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Hamas and the “Arab Spring”

For five years the Gaza Strip has been controlled by Hamas. Despite constant efforts, a reunification with the West Bank, governed by Fatah, is not in sight. To the contrary: The Islamists established a small but efficient authoritarian entity. But the changes related to the “Arab Spring” present a latent danger for Hamas.

Founded in Egypt in 1928, the Sunni fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood never controlled the land of the pyramids. Only after nearly eight decades, a branch of the Brothers, the Palestinian Hamas, won elections which were considered free and fair by international observers. One year later, in 2007, Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in a bloody civil war. Since then, the Palestinian Territories have been separated: Gaza, governed by Hamas, and the West Bank, governed by Fatah.

The numerous efforts to reach reconciliation failed because of the lack of will to find a compromise. None of the two Palestinian groups is willing to share power in their respective stronghold. From the actual perspective, a permanent separation of the Palestinian Territories seems to be likely.

Islamic governance

The developments in the Middle East are often seen in parallel with a strengthening of Islamist forces, but in fact they present a real challenge to Hamas. At the same time, the changes open new possibilities for internal restructuring processes and a centralisation of competing centres of power.

Hamas' rapid consolidation of power after the takeover of Gaza was, besides the brutal suppression of the opposition, the result

of mistakes made by Fatah. The Islamists were able to present themselves successfully as an alternative to the secular nationalists who had the reputation of being corrupt. The administrative apparatus with 23,000 employees lead by Hamas works efficiently and the 16,000 members of the security forces ensure to a large extent the end of internal power struggles in Gaza.¹

The price for the takeover of power was high. The Hamas government was internationally isolated because of the refusal to recognize Israel and the existing Israeli-Palestinian agreements and to renounce violence. Israel and Egypt imposed a widespread embargo on the small coastal strip. As a result, smuggling in the tunnels underneath the border with Egypt exploded. Only a small group profited from the breakdown of the legal economic system. The majority of the people is suffering because of the clientelistic practices of Hamas, the return of corrupt procedures, the double-digit decrease of the GDP and the dependence from foreign donors. Around 30 percent of Gaza's workforce is unemployed.²

Furthermore, the reputation of Hamas as a potent resistance movement is damaged because of their preference to avoid direct attacks on Israel after the last war in December 2008/January 2009. This reluctance is a result of the Hamas efforts to consolidate power in the Gaza Strip in the long term.

¹ Cf. Ibrahim Barzak and Karin Laub, „Hamas Entrenched in Gaza After 5 Years of Rule“, *The Associated Press*, 23 June 2012, <http://news.yahoo.com/hamas-entrenched-gaza-5-years-rule-064717491.html> [accessed 20 July 2012].
² Cf. *ibid.*

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The increased smuggling of weapons into the Gaza Strip provoked the loss of Hamas monopoly of power. The Islamic Jihad as well as small independent groups who feel partially obliged to global Jihad wage a small-scale war against Israel with weapons from Iran and plundered stocks of the collapsed Libyan regime.

Hamas takes actions against these groups, sometimes with brutal force, but with these actions it puts its own legitimacy in serious danger. The antagonism between the militant rhetoric and the observation of an unofficial ceasefire with Israel contributed to the decline of Hamas' credibility. This stands behind the June 2012 decision of Hamas to attack Israeli targets for the first time after more than a year with short distance rock-ets. The armed branch of Hamas in Gaza, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam-Brigades, took responsibility for the attacks via the internet.³

The undermining of state authority in Syria, Egypt and Libya since the beginning of the "Arab Spring" contributes to a vicious cycle of violence. So far, the regional developments have not put the rule of Hamas in Gaza in serious danger. In response to political and ideological dissent, Hamas arrested activists and supporters of Fatah, closed independent media and threatened journalists. But the future of Hamas depends decisively on the developments in the region.

The ambivalent consequences of the "Arab Spring"

It is a common interpretation that the upheaval against the Syrian regime weakened Hamas and that the fall of the Egyptian president and the following increase in influence of the Muslim Brotherhood gave Hamas new self-confidence. After a more

detailed observation of the situation, a more complex picture emerges.

1. Syria – Catalyst for an internal restructuring of Hamas: During the first months of anti-regime demonstrations, Hamas was criticised for not having dissociated itself from the allied Assad regime. Protests in Gaza in expression of sympathy for the Syrian opposition were forbidden or dissolved. But, after Palestinian refugees became victims of the atrocities of Assad's henchmen, Hamas changed its attitude.

The whole exile leadership around Khaled Meshal, chairman of the political bureau, left Damascus. This led to the dispersal of Hamas leaders throughout the whole region. While Meshal currently resides in Qatar, his deputy and rival Moussa Abu Marzouk lives in Cairo. Others hunkered down in Turkey, Sudan and Gaza.⁴

As a consequence, Hamas in Gaza profited from the weakening of the exile leadership. It is said for example that Meshal lost the authority over the budget for the armed branch of Hamas in Gaza. Only a few supporters of Meshal won in the internal election of the political bureau in Gaza. Instead, representatives of the armed branch e.g. Ahmed Jabari were successful. The elections for the shura council in Gaza, the second important decision making body of Hamas, produced the same result.⁵

These developments provoked serious tensions between Iran and Hamas that have two main origins:

- On the one hand, Hamas supports openly the Syrian opposition and acts hereby against its closest ally Iran. During a Friday sermon in the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo in February 2012, the prime minister of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, saluted all supporters of the "Arab

³ Cf. Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, „Hamas' change of strategy: Rocket fire directed at Israeli military targets“, *Haaretz.com*, 20 June 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/east-side-story/hamas-change-of-strategy-rocket-fire-directed-at-israeli-military-targets.premium-1.439939> [accessed 20 July 2012].

⁴ Cf. Jonathan Spyer, „Arab World: Siege mentality“, *Jerusalem Post*, 22 June 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Features/FrontLines/Article.aspx?id=274785> [accessed 20 July 2012].

⁵ Cf. ebd.

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Spring" and *"the Syrian people who seek freedom, democracy and reform"*⁶.

- On the other hand, the military branch of Hamas refuses to follow orders from Tehran. Even if a war between Israel and Iran erupts, it is not sure whether Hamas will take part in retaliatory attacks. Mahmoud al-Zahar, one of the most influential Hamas leaders in Gaza, denied in an interview with the BBC that Hamas is *"part of any political axis"*⁷ and explained that the group *"will not get involved in any other regional conflict"*⁸.

Conclusion: The events in Syria do not present a weakening of Hamas, they only contributed to a shift of the Hamas-internal power balance. Hamas' accumulation of power in Gaza is a re-establishment of former conditions. Gaza is the place where Hamas was founded and it was already in the early 1970s the centre of power of its predecessors. The loss of power to exile members and the concentration on only two allies, Iran and Syria, are in contradiction to the self-image and goals of Hamas as a nationalist-Islamist movement that does not follow a regional or a global agenda.⁹

2. Egypt – Challenges for the model of political Islam: The events in Egypt have similar complex implications. The success of the Muslim Brotherhood during the first free legislative elections and the victory of its candidate in the presidential runoff elections are seen mostly as a boost for political Is-

lam in the whole region. As a branch of the Brotherhood, Hamas is said to be benefiting from these developments. The reasons are seen in the rising influence of Hamas-friendly forces and in the new power holders distancing themselves from Israel.

This often heard chain of associations is an unacceptable reduction of the facts on the ground. The real power holders in Cairo are still from the circle around the overthrown president. Judges of the Supreme Court, once appointed by Mubarak, declared the parliamentary elections void and the incumbent Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) prevented the meeting of the parliament. Moreover, the SCAF passed a transitional constitution that gives the "old guard" broad decision-making powers, especially in the areas of defence and finance, and appointed a committee that is supposed to draft a new constitution.¹⁰ The next months are likely to be dominated by a power struggle between the army and Islamists which will be characterised by alternate compromises and confrontations.

The so far moderate position of the Muslim Brotherhood concerning the military and its lacking willingness to synchronize stronger with other revolutionary forces leads to a gradual erosion of their self-image and their reputation as a rigid opposition force. In confrontation with the political reality, the model of political Islam starts to fray and to lose attractiveness – a development that happened also in Gaza. For Hamas, a stronger binding to the Muslim Brotherhood is only useful under the condition of not losing its independence.

Further, it is in their interest that the authority of the Egyptian military as a broker between Israel and the different forces in Gaza stays intact. Without such a third party, the recent military conflicts in the Gaza Strip would not have been resolved

⁶ Fares Akram, "In Break, Hamas Supports Syrian Opposition", *The New York Times*, 25 February 2012,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/25/world/middleeast/hamas-leader-supports-syrian-opposition.html> [accessed 20 July 2012].

⁷ Jon Donnison, "Hamas denies it will attack Israel in any war with Iran", *BBC News*, 07 March 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17285050> [accessed 20 July 2012].

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Cf. Guido Steinberg, "Die irakische Aufstandsbewegung: Akteure, Strategien, Strukturen", *SWP-Studie*, 2006, Nr. 27, 8, http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/aufstaendische_im_irak.html [accessed 20 July 2012].

¹⁰ Cf. David D. Kirkpatrick, "Egypt's Military Cements Its Powers as Voting Ends", *The New York Times*, 18 June 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/18/world/middleeast/egyptian-presidential-vote-enters-second-day.html?ref=davidkirkpatrick> [accessed 20 July 2012].

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with the observed speed. A stable ceasefire benefits not only Israel, but as well the de facto sovereign entity controlled by Hamas. A worrying trend is the growing power vacuum on the Sinai. It results from the widespread absence of the Egyptian state on the peninsula and the continuous instability in Libya after the fall of Muammar al-Gaddafi. This presents a danger for all neighbouring countries, above all Israel but as well the quasi-state Gaza.

3. Libyan weapons jeopardize Hamas monopoly of power: The fall of the Libyan dictator has not brought stability to the country. Gaddafi prevented, during his more than forty years in power, the establishment of modern state institutions. Instead, he manipulated the complex tribal structures of the country. Therefore, it is not surprising that Libya, in contrast to Tunisia or Egypt, fell back into a state of anarchy and chaos.

Militias based on tribal identities controlling wide areas, whereas the emergence of a central power proceeds only slowly. Unsurprisingly, during the civil war and the months following it, arms depots were looted on a large scale. Some of these weapons found their way via Sinai into the Gaza Strip. Among the most dangerous weapons that are in the hands of non-state actors like Bedouin smuggler groups, weapon traders and militant Palestinians, are missiles of Soviet origin, including most notably the SA-7 and the SA-24. This could lead to a change in the power balance between Palestinian fighters and the Israeli army.¹¹

The SA-24, in Russia known as "Igla", is a surface-to-air guided missile system. It was designed to shoot down helicopters and airplanes at a flight level of up to 3300 meters. It can be mounted on vehicles but with the help of a special launching device it can also be used by individuals. Under these circumstances it is almost as flexible as the American anti-aircraft missile Stinger.

¹¹ Cf. Yaakov Katz, "Security and Defense: Gaza's global jihadis", *Jerusalem Post*, 22 June 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Features/FrontLines/Article.aspx?id=274784> [accessed 20 July 2012].

The SA-7 or "Strela" is a man-portable air defence system. Up to 20,000 of these missiles were allegedly in the Libyan arsenal before the fall of Gaddafi. Missiles of this type have already been used multiple times in terror attacks. For example during the attack on an Israeli passenger aircraft above Kenya in November 2002.¹² Israeli defence experts assume that these mobile air defence weapons, known as Manpads, have already found their way into Sinai and the Gaza Strip.¹³ There they would be a danger for helicopters and military airplanes but also for the civil air traffic in the region.

The smuggling of small arms and hundreds of Grad missiles with a range of up to 70 km poses a potential source of danger even for Hamas. Independently operating terrorists used these weapons in Sinai and in Gaza to attack Israel, provoking Israeli counter attacks on Gaza. Since Israel cannot operate militarily on Egyptian soil it takes even more drastic measures in Gaza. For the Israeli army, Hamas "is solely responsible for any terrorist activity emanating from the Gaza Strip"¹⁴. A comprehensive Israeli military offensive in Gaza is currently the sole danger for the rule of the Islamists.

Conclusion

The rule of Hamas over Gaza was consolidated before the outbreak of the "Arab Spring". The upheavals have not endangered this consolidation until now, but they have a considerable impact for Hamas on three dimensions.

¹² Cf. Rod Nordland and C. J. Chivers, "Heat-Seeking Missiles Are Missing From Libyan Arms Stockpile", *The New York Times*, 08 September 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/world/africa/08missile.html?ref=cjchivers> [accessed 20 July 2012].

¹³ Cf. Gili Cohen, "Sinai peacekeeping force commander warns of weapons smuggling to Gaza", *Haaretz*, 01 June 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/sinai-peacekeeping-force-commander-warns-of-weapons-smuggling-to-gaza-1.433567> [accessed 20 July 2012].

¹⁴ Elad Benari, "IAF Hits Terror Squad Before Rocket Attack", *Israel National News*, 22 June 2012, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/157138> [accessed 20 July 2012].

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1. Internal power concentration: The monopolization of internal decision-making processes in Gaza offers Hamas the chance to develop a consistent policy. This is valid especially for the question of violence, which should be solved anyway at its point of origin and where the consequences occur. A reconciliation with Fatah became less likely because Khaled Meshal, its strongest advocate within Hamas, lost influence. But even Fatah, which lost considerably sympathy in Gaza according to a recent poll conducted by the KAS partner PSR¹⁵, seems to have only little interest to grant Hamas more influence in the West Bank.

2. Political (in-)dependence: The rise of political Islam in the region will not continue unlimitedly. Evidence can be found in the fact that the Brotherhood candidate in the Egyptian presidential runoff elections won only with a slight advantage. Whereas the Muslim Brotherhood won the legislative elections and together with the Salafis achieved a clear absolute majority, some months later they were not able to repeat this impressive outcome against a representative of the hated former regime. Close ties with other Islamic forces in the region are natural but can lead to a loss of independence of Hamas. If it wants to keep its power there it has to strengthen its character as a national movement sooner or later. Therefore, Hamas has to represent first of all the interests of the Palestinian people and not follow instructions from Cairo or Tehran.

3. Loss of control: To secure its power Hamas needs to be perceived internationally as a responsible and recognized actor. Neither is it able nor allowed to take responsibility for the stateless areas on the Sinai, but it lies within its responsibility to secure the border between Gaza and Egypt and to stop smuggling or at least to restrict it to non-military goods. Until now Hamas shows no interest in doing so. Partly because Hamas itself smuggles weapons from the

Libyan stocks and Iran into Gaza and also because of the taxes it imposes on smuggled goods. But other groups arm themselves as well. It cannot be ruled out that these groups will at some point use their arms against Hamas' reign of violence. Nowadays, they already use these weapons for attacks on Israel.

Should Israel eventually suffer bigger casualties due to these attacks, a new war is very likely. This could lead to the fall of Hamas. Fatah, which does not have an institutional basis in Gaza, would not benefit from this situation. In the end, the winners would be the groups that arm themselves day after day and are responsible that the expression "Islamic Winter" finally could become true.

¹⁵ Cf. „Press Release: Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No (44)“, *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR)*, 25 June 2012, <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2012/p44epressrelease.html> [accessed 20 July 2012].