeli army and most communication lines are thought to be disengaged.

In recent years, Hamas has undergone the process of becoming less of a guerrilla organisation and is now closer to being a fully-fledged military one, similar in many respects to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The organisation's defensive deployments are organised into a series of semi-circles, facing the Israeli border on the East and North, mainly focussed on protecting the Gaza City centre, where the organisation's major compounds are located. The regional battalions situated closer to the border, such as those in Beit-Hanoun, the Shujeaya neighbourhood and Eastern Rafah, are considered some of the best trained and are also the most well equipped units.

Hamas' military organisation is arranged into six regional brigades, which are then divided into 27 regional battalions. Every battalion has independent operational capabilities such as launching long and short range rockets, anti-tank rockets, anti-aircraft, UAV's and tunnels (both defensive and offensive). The digging of offensive tunnels, considered a top-priority project, had been supervised personally by the brigade commanders.

Between its regional brigades and battalions Hamas has between 15,000 and 20,000 armed men²¹. The fighters carry personal weapons, M-16's and AK-47's. The organisation also uses machine-guns, anti-tank rockets (RPG-29 and the more sophisticated Russian-made Cornets) and also anti-aircraft missiles (mostly SA-7) which hardly pose a threat to the Israeli warplanes and helicopters. Its defensive alignment also relies on explosives, booby-trapped houses (put in place prior to an anticipated Israeli attack) and a large system of defensive tunnels and bunkers, used for command and control, as well as for storage of weapons.

Offensively, Hamas now concentrates mainly on rockets and tunnels. The organisation never specifies its precise capabilities or the size of its arsenal, but the Israeli military intelligence estimated that Hamas and the other Palestinian factions held close to 10,000 rockets before the war²². The Palestinians launched 4,500 rockets during the war²³, while Israel assesses that it destroyed close to 3,000 rockets through airstrikes²⁴. Of the remaining rockets, most are short range (up to 42 kilometres), a little over a hundred have a range of between 42 and 80 kilometres

¹⁹ "Three Senior Hamas Military Leaders Killed in Israeli Airstrike", *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 August 2014, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/three-senior-hamas-military-leaders-killed-in-israeli-airstrike-in-gaza-1408604692>

²⁰ Telephone Interview with Amos Harel of *Haaretz*, 24 February 2015.

²¹ White, J. and Zilber, N., "Boots on the Ground: Israel enters Gaza", *The Washington Incident*, 18 July 2014, available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/boots-on-the-ground-israel-enters-gaza>

²² "Operation Protective Edge by Numbers", *Israel Defence Forces*, 5 August 2014, available at: <http://www.idfblog.com/blog/2014/08/05/operation-protective-edge-numbers/>

²³ Rubin, U., "Israel's Air and Missile Defence During the 2014 Gaza War", 11 February 2015, available at: <http://besacenter.org/mideast-security-and-policy-studies/israels-air-missile-defense-2014-gaza-war/>

²⁴ "Operation Protective Edge by Numbers", *Israel Defence Forces*, 5 August 2014, available at: <http://www.idfblog.com/blog/2014/08/05/operation-protective-edge-numbers/>

(some of them reaching the Tel Aviv area) and a few dozen could possibly reach up to 160 kilometres and hit the Haifa area in Northern Israel²⁵. Most of the longest range rockets are home-made, primitively produced in Gaza and hardly able to cause damage during the war. The most lethal weapon has been the short range rockets (122 and 107 millimetres in calibre, some with a range of 15 km) and mortar bombs (80 to 120 millimetres in calibre, up to 8 km range), which killed five Israeli civilians and ten Israeli soldiers during the war²⁶.

During the 2014 war in Gaza, Hamas rockets caused limited damage, mostly as a result of the efficacy of the Israeli produced rocket intercepting system, Iron Dome. About 85 percent of Palestinian rockets shot at populated Israeli areas were intercepted by Iron Dome (the system can assess which rockets are about to land in a populated area and ignore the rest). None of the rockets were able to cause significant damage or casualties in the country's centre, and the damage was mostly indirect. However, the constant alarms had a considerable negative impact upon daily life and the Israeli economy and managed to stop most international flights to Ben Gurion Airport for 36 hours. The most serious damage occurred in Israel's south, where normal life was paralysed for almost 50 days consecutively. In spite of this, the Israelis believe that Hamas was actually frustrated by the limited results of the rocket attacks. During the war, Israel deployed 9 Iron Dome batteries, covering the area from Eilat, Israel's southernmost city, to Haifa in the north. Additionally, Israel is working on producing David's Sling batteries (meant for medium-range rockets and missiles) and it also now possesses Arrow III batteries (for long range missiles) which are already deployed but not yet used in combat²⁷.

Hamas' second important offensive project had been the tunnels. The organisation has used tunnels before, for attacks against Israeli military outposts inside the Gaza Strip (prior to the Israeli disengagement in 2005), for smuggling of weapons and goods from Egypt and for limited attacks into Israel (such as the kidnapping of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit in 2006). Around 2008, the organisation began digging a massive infrastructure of tunnels, both for offensive and defensive use. The Israeli intelligence community believes that once Deif became the head of the military wing in late 2012, he decided to focus on improving the offensive tunnels. During the summer 2014 war, the Israelis discovered and destroyed 32 offensive tunnels, 14 of which had crossed under the border into Israeli territory. The IDF assumes that a few more tunnels might not have been discovered and is still searching for them from the Israeli side. Each tunnel is between 2.5 and 5 kilometers long, dug between 25 and 40 meters underground and can allow a commando unit of 10-20 fighters to cross the border rather quickly without been spotted²⁸. The exits from the tunnels were discovered between 100 and 500 meters east of the border fence, inside Israeli territory. It is estimated that every tunnel cost several million dollars to dig and that each project, supervised by senior Hamas commanders, took more than a year to finish. Hamas has trained an elite force, the "Nuchba" unit, to attack Israel via these tunnels.

The tunnels are believed to have been intended for a surprise offensive against Israeli territory, at an appropriate time of Hamas' choosing. Eventually, war in Gaza broke over a Hamas attempt to launch such an attack around July 7th at the Kerem Shalom Crossing, on the southernmost point of the Gaza border. The Israeli air force bombed the Palestinian side of the tunnel and caused the

²⁵ Telephone Interview with Amos Harel of *Haaretz*, 24 February 2015.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Telephone Interview with Amos Harel of *Haaretz*, 24 February 2015.

death of 7 Hamas gunmen as the tunnel collapsed. This led to a harsh Hamas response, launching rockets at both Israel's southern population centres and the Tel-Aviv area. During the war, Hamas attempted five attacks through tunnels into Israeli territory, mostly aimed at military posts close to the borders. Two attacks were blocked by the IDF with no Israeli casualties. In three other cases, 11 soldiers died - a significant number by Israeli standards, which Hamas considers one of its major operational and psychological achievements during the fighting. However, it would be safe to assume that the organisation expected even higher results and was disappointed to see that the IDF managed to quickly locate and destroy so many tunnels.

There is an ongoing debate in the Israeli intelligence community as to whether Hamas planned an immediate attack through the Kerem Shalom crossing, attempting to kidnap an Israeli soldier and force Israel and Egypt to ease the economic siege over Gaza, or whether it was preparing the tunnel for an attack at some point in the future. The strategic objective appears to have been to inflict severe damage on Israel, in a situation where Israel attacks the Strip, using surprise underground attacks which the army has been ill-prepared to deal with, as another important factor alongside the rocket bombardments. Since most of the offensive tunnels were destroyed in Gaza, it remains to be seen whether Hamas would try to re-launch the project again. Except for the tunnels, Hamas tried to launch different "quality" surprise attacks, using naval commandos, paratroopers (with paragliders) and UAV's (evidently carrying cameras, not explosives and mostly meant for a psychological affect). All these plans were successfully thwarted by the IDF during the war.

Nevertheless, Hamas has become an increasingly formidable military force. For one thing, Hamas has undergone an impressive learning curve, drawing quick conclusions from tactical failures. Meanwhile the number of fighters in the organisation has increased almost tenfold within 8 years and their level of training has improved significantly. In 2006, Hamas only had rockets with a 20 km range. By 2008, the maximum range was doubled to 40. It doubled again by 2012, to 80 km, and again - to around 160 km, by 2014²⁹. Deif's control of the military leadership focused the operational activity and made it much more effective. The organisation drew enthusiasm from a series of successes, most notably the Shalit deal in 2011, which led to the release of no less than 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in return for one Israeli soldier.

4. Rearming and Realigning

Over the years, Hamas has relied extensively on Iranian help and Hezbollah guidance. Hamas terrorists, especially after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, attended training camps in Lebanon, Syria and Iran, alongside members of Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Some of these camps were run by the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), led until recently by major General Qassem Soleimani. There, Hamas members were taught guerrilla tactics, command and control, communications, commando fighting and the use of a large variety of weapons, from anti-tank rockets to mortar fire.

²⁹Shapir, YS., "Rocket Warfare in Operation Protective Edge", *The Institute for National Security Studies*, 22 July 2014, available at: <http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/Rocket%20Warfare%20in%20Operation%20Protective%20Edge.pdf>

At the same time, the organisation improved its rocket launching capabilities, assisted by Iran through a sophisticated system of weapons smuggling, from the Persian Gulf through Yemen to the Red Sea to Sudan, Egypt, Sinai and – usually through the smuggling tunnels in Rafah – to the Gaza Strip. Both Hezbollah and Syria assisted Teheran in this massive operation. The weapons were picked up in Gaza by both Hamas and PIJ, which was considered a direct proxy-organisation of Iran. In several cases (among them in 2002, 2011 and 2014) Israeli Navy Seals confiscated such shipments in both the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. There were also several mysterious air strikes against convoys of trucks carrying weapons in Sudan—for which Israel never acknowledged responsibility—from 2009 onwards. Among the weapons Israel confiscated were coast-to-sea Chinese C-704 missiles and Syrian made 302mm rockets with a 160 km range. However, during these years Iran managed to smuggle to Gaza a small number of Iranian made Fajer rockets (75 km range) and large numbers of Russian and Chinese made Katyusha rockets (24 and 42 km)³⁰. The senior Hamas military official who commanded the smuggling project was Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, who was assassinated in Dubai in January 2010. Mabhouh, who fled Gaza in the early 1990's to avoid an Israeli arrest, was the point of contact between Hamas and Iran and Hezbollah. Israel, blamed for his killing, never admitted it was behind the operation, but his assassination was thought, at the time, to have created serious problems for the smuggling effort. His successor's name remains unknown.

Two significant changes have occurred since 2012. At first, Hamas broke off its ties to Iran and Syria in response to the Syrian Civil War in which the Assad regime had slaughtered tens of thousands of Sunni civilians and Muslim Brotherhood members (PIJ remained affiliated with Iran and was therefore the primary partner of the last botched smuggling plan to Gaza in March 2014). Then, in July 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo was toppled by a military coup. The new regime, controlled by Egyptian generals, became much more sympathetic to Israeli security concerns, while showing deep hatred toward Hamas, which it identified with the Brotherhood. According to the Generals' orders, most smuggling tunnels in Rafah were systematically destroyed.

During the year before the Cairo coup, Hamas mostly relied on weapons smuggling from Libya, but now this route had been blocked as well – so the organisation has increasingly focussed on self-production of rockets, which have turned out to be less lethal and accurate than the smuggled ones. Israel estimated that it managed to destroy about 80 percent of the rocket production sites in the Gaza Strip during the war and that Hamas would encounter difficulties both in resuming production and renewing the smuggling. Therefore, if Israeli-Egyptian cooperation continues and the international community establishes a system of effective supervision, this time there might be a good chance of slowing down Hamas' attempts of rebuilding its firepower. Israeli Defence Minister, Moshe Yaalon, recently claimed that since the Generals took control of Egypt, not one rocket had been smuggled through the Rafah tunnels during the last year³¹.

In mid-October, Hamas military commanders announced in the Hamas newspaper al-Risala that the organisation has resumed digging offensive tunnels towards Israel³². So far these tunnels are

³⁰ Nerguizian, A., "The Struggle for the Levant: Geopolitical Battles and the Quest for Stability", *The Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 18 September 2014, available at: http://csis.org/files/publication/140918_Iran_VIII_Levant_report.pdf

³¹ "Israel Gives Syrians aid so Moderates Keep Rebels from the Border", *Haaretz*, 15 October 2014, available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.620882>

³² Telephone Interview with Amos Harel of Haaretz, 24 February 2015.

not actually believed to have crossed beneath the Israel-Gaza border, however it is presumed highly likely that Hamas will attempt this once again in the near future. Both Hamas and PIJ have held a series of rocket launching and mortar fire tests since the war ended. These have been primarily for short-range weapons and directed into the Mediterranean. However, the missile trials are becoming increasingly frequent³³. Hamas has also initiated a significant new recruitment and training program to replenish its ranks in the wake of the summer's fighting. As part of an effort to create a 17 thousand man strong "Liberation Army" Hamas is believed to have created 18 new training camps. Among those being recruited are reported to be a large number of adolescent males and even minors³⁴. Others, such as the Nasser Edin brigades are also now recruiting and training female fighters. This is all part of an effort by Hamas and other Jihadist groups to turn Gaza into a highly militarised society that can be directed against Israel.

Qatar replaced Iran and Egypt as Hamas' primary financial supporter. There are now reports of Hamas and Iran renewing their former ties, although it is not yet clear whether Tehran has fully resumed its military and financial support to Hamas. Meanwhile, senior Israeli and Western security officials estimate that Qatar has transferred more than 500 million dollars to Hamas in recent years. The previous Amir of Qatar visited Gaza in late 2012 (avoiding a similar visit in the West Bank) and announced a huge infrastructure project. Much of this money was evidently used to build Hamas military compounds and to dig tunnels. Hamas leader Khaled Mashal has been resident in Qatar over the last two and a half years, since he left Damascus on account of the rift between the organisation and the Assad regime. Former Israeli President, Shimon Peres, said in July that Qatar was helping Hamas to turn Gaza into a "centre of death".

Another important ally of Hamas is Turkey, but here the support is mostly diplomatic, rather than financial. However, there has been a significant increase in the number of senior Hamas operatives based in Turkey, and it has been suggested that in the event that the political leadership is no longer able to remain in Qatar then it may instead look to relocate to Turkey. The relationship between Ankara and Jerusalem, once close, had deteriorated mostly over Turkey's support of Hamas, particularly after Operation Cast Lead in 2009 and the Turkish flotilla to Gaza in 2010. On 20 October 2014, Israeli Defence Minister Yaalon publicly blamed Turkey for hosting the headquarters of Hamas' military wing abroad in Istanbul³⁵. Yaalon was referring to Salah al-Arouri, a senior Hamas official from the West Bank who arrived in Turkey two years and is believed to be sending both money and orders to Hamas cells in the West Bank. Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have accused Arouri of masterminding multiple attacks against Israeli targets, with Arouri even admitting that Hamas had been behind the June 2014 kidnapping and murder of the three Israeli teenagers³⁶.

Within Gaza itself, Hamas maintains a delicately balanced coexistence with several other smaller militant organisations. As mentioned, Hamas has increasingly cooperated with the terrorist activities of Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades within Gaza. However, the other primary terror group within Gaza is Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Like Hamas, PIJ is similarly built with five

³³ "Hamas Resumes Trials of Homemade Rockets", *ynet News*, 20 November 2014, available at: <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4594176,00.html>

³⁴ "15,000 Young Gazans Complete Hamas Terror Training Camp", *Times of Israel*, 30 January 2015, available at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/15000-young-gazans-complete-hamas-terror-training-camps/>

³⁵ Moshe Yaalon speaking on the Charley Rose show, PBS TV, 20 October 2014.

³⁶ Bekdil, B., "Hamas in Turkey: Humanitarian Activity", *Gatestone Institute*, 6 March 2015, available at: <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/5324/hamas-turkey>

regional brigades, however, during the latest war, this organisation appeared to be more vulnerable to Israeli attacks and could hardly initiate offensive action against Israel. Three of the PIJ's senior officers and 11 battalion and company commanders were killed in action.

Smaller armed Palestinian factions, such as the Popular Struggle Committees operate as loosely organised terrorist groups which mostly launch rockets at Israel, partially coordinated with Hamas. Then there are a number of Salafist groups operating within Gaza, not all of them committed violence, but some are critical of Hamas for not going further with implementing Islamic law within Gaza. Some of the most extreme of smaller Jihadi groups have been linked to al-Qaeda and now others have sworn allegiance to the Islamic State. Despite efforts by Hamas to prevent this, Islamic State supporters have on occasion openly demonstrated their presence on Gaza's streets³⁷.

5. Crisis with Egypt

The coming to power of Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2012 appeared to represent a significant strategic breakthrough for Hamas. At the very time that the organisation was pivoting away from Iran, on account of Tehran's activities in the Syrian Civil War, Hamas in Gaza had now acquired a powerful friend on its immediate border. With the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt being ideologically sympathetic to Hamas' wider goals, this period represented a significant opportunity for rearmament and weapons smuggling. Similarly, the Morsi government proved a useful ally for Hamas when it came to negotiating a ceasefire with Israel during the November 2012 conflict in Gaza.

With Morsi's fall from power in July 2013, however, Hamas not only lost a crucial source of support, but the organisation now has to confront the reality of a formidable opponent in the form of President Sisi's administration. The present Egyptian government is not only at odds with Hamas over its association with the now ousted Muslim Brotherhood, but also on account of Cairo's belief that Hamas in Gaza is providing material assistance to jihadist militants in the Sinai. Indeed, as fighting between the Egyptian military and Islamists in the Sinai has intensified, so the policies of Sisi's government have hardened against Hamas.

During the summer 2014 war in Gaza, the extent of Egypt's firmly anti-Hamas policy was already evident. Not only had the Egyptian military gone to great lengths to destroy the smuggling tunnels beneath the Egyptian-Gaza border, but throughout the war the Egyptians only permitted very limited movement through the Rafah crossing. Furthermore, this time around the Egyptians proved far less enthusiastic about assisting with the brokering of a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, presumably believing that the damage that the Israeli military was inflicting upon Hamas would prove strategically advantageous. Rather, the Egyptians attempted to impose their own terms for a ceasefire with Israel upon Hamas, which in turn led to Hamas seeking the backing of Turkey and Qatar in the negotiations³⁸.

³⁷ Toameh, K., "Islamic State Deepens Grip in Future Palestine", *Gatestone Institute*, 23 January 2015, available at:

<http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/5139/palestinians-islamic-state>

³⁸ Neria, J., "Egypt, Israel, and Hamas - the impossible equation", *The Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs*, 27 July 2014, available at: <http://jcpa.org/egypt-israel-hamas-impossible-equation/>

Following the summer 2014 Gaza war, and as part of the ceasefire agreement that ended that round of conflict, Egypt was supposed to assist with facilitating continued indirect discussions between Israel and Hamas. However, these talks have been postponed indefinitely as Egyptian policy on Hamas and fighting terror in Sinai has become still more robust³⁹. This move stems from the accusation by the Egyptian government that from Gaza Hamas is assisting, sheltering and collaborating with Sinai Jihadists.

In particular Egypt draws a link between Hamas and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, which was indeed formed from veteran Hamas members and residents from Gaza along with local Salafists, and which since November 2014 shifted its ultimate allegiance to IS and the authority of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi⁴⁰. Ever since the 24th of October when this group carried out a major attack on the Egyptian army in the northern Sinai, killing some 33 Egyptian soldiers, Cairo has intensified its policy against Hamas, and by extension Gaza. Beginning March 2014⁴¹, there have been a series of Egyptian court rulings aimed at outlawing Hamas. In February 2015, further legal action was taken to specifically outlaw both Hamas' Izz al-Qassam Brigades as well as the political wing⁴². These moves have evidently been met with alarm in the Hamas leadership, and the organisation held a series of angry demonstrations in Gaza as a response. Along with these legal moves, Sisi has pursued policy of keeping the Rafah crossing for the most part closed, with Egypt now implementing the most severe blockade of Gaza. For the moment, almost all goods and people that do pass in and out of Gaza are now doing so via Israel.

The most extreme element of Egypt's strategy against Hamas has been the creation of a large buffer zone along the Gaza-Sinai border, a move aimed at definitively preventing the reconstruction of the smuggling tunnels. The buffer zone is to cover a 500 yard area along the nine mile border and is set to include a deep water filled trench along the border. In late October 2014, the Egyptian authorities began evacuating and demolishing some 800 homes in Egyptian Rafah⁴³. But in January 2015 further action was taken so as to double the size of the exclusion zone, extending the area by another 500 meters and involving the evacuation and demolition of an estimated 1,500 homes⁴⁴, impacting upon thousands of the mostly Palestinian residents of Rafah. Such a drastic measure is a clear indication of Egypt's determination to prevent the smuggling tunnels and demonstrates just what a critical threat Cairo believes Hamas is to Egypt's national security.

It is now being speculated that Cairo may be on the verge of formulating a far more robust strategy against Hamas in Gaza than the one pursued by Israel, which has always stopped short of attempting a full overthrow of Hamas in Gaza. Clearly, however, both Israel and Egypt have shared and acknowledged security objectives where the Sinai and Gaza are concerned. Israel has

³⁹ Michael, K. and Dekel, U., "The Gaza Strip: what can Israel do to prevent the next round of violence", *The Institute for National Security Studies*, 11 December 2014, available at: <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=8325>

⁴⁰ Schweitzer, Y., "Egypt's War in the Sinai Peninsular", *The Institute for National Security Studies*, 3 February 2015, available at: <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=8667>

⁴¹ "Cairo Court Outlaws Hamas Activities in Egypt", *Haaretz*, 4 March 2010, available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.577802>

⁴² "Egyptian Court Designates Hamas as a Terror Organisation", *CNN*, 28 February 2015, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/28/middleeast/egypt-hamas-terror-designation/>

⁴³ "Thousands Forced from Homes as Egypt Clears Gaza Border Area", *The Telegraph*, 29 October 2014, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocan/egypt/11196738/Thousands-forced-from-homes-as-Egypt-clears-Gaza-border-area-after-bombing.html>

⁴⁴ "Egypt Begins Doubling Size of Gaza Buffer Zone", *Times of Israel*, 9 January 2015, available at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/egypt-begins-doubling-sinai-buffer-zone-along-gaza-border/>

permitted Egypt to increase its military presence in the Sinai well beyond the levels allowed under the Camp David accords⁴⁵, a concession that is seen as necessary if the jihadist groups proliferating there are to be effectively combatted.

While it still remains to be seen whether the Egyptian government now believes that toppling Hamas in Gaza is an essential part of rooting out Islamist militants in the Sinai, Israel's military leadership and successive governments are still reluctant to commit to any policy that would require a full ground invasion and reoccupation of the Gaza strip. Israel has a wide range of concerns about pursuing such a strategy, not least the cost that it would exact in Israeli lives. Nevertheless, with Hamas and the Sinai terror groups operating a mutually sustaining relationship, it may prove difficult to sufficiently undermine one without a coherent strategy for countering them both. What cannot be in doubt is that their continued presence in the region will remain a destabilising factor and major security threat for both Egypt and Israel.

Conclusion

Hamas today remains as ideologically committed to its founding principles as when the organisation was first founded. With a well-established base in Gaza from which to launch attacks against Israel, and fearing little internal opposition within Gaza itself, Hamas finds itself in a far stronger position than that of just a decade ago. While Israel has demonstrated that it is prepared to hit back hard against attacks emanating from the Gaza Strip, and has shown that it has the means to inflict serious short term damage to Hamas' operational capabilities, it is also apparent that there is not currently the political will in Israel to retake Gaza and topple Hamas fully.

Under President Sisi, Egyptian policy has hardened against Hamas somewhat and there are indications that this might be part of a wider plan that would seek end Hamas rule Gaza in an effort to rid the Sinai peninsula from Islamist influence. This change in Gaza's relations with Egypt has left Hamas both more isolated and more exposed. Its ability to smuggle weapons through the Rafah border has been severely limited and Cairo will no longer advocate for Hamas demands during international negotiations. Meanwhile, Egypt refuses to ease its policy on keeping the crossing on the Gaza border closed.

Despite this, Hamas continues its efforts to restock its weapon stockpiles and to rebuild its tunnel infrastructure. As such, the organisation remains a permanently destabilising factor in the region. If Gaza's Islamist rulers are not likely to be removed from power in the near future then their destabilising influence could at least be limited by ensuring the comprehensive demilitarisation of Gaza. Israel and Egypt already operate a coordinated effort to limit the smuggling of weapons in Gaza. Currently, however, there is not a clear strategy in place for ensuring the prevention of the manufacture and hiding of weapons within Gaza itself. Without such measures, it appears highly likely that Hamas will soon have the means to fight a fourth war against Israel.

⁴⁵ Neriah, J., "Egypt, Israel, and Hamas - the impossible equation", *The Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs*, 27 July 2014, available at: <http://jcpa.org/egypt-israel-hamas-impossible-equation/>

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