The Hamas Movement and its political and democratic practice, 1992–2016

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ABSTRACT
The concept of a political opportunity structure contributes to the analysis of the behaviour of political actors and is one of the current central topics that has importance for political systems at the regional and international levels, as well as for political and social scientific research centres. This study falls within the range of studies on ideological movements and political parties, and the political variables that affect the political system and these movements which lead them to adapt their ideology, by changing their position – from one of rejection to one of acceptance – with regard to participation in parliamentary elections. To achieve their aim of getting into power, ideological movements and political parties can adapt to political changes, influence the structure of political opportunities and exploit ones available to them. This study focuses on the analysis of factors that led to the change in the position of Hamas with regard to democratic practice, from boycotting the first parliamentary elections in 1996 to actively participating in the 2006 elections. It discusses a number of factors: first, the internal organizational factors of the movement; second, the political variables in the Palestinian arena; and third, the internal factors related to the ruling party (Fatah). In light of this, the study principally aims at providing an objective view on the position of Hamas with regard to its political and democratic practice prior to its participation in the Palestinian political system and beyond, using the concept of political opportunities structure. Given that the movement was restricted by its ideology and governed by the political changes that had taken place in the Palestinian political system, it was forced to adapt to the new circumstances that followed the Oslo Treaty by changing its position from opposition and rejection to political participation.

The importance of the concept of the structure of political opportunities

Using the concept of political opportunity structure in the analysis of political parties and movements is a useful analytical tool. The structure of political opportunities, according to Sydney Taro, is defined as ‘consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure’ (cited in Berkhout, Sudulich, and van der Brug 2012, 6–7).

KEYWORDS
Hamas; Fatah; political opportunity structure; Oslo Treaty; Yasser Arafat; Ahmed Yassin; Al-Qassam Brigades; Israel; Gaza
The structure of political opportunity consists of two sets of elements: static and dynamic (Morgan 2006). The static elements of structure are described as stable and not transformable. If they changed, it would be in a gradual process, and due to exceptional circumstances. These elements are most useful in a comparison of movement activity within different settings (Ezzeddine 2005). As for the dynamic elements, they depend mainly on the actions of political actors, and these elements are useful for interpreting the emergence of a movement or its evolution within political changes. Thus, the structure of political opportunities can be considered static and dynamic at the same time, as these elements compose the structural side of the definition of political opportunity structure (Morgan 2006).

The change in the structure of political opportunities depends on two main components: ideological movements and political opportunity (Muhr 2010). The groups and movements can influence the structure and change it, and create opportunities for themselves through their practices and activities. However, the movements differ in their ability to capture the opportunities offered by the structure, although they exist in the same context. This is due to their objectives and work pattern, as well as the pattern of education and the system of goals set by the movement that defines the organization’s or group’s plans, irrespective of the extent of stagnancy or flexibility affecting the institution. It is also due to the ability to interact with events and their ability to seize and exploit opportunities. When the group is governed and disciplined by a set of principles and the institution that operates its affairs is aware of reality and history and has a high ability to read and employ all data, and look forward to the future, the possibility of investing all opportunities, therefore, remains great. Groups that are subject to individual moods, and judgments of people that they do not share a single vision or a unified reading of reality, have fewer opportunities for advancement, and their opportunities fade in the face of their conflicting ideas; this is what happened with the Fatah movement.

With regards to political opportunities, their emergence depends on the elements of political opportunity structure. The change in the elements of a fixed structure leads to the emergence of great opportunities, e.g., the collapse of a political system (Gamson and Meyer 1996). The change in the dynamic elements of structure results in limited opportunities or the ‘political window’ – which can be defined as opportunities that emerge as a result of limited change in some aspects of the political system (Ezzeddine 2005).

Opportunities are divided into two types according to the role of the political movement: those realized by the movement and seized when they emerge; and others created by the movement through its activities (Ezzeddine 2005).

The structure of political opportunities affects groups and movements in whole or in part, but its impact is variable and not fixed for all groups, as it varies from one group to another and from time to time, even in the group itself. The movements can be affected or influenced by structure (Goldner 2001). They can be influenced by changes in the new political context by changing their objectives, strategies and practices (Adair 2001). The movements can influence the structure and change it to their advantage through a number of political activities and events, such as changing political alliances (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996).

**The Hamas movement between ideology and realism**

The dogmatic or holistic ideologies indicate the integrated or comprehensive ideologies that have a conception of man, such as Communism and Islamism. The Communism
in Western Europe, based primarily on the dictatorship of the proletariat, has adapted its thought and ideology to the new democratic political environment in order to achieve its goals of reaching power through parliamentary elections, and not through the revolution where it was unable to achieve its objectives. The movement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is an example of the Islamic movements that have changed and adapted their positions preparing for political participation in the political system. Hence, they adapted the religious text to commensurate the new reality before participation and after reaching power. This, in turn, leads us to the conclusion that there are those who deal with ideologies as not fixed but variable; they are considered as a vehicle for movements to achieve their goals and objectives of reaching power.

The author believes there is a misconception among many of the proponents of movements emanating from ideological thought, which is represented by the mixture of judgment in the realm of permissibility and the judgment that contradicts the principles. The followers prompt justifying every political judgment, even if it is, in fact, contradictory to ideological constants that have remained a milestone of those groups. The author does not call for intellectual stagnation and closure, but rather to differentiate between departing from stagnation and constants. In view of the path of many ideological movements in the East and West, we find that most of these movements have fallen into the trap of pragmatism and the desire to attain power. However, this has led many of them to go beyond their intellectual and ideological system under the cover of dealing with the requirements of the stage, and to grasp the available opportunities. This is what happened to the Hamas movement in dealing with opportunities, even if the dealing was at the expense of ideological constants that they had long advocated, and blamed the Fatah movement for denying the latter, and violating the terms.

It has been unequivocally proven that what many Islamic movements echoed as constants that could not be compromised or neutralized is no longer the case; they have been adapted and reproduced commensurate with the changing political reality in order for these movements to achieve their partisan interests and facilitate reaching power.

Like other ideological movements, the Hamas movement emerged as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The movement began its work for religious advocacy and social work (Mahmoud 2004) and since then its popular base has expanded. It participated in trade unions and student unions in Palestinian universities (Mabhouh 2010) and worked on building its own institutions (Mishal and Saylaa 1999) at the time when the factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) were engaged in resistance work and targeted by the occupation. The occupation turned a blind eye to the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood movement and its events during that period because the resistance to occupation was not among the movement’s priorities at that time (Issa 2007).

In the outbreak wake of first Intifada (uprising) in 1987, the movement announced the formation of the Islamic Resistance Movement ‘Hamas’ as one of the resistance arms of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, where it began to exercise the resistance by itself, without the participation of the organization factions, or even the Islamic Jihad, in an attempt to place itself as an alternative to the PLO. The movement began to develop its military action until it became a major force in the Palestinian arena, which has increased its popular base.

The charter, issued in 1988, defines the ideological reference of Hamas, where it pointed out in its articles that the starting points of the intellectual movement stem from the
Islamic religion, and follow the ideological approach of the Muslim Brotherhood (Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) – Palestine 1988). In 1993, it identified its political identity.

The Hamas movement began its course with ideological fanaticism represented by the rejection of Palestinian leftist forces and the secular approach of the PLO; fanaticism that has gradually changed towards moderation and acceptance of the other, while synchronized with the initiation of the work of the resistance. The movement began to favour the political aspect over the ideological one. Therefore, the movement allied itself with the leftist and nationalist forces opposed to the Oslo Treaty signed between the PLO and Israel, not only because of its opposition to its ideology but also because the movement saw in the Oslo Treaty a threat to its existence and its resistance.

**Changing the structure of political opportunities in the Palestinian situation**

The Hamas movement refused to participate in the first legislative elections and showed ideological and political opposition because its participation in the elections would be trapped in ideological contradictions, and because it would lose the leadership of the political opposition, its credibility ran the risk of being undermined in the Palestinian street. Moreover, its participation would be at the expense of its resistance and, more importantly, would weaken its popular base. However, the movement agreed to participate in the second legislative elections, although the reference to the first and second elections did not depart from the umbrella of the Oslo Accords, while the changes in the electoral system, such as the increase in the number of deputies and others, were only minor. The main reason for the movement’s participation in the Palestinian political system in 2006 was the change of the structure of political opportunities and its transition from the Fatah movement to the Hamas movement.

**The structure of political opportunities of the Fatah movement**

Fatah’s defeat in the second legislative elections and the decline of its popularity resulted from a combination of subjective and objective factors. The Fatah movement had been led by the Palestinian revolution headed by the martyr Yasser Arafat, who was able to transform the PLO from being Arab dependent to become the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people (Al-Masri 2014). The Fatah movement was stepped up because of its military action that has encouraged thousands to join its ranks (Abu Fakhr Saqr 2014). The movement continued its struggle until it began to adopt the path of negotiations with Israel. The latter negotiations culminated in the signing of the Oslo Treaty and the formation of the Palestinian National Authority (PA). The movement subsequently moved away from carrying out its struggle and began to arrest the resistance fighters in coordination with Israel in order to fulfil its pledges and commitments with Israel. This led to a decline in its popularity.

The Oslo Treaty was the first step on the path of decline in Fatah’s popularity. On the basis of the agreement, the emerging authority could not achieve the Palestinian dream of establishing a Palestinian state and promoting the economic situation. On the contrary, individual and partisan interests and corruption surmounted the interest of the movement.
and public interest, which removed it even further from exercising its role towards its people in various fields of life.

Negotiations have failed to achieve the national demands of people. As a result of Israel’s non-compliance with the agreements signed between the two parties, the negotiations reached a deadlock. Therefore, the Fatah movement has borne the results of the political failures of peace agreements as its leaders and members constituted the main component of the PA. The integration of Fatah into the institutions of the PA has impeded the political and organizational activity of the movement (Ershid 2007). In the final outcome, all the disadvantages of power returned to Fatah, while the advantages returned to government members.

Thus, the martyrdom of President Arafat was one of the factors that aggravated the Fatah crisis; then the movement reeled on the verge of disintegration, as an organization and as a political project (Usher 2006). The second legislative elections coincided with a regulatory slouch that gripped the Fatah movement. The presence of rival political leadership and differences clearly emerged when the movement was unable to advance a single list for the second legislative elections, which reflected negatively on Fatah chances to win the elections. The internal disagreements of Fatah were exacerbated. The member of parliament and member of the movement’s central committee, Mohammed Dahlan, was deposed. This led to the emergence of two streams within the movement: one in Ramallah, the other in the Gaza Strip. Consequently, all attempts to resolve the conflict between both streams through regional mediation have failed.

At the level of freedom of expression, the PA has pursued in the West Bank the policy of mouth muzzling, which has been marked by gunfire and political detention. This was not confined to the opposition only, but has spread to affect some Fatah leaders and deputies’ members, in addition to withholding the payment of salaries and referrals on early retirement for members of the Fatah movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The corrupt policy of recruitment and promotion has increased, with officials and ministers who were employing their sons and relatives in sensitive positions, despite their lack of experience and efficiency in the face of unemployment and poverty in the West Bank. The inability of Fatah to solve the problems of Gaza has increased, notably the problem of 2005 vacations and promotions for the military and civilians similar to the West Bank.

Corruption was not limited to PA institutions in the West Bank, but has extended to the Palestinian embassies, since they are generally corrupt and dependent on mediation, favouritism and discrimination between the Palestinians. The Palestinian embassies are weak and their security has been infiltrated and cannot protect and assist any Palestinian resorting to them (Kassem 2016). The assassination of martyr Omar al-Nayef inside the Palestinian embassy in Bulgaria by the Israeli Mossad in February 2016 is an important example of proof.

Otherwise, the teachers’ strike came to reveal the government’s disregard for the agreements signed between it and the teachers union in 2013, which forced more than 30,000 teachers to strike in February 2016. The government responded to the strike by arresting and summoning dozens of teachers and setting up barriers to prevent teachers from arriving at a sit-in in Ramallah.

Since President Abbas became president, he has insisted that security coordination should not be compromised, considering it as ‘sacred’ (YouTube 2014) despite the increasing Israeli crimes against the Palestinian people, the continuation of settlements and the
Judaization of Jerusalem, and the initiation of the plan to divide Al-Aqsa Mosque. The Central Council of the PLO, at its 27th ordinary session held in Ramallah in March 2015, decided to stop security coordination with Israel because it did not abide by the agreements signed with the Palestinian side (Al Jazeera Net 2015). However, the decision was not implemented.

Finally, the practices of some Fatah leaders on several occasions have injured the sentiments of Palestinian national feeling and influenced the movement’s popularity. The most prominent of these was the reception of Israeli General Munir Ammar by one of the Executive Committee members at his home in Nablus, and condolences offered by Munir by an official delegation from the Central Committee of Fatah and the Executive Committee of the PLO and PA. Added to this list was the participation in economic relations with Israeli merchants, and the participation of an Executive Committee member commissioned by the Palestinian President at the Herzliya Conference in June 2016.

With regard to the objective factors, the imposition of an economic and political siege by the United States and Europe on the PA has led to the deterioration of the economic situation, in addition to the boycott of a number of Arab and Western countries against Arafat, after Israel had imposed a siege on him. After Arafat was martyred and Abbas attained the presidency, Israel did not offer the latter anything through the negotiations, but rather increased its repressive and settler practices. Israel refused and disclaimed implementation of the agreements signed with the PA and refused the international initiatives to resume negotiations with the PA in March 2016. Despite the implementation of all obligations required of the PA, Israel did not recognize the existence of a Palestinian party, and this was evident through its practices. These factors have emptied the PA of its content and its role is limited only to the security coordination that distorted its image in the Palestinian street. In addition, the relationship between the PA in some Arab countries – such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and Jordan – has worsened due to the rejection of its initiatives by the president to resolve the Fatah–Fatah conflict and many issues. The UAE has suspended its financial aid to the PA and transferred it to Dahlan’s current account.

The structure of political opportunities of Hamas

Many of the subjective factors of the Hamas movement also coincided with objective factors and played a role in preparing the movement to grasp the opportunity for change, which meant participation in the Palestinian political system. A number of objective factors prepared to create an institutional structure for the movement and to create a public base for it so as to enable its development.

The Israeli occupation indirectly supported the Muslim Brotherhood in order to strike the PLO and its affiliated factions. The occupation did not suppress any activity of the Muslim Brotherhood (Issa 2007), enabling them to carry out their religious advocacy and social activities and build their institutions, thereby taking advantage of this opportunity in their favour.

In the wake of the first Intifada, the Islamic revolution and resistance, in both Iran and Lebanon, constituted an incentive for the possibility of the Hamas movement to liberate Palestine. Hence, under the weight of the internal pressure of the movement’s young
leadership that had increased its political chances on the Palestinian arena, it saw in the outbreak of the first Intifada a political window of opportunity to exercise military action under a new name: the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas.

The signing of the Oslo Treaty had led to a different role for both the Fatah and Hamas movements. From the beginning, the Hamas movement opposed and refused to participate in the political system because, in the opinion of Hamas, the political system was based on an agreement that doomed it to fail. This led to increased opportunities for Hamas as the opportunities for Fatah diminished with each failure that accompanied the course of negotiations.

Arafat’s martyrdom and the ensuing disputes and splits within the Fatah movement led to Hamas’s decision to participate in the political system. Hamas saw that the martyrdom of Arafat had left a void and offered a great opportunity for it to enter the political system; had it participated during his lifetime, it would not have been able to make any change in the political reality.

In terms of subjective factors, at the beginning of its inception as a Muslim Brotherhood, the Hamas movement gave priority to the social and service work in its thought and practices (Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas – Palestine 1988, Articles 20–21) through its institutional structure represented by the mosques and the established institutions (Bennett 2006), medical (Robinson 2004), educational (Bennett 2006), and political institutions (Robinson 2004), and the movement has paid great attention to the families of martyrs, detainees as well as to the poor and sick (Baba 2010).

The movement’s polarization of these social groups increased its popular support at a time when the PA has been unable to provide the minimum demands for these groups (Balqziz 2006). The movement also helped by adopting the religious discourse in dealing with all social, political and economic matters; this was the most prominent factor in attracting supporters (al-Hassan 2005).

The work of the resistance movement was developed significantly in the early 1990s with the formation of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, which used the strategy of kidnapping Israeli soldiers and also carrying out many martyrdom operations (The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) 2013). With the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada, the movement intensified its operations against the occupation, which increased the frequency of its targeting by the occupation through not only the assassination of the leaders of the military wing, but also it was extended to target a large number of its own political leaders, including Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

The assassination of its founder has increased the strength and cohesion of the Hamas movement in contrast to what happened with the Fatah movement, because Hamas depended for all its decisions on the institution and not the individual. This enabled it to surmount the martyrdom of its founder, while in the case of Fatah, the martyrdom of its founder and leader caused a political and organizational crisis, since it was dependent on individual rather than institutional decisions.

Hamas continued its military operations, forcing the Israeli occupation forces to withdraw unilaterally from the Gaza Strip in 2005. The movement asserted that resistance, as a means of recovering the occupied land, had proved its success in managing to liberate Gaza from the occupation. On the contrary, the path of negotiations adopted by Fatah only led to that movement making further concessions, while the settlements and Judaization of Jerusalem continued.
In terms of the electoral lists of Hamas, the movement presented a unified central list on which none of its members ran outside the official lists. The selection of candidates was based on criteria set by the movement, including people recognized for their sound moral and financial integrity and popularity, as well as having high scientific qualifications (Zaid 2011).

Hamas was able to employ the political opportunities in the Palestinian situation, in order to serve its political strategy and electoral programme; this reflected positively on the results of legislative elections. It was aware that its competitor had many gaps, and its historical struggle was filled with contradictions; its chances of real competition and victory were reduced. Therefore, the Hamas movement made a great effort to strengthen that gap and to highlight all the contradictions that entrenched the Fatah opponents and prevent their victory. Hamas invested in all its chances of success, and strengthened all the factors that would bring about the decline and defeat of its opponents. In other words, the victory of Hamas was not purely through self-sufficiency, but was also the result of important objective factors, most notably the organizational fragility that afflicted its opponents and the absence of other competitors in the political arena who had distanced themselves from Oslo, such as Islamic Jihad and others.

In light of the above, it is clear that the popularity of the Hamas movement in the West Bank was increasing at the expense of the Fatah movement, and in contrast the popularity of the Fatah movement in the Gaza Strip was increasing at the expense of the popularity of the Hamas movement. Therefore, this clearly indicates that there is general dissatisfaction with the authority of both Fatah and Hamas.

Hamas in power

The second legislative elections were held in 2006, and Hamas won a majority of the seats in the Legislative Council (60%), which enabled it to form a government. Abbas assigned Ismail Haniyeh to form the 10th government.²

Hamas was forced to form a single government because of the boycott by some factions (al-Masri 2006), despite its initial attempt to form a governing of national coalition (Saadeddine 2010). As the movement attained power, conflicts and disputes began over the powers of the presidential institution and government (Shikaki 2008), in addition to Israel as well as the international community and some Arabs imposing a financial and political blockade, rendering the government unable to pay the salaries of its employees (Issa, year 223). The situation between the two movements deteriorated to the point of infighting and the use of violence and force. This led the Palestinian leadership in Israeli prisons to formulate the national reconciliation document, which later resulted in an agreement between the two parties and the formation of the 11th government (the government of national unity). This government did not last long because of the disputes and political strife between both movements. This prompted the Hamas movement to carry out a military coup in Gaza in 2007. Abbas then dismissed the government and declared a state of emergency and appointed Salam Fayyad as prime minister. This resulted in two governments: the first in Ramallah, the second in the Gaza Strip.

Following the coup in the Gaza Strip, Hamas formed a government led by Haniyeh and the membership of a number of ministers from the Gaza Strip. They used the PA’s buildings and institutions, and made changes to administrative structures in government
institutions (Hovdenak 2010). Hamas activated the Legislative Council in Gaza, while the Legislative Council in Ramallah remained officially disabled.

About seven years after Ismail Haniyeh’s government was formed in the Gaza Strip, Hamas agreed to dismiss its government, as agreed with the Fatah movement, to form a national reconciliation government in June 2014. But the government failed to meet the goals of its formation. There were many failed attempts at reconciliation between both sides. The one by Qatari mediation at a meeting in Qatar in June 2016, which coincided with the ninth anniversary of the split, provided a good example.

The coup led to deterioration in the economic situation in the Gaza Strip because of the imposed siege on the Hamas movement. Poverty spread and unemployment increased. This was accompanied by a stem in the flow of food, medical supplies and construction materials to the Gaza Strip (Byman 2010). Hamas strived to solve part of its financial problem by imposing new taxes on citizens to pay salaries to the civilians and military employees who had not been paid regularly for more than two years since the flow of financial aid from Iran to the Hamas government stopped; Iran retained financial support only for the military wing. This is what counts for Iran insofar as it maintained the financial support for the resistance despite its conflict with Hamas. The military wing of the movement was pressing for a return to the relationship with the resistance alliance, which offered and continued to provide the support to resistance; this was unlike the Muslim Brotherhood alliance, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which wanted to internalize the movement and move it into the sphere of moderation, then to negotiation with Israel and subsequently to recognize Israel.

At the security level, Hamas made changes to the security devices by cancelling or merging some of them and introducing new ones (Itani 2008). One of the most important achievements in this regard was the fight against the phenomenon of traitors, which led to preventing the occupation from following the activities of resistance factions and movements. In addition, it eliminated the security chaos that was prevalent in Gaza (Ministry of Interior and National Security, Palestinian National Authority 2006); unlike the situation in the West Bank, where the pace of organized chaos increased (Salah 2016).

In terms of public rights and freedoms, Hamas exercised the same practices as those of the opposition, such as political arrest, press and media suppression, in addition to the prosecution of writers, and its attempt to Islamize the community. With regard to the armed resistance, the number of its military operations decreased. It prevented the factions from firing rockets in response to Israeli bombardment and pursued them in an attempt to stabilize the truce with Israel (Asaileh 2010). However, the facts on the ground in Operation Protective Edge proved that the movement did not abandon the resistance, but that it was, in fact, preparing for any possible war with Israel.

On the democratic side, Hamas rejected Rami al-Hamdallah government’s decision, in June 2016, to hold local and municipal elections in October as it was a deviation from the national consensus, and that priority should be for the legislative and presidential elections (Haniyeh 2016). Moreover, in January of the same year, the movement confirmed that it was ready to participate in all forms of elections (Ajnad 2016). Meanwhile, the rest of the Palestinian factions agreed to hold local elections, considering it as being a national necessity.

As for the elections of student councils in the Gaza Strip, the movement prevented them, while participation in the student council elections in the West Bank universities
won them a landslide victory in the Birzeit University elections in April 2016. Therefore, it was clear that Hamas was exercising democracy according to its interests and available opportunities, and not by believing in a democratic approach.

Otherwise, after Hamas became the sole ruler of the Gaza Strip, the nature of the relationship that prevailed between Hamas and the other factions and movements was governed by the extent of the movements’ commitment to the decisions of Hamas, especially with regards to the truce with Israel; here the Hamas ruling was very similar to that of Fatah. Hamas exercised the same encroachment on other factions as that which Fatah had done on Hamas when it was in the opposition ranks during the rule of Fatah.

**The role of regional factors in changing the structure of political opportunities**

The position of Hamas changed according to the changing opportunities in the Arab regional political environment. It is well known that Hezbollah, Syria and Iran are Hamas allies. Hence, when Hamas took hold of power in the Gaza Strip and with the changes that took place at the Arab regional level, represented by the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia, and attained power in Egypt, Hamas considered these changes as a victory and support for its own position. Accordingly, Hamas changed its position towards the tripartite of resistance, and left Syria, which embraced, supported and trained its military wing, to join the train of Qatar and its funds; thus, Hamas joined the Muslin Brotherhood alliance represented by the tripartite of Egypt, Turkey and Qatar, under pressure from the International Muslim Brotherhood and the leadership of Hamas abroad. By so doing, the movement appeared disloyal and ungrateful to those who had embraced and supported it, as well as by the fact that it supported the Syrian opposition against the regime. These transformations caused embarrassment for the movement not only at the external level but also at the internal level, especially for the Gaza leadership, and they constitute the worst decision taken by the movement since its military coup.

The movement lost its bet on the fall of the Syrian regime. Instead, the Muslim Brotherhood’s rule in Egypt fell and the political support for the movement fell with it, even though the Muslim Brotherhood, during its short rule, only provided support at the theoretical political level. Hence, Hamas lost political and financial support as well as Iranian military support. Syria and Hezbollah, too, have cut their relations with the movement. Thus, Hamas faces a perilous abyss: it cannot return to the resistance alliance in the absence of trust, and cannot leave Qatar either; this has reflected negatively on the movement. Egypt tightened the siege on Gaza after the fall from power of the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite the visit to Teheran of a Hamas leader and delegation in December 2014, Iran refused to receive Mesh’aal, even though the Hamas media spokesman had presented thanks to Iran on the occasion of the 27th anniversary of the movement’s military wing in an attempt to cool the situation for reconciliation and the hope of restoring the relationship between the parties.

The reason that Iran refused to receive Mesh’aal, from the author’s point of view, is that Iran views Mesh’aal with apprehension because of his position regarding events in Syria. Hamas has surmounted its interests in its relationship with the Syrian regime, which
supported, sustained and embraced it after its expulsion from Jordan in the 1990s. Hence, Hamas has lost the project of belonging to the tripartite of resistance and has bet on the alliance tripartite of the Muslim Brotherhood, which lost the bet on the Arab revolutions and was trapped by the Arabs. Hamas was unable to return quickly to the tripartite of resistance because of its inability to justify its position at the regional, national and even internal levels. The internal leadership and the military wing were very embarrassed by the movement’s official position, which let down those who had embraced it when everyone else had abandoned it. This discrepancy was clearly demonstrated by Hamas’ highest military rank, through the statement of the commander-in-chief of the Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades, Muhammad al-Dheif (2015), in a message of condolence to the martyrs of Hezbollah. He stated clearly that ‘the resistance gun must be one and its goal is one, and should be directed towards the Israeli enemy. It is enough to drain the energies of the nation and the wastage of its will’. However, the movement repeated its attempts to approach Iran on more than one occasion. ‘The support provided by Iran to the Palestinian resistance, whether in terms of supply, training or funding, is not match any level, and most countries cannot equal it’ (Waked 2016), said Abu Marzouk, second-in-command at Hamas. Based on the above, the author believes that it is politically immature to assess the fundamentals of Hamas and its strategy in isolation from the political opportunities available to it.

Hamas is well aware of how to exploit the opportunities and improve its exploitation, but there is something to be clarified. First, Hamas’s reliance on its interests and, second, the influence the Muslim Brotherhood had on it, caused it to fall into serious political pitfalls. This was evidenced by political fluctuation between the wishes of the Muslim Brotherhood and some Gulf regimes and Turkey, and compatibility with those who share their view of regional conflict. This refers to two main issues:

- The movement suffered a severe financial crisis, prompting it to exploit the political opportunities available to it. This was accompanied by financial and media inducements, and self-propelled by the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Thereby, it lost its original position in the axis that had embraced it at political, financial, military and mediatic levels.
- Hamas’s actions were based on pragmatism, and it is here that the danger lies.

The author believes that Hamas, notwithstanding its religious depth and jihadist balance, remains captive to a political system that gives it a lot of political vagueness. Even if it is shrouded in a religious cover that allows flexibility, Hamas does not accept the same flexibility in other movements. These fluctuating political positions are due to the fluctuating political ground on which the movement stands and its unjustified impact – legitimately or politically – on the opportunities that are emerging in the international arena.

Like other movements and regimes, Hamas is leaning on a constantly changing popular memory, exploiting the reality of religious discourse in a religious society, and the people’s desire to resist the occupation to pass its unjustified political shifts under the guise of former factors. It also knows how to employ its media and spokespersons to pass over its political contradictions without leaving the viewer the opportunity to confront these blatant contradictions.
In observing the political course of Hamas, a very important issue becomes clear, namely, that the constant components in its path are partisan interest and political success; considering that its policy emanates from Islam, no impartiality of its fundamentals is tolerated. What does appear to be changing, however, is the intolerance of one of its constants and strategies. However, the events, alliances and political alignments in the Arab world after the Arab Spring have clearly shown a political fluctuation in the position of Hamas and its loyalties and alignments. This prompts the author to believe that Hamas belongs to a political project dominated by an interest in dealing with every opportunity that serves the political project, regardless of the legitimacy of those opportunities and their incompatibility with the basic tenets of the religious beliefs that control the rhythm of its political programme, alliances, relations and multiple positions.

The path of Hamas has clearly demonstrated the pragmatism of the political behaviour of the movement and its ability to adapt its principles in favour of what it deems useful at a particular moment. This was demonstrated after the start of military action against the Houthis in Yemen, under the name of ‘Storm of Hazm’ (Determination) through a Saudi-led military alliance on March 26, 2015. At that time Hamas issued a statement on March 28 in which it supported the Arab Alliance against the Houthis and confirmed its stance with the political legitimacy in order to keep pace with the political changes taking place in the Arab region and to try to benefit from them, whereas it had previously distanced itself from publicly taking any political position in support of or opposite to regional events.

It may be that Hamas’s visit to Cairo for the trial of the Muslim Brotherhood’s general guide and members of the Guidance Office is another example that Hamas’s policy is governed by interests rather than principles. Hamas tried to revive the relationship with the Egyptian side through the visit of movement’s delegation to Cairo in March 2016 in order to lift the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip and the opening of the Rafah crossing. Here it was obvious that the movement was strongly seeking to restore relations with all parties because it was experiencing a real crisis in the Gaza Strip. Its relations with the moderate axis – Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia – have achieved nothing, as Turkey has re-established relations with Israel, renouncing the lifting of the blockade of the Gaza Strip as a condition for restoring relations. Qatar has also shied away from providing financial aid to solve the problem of Hamas government employees, and Saudi Arabia is busy strengthening its relations with Israel.

The future of the structure of political opportunities in the Palestinian case

It should be noted that the ability of Hamas to exploit the structure of opportunity varies from being a resistance movement operating from outside the PA and acting as a ruling group at the same time. In particular, its ability to exploit the structure of opportunities during its rule has decreased in some aspects and increased in others. However, Hamas remains a captive of international relations that impose a level of political discipline on it to reduce the opportunities for manoeuvring and dodging when compared with its capacity when it was not in power and obliged by the obligations inherent in it. It is also important to note that as Fatah paid for its presence in power and the consequent benefits at the expense of its popularity, Hamas has also been affected by its presence in government and the need to deal with political matters and international and regional
relations that it would not have been accepted, if it had not been forced to remain in power and to reduce the international and regional anger over it.

In the light of Operation Protective Edge, which Israel launched against the Gaza Strip, and in which Hamas developed strategies and tactics and remained steadfast, the author believes that the political future looks positive for Hamas; the data indicate that Hamas is expected to go through the same political and struggle stages that the Fatah movement underwent in terms of political and military rigidity in the 1970s. These factors were eroded over time and the local and regional political changes reached the extent of dealing with the status quo, or accepting it. It has changed its intellectual system to be compatible with the new transformations. The author also believes that Hamas is moving rapidly to deal with the surrounding reality and the successive political developments which qualify it to assume the political status of the Fatah movement as represented by the PA. The Fatah movement has ended in the old sense, and in future Hamas will move towards a more pragmatic approach in which the political will replace the ideological completely.

It is concluded from the foregoing that there is a basic rule that governs Palestinian politics: the only thing that is fixed is instantaneous change.

After Hamas’s takeover of the Gaza Strip, Abbas was rendered illegal, but his legitimacy was later recognized. However, Hamas repeatedly called for his deposition either voluntarily or by force. Iran and Syria were strategic allies, but after the war on Syria, both Qatar and Turkey became new allies of Hamas; so did Mohammed Dahlan, an arch-foe of Hamas, subsequently became welcome in Gaza after his conflict with Abbas. This confirms, therefore, that the movement changed its positions in accordance with its perception of available opportunities.

Hamas, which emerged as an Islamic project that sought to liberate Palestine from the sea to the river, refused to enter into negotiations with the Israeli occupation, and also to participate in the first legislative elections, because it was the result of the Oslo Treaty; it is like other ideological movements that adjust their ideology in order to achieve their objectives, in contradiction of their basic ideological principles. When Hamas realized that the political environment was conducive to participation and that its chances of winning were great, it decided to participate in the second legislative elections to gain power.

The author expects that Hamas, in light of the new facts, will take the following steps:

- Complete Palestinian reconciliation and run for legislative and presidential elections by supporting a candidate either from the movement or through agreement with one of the independents who are popularly accepted.
- Support a peaceful solution through the establishment of a Palestinian state in the 1967 territories.
- Negotiate directly with Israel.
- Issue a new document defining its strategy for the next phase at various levels.

This is mainly due to Israel’s ability to exploit the transformation of Hamas and the creation of political opportunities for its success, because it is Israel itself that has not helped the Fatah movement, despite all the concessions that have had profound implications for the Palestinian political reality and the foreseeable future. Since its inception, Hamas has proved its ability and merit to read the political reality correctly and has shown an awareness of the opportunities available to it, despite some of the mistakes it made. This
is unlike the Fatah movement, which could not even maintain the opportunities that did exist. The Fatah movement is moving rapidly towards increasing internal problems and conflict that beset its organizational unity. The movement has become a captive to individual and hasty decisions that do not serve the interests of the movement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

2. Presidential Decree No. (9) 2006 on the selection and appointment of the Prime Minister, February 22.

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