



# POLARIS

## SPECIAL ISSUE

AUGUST 2008

N  
A  
T  
O  
S  
C  
H  
O  
O  
L



### ISRAEL AND HAMAS OPPORTUNITIES, OPTIONS AND RISKS

By Bjoern Budde  
Visiting Fellow, NATO School



**NATO SCHOOL**

Research Department  
Am Rainenbichl 54  
82487 Oberammergau  
GERMANY

URL: [www.natoschool.nato.int](http://www.natoschool.nato.int)

E-mail: [RPD@natoschool.nato.int](mailto:RPD@natoschool.nato.int)

Subscription is free of charge. Please provide us with your contact information.

**Disclaimer:** The NATO School (NSO) is not responsible for the factual validity of the articles covered in POLARIS. The opinions and analyses expressed in POLARIS are those of the individual authors. Publication of articles does not constitute approval or endorsement by the NSO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Partnership for Peace Program, member states, or partner governments. The NSO respects individual opinions and protects academic freedom.

**POLARIS STAFF**

**Commandant:**

*COL James Tabak, USA-MC*

**Dean of Academics:**

*LTC Gerald Conrad, CAN-AF*

**Editors:**

*Liliana Serban, ROU-Civ*

*Phillip Cornell, USA-Civ*

## Editorial

Hamas' 2006 electoral victory and its defacto grip over the Gaza Strip since June 2007 have created policy dilemmas for the Palestinian Authority, Israel, the wider international community, and also for Hamas itself.

Bjoern Budde analyzes the implications of those two events for the regional peace process, focusing on the prospects for an agreement between Hamas and Israel based on the new realities of Hamas's capabilities and roles. Hamas's takeover has pushed the organization towards transforming itself into a political actor now accountable for Gaza's welfare, at the same time posing a critical dilemma: Hamas must decide between politics and terrorism.

Budde's analysis goes beyond political rhetoric on the subject, examining the causes of Hamas's electoral victory and how they led to the current dichotomous choice facing the organization. As Hamas currently seeks to monopolize the use of force in Gaza, and aims at providing both internal and external security, it must either integrate or confront rival Palestinian terrorist organizations. Neither will be an easy task. And despite the announcement that it wields control over the security forces in Gaza, the reality is that Hamas has only limited influence over the other groups.

The peace process in the region is at a standstill and various actors are weighing their options. Gaza's fate is caught between efforts to cease hostilities and plans for a new Israeli offensive to end Hamas's rule. Israel's waning willingness to act as mid-wife for a future Palestinian state is reflected in recent statements, and drives a policy of strict separation from the Palestinian territories. Budde recognizes the consequences of a physical security barrier in the region, and stresses that a long term solution for the region must include the improvement of living conditions in the Strip. Otherwise, a continuation of the status quo will drive Hamas to re-embrace a strategy of terrorism. Assessing the implications of open confrontation between Israel and Hamas, Budde concludes that an open conflict between the two parts will bring unwelcome chaos to Gaza.

Finally, Budde puts the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the international context, and notes

the necessity of outside involvement to any lasting regional solution. He also considers NATO's potential role, and comments on allied initiatives which seek to enhance its partnerships with the Middle East region.

Incremental improvements in Gaza's security – intensifying the fight against corruption or gradually containing warlords - are not enough if Hamas wants to become a legitimate political actor. And despite its claims to be one, legitimacy in the eyes of both Gazans and the outside world will be bestowed as a result of its actions more than its words.

This paper is a result of the NATO School's visiting research program, in conjunction with the Chair of International Relations at the Geschwister Scholl Institute for Political Science, University of Munich (LMU). The program is designed to provide junior scholars with valuable research and teaching experience in a multinational environment.

*Liliana Serban*

*Research Department Director*

*NATO School*



## Israel and Hamas Opportunities, Options and Risks

### Introduction

After its victory in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in January 2006 and the violent ousting of Fatah from the Gaza Strip in June 2007, Hamas has made several peace offers to Israel while increasing the bombardment of northern Israeli towns using Qassam rockets and mortars. Is Hamas, considered a terrorist organisation by Israel, the United States and the European Union (EU), solely trying to gain time to fulfil its military build-up, or is there a serious chance for progress in the Israeli-Palestine conflict? The aim of this paper is to assess the prospects for an agreement between Hamas and Israel based on the former's capabilities and needs rather than its official self-perception, which is codified in its 1988 charter. This article works from the assumption that most terrorists act on a rational basis, using a strategic choice model to achieve their goals.<sup>1</sup> Analyzing a terrorist organization's goals and capabilities thus allows it to assess its most likely behaviour, or strategy. As risk assessments are only as accurate as the analysis on which they are based, it is of particular importance that the risks and chances of an agreement between Israel and Hamas be reevaluated through the lens that matters: that of Hamas itself.

### 1. The ascendancy of Hamas as Political Representative

The 56% victory of Hamas in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council on January 25, 2006 came as a surprise to Israel and the members of the *Quartet* (United Nations [UN], Russia, U.S. and EU).<sup>2</sup> The initial rationale behind the West's support of the elections had been to foster Fatah's position as the legitimate representative of the Palestine people. Hamas's victory thus caused a dilemma for

<sup>1</sup> Martha C. Crenshaw, "The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a product of Strategic Choice," 1998; also: Craig Stapley, "Terrorism: Its goals, targets, and strategies," 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Youngs/ Ben Smith, "Hamas and the Seizure of Gaza", *House of Commons Library, International Affairs & Defence Section*, , Research Paper 07/60, 6. July 2007, 10.

Israel and the *Quartet*: labelled as a terrorist organization, Hamas was the clear victor in an "open and fairly-contested electoral process".<sup>3</sup> After the election, Israel and the *Quartet* announced that they would refuse to accept Hamas as a political actor as long as it did not distance itself from its previous goals. Four days after the election, Israeli Prime Minister Olmert said that "we have made it clear that without giving up its ways of terror, recognizing Israel's right to exist in peace and security, and honouring all the Palestinian [National] Authority accords towards Israel - including, of course, annulling the Hamas charter calling for the destruction of the State of Israel - Israel will not hold any contact with the Palestinians."<sup>4</sup>

In June 2007, after a short phase of political cooperation with Fatah, Hamas took full control of the Gaza Strip. This event, lasting four days and causing over 100 fatalities, essentially established two different Palestine entities, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.<sup>5</sup>

Hamas's election victory in 2006 was based primarily on the delivery of social services and its reputation as a disciplined and reliable organization vis-à-vis Fatah, rather than on its attacks against Israel.<sup>6</sup> "Its popularity [...] stems less from widespread support for its extremist ideology than from dissatisfaction with the [Palestinian Authority's] corruption and the stagnant Palestinian economy. Understanding this situation well, Hamas ran on a platform stressing reform and good governance rather than ideological struggle."<sup>7</sup>

*Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre* (JTIC) states that "frustrations over corruption and a lack of reform as well as the deteriorating social, economic and security conditions resulted in growing public disillusionment with the PA and ultimately led to Hamas' victory in the January 2006 election."<sup>8</sup> The remaining question is whether this success will have positive or rather negative ramifications for the relationship with Israel.

<sup>3</sup> Statement of the EU Election Observation Mission, in: Tim Youngs, "The Palestinian Parliamentary Election and the Rise of Hamas", *House of Commons Library, International Affairs & Defence Section*, Research Paper 06/17, 15 March 2006, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Pippard/ Will Hartley, "Israel, Gaza & the West Bank", *Jane's Terrorism and Counterinsurgency Centre* (JTIC) Country Briefing, 22. October 2007, 4.

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons 07/ 60, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Herzog, "Can Hamas be tamed?" *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2006.

<sup>8</sup> JTIC Country Briefing: Israel, Gaza & the West Bank, 3.

## 2. Ambush or Option?

Recent offers for an agreement with Israel, made by Khaled Meshaal, Hamas's political leader, once again stressed the preference for a peaceful solution to the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Meshaal said that "we have offered a truce if Israel withdraws to the 1967 borders, a truce of ten years as a proof of recognition"<sup>9</sup>. He also announced, however, that Hamas would not formally accept Israel as a state. The validity of Hamas' 1988 charter, which calls for the destruction of Israel, thus remains unclear. Meshaal's announcements, however, gained some attention in the media due to the use of the Arabic word "hudna" for truce, which implies recognition of the other party's existence. "Tadiya", meaning solely a period of calm, was the word usually used by Hamas when making offers to Israel.<sup>10</sup> The Israeli government, perceiving Fatah (now limited to the West Bank) as the only legitimate Palestinian representative, remained unresponsive to Meshaal's offers.

Israel's rejection is not unreasoned. In the past, leading members of Hamas always proclaimed their refusal to modify the charter. Hamas's leader and former Palestinian Prime Minister Ismael Haniye said in 2006 that "the constants and the strategy of Hamas do not change according to circumstances. Hamas will stay faithful to jihad, to resistance, to guns, to Palestine and to Jerusalem."<sup>11</sup>

The main argument for Israel's position, however, is the large number of Qassam-rockets and mortars which have been fired on Israeli towns from within the Gaza Strip since Israel's military withdrawal.<sup>12</sup> During a NATO conference in October 2007, Israeli Foreign Minister Livni said "Israel fully withdrew from the Gaza Strip, thus terminating its so-called occupation of the Strip, and allowing the Palestinians to establish independent governance. In return, we received increased terror, daily Kassam rocket attacks against cities in Israel and the establishment of a

---

<sup>9</sup> Barak Ravid, "Meshal offers 10-year truce for Palestinian state on '67 borders," *Haaretz*, May 19, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> "Hamas Offers Conditional Truce To Israel", *CBS News*, April 21, 2008, [http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/04/21/world/main4031872.shtml?source=RSSattr=World\\_4031872](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/04/21/world/main4031872.shtml?source=RSSattr=World_4031872); accessed 29 June 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Anti defamation league, [http://www.adl.org/main\\_Israel/hamas\\_own\\_words.htm](http://www.adl.org/main_Israel/hamas_own_words.htm); accessed 26 June 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Shin Bet, *Palestinian Terrorism in 2007 – Statistics and Trends*, 8.

Hamas stronghold on our southern border".<sup>13</sup> In light of these facts, a durable agreement between Israel and Hamas would seem unlikely.

The current situation, however, is distinct from earlier ones. Both Hamas and Israel have reached a condition where they are forced to make further decisive steps that will determinate their future relationships. There is a chance that both parties can significantly dismantle the conflict. But this requires great efforts from both sides and may not be possible without external support.

## 3. Hamas at the Crossroads

After its electoral victory, Hamas claimed to be a political, democratically legitimated actor. What may be considered as Hamas's greatest victory left the organization in a dilemma; it now had to decide between terrorism and politics.

In the past, the organization applied an effective (if inhuman) *terrorist* strategy: by presenting itself as the "vanguard" of the Palestinians against an "evil" Israel,<sup>14</sup> Hamas sought to attract the local population ("target audience"). The core of this strategy is to commit terrorist attacks that will provoke a counteraction from the "enemy" (e.g. military operations, blockades, etc) which will have negative ramifications for the target audience which it can yet redress. To understand how this system works in theory, one can imagine the target audience as a log of wood, the terrorists as a spike and the government as a sledgehammer: Every governmental countermeasure will inevitably drive the spike deeper into the log. Accordingly, Hamas benefitted from Israel's retaliation measures, especially the closing of the borders between Israel and the Gaza Strip. Due to the clandestine financial and material support coming from other state- and non-state actors (e.g. Hezbollah and Iran), Hamas was able to deliver elementary goods such as food and pharmaceuticals in face of the Israeli blockade. A member of the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA), the official Palestinian political representative, concluded that despite the blockade, "Hamas gets what it wants through

---

<sup>13</sup> Address by Tzipi Livni, Foreign Minister of Israel, <http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2007/10-october/e1022b.html>; accessed 4 July 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 20; also: Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 170.



the tunnels and is not hurt politically or materially".<sup>15</sup>

Hamas's social activities, also described as its "winning card"<sup>16</sup> have been decisive for its success in the Gaza Strip. It also distinguishes Hamas from other militant organizations in the region (including Fatah) which might be able to match Hamas's military capabilities, but not its social efforts.<sup>17</sup> Israeli scholar Reuven Paz argues that 90% of Hamas's work is devoted to social, educational and welfare activities.<sup>18</sup> The support of the Gazan population and the widespread mistrust against Fatah provided Hamas with the necessary public backing to claim political responsibility over the Gaza Strip and rout Fatah.

Hamas's dilemma is that if it chooses politics, it has to overhaul its strategy: The goods that Hamas is able to deliver help the Gazan population, but only on a very basic level. Although there has not been a famine inside the Gaza Strip so far, living conditions and the overall economic situation are desperate. After the Hamas takeover in June 2007, the UN estimated an unemployment rate of about 50%.<sup>19</sup> Israel's measures, especially the closure of the crossings, further exacerbated that situation.<sup>20</sup> Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, now the official envoy of the *Quartet*, in June 2008 described the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip as "dreadful".<sup>21</sup>

The former strategy was useful as long as Hamas was able to blame the bad living conditions on Israel and Fatah (which was

officially in charge of the Gaza Strip until June 2007), while presenting itself as the sole supporter of the Gazan population. Now that Fatah is gone and Hamas, which won the 2006 elections promoting anticorruption and good governance rather than terrorism, has to improve the situation in Gaza if it wants to maintain public support (which requires first and foremost the improvement of the devastated Palestinian economy). This, in contrast to its former role as a terrorist actor, requires a firmly *political* strategy. An extension of the current situation thus will frustrate those moderate Palestinians who supported Hamas in the election hoping for improving living conditions. A Palestinian aid worker told the *International Crisis Group*<sup>22</sup> in December 2007 that "people in Gaza are more concerned with Karni [crossing] than al-Quds [Jerusalem], with access to medical care than the Dome of the Rock. The frustration is so intense".<sup>23</sup>

If its *political* strategy fails, Hamas will risk its current leadership position vis-à-vis Fatah and other extremist Palestinian organizations (see below). Thus, if *political* success comes to be seen as unattainable, Hamas will likely return to its past *modus operandi*.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Challenges for a peace agreement

The conflict between Hamas and Israel is by no means a singular conflict between two parties. Instead, there are at least three different conflicts: First within Hamas itself, then between Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups and finally between Hamas and Israel.

##### 4.1 The divided structure of Hamas

The organization is not united around a strong leadership, but consists of three different branches: The "outside" or international branch, led by Khaled Meshaal, currently residing in Damascus; the social or domestic branch inside Gaza led by former Palestine Prime Minister Ismael Haniye; and finally the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas's military wing.<sup>25</sup> Although both Haniye and Meshaal announced their disposition toward an

<sup>15</sup> *International Crisis Group*, "Ruling Palestine I: Gaza under Hamas" Middle East Report N°73, 19 March 2008, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas. Vision, Violence, and Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), XIV.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "Is Hamas only a terrorist group?" <http://www.cfr.org/publication/8968/>; accessed 23 June 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Jane's Sentinel Country Risk Assessment: Gaza and the West Bank, June 27, 2008, [http://www4.janes.com.proxy.www.merln-europe.org/subscribe/sentinel/EMEDS\\_doc\\_view.jsp?Sent\\_Country=Gaza%20and%20the%20West%20Bank&Prod\\_Name=EMEDS&K2DocKey=/content1/janesdata/sent/emedsu/gazas010.htm@current#toclink-j1091116255656981](http://www4.janes.com.proxy.www.merln-europe.org/subscribe/sentinel/EMEDS_doc_view.jsp?Sent_Country=Gaza%20and%20the%20West%20Bank&Prod_Name=EMEDS&K2DocKey=/content1/janesdata/sent/emedsu/gazas010.htm@current#toclink-j1091116255656981); accessed 6 July 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Jane's Sentinel Country Risk Assessments: Gaza and Westbank.

<sup>21</sup> BBC News, "Key Points: Blair grilled by MPs", 5 June 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/7437338.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7437338.stm); accessed 26 June 2008.

<sup>22</sup> The *International Crisis Group* is a reputable independent nongovernmental organization that provides own independent data and analyses.

<sup>23</sup> *International Crisis Group*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> JTIC Country Briefing, Israel, Gaza & the West Bank, 25.

<sup>25</sup> "Country Reports on Terrorism 2007," *U.S. Department of State*, 278.

agreement with Israel, the future relationship between the individual branches remains ambiguous.<sup>26</sup> Neither of the two leaders is considered able to replace Hamas's founder and former head Sheikh Yassin, another obstacle for agreement between Hamas and Israel. Shaul Mishal<sup>27</sup> argues that "since Yassin's death [in 2004], Hamas has suffered from the lack of a high-stature charismatic leader capable of serving as a source of ideological inspiration, a political authority, and a figure to whom strategic initiatives can be addressed."<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.2 Other Palestinian Terrorist Organizations

Hamas's past success and influence had been based in large part on its image as the "vanguard" of the Palestinians against Israel. This image also limited the power and influence of other militant organizations in Gaza, including the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)<sup>29</sup> and its military wing, the Al-Quds Brigades, as well as the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (AAMB),<sup>30</sup> the military fraction of Fatah.<sup>31</sup>

To overcome the current situation vis-à-vis Israel, Hamas will not only have to change its own strategy (and charter), but also to dismantle these groups and/ or integrate them into its own structure, none of which will be easy. Despite Hamas's claim to control Gaza and the deployment of a 3000-member security force in May 2006,<sup>32</sup> it has at best limited influence on the numerous other groups. Asked what they would do if Hamas were to limit their violence, *Jane's Terrorism and Counterinsurgency Centre* quotes a source

<sup>26</sup> Mishal/ Sela; XXIII.

<sup>27</sup> Shaul Mishal is Professor for Political Science at Tel Aviv University.

<sup>28</sup> Shaul Mishal, „Hamas: The Agony of Victory“, *The Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale*, Vol. 9, No. 1, April 2006, 5f.

<sup>29</sup> Palestinian Islamic Jihad is considered a radical religious Palestinian organization. Founded during the 70s, it receives support from Syria and seeks the establishment of a Palestinian State as well as the destruction of Israel. *U.S. Department of State: Country Reports on Terrorism 2007*, 295f.

<sup>30</sup> The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (AAMB) is a loose cooperation of radical Palestinian militants, which emerged during the second Intifada 2000. Although lacking a coherent leadership, its members are loyal to Fatah and get support from Iran. Its goal is to found a Palestinian State and expel Israel from Palestinian territory. *U.S. Department of State: Country Reports on Terrorism 2007*, 270.

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed overview of Palestinian Terrorist Organizations see JTIC Country Briefing, Israel, Gaza & the West Bank, 22. October 2007, 33-38.

<sup>32</sup> House of Commons Research Paper 07/60, 11.

from the Al-Quds-Brigades, saying "we will oppose them as we did the Palestinian Authority."<sup>33</sup>

#### 4.3 Israel

Notwithstanding Hamas's internal dilemma, it also finds itself confronted with an Israeli government that has diminishing interest in serving as a mid-wife for a future Palestinian state.<sup>34</sup> After years of negotiations, the Israeli government seems to prefer a strict physical separation between Israel and Palestine. Its unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, albeit increasing the number of Qassam- and Mortar-attacks, was seen as a precedent to its future strategy vis-à-vis the occupied territories. Dov Waxman, professor at the Baruch College in New York, argues that "the majority of the Israeli-Jewish public had gradually come to believe that ruling over millions of Palestinians in the territories was a demographic and security liability, jeopardizing their personal security and Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state. [...] The basic idea was that Israel, without negotiations with the Palestinians, would withdraw from some or all of the territories and establish a physical barrier, with the Palestinians on one side and Israelis on the other. 'Us over here, them over there,' was how Barak succinctly put it"<sup>35</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that currently, according to a February 2008 poll, 64% of Israelis favour negotiations with Hamas instead of a strict physical separation.<sup>36</sup>

The security barrier is hardly a reliable protection against Palestinian terrorism. Even if it is credited with the drastic decrease in Palestinian suicide attacks,<sup>37</sup> it will protect Israel neither from Palestinian Qassam rockets and mortars nor from the more effective Katyushas.

The closure of crossings between Israel and Palestine, as well as the construction of the

<sup>33</sup> JTIC Country Briefing , Israel, Gaza & the West Bank , 26.

<sup>34</sup> Marina Ottaway, "Promoting Democracy after Hamas' Victory," Web Comment, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 30, 2006, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=17978&prog=zgp&proj=zdlr,zme> accessed 26 July 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Dov Waxman, "From Controversy to Consensus: Cultural Conflict and the Israeli Debate Over Territorial Withdrawal", *Israel Studies*, Vol. 13, Nr. 2, 2008, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Israeli airstrike damages Hamas premier's office", *CNN International*, March 1, 2008, [http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/03/01/Mideast/index.html?eref=rss\\_topstories](http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/03/01/Mideast/index.html?eref=rss_topstories); accessed 8 July 2008.

<sup>37</sup> House of Commons Research Paper 07/60, 9.



security barrier may serve at best as short-term solutions and could eventually yield severe consequences. In permanent need of additional resources, Hamas will likely cooperate with ungrudging supporters of Palestinian terrorism like Iran, which would likely desire to establish a second well-armed Hizbullah-like ally in contiguity to Israel. Even if dependence on Iran would not favour Hamas, it would have few other alternatives to gain material and financial support.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, a return to an open and full-fledged confrontation with Hamas – a “third intifada” – would probably have dangerous ramifications for Israel. Even if it would be possible to defeat Hamas militarily, the consequences would be even worse. Shaul Mishal argues that if Hamas would lose control, the Gaza Strip would likely attract foreign terrorist organizations, turning the area into a “second Iraq.”<sup>39</sup>

A former senior Israeli intelligence official told the *International Crisis Group* in November 2007 that “if the policy is to destroy Hamas as a viable political force, you will get warlords. Without Hamas, Gaza will become a no-man’s land.”<sup>40</sup>

## 5. Hybrid Hamas

Unwilling (or unable) to decide between terrorism and politics, Hamas currently follows a dangerous middle way between limited terrorism and truce offers to Israel.<sup>41</sup> The Qassam rockets, Hamas’s current weapon of choice, threaten the inhabitants of Israeli border towns like Sderot and Ashkelon, but cause only moderate numbers of casualties. According to *Jane’s*, the fatality rate is one per 430 rockets.<sup>42</sup> Hamas proved in the past that it has access to more sophisticated Katyusha rockets, but has refused to use them extensively.<sup>43</sup> Ahmed Yusuf, a Hamas representative, told *The Economist* that “if you hit the heart of Ashkelon it will give them [Israel] an excuse to hit Gaza and kill 2,000 people and the world will say nothing.”<sup>44</sup>

Hamas currently appears to be a hybrid of a terrorist organization and a political actor. Mishal argues that “as an Islamic movement that boasts an alternative outlook, Hamas cannot shake off its radical image. However, as a social movement, Hamas must take into account the needs and priorities dictated by everyday life that require coming to terms with the reality of political arrangements. Hamas’s ideology and symbolic world call for uncompromising activism and focus on maximalist aims. In practice, however, the movement has adopted a policy that is more pragmatic than dogmatic and more reformist than revolutionary.”<sup>45</sup>

In sum, the current situation between Hamas and Israel appears deadlocked: Israel’s strategy of alienating and combating Hamas in supposed favour of Fatah has proven to be unsuccessful. As a multi-role actor that provides numerous social services such as schools and clinics, Hamas is too entrenched in Gaza to be wiped out militarily. Israel could probably defeat Hamas’s armed forces, but not rout the whole organization and its supporters. Hamas’s situation, however, is equally unpromising: Its current self-perception as political leader of the Gaza Strip is internationally repudiated, and its local supremacy is challenged by several militant groups which continue attacks on Israel. Having been a terrorist organization for more than two decades, past violent clashes with Israel (such as the second Intifada) generally strengthened Hamas’s position inside the Gaza Strip rather than weakened it.<sup>46</sup> As a genuine *terrorist* actor that lived on its image as avenger and protector, Hamas was in permanent need of a “diabolic” enemy. To alter this behaviour, one has to create a situation in which terrorism may have negative ramifications.<sup>47</sup>

Hamas’s formula for success in the 2006 elections (running under the name “Change and Reform”) was the promise of reform and good governance. Its decision not to stress radical goals (e.g. the destruction of Israel) and the subsequent success demonstrated that the majority of Palestinians supported a moderate rather than a radical policy.<sup>48</sup>

Since the elections, Hamas has benefitted little from its victory. It enabled Hamas to

<sup>38</sup> JTIC Country Briefing, Israel, Gaza & the West Bank, 25.

<sup>39</sup> Mishal, 7.

<sup>40</sup> *International Crisis Group*, 31f.

<sup>41</sup> House of Commons Research Paper 07/60, 30.

<sup>42</sup> JTIC Country Briefing, Israel, Gaza & the West Bank, 23.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> “Hamas’s Battle for Hearts and Minds”, *The Economist*, March 27, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Mishal, 4.

<sup>46</sup> John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998) 230f.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Herzog, “Can Hamas be tamed?”, *Foreign Affairs*, March/ April 2006.

<sup>48</sup> House of Commons Research Paper 06/17, 9.



underscore its pursuit for political power, but its current position inside Gaza stems from its military power and not the election victory. Accepting Hamas as the political representative of the Gaza Strip would therefore mean to support its political, not terrorist efforts. The objective is to create a situation for Hamas where it can enhance its power *only* by political means. An international recognition, which would be beneficial to Hamas because it would increase its power vis-à-vis Fatah therefore has to go hand in hand with the warning that as soon as Hamas deviates from its political strategy, it will face severe international retribution. Thus, accepting Hamas as a political actor has to be a first, but not the final step. International recognition would be a chance for Hamas and first of all for the Gazan population, but may not be an act of grace. "Political engagement with Hamas and the removal of it from international terrorist lists should be made contingent on real progress in these areas, not simply on the group's willingness to enter the political field",<sup>49</sup> says Michael Herzog, Brigadier General in the Israeli Defense Forces.

Hamas's decision to take part in the 2006 election was a rational decision to consolidate its power, not a sudden change of opinion. The same holds true for the Egypt-brokered truce with Israel that came into effect June 19, 2008. An Israeli security analyst told *The Jerusalem Post* that Hamas "wants to be Gaza's sole ruler, and it needs quiet from us in order to act internally to consolidate its rule. So Hamas will do all it can to continue the cease-fire."<sup>50</sup>

If Hamas gets the chance to transfer its election victory into legitimate power, it will find itself in a situation where terrorism is no longer attractive, because it will destroy its international reputation and put at stake the support of the Gazan population. The truce with Israel was important, but by no means sufficient. A more concrete agreement is still to come. Former British Cabinet minister Peter Hain argued in June 2008 that "despite the intensity of bitterness and hatred between Hamas and Israel, neither can militarily defeat the other - they will each have to be a party to a negotiated solution that satisfies Palestinian aspirations for a viable state and Israel's need for security."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Michael Herzog, "Can Hamas be tamed?"

<sup>50</sup> Herb Keinen et al., "Livni: Israel should response militarily", *The Jerusalem Post*, 26 June 2008.

<sup>51</sup> The Guardian, "Blair returns to Commons to face MP's questions on Middle East", 5 June 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/jun/05/tonyblair.foreignpolicy?gusrc=rss&feed=politics>; accessed June 27, 2008.

## 6. International Support

In its current situation, the Israel-Gaza conflict stands on the brink. A significant step towards a more peaceful relationship between Hamas and Israel seems to be within reach, but may not be possible without the support of external actors.

The Israeli-Palestine conflict is by no means new. Over the last several years, various attempts have been made to develop a sound solution. Although both sides agreed on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, the latest international plan, the so-called "Roadmap" developed by the *Quartet*, got stuck when both sides refused to fulfil their obligations.<sup>52</sup> Based on the experience of numerous past conferences and agreements (Oslo I, 1993; Oslo II, 1995; Wye River Memorandum, 1998; 2000 Camp David Summit), it is of crucial importance that both parties not only reach mutual agreements, but finally implement them.

As stressed in this article, both sides have incentives to improve their relationship in a peaceful manner. After the truce between Hamas and Israel was violated by Qassam-rockets launched by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, "a Hamas spokesman said the 'tahadiyeh' (calm) was a national Palestinian interest, and that anyone who tried to sabotage it was acting in an 'anti-national' way."<sup>53</sup>

As mentioned above, accepting Hamas as a political actor has to come along with a close monitoring of its future actions. Hamas has to be aware that returning to its former terrorist strategy will cause massive retribution. Decisive for this approach thus is the role of an international observer: He will first have to monitor Hamas's behaviour and also solve a second problem: The deep mutual mistrust between Hamas and Israel, which is an occasion for third parties (see 4.2) to spoil the peace process as long as Hamas has no full control over the Gaza Strip.<sup>54</sup> The accurate identification of the origin of a future attack on Israel is elementary to any progress between Israel and Hamas.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> JTIC Country Briefing, Israel, Gaza & the West Bank, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Avi Issacharoff et al., "Hamas: Qassam fire is harming Palestinian interests", *Haaretz*, 26 June 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," in: Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict, ed. Michael E. Brown et al. (Cambridge/London: MIT Press 2001), 366-414, 368.

<sup>55</sup> Secretary of State Livni stated on June 26 after a Qassam-attack committed by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade that "I don't care who fired. Every breach



This task requires a nonpartisan actor which possesses comprehensive knowledge about both parties as well as the surrounding nations. NATO has stressed in the past that it will not engage in the Israeli-Palestine conflict.<sup>56</sup> With regard to NATO's increased cooperation with the Mediterranean states which started in 1994 with the establishment of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), however, a NATO contribution in terms of a monitoring mission could in fact bridge mutual suspiciousness and secure the implementation and abidance of agreements on both sides.<sup>57</sup> In 2005, NATO Secretary General Scheffer stated that "the perception of NATO in the [Mediterranean] region has changed for the better, and there is a willingness to engage in concrete security-related discussions and cooperation."<sup>58</sup>

At the 2004 Istanbul Summit, NATO further deepened its collaboration with Mediterranean/Middle Eastern nations, launching the "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative" (ICI), a practical bilateral cooperation with countries of the Gulf region. It was emphasized by NATO "that the words 'country' and 'countries' in the document do *not* exclude participation, subject to the North Atlantic Council's approval, of the Palestinian Authority in cooperation under this initiative."<sup>59</sup>

Concerning international support for the building of a viable Palestinian State, Israeli Secretary of State Livni mentioned at the 2007 NATO Brussels meeting that "there is no-one better to lead the way than NATO."<sup>60</sup>

What makes NATO an appropriate organization for this task is its good relationship with the nations concerned, namely Israel and Egypt. A NATO involvement therefore should take place within the framework of a mutual agreement between

---

must be met with an immediate military response."

*Haaretz*, 26 June 2008.

<sup>56</sup> Speech by Deputy Secretary General of NATO, Ambassador Claudio Bisogniero, 23. October 2007, <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2007/s071022b.html>; accessed 20 June 2008.

<sup>57</sup> The Rand Palestinian State Study Team, *Building a Successful Palestinian State*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007), 381.

<sup>58</sup> Scheffer 2005, <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2005/s050224a.htm> accessed 27 June 2008.

<sup>59</sup> NATO update "NATO elevates Mediterranean Dialogue to a genuine partnership, launches Istanbul Cooperation Initiative" <http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2004/06-june/e0629d.htm>; accessed 6 July 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Address by Tzipi Livni, Foreign Minister of Israel, <http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2007/10-october/e1022b.html>; accessed 27 June 2008.

Israel and Hamas, and not in form of a peacebuilding-operation. Just as Scheffer said after the meetings of NATO and MD foreign ministers in Brussels on December 6-7 2007: "when an Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Syrian agreement does finally come about, someone will have to protect it. NATO will not bring peace, but if peace comes, it will accept an invitation to keep an eye on it."<sup>61</sup>

## 7. Conclusions

The primary reason for Hamas' decision to pursue political power was its desire to consolidate its control over the Gaza Strip. It finally accomplished this aim in 2007 after a violent battle with Fatah. This success, however, came with a decisive change of Hamas's role: Now that it claims to be the political representative, it will have to prove its willingness (and ability) to bear this responsibility.

There is no guarantee that Hamas will not return to terrorism in the future; even an agreement with Israel and international recognition may not prevent it from employing terrorist means as it deems appropriate. Its divided structure as well as the conflict with Fatah poses an unpredictable risk. With regard to the current situation of Israel and Hamas, however, accepting Hamas as the official representative of the Gaza Strip seems to be the best available option. Hamas's decision to participate in a democratic election should be perceived as an opportunity to truncate its terrorist activities. Being officially in charge of the Gazan population will make it more difficult for Hamas to haphazardly break agreements with Israel – it would face a renunciation from the moderate Palestinians on which it depends for political legitimacy.

Forcing Hamas to bear the responsibility for its own actions vis-à-vis its people in the Gaza Strip is probably the surest way to prevent a return to its terrorist strategy. An indispensable precondition for the success of such a strategy, however, is the close monitoring by an international observer. Only if one can detect individual breaches of agreement will the involved parties be forced to conform to their obligations. According to a NATO publication, "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a major

---

<sup>61</sup> Amir Oren, "Ballistic in Brussels", *Haaretz*, 10 December 2007, [www.nato.int/medial/articles/english/2007/071210\\_en\\_israel\\_haaretz.pdf](http://www.nato.int/medial/articles/english/2007/071210_en_israel_haaretz.pdf); accessed 27 June 2008.

source of tension. Progress towards a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement of this conflict should be a priority for the countries of the region and for the international community as a whole.”<sup>62</sup>

Finally, the objective of this paper was to develop a feasible approach, based on the current circumstances and capabilities of the involved actors. This approach may not be a perfect one, but as Thomas L. Friedman argued in a 2001 NYT article regarding the Israeli-Palestine conflict, “perfect isn't on the menu anymore.”<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> NATO-Publication “Security Cooperation with the Mediterranean region and the broader Middle East”.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; How about sending NATO somewhere important?” *New York Times*, September 4, 2001.