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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Hamas and a Two-state Solution: Move toward Moderation?**

By Damien D. Cheong

### **Synopsis**

*Hamas' reported acceptance of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict expectedly met with scepticism. Nevertheless, there are increasing push-factors that seem to be encouraging Hamas toward moderation.*

### **Commentary**

THE OUTGOING Hamas politburo bureau chief, Khaled Meshal, was recently reported by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz as declaring that the movement is supportive of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This declaration has expectedly met with scepticism since critics claim that Hamas has not amended its charter, or renounced violence, or recognised Israel's right to exist. Hence, this declaration should be taken with a pinch of salt until there are tangible manifestations of Hamas' moderation.

While there may be good reasons to doubt Hamas' intentions, it is nevertheless important to consider if this declaration, which was conveyed to US President Barack Obama through King Abdullah of Jordan, signals that Hamas might be headed down the path of moderation.

### **Factors encouraging moderation**

While the term 'moderation' is conceptually problematic because of its varied meanings, it is reflective of an approach which employs or seeks to employ non-violent methods as the first step towards resolving political disputes. However it would be difficult to expect non-state actors to completely refrain from using force when states themselves still threaten to use force against each other to solve their differences.

Assuming governing control of the Gaza Strip has brought with it new pressures for Hamas. At the moment, these seem to be pushing the movement toward a more moderate position. But it is too soon to say if Hamas will successfully make the transformation from an armed militant organisation to a political party.

The varied and growing needs of the electorate in Gaza have compelled Hamas to focus on maintaining the overall well-being of the population. To that end it has sought various ways to increase its resources (financial or otherwise) so as to allow it to carry out its administrative activities, as well as to ensure that food and essential supplies can reach the enclave. Admittedly, it has also improved its attack capabilities (as witnessed in the recent Israel-Gaza conflict). Nevertheless, Hamas is aware that Israeli reprisals from attacks emanating

from the Gaza Strip increase existing hardships, cause devastation and result in major civilian fatalities and casualties. While this outcome does increase the population's anger towards Israel, it also stokes their anger at Hamas for provoking the reprisals in the first place. It is therefore in the interests of Hamas to prevent other militant groups from attacking Israel. Yet, this has to be done cautiously.

### **Potential challenge from Salafis**

The Salafi groups have already accused Hamas of selling-out, and by moving decisively against such groups, Hamas opens itself up for criticism and portrayal as Israel's policeman – an accusation it once levelled at Fatah when it signed the Oslo agreements. Hamas also runs the risk of being challenged by the Salafi groups, which it does not want for fear of sparking a mini civil war in Gaza. Nevertheless, it is the needs and demands of the electorate that act to moderate Hamas as the movement is compelled to exercise flexibility and make compromises (ideological, strategic and tactical) to address these issues.

Notwithstanding Israeli military pressure, Hamas is also affected by its relationship with other Arab states and Iran. Resources (financial or otherwise), sanctuaries, and forms of assistance do come with a heavy price. For instance, Hamas' refusal to support the Assad regime in Syria greatly strained the relationship between the movement and Iran (Assad's patron), as well as resulted in the moving of its headquarters from Damascus to Doha, Qatar.

As Qatar is geographically further from the Palestinian territories, Hamas cannot afford to lose its base there and must not do anything to jeopardise this arrangement.

Qatar unlike Syria will not be party to supporting conflict with Israel. In this context, Qatar would most likely encourage Hamas to re-evaluate its approach to the conflict. Even Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi is keen to maintain peace with Israel, and has pledged to abide by the Israeli-Egypt Peace Agreement. If the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt seems willing to co-exist with Israel, Hamas may be pressured to do the same, considering that Egypt is currently Gaza's primary life line.

Fatah achieved a diplomatic triumph last year when Palestine was granted non-member state status in the United Nations. Although this recognition was largely symbolic, Hamas did not impede the process or sabotage Fatah's efforts as it believed that the move would advance the Palestinian cause however slightly. By reconciling with Fatah to achieve a united Palestinian front at the UN, Hamas not only abided by the wishes of the Palestinians to end the internecine conflict, but also signalled its recognition of the value of international support. If Fatah and the international community continue to demonstrate the tangible benefits of moderation, this would certainly encourage Hamas to recalibrate its position.

### **New Hamas leader's policy?**

Until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is ended, it is highly unlikely that Hamas will disarm even if it pursues the path of moderation. The ability to use force serves many varied purposes including: deterrence, defence, pressure and communication. But Hamas' ability to use force does not necessarily mean that it will use force. With the right incentives and pressure, Hamas can be encouraged to explore other non-violent options first before even contemplating using violence.

The conundrum lies in the current situation where tension between Israel and Hamas actually helps both their domestic political agendas. However, the ease with which such tensions can escalate and the resulting cycles of violence suggest that this situation is untenable. Nevertheless, both Israel and Hamas have also realised that cooperating (e.g. the prisoner exchange) can be politically advantageous too. How the Israeli-Palestinian conflict develops in future would certainly impact Hamas' moderation.

Khaled Meshal's successor may take Hamas in the opposite direction. The parties that wish to see a more moderate Hamas should consider applying a range of pressures and incentives to encourage moderation. However, there will be dynamics at play which could easily pull Hamas in the opposite direction. In any case, it should be noted that the moderation of any Islamist group is not only dependent upon push and pull factors but also on the dynamics between such factors.

*Damien D. Cheong is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Excellence in National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.*