

1. Hamas in and out of power

by Khaled Hroub¹

On 25 January 2006, the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, which is officially branded as a terrorist organisation by the US and the EU, won the elections and took charge of the Palestinian Authority (PA). It achieved this stunning triumph against the wishes (and efforts) of many parties – its main rival Fatah of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Israel, the US, the EU, the UN and a number of Arab countries. Two years after its electoral victory and the formation of a Hamas-led government (in March 2006) which was followed by a short-lived national unity government (in March 2007), and then a military takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, the balance sheet of Hamas' performance is mixed. Central to the tremendous difficulties that Hamas has faced is the international and regional blockade imposed on its government and the cutting off of aid and diplomatic relations with the Palestinians. This notwithstanding, 'Hamas-in-power', as opposed to 'Hamas-in-opposition', has structurally changed the rules of the game in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Hamas, acknowledged as a major party in the Palestinian political scene, has now become an integral part of the Palestinian leadership. Without its participation, or tacit approval, any lasting agreement between the two sides seems inconceivable.

The ramifications of Hamas' electoral triumph, its experience in power and the ensuing developments have been far reaching. But it is sensible to start by analysing 'the road to power' which led Hamas to victory, and then look at what this change has meant to Hamas' internal dynamism and its religious/political nature.

1.1 The road to power

Hamas has striven hard since its inception in late 1987 to harmonise two impetuses within the movement: the nationalist liberationist drive and the religious Islamist one. Hamas emerged under (and against) the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, at the same time historically projecting the Palestinian version of the rise of political Islam across the Middle East during the past four decades. The 'nationalist' and 'religious' drives within Hamas have largely overlapped, but sometimes could be seen as a continuum with more political nationalist discourses residing at the top and the more religious discourses prevailing within the lower ranking members.

Similar to other Palestinian movements, Hamas' ultimate nationalist aim is to 'liberate Palestine'. Unlike other movements however, Hamas adopted an Islamist, rather than a secular ideology in order to justify this aim. Espousing the ideological objective of Islamism, Hamas' early rhetoric emphasised that once the 'liberation' of Palestine was achieved, the resulting Palestinian state would be an Islamic one. In later years this rhetoric was toned down.

The tension between the 'nationalist' and the 'religious' tendencies within Hamas culminated in the decision taken in March 2005 to run for the 2006 elections. In the minds of many Hamas supporters (and foes), the decision contrasted severely with Hamas' rejection of any participation in similar elections in 1996. At the time, the rejection was based on the insistence that those elections were part and parcel of the Oslo Agreements which Hamas strongly opposed. The 2006 elections were organised within the political framework resulting from those agreements as well however; hence the controversy within Hamas prior to reaching the final decision to participate. In fact, the March 2005 decision was coupled with two equally significant decisions: the suspension of Hamas' suicide attacks against Israel and the agreement in principle to join the PLO. Hamas was making important leaps in the direction of playing a more political and less military role.

The decision to run for the elections was promptly translated into action. 'On the day following that decision', as one of Hamas' leaders explained, 'we immediately started practical preparation, wasting no time'.² Hamas' campaign for the 2006 elections, under the name 'Change and Reform', was based on an 'Electoral Platform' of 14 pages covering all political, social, educational, legal and environmental aspects. The most interesting dimension of this platform was the deliberate minimisation of the 'religiosity' of Hamas, allowing for more of a political and nationalist discourse to prevail. Most of Hamas' pronouncements in its electoral agenda fit neatly within the thinking of other secular Palestinian factions.³

1.2 Hamas in power

Harvesting an unexpected victory in the elections, Hamas faced a situation it was unprepared for: forming a Palestinian government. The movement had long trained its candidates to the Legislative Council to be in opposition, not a ruling party.⁴ The

unexpectedly victorious Hamas' immediate chosen option was to call upon all other Palestinian factions to join them in a coalition. Leaders of the movement spent almost two months trying to convince other parties to join. Expectedly, Fatah refused, hoping that an 'inexperienced' Hamas at the top of the PA would quickly fall. Leftist Palestinian factions and other independent personalities equally rejected Hamas' offer, protesting against the 'government's political programme'. Their position was hardened by Hamas' refusal to declare in the government programme that the PLO is the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. In the end, on 29 March, Hamas formed a government of its own members and close supporters.

In response to Hamas' government, the Quartet (the US, the EU, Russia and the UN) imposed three conditions to establish normal relations with (and provide aid to) the government: recognition of Israel, acknowledgement of all previous agreements between the PLO and Israel, and a complete stop to 'terrorism'. The three conditions were rejected by Hamas. Western and non-Western diplomatic relations with the government were either immediately severed or not established. In the following months, and apart from a very few countries, Hamas ministers were unwelcome almost everywhere. Many Arab and Muslim countries had carefully synchronised their moves with Western policies. The immediate and disastrous outcome of the embargo was felt most catastrophically by ordinary Palestinians. European and other international funding to the PA, which is one of its two main sources of income, was stopped. The second main source of income, the monthly Palestinian tax revenues controlled and collected by Israel, in accordance to the Oslo Agreements, were also frozen.⁵ Caught between the hammer of rising internal dissatisfaction and the anvil of external embargoes, Hamas' policies started to grow nervous. Yet the movement and its government also demonstrated a great level of steadfastness and remained intact and coherent.

In addition to the cutting off of all funds, the Hamas-led government endured continuous Israeli military pressure and incursions into areas of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. At the risk of erosion to their own 'resistance legitimacy', Hamas leaders pressured their own military wing to exercise restraint and to maintain the shaky truce (*'hudna'*) that had been in place months prior to the elections. But at the same time they allowed other factions, such as Islamic Jihad, to resume launching rockets and conducting other military activities in response to the relentless Israeli raids against the Gaza Strip.

At a factional level, Fatah, which had been defeated in the elections, decided to make Hamas' time in government as difficult as possible. The goal was to foil Hamas in power and force it to step down, resulting in a need for early new elections.⁶ Because of Fatah's domination over the Palestinian civil service by virtue of its control of the PA during the previous 12 years, tensions between the new Hamas ministers and their Fatah staff paralysed the work of many ministries and the public sector in general. On the security front, and particularly in the Gaza Strip, several Fatah-controlled security organisations remained outside the control of the interior ministry, making the government appear toothless. To compensate for this awkward situation of having the security forces out of government control, the interior ministry established its own 'official' security apparatus 'the Executive Force'. Predictably, a growing friction between this new force (most of its members drawn from Hamas) and the old Fatah-controlled forces continued to increase, leading to military clashes between the two parties during January and February and then again in May and June 2007, pushing the situation in the Gaza Strip to the brink of an all-out civil war. This was only briefly averted in early 2007 by the sudden heavy-weight intervention of the Saudis, culminating in the Mecca Agreement between Fatah and Hamas in February 2007 as further discussed below.

The balance sheet of Hamas' one year in power offers a melange of success and failure. Delving into the details of such an assessment lies beyond the scope of this analysis. But what is important to observe is that a considerable part of Hamas' failure can be attributed to the embargo and aid suspension imposed on the government by the international community. In the eyes of many Palestinians, Hamas was largely absolved of much responsibility for failing to deliver public services, which were largely crippled by its failure to pay the salaries of more than 160,000 civil servants. This failure was blamed on Western and Israeli policies, which were seen as a punishment against all Palestinians because of the exercise of their democratic choice.⁷ But at the level of Hamas as a political movement, the experience was, and is still, painfully formative. A frequent sentiment that one hears from Hamas' leaders about their reign in power often revolves around what Ahmad Yousef, the political advisor of Hamas' appointed prime minister Ismail Haniyya, stated: 'it was a tough year but a great one as well; like an intensive course in politics where we had to learn in one year what would otherwise require us 10 or 15 years to learn'.⁸

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2 Interview with Osama Hamadan, Hamas' representative in Lebanon and member of its political bureau, 29 January 2006.

3 For extended analysis of Hamas' Electoral Platform, see Khaled Hroub (2006), "A 'New Hamas' through Its New Documents", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, No. 4, Summer, pp. 6-28.

4 Dr Mahdi Abdul Hadi, head of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA) told me in Jerusalem that prior to the election, PASSIA was approached by Hamas candidates in Jerusalem to organise a 'training course' for them on the Palestinian political system and the Legislative Council and its functioning, Jerusalem, interview, 6 March 2007.

5 See Tocci's chapter in this report.

6 In an interview with a European official I was told that some of Fatah's senior politicians appealed to EU officials not to deal with the Hamas government, and only giving it two months before Hamas would certainly fail and step down, interview, 11 October 2006. On the American endeavour to bring Hamas' government down see 'Elliot Abrams' uncivil war on <http://conflictsforum.org/2007/elliott-abrams-uncivil-war/>

7 Ben Bot, the Dutch foreign minister, was quoted on the record saying 'The Palestinian people have opted for this government, so they will have to bear the consequences', *Associated Press*, 10 April 2007.

8 Interview with Dr Ahmad Yousef, the political advisor of Ismail Haniyya, then the Palestinian Prime Minister and Hamas leader, Gaza 7 March 2007. Almost the same words were used by Dr Naser Eddin Al-Shaer, then deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Education when I interviewed him in Nabulus, 1 March 2007.

1.3 The Impact of politics

During Hamas' year in power, one of the remarkable and speedy transformations that took place within the movement's discourse was the shift in its *justification* of its 'hard-line' positions. Religious justifications increasingly gave way to political justifications. The increasing exposure to politics and the outside world engendered a discourse that was formulated more in accordance with external conditions than internal ideological thinking. This further confirms the predominance of the nationalist pragmatic line in Hamas over the religious one in recent years. While this could appear to have been a surface change, it nonetheless permeated deeper into the layers of the political and ideological thinking of Hamas. The impact of such a discourse proved to be most considerable among the lower ranks of the movement, where the religiosity and rigidity of thinking were stronger.

Examples of this shift are many, yet it is sufficient to highlight three major ones that have intimate relevance to current debates about Hamas and its changing fortunes. The first example is the question of recognising Israel. Hamas' 'starting position' was purely religious. Recognising Israel was perceived as tantamount to an infringement of Islam and thus considered as lying beyond the practice of politics. Hamas' Charter was blunt in denouncing any party, Palestinian, Arab or Muslim that would undertake such an anti-religious move. Palestine was declared to be a *waqf* or an endowment for Muslim generations which no one has the right to compromise upon.⁹ The justification that today's Hamas would offer is political and not religious. Hamas argues that Israel is a 'borderless' state and that it has never identified clear borders. So what is the geography of Israel that Hamas and the Palestinians are asked to recognise? Hamas' spokesmen also contend that the PLO has recognised Israel since 1988 yet this has not brought any tangible benefits for the Palestinians. Hamas leaders point to the Arab Summit Peace Initiative adopted in Beirut in 2002, which offered Israel full and collective Arab recognition and normalisation of relations in return for accepting the two-state solution. Their point is that when Israel refuses such a collective Arab recognition, how and why would Hamas' recognition change Israeli attitudes?¹⁰

The second example of the change in Hamas' discourse regards its position on military attacks in Israeli cities. This policy, rigidly and religiously speaking, is akin to stopping the '*Jihad*', the *raison d'être* of Hamas. Perhaps no other notion was so repeatedly confirmed in Hamas' early literature in the late 1980s and early 1990s, than that of *Jihad*. Yet, when Hamas now is asked why it has frozen its '*Jihad*' against Israel, it resorts to political and not to religious justifications. Its leaders link this decision to the delicate calculations that account for the unfavourable political conditions of Hamas' position in government. The significance of such thinking denotes the extent to which Hamas is willing to subjugate its ideological, and seemingly inflexible, convictions to its political pragmatism and goals. Hamas' rhetoric still stresses the concept of 'resistance', even when this 'resistance' is idle. Even more significant is Hamas' recent position that resistance is a political means and not an objective in itself.¹¹

The third example that underlines the shift in Hamas' political thinking is the movement's stance *vis-à-vis* the PLO and the question of joining this organisation. The PLO has been the embodiment of Palestinian legitimacy and representation for many decades, recognised as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinians by the international community. Established in 1964, and controlled by Fatah, all Palestinian factions, nationalist, Marxist and pan-Arabist joined the organisation at different points in time, seeing it as the umbrella for Palestinian nationalist resistance against Zionist aggression in Palestine.

Hamas, the late-comer to the resistance scene in 1987, neither joined the PLO nor acknowledged it as 'the sole' representative of the Palestinian people. It considered the PLO only as 'a' representative of the Palestinians. One of its main objections to the PLO was its 'secular nature'.¹² Other main objections included the PLO's tacit recognition of Israel by endorsing the principle of the two-state solution. Yet the position of today's Hamas concerning the PLO is different, or at least the justification of the old positions has changed. Further, Hamas has engaged in dialogue with Fatah and other Palestinian factions to reform the PLO and include Hamas in it. In all the discussions and debates about a 'new' PLO, which would include Hamas, there has not been a single statement pronounced by Hamas about the 'secular nature' of the PLO or its 'un-Islamic essence'. Even the recognition of Israel by the PLO has been downplayed in view of the fact that Hamas' positions over the past few years have also been converging towards the idea of the two-state solution.¹³

⁹ For the full text see Khaled Hroub (2000), *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, Washington DC.: Institute for Palestine Studies, pp.267-301.

¹⁰ These statements have been repeatedly expressed by Hamas leaders' statements and written articles. For example, see Ismail Haniyya's 'A Just Peace or No Peace', *The Guardian*, 31 March 2006; Musa Abu Marzuk, 'What Hamas is Seeking', *The Washington Post*, 31 January, 2006; and statements made by Khaled Mash'al, Hamas' political bureau chief, to *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 28 February 2007. By contrast, statements that would refer to religious qualification of this position have dramatically diminished.

¹¹ Khaled Mash'al, interview, *Al-Mashhad Al-Siyasi*, 17 March 2007.

¹² In Hamas' Charter, Article 27, sub-titled 'Palestine Liberation Organisation', states that 'Secular ideology is diametrically opposed to religious thought'.

¹³ Khaled Mash'al emphasized, for example, that there is a need to reform and democratise the PLO, yet without reiterating the old Hamas' argument on the PLO, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* 28 February 2007.

At the level of Hamas as a movement and in the eyes of Palestinians at large, Hamas' victory in the elections and the subsequent formation of its government brought about new realities. For the first time in the history of the Palestinian national movement, a party that subscribes to Islamist/religious ideology has managed to eclipse secular factions, leftists and nationalists allied together, and advanced to the forefront. This dramatic change challenged the traditional leadership of 'the Palestinian nationalist liberationist project' which had been controlled almost entirely by secular forces since the days of the British mandate in the 1920s.

Hamas' triumph also accentuated the dichotomy in Palestinian politics between itself and Fatah. The weakness of other factions with either leftist or liberal orientations was further exposed. In many ways, this is an unfortunate development that can be attributed in large measure to the disorientation that many Palestinian elites suffered before, during and after the Oslo Agreements. Suffice it to say that in light of the sharp Fatah/Hamas polarity, the chances of the emergence of a popular and powerful 'third way' in Palestinian politics are slim for the foreseeable future. After one year of Hamas rule, the formation of a national unity government in March 2007 could have represented a historical milestone in Palestinian politics. In fact, the agreement could have helped create a political consensus upon which the Palestinians could deal with Israel, thus bridging the destructive gulf that has so far crippled Palestinian political thinking and strategy.

Over the past 15 years or so, Palestinian forces have been divided between two strategies for achieving Palestinian rights and self-determination: peace talks with Israel (the PLO and the PA) or military resistance against the Israeli occupation (Hamas and other factions). Both strategies worked against Israel but also against each other, yielding little for the Palestinians. Due to their working in opposing directions, these two strategies have effectively frustrated each other: what would be achieved by one of them would be wasted by the opposite party. The lack of a unified leadership that could harmonise the duality of 'resistance and negotiation' resulted in a dynamism of mutual destruction between the two opposing strategies. Sustaining a united platform as embodied in the national unity government could be seen therefore as a necessity for internal coherence of the Palestinian national movement and the resolution of the conflict with Israel. External actors certainly have helped in the early collapse of the national unity government and the potential of long-term consensus-building among the Palestinians. As analysed in depth in Tocci's chapter, the continuation of economic and financial embargos on the national unity government and the explicit policy of sustaining Mahmoud Abbas against Hamas caused the resumption of clashes between Hamas and Fatah and the collapse of the Mecca Agreement between the two factions by June 2007. Not only did Western and Israeli policies provoke the return of a destructive polarity in the Palestinian national movement, but they also encouraged the formation and re-formation of smaller militant groups that listen neither to Fatah nor to Hamas.

The ramifications of Hamas' electoral victory on the conflict could be examined by addressing two main questions. First, would Hamas-in-power help or hinder the achievement of a peace settlement; and two, would Hamas-in-power pose more or less of a threat to Israel's security and citizens?

Concerning the first question it is necessary to clarify some assumptions: before and during Hamas' taking of power there have been no genuine peace talks to be helped or hindered by Hamas in the first place. The peace track had gone astray well before Hamas' rise to power. Since the second *intifada*, which erupted in response to Oslo's failure to bring about any tangible gains for the Palestinians, the peace process had been idle. Although Abbas had been the leader of the Palestinians for more than a year before the 2006 elections, and is still at the top of the Palestinian hierarchy, Israel has not engaged with him in serious negotiations. Abbas is seen as the most moderate Palestinian leader with whom Israel could (or should) make peace. Yet, he was considered to be incompetent as a 'peace partner' by Israel, and his political capital in the eyes of the Palestinians has gradually been eroded as he failed to change their dire *status-quo*.

Furthermore and regardless of the internal make up of the Palestinian government, there have been strong doubts whether Israel is ready to make any serious moves towards concluding a peace agreement. The current Israeli leadership has been somewhat damaged politically and humiliated militarily after the Lebanon war in addition to a number of top Israeli figures facing prosecution for financial or sexual corruption. If the Olmert government were forced to resign, any potential alternative – either another Kadima-led government, potentially as weak as the current one, or a Netanyaheu/Liberman-led government, representing

1.4 Implications for the Palestinian polity and legitimacy

1.5 Implications for Israel and for the future of a 'peace settlement'

the far right – would not be expected to gear the agenda for any peace process with the Palestinians. Therefore it really remains an open question whether Hamas should be held responsible for the ‘inaction’ of the peace talks between the two parties.¹⁴

In terms of military threat or security for Israel there is an apparent irony: the period in which Hamas was either in full control of the PA or engaged in power-sharing with Fatah (March 2006 – June 2007) was almost the most peaceful and calm period that Israeli cities had enjoyed over the past few years. The year running up to the elections and the year of Hamas in power witnessed almost zero suicide attacks conducted by Hamas in Israel.

Another security scenario that could be contemplated and largely interrelated to changes within and surrounding Hamas, is the possibility of the emergence of Al-Qaeda cells within the Palestinian territories. This could be the result of a combination of several factors. Among these is the appeal within angry and frustrated Palestinian factions of the uncompromising *Al-Qaeda* model which has been embraced in Iraq and elsewhere. This might also be true for the many disenfranchised ultra-religious zealots within Hamas, who have become disillusioned by the ‘futile’ political line adopted by their leadership. These factors are exacerbated by the chaotic situation in the Gaza Strip in particular and the free market of arms. Nonetheless, so far Al-Qaeda has failed to establish its own cells in Palestine. Hamas has functioned as a bulwark blocking any newly emerging group, and *Al-Qaeda* has found it hard to infiltrate. However, things could start changing. The erroneous external policies pursued by Israel and the West in general which have placed the Gaza Strip under blockade, starving people and humiliating them, would naturally provoke more radical tendencies than the existing ones.

1.6 The Unity Government and its aftermath

The rivalry between Fatah and Hamas since the January 2006 elections has pushed the internal Palestinian situation from bad to worse. By January 2007, marking exactly one year since Hamas’ victory, the spectre of civil war had become a serious potential. Egyptian, Syrian, Qatari and Jordanian attempts to mediate between the two fighting factions failed one after the other. In early February the Saudi King Abdallah took an initiative and called the leaders of both movements to convene in Mecca.

The Saudi initiative was successful and between the 6 and 8 of February 2007 Fatah and Hamas concluded what would be known as the ‘Mecca Agreement’. Putting an immediate end to Palestinian in-fighting in Gaza, the agreement paved the way for the formation of a Palestinian national unity government which took place in March 2007. The political programme of the would-be government confirmed the pragmatic line of Hamas, in which it agreed to ‘respect’ previous agreements signed between the PLO and Israel. It also stipulated the establishment of a Palestinian state using the 1967 borders as the national aim of the government, yet without conceding a blunt recognition of Israel. The Mecca Agreement was a breakthrough, offering a potential Palestinian consensus, however shaky, on a unified political programme.

The National Unity Government did not change the Quartet and Israeli policies of isolating and boycotting Hamas. In particular the new government did not succeed in breaking the international boycott and in controlling and unifying the internal security forces loyal to Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan. The skirmishes between Fatah-affiliated groups and security forces and Hamas’ Executive Force and Al-Qassam Brigades intensified. A new round of violent internal fighting by May-June culminated in mid June with Hamas’ taking control of the security forces in the Gaza Strip. Dozens of Palestinians from both sides were killed, and hundreds wounded. The Gaza Strip fell entirely under Hamas’ control. Immediately after that Abbas nominated a non-Hamas government in the West Bank which was quickly recognised and supported by the Quartet and by Israel. Since then the Palestinian polity and geography have become ever more divided with the West Bank under the control of Fatah and the Gaza Strip under the control of Hamas, and each claiming to have the legitimate government. The international community sided with the government in the West Bank, and tightened the blockade on Hamas and the Gaza Strip and its almost one and a half million Palestinians.

1.7 In power – out of power: Hamas’ military takeover of Gaza, June 2007

The military takeover of the Gaza Strip can only be understood from the perspective of rational-players’ power politics. Hamas and Fatah were stubbornly engaged in a rivalry over power where the surrounding conditions induced the use of force more than reconciliation. Fatah and the Palestinian president have spared no tactic to bring about the failure of Hamas’ government. In the two weeks following the results of the elections, several presidential decrees were passed aimed at stripping basic powers from the Hamas’ government-in-waiting. Abbas brought back to the ‘presidency’ all the

powers that he had struggled hard to wrest away from former president Arafat when he was a prime minister in the year 2003. The 'presidency' started to accumulate excessive power that would in the absence of Hamas be criticised world-wide. Hamas' incoming government and its ministries were stripped of real authority, especially in areas of finance and security.

All security forces would, by virtue of the new decrees, fall under the responsibility of the president and would be run by the 'National Security Council' which had previously played only a consultative role. The official media was moved from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Information to that of the 'presidency'. All border points, especially the Rafah border, which used to be under the control of the national security forces, belonging to the Interior Ministry, were brought under the authority of the 'presidency' through its 'presidential guards'. The latter had rapidly been beefed-up to become a most important 'military force' assuming far more responsibilities than safeguarding the president. A number of presidential decisions were also taken in which Fatah officials were appointed or promoted to occupy key security posts. Even after the formation of the national unity government in March 2007, the failure to resolve the thorniest of issues, the control over security forces, heavily weighed in favour of Hamas' use of force.

On Hamas' side, the mounting pressures were also eliminating any alternatives but the resort to force to re-structure the *status quo*. Because of its lack of control over security forces, Hamas' government failed to maintain security for ordinary Palestinians, leaving the streets of Gaza to fall into the hands of various groups of thugs and militant gangs. The chaotic situation was partly provoked by militant elements close to Dahlan the then-strongman of the Preventative Security.¹⁵ Their aim was to prove that Hamas was incapable of delivering security, discrediting it in the eyes of the Palestinians. Also and as a result of the cutting off of external aid, Hamas had failed to provide salaries to tens of thousands of public sector employees. Exploiting the situation, Fatah mobilised widespread strikes among civil servants, especially teachers, which truly harmed Hamas' image. The compounded pressures on Hamas created panic and unrest among the rank-and-file of the movement. The wisdom of engaging in such a political process, as opposed to remaining in the 'resistance' and opposition, has become a question of essence.

Internally, anger and impatience increasingly dominated Hamas' military wing (estimated to be in the range of 10,000 and 15,000 armed men), which until then had been kept under the full control of the political leadership. In the days preceding the military takeover, Hamas' military had been caught in a feeling of compounded humiliation. On the one hand, and in order to avoid harming the government's political agenda, they had ceased their attacks against Israeli targets which had fallen easily within their reach. This had invoked criticism and mockery of their 'resistance project'; Fatah was prompt in pointing at Hamas' relinquishing of resistance for the sake of 'governmental posts'. On the other hand, the chaotic security situation spreading across the Gaza Strip was seen to be mobilised by rival groups, from or close to Fatah, which Hamas' military wing felt they could have ended if they were given the green lights. Hamas' Al-Qassam Brigades were not allowed to interfere in the daily business of the government, although it oversaw and trained the 'Executive Force' which the government established as a police force. Hamas' military wing by then had started to see itself as an impotent or put-to-pasture army, losing its respect and aura.

However, the most intolerable and decisive factor for Hamas' military leadership was the continuous arming of Abbas' presidential guards and other security forces in the Gaza Strip. Shipments of arms arrived to the Strip from Egypt, Jordan and Israel. For Hamas' military it looked as if they were merely naively waiting for the moment when their rivals would launch an all-out assault on Hamas. Thus, their calculations were to undertake a preventative blow which would save the movement from a looming and crushing Fatah attack. For many in Hamas' military leadership it was a life or death decision given that it was them, and not Hamas' political leadership, that topped Fatah's target list.

In a nutshell, Hamas' government was put under enormous pressure: externally, internally and organisationally. Cut off financially and diplomatically Hamas, after 18 months in power, lacked political capital to present to its members or the Palestinian at large. It looked crippled in delivering even the most basic services of government. On top of that, its military leadership perceived a ticking clock that would lead to the eventual destruction of the military power that they had spent years to build. All these pressures culminated in the political leadership giving way, perhaps for the first time in Hamas' political life, to its military wing to decide and implement how to deal with Fatah on the ground.¹⁶

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the post-Annapolis talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians, in December 2007, had faced intractable difficulties, not because of Hamas, but due to Israel's insistence on building new settlement units in East Jerusalem.

¹⁵ Dahlan was frequently quoted that he would 'drive Hamas' government nuts' in the Gaza Strip. A sample of statements were included in a long public letter addressed to Fatah members and distributed in the Occupied Territories written by the prominent Fatah leader and former Justice Minister Nahed Muneer Al-Rayyes in early July 2007. Al-Rayyes was one of few Fatah figures who publicly blamed Dahlan and his Security Forces for the deterioration of the situation in the Strip, namely provoking Hamas. Another prominent Fatah member who was equally outspoken is Hani Al-Hassan who gave an interview to *Al-Jazeera* in which he accused 'the corrupt tendency (*tayyar*) in Fatah leaders' for what happened in the Strip; *Al-Jazeera* 29 June 2007.

¹⁶ Hamas issued what it called 'The White Paper' [Al-Kitab Al-Abyad], in which it explained its reasons behind the 'military takeover' of the Gaza Strip. The subtitle of the book is 'out of coercion not choice'. See *The White Paper: The Military Decisive Operation – Out of Coercion Not Choice*, Hamas' Press Office, November 2007.

1.8 Conclusion: What future for Hamas?

Toning down the religious proclamations in Hamas' discourse and delivery was not an internally pain-free process. There are certainly leaders and members within the movement who have questioned the recent line adopted by the movement.¹⁷ Until very recently, they were the minority and eventually restrained their discontent in the interest of the unity of the movement. The military wing, in particular, endured tremendous pressures from its 'unemployed' members. One major source of 'moral and political pressure' was the continuous stream of accusations coming from rival groups that Hamas had given up resistance for the sake of futile politics and governmental posts and privileges; exactly what their rival Fatah movement had done in previous years. Hamas' leadership was desperate to achieve concrete results from its 'political process' so as to sell the political route to an increasing number of its dissatisfied members. Yet external players, Israel, the West and Arab governments, did not help consolidate the gradual turn within Hamas. On the contrary, a major part of the effort was directed towards bringing down Hamas' government as soon as possible, and indeed these efforts bore fruit in the West Bank, crystallizing further the political division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Their short-sighted policies may have reduced the possibility of consolidating a more politicised and pragmatic organisation. The Gaza Strip/West Bank divide has further exacerbated Palestinian weakness. With the international community only dealing with the West Bank while continuing the embargo on Gaza, positive prospects seem minimal, if any. Without reuniting both parts of the Palestinian territory under a coalition leadership that includes Fatah and Hamas, efforts to bring about peace and stability look meaningless. As for Hamas as a movement, both internal and external dynamics will determine whether the shift in Hamas' politics and thinking will outlive the experience of the last two years.

¹⁷ In an interview with the author in Gaza city, Dr Mahmoud Zahhar, prominent Hamas figure and the foreign minister during the Hamas-led government, expressed his dissatisfaction with the 'direction' that his movement was taking with the national unity government. He criticized the 'indirect' recognition of Israel, but declined to answer what he and other dissatisfied Hamas leaders and members would do if the movement continued on its 'new path'; 8 March 2007.