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Omni-balancing: the case of Hamas and the Syrian Regime

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The relationship between Hamas and the Syrian regime is one of the most controversial in the Middle East. Despite some historical hostility and ideological differences, they enjoyed a good relationship prior to the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. That changed the relationship radically, leaving it unclear as to where it would go. This paper aims to explain the changing nature of the relationship between the Syrian regime and Hamas, using Omnibalancing theory to explain both the conduct of regimes in the global south, such as Syria's and that of non-state actors, like Hamas, illustrated by the evolving relationship between Hamas and the Syrian regime. Thus, this paper hopes to explain how the two parties moved from rapprochement to the complete breakdown of relations.

Introduction

The Syrian revolution caused more conflict among the Palestinian people in general, and between the Palestinian political factions in particular, than all the other

Arab Spring revolutions. Indeed, neither the Palestinians nor their factions had ever been in the situation they found themselves in as a result of the events in Syria.¹ The conflict affected every level of Palestinian society, dividing families and factions alike. The Palestinians had previously experienced such internal conflict in the wake of the Oslo Accord and during the civil war in Lebanon. Then, however, the divisions were less severe, and the events related directly to the Palestinians themselves. Of the Palestinian factions involved in the Syrian revolution, Hamas was the most affected, being the sole Palestinian faction to come out in opposition to the regime, with the consequent challenges in certitude and stability its opposition cost it.

This case study seeks to shed light on the development of the relationship between Hamas and the Syrian regime, looking first at the factors that brought the two parties into a close relationship before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution; and those that subsequently brought the relationship to the point of breakdown. It goes on to consider the possible scenarios for the future relationship between Hamas and the Syrian regime.

The author has relied on previously published studies, in addition to his own broad experience as a Syrian Palestinian political scientist, with experience of life in

¹For discussion of the reasons behind the division of Palestinian refugees in Syria towards the Syrian revolution see: Mousa, Ashraf, "*Palestinians in the Syrian Uprising: The Situation on the Ground*," Syria Studies Journal, VOL 11, NO 2, Winter, 2019.

one of the Palestinian camps in Syria, in which the Palestinian factions were generally active, Hamas in particular. This allowed the author to gather, first-hand, data on the relevant events and occurrences as a participant-observer. This was in addition to his direct observation of the Syrian civil war up to 2016. Throughout this period, he visited and spent time in several of the refugee camps, speaking to individuals who had participated in the events which occurred in them. These included some of the most notable Hamas loyalists and members of the other Palestinian factions. Since that time, he has completed the picture with a number of discussions with other informants, drawn from his personal network, themselves members of various Palestinian factions, Hamas in particular. The paper also draws on articles and reports by journalists, official announcements from the leaderships of Hamas and the Syrian regime, and social media posts by individual activists, both Syrian and Palestinian.

Theoretical framework

The study rests on the assumption that the relation between Hamas and the Syrian government can best be understood within a modified realist framework focusing on balance of power. Omnibalancing Theory, developed by Steven R. David², addresses one of the weaknesses inherent in the classic Balance of Power theory. According to David, the Balance of Power

²For further details: David, R. Steven, "*Explaining Third World Alignment*," Cambridge University, *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Jan 1991, pp. 233-256.

theory does not consider the peculiarities of so-called Third World or global south countries. Leaders in such countries engage in external alliances to protect themselves not only against external threats but also against internal ones; indeed, the most high-risk threats arise from within the borders of third-world states and not from outside. This is due typically to leaders of these countries being dictatorial and illegitimate, their prime motivation being to ensure they remain in power. Omnibalancing theory, as interpreted here, posits that a regime will look to protect its survival without regard for the society over which it rules, allying itself with external actors, to shore itself up against internal threats.

This paper aims to introduce some theoretical improvements to the main assumption of the theory: in particular, to demonstrate that non-state actors should be given equal weight to state actors in the analysis of the politics of global south countries. The case of Syria and Hamas presents a fertile illustration of this. Some studies explain how Ominbalancing Theory provides a clear explanation of the Syrian regime's conduct, whether during the era of Hafez al-Assad or his son Bashar, but the theory is more robust when it takes into account non-state actors such as Hamas³. It is the purpose of this paper to use this ungraded form of omni-

³For further details see Bergen, Christopher. *"Omnibalancing in Syria: prospects for foreign policy."* Naval Postgraduate School, California, 2000.

Kristiansen, Magnus, *"Syria's Omnibalancing Act. Making sense of Syria's support for the Hezbollah"*, University of Oslo, 2006.

balancing to understand the relationship of Hamas and Syria and to use the latter case to demonstrate the superiority of this upgraded theoretical approach.

Despite the Syrian regime's historical hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood movement⁴, the regime had, previous to the uprising, agreed on a close alliance with Hamas. For its part, Hamas was willing, despite the massacres the regime had committed against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, to enter into this relationship with the regime. This behaviour is a good illustration of Omnibalancing theory, where a state and a non-state actor, though having strong differences, put these aside in order to more effectively confront threats from internal and external opposition.

The breach in the relationship between Hamas and the Syrian regime came about after hostilities broke out in Syria between the regime and the popular movement

⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood Movement attempted to overthrow the regime of Hafez al-Asad in Syria in the 1970s and 1980s. Since that time "the elimination of the Muslim Brothers" became a daily-recited slogan repeated in Syrian schools. The Hamas Charter, Article 2 stated that "The Islamic Resistance Movement was the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine". Hamas severed its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood movement when the previous president of Hamas' political office, Khaled Mishaal, appeared at a press conference in Doha on 1st May 2017. He announced a new charter of general principles, which made it clear that Hamas was no longer part of the Muslim Brotherhood. For further information refer to: *"The New Hamas Charter: Between Political Pragmatism and Regional Confrontation,"* Fanack website, 16/5/2017. Accessed: 10/5/2020.
<https://fanack.com/ar/palestine/history-past-to-present/hamas-charter/>

there. The regime sought help from external state actors, Russia and Iran, in its struggle with its internal enemy, the popular movement. Hamas, however, abandoned its alliance with its main external patron, Syria, in order to appease internal opposition to the regime's repression of the popular movement.

The Emergence of a Close Relationship; pre-uprising relations between Syria and Hamas

The relation between the Syrian regime and Hamas was shaped by the evolution of relations between Damascus and the Palestinians as a whole. Some decades prior to the alliance between the Syrian regime and Hamas, political estrangement had occurred between the regime and the PLO, led by the Fatah movement of Yasir Arafat, which worsened when the latter entered into the peace negotiations with the Israelis without consulting Damascus. This breach provided the opportunity for Hamas to replace Fatah's standing in Syria, gaining for itself the regime's support and so strengthening its position among Palestinians in general and Syrian Palestinians in particular.

The close relationship between Hamas and the Syrian regime came about in a series of gradual and cautious steps, building on successive breakthroughs in the relationship, culminating in the establishment of warm relations. At first, both parties had remained guarded and doubtful of the intentions of the other. The Syrian regime remained cautious towards Hamas, it being an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood which was long a

rival of the ruling Ba'th Party. Likewise, Hamas felt it could not work with the Syrian regime. However, a number of subsequent events brought this state of suspicion to an end, creating a new stage in the relationship between them.

The first breakthrough occurred in 1991, after the more militant Palestinian factions assembled in Iran, a few days prior to the Madrid peace conference, in which the PLO leader Yasser Arafat had agreed to participate. Here a new political alliance was formed, comprised of ten so-called "rejectionist" Palestinian factions.⁵ This alliance criticised the Madrid conference, agreeing to hold their own rival conference in Damascus. The alliance believed that the Madrid conference would lead to catastrophic results for the Palestinian cause notably depriving the Palestinians of the "right of return" enshrined in UN resolutions. For the Syrian regime, holding the conference in Damascus would demonstrate its solidarity with the Palestinian cause, out-bidding Arafat's claim to represent Palestinian interests among the Arab public.

⁵The Factions are Hamas, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine, better known in the West as Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), as-Sa'iqa, Fatah al-Intifada, Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF, Abu Nidal Ashqar faction), Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF, Khalid' Abd al-Majid faction), and Palestinian Revolutionary Communist Party.

At the time, there was no Hamas representative in Damascus. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Council (PFLP-GC), a group controlled by the Syrian regime, brokered a deal that permitted the opening of a Hamas office. As an indication of the level of caution and vigilance on the part of the regime at the time, Ahmad Jibril⁶ mentions that the Syrian Vice President, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, refused this request. However, Jibril was able to convince Hafez al-Assad to agree to it, though, as Jibril notes, this was despite Assad's lacking enthusiasm for it. Then too, Assad only agreed on the understanding that Jibril would take responsibility for the activities of Hamas.⁷ After this, the Hamas representative in Syria, Mustafa al-Duwadi, was able to organise an official visit by a Hamas delegation to Damascus led by the Political Bureau head, Musa al-Marzuq, in January 1992.⁸ This visit was followed by a number of events that transformed the

⁶The founder and leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC).

⁷An interview with Ahmed Jibril, Al-Mayadeen TV, 12/2/2020, Accessed 9/9/2013.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqQWvWNAXGA>.

⁸At that time, the representative of Hamas in Syria (Mustafa Al-Ladwai) did not have an official capacity. His position became official after another visit by the Hamas delegation to Damascus and a meeting with Abdel Halim Khaddam. During this visit, the relationship between the two parties was organized, but Hamas was still not allowed to open an official office in Damascus. Al-Ledawi, even as Hamas' official representative, still had to work from his home. For further information, see: Hanini, Abdul Aziz Hakim, "*Hamas Foreign Methodology, Syria as an example*," Zaytouna Center, Beirut, 1st Edition, 2018, pp. 85-87.

relationship between the two parties. In 1992, more than 400 Palestinian members of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad were expelled by the Israelis from Palestinian territories. This gave a new impetus to the relationship, when the Syrian government permitted Hamas to open an office in Damascus, after a group of these exiles met with the Baath party leadership.⁹ Another watershed was the visit of Hamas, founder, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin to Damascus in 1998¹⁰, where he was introduced to President Hafez al-Assad. This brought to an end the state of caution and vigilance in the relationship. A new stage now began, in which Hamas was permitted to engage in charitable, social, and political activities inside the Syrian camps, no longer needing to operate under the sponsorship of the PFLP-GC.¹¹

In 1999 Jordan expelled Hamas political bureau chief Khaled Mishaal and three members of the political bureau, to Qatar, as a result of Israeli pressure. Hamas

⁹Syrian TV covered the event and showed special interest in it on 1/1/1993. For further details, see Hosni, Muhammad, "*Marj Al Zuhour, a stage in the history of the Islamic movement in Palestine*," Zaytouna Center, Beirut, 1st Edition, 2012, p. 232.

¹⁰Yassin visited Damascus after Israel had released him in the wake of the failed assassination attempt on Khaled Meshaal by the Israeli Mossad in Jordan. During this visit, Yassin discussed with the regime the possibility of reconciliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. For more details, see Hanini, Abdul Aziz Hakim, Op. cit, 2018, pp. 114-115.

¹¹Based on the researcher's experience, most Hamas activities in the Palestinian camps were held in the Popular Front offices of its General Command, but later it had its own headquarters in most camps.

now found it preferable to carry out its work in Damascus for numerous reasons. The Syrian government welcomed the movement's leadership into its territory. Hamas, finding its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood¹² no longer a hindrance, felt thoroughly secure in Damascus.

The Reasons for the Increasingly Close Relationship between the Two Parties

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's opposition to Hamas' cultivation of ties with the Syrian regime¹³, Hamas nevertheless felt justified in embarking on this course. Hamas is the most hard-line of the Palestinian factions with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Syria is the most committed Arab country. Furthermore, after its exit from Jordan, Hamas did not have many options. It chose to base itself in Syria, not only because it was pressured by these circumstances, but also because in Syria it was embraced by the Palestinian public as the representative of the Palestinian

¹²When Khaled Meshaal was interviewed, he asserted that "the roots of Hamas is the Muslim Brotherhood movement, but it has turned into a national Islamic resistance movement and a liberation movement that seeks to achieve the Palestinian project." He added: "Hamas' openness with countries pushes them to deal with it regardless of its original roots, and that is what Syria does." See: Khaled Meshaal, interview with the Kuwaiti Al-Qabas newspaper, issue No. 12977, 14 / 7 / 2009.

¹³For more details, see Hanini, Abdul Aziz Hakim, *Op. cit.*, 2018, pp. 112-113.

people in the camps.¹⁴ For any Palestinian faction, the Syrian camps were a source of human capital, upon which it depended for both its legitimacy and recruits to its forces, all much enhanced by Syria's geographical proximity to Palestine. Moreover, Hamas found its presence in Syria to be an opportunity to fill a political vacuum. The 1983 exit of Arafat from Syria and the curtailment of Fatah's political activities among Syria based Palestinians created this vacuum.¹⁵ From this point on, Hamas was to be the most significant Palestinian faction in Syria, its position now improved to the point that it was competitive with Fatah, both inside and outside of Palestinian lands. Its presence in Syria would open up opportunities for it to meet with delegations and foreign politicians, thus making it easier to advocate its point of view. Through the researcher's presence and his visits to many Palestinian camps in Syria, he ascertained that Hamas was able to become

¹⁴According to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) statistics, the number of Palestinian refugees in Syria in 2020 was 522,000 distributed among 12 camps. This number refers to the number of Palestinians officially registered as refugees in Syria. However, there are also unregistered Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA website, Accessed 15/6/2020.

<https://www.unrwa.org/ar/wherewework/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>.

¹⁵This happened when President Hafez al-Assad supported the split within Fatah in 1983 and created the so-called Fatah Intifada. This paved the way for what was known as the "Camp War" in Lebanon. The signing of the Oslo Agreement in 1991 escalated the dispute, as Damascus began to condemn the agreement and accused the Palestinian Authority of compromising the rights of the Palestinians.

the dominant political force in the camps. The rest of the Palestinian factions, especially the left-wing factions, were unable to fill the political vacuum after the Fatah movement was banned in Syria in 1983. These other factions, having always aligned their left-wing leanings with the Soviet Union, had found their support fading in the camps, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Important for Hamas was not just the support Syria could provide it, but also the material, military, and logistical support a good relationship with Syria¹⁶ would attract from Hezbollah and Iran.¹⁷ Despite the religious sectarian differences - Shiite Hezbollah and Iran and Sunni Hamas - both Hezbollah and Iran recognised the pivotal role of Hamas in the Palestinian cause, and therefore supplied it liberally with both financial and military support, and more besides.¹⁸ For

¹⁶According to a study prepared by a group of Hamas leaders and some academics, they praised this support by stating: "Syria and President Bashar supported the movement during all hard situations, and the relationship used to be excellent. That was followed by asserting that a lot of pressure was put on the Syrian regime to expel Hamas from Damascus, but all these attempts were doomed to failure because the Syrian regime did not bow to it." For further details see Abu Marouq, Musa, and others, edited by Salij, Mohsen Muhammad, *The Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas: Studies in Thought and Experience*, Al-Zaytuna Center for Studies and Consultations, Beirut, 2nd Edition, 2015, p. 512.

¹⁷"Meshaal thanks Iran for its efforts with Hamas in Gaza," *Al-Arabiya TV*, 11/22/2012. Accessed 20/9/2020.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_pfT0fV6-M.

¹⁸Abu Hadid, Muhammad Hussein, "What does Iran benefit from its support for Hamas?" *Al-Jazeera Net*, 19/1/2020. Accessed 12/4/2020.

Hamas, its good relations with Syria also enabled it to practice its activities freely in Lebanon, especially in the Palestinian refugee camps there, due to the extensive influence that Syria enjoyed in Lebanon at the time. Sectarian differences matter less where there are common and mutual political interests, notably shared threats. Hamas wanted military and financial support in its struggle with Israel. Iran wanted to maximize its influence through a good relationship with Sunni Hamas, thus giving credibility to its hostile narrative toward Israel and the USA. The same was true of Hezbollah.

Syria desired, for its part, to develop closer relations with Hamas for a variety of reasons. The relationship allowed the Syrian regime to advance its influence in the Palestinian sphere, at a time when Damascus was losing its revolutionary credentials in the minds of Palestinians, as a result of its historical dispute with Arafat.¹⁹ The Syrian regime thus stood to increase its legitimacy, defending itself against accusations that its

<https://blogs.aljazeera.net/blogs/2020/1/19/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3>

¹⁹Assad never trusted Arafat, according to Assad's political advisor, Buthaina Shaaban. She claims that Assad believed Arafat would monopolise Palestinian decision making, advancing his own interests while ignoring those of the Palestinian cause. For further details, see: -Shaaban Buthaina, *Ten Years with Hafez Al-Assad, 1990-2000*," Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 2016, p.116.

enmity with Israel, and its support for the Palestinians, was shallow and merely rhetorical.²⁰

The regime's overriding determination was to maintain as many fingers in as many different pies as possible, with the Palestinian cause being the pivotal conflict in the region.²¹ As such, the regime's position of maintaining its influence in the Palestinian cause was considered to be strategically valuable. Similarly, Syria's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah in the "Axis of Resistance" meant the relationship with Hamas added up to a pact extending Syrian influence across the region.²² This gave it credibility across Arab populations in general, but especially among the Sunni majority in Syria. Syria's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah had presented the regime, to most Sunni Arabs, in a sectarian light which did not enamour Sunni Arabs to the regime; the regime's embrace of Hamas, therefore, enhanced the authenticity of its slogans, of its enmity against Israel and its defence of the Palestinian cause. Based on the researcher's experience and his participation in many Hamas activities, many Syrians would regularly

²⁰Erik Mohns and André Bank, *"Syrian Revolt Fallout: End of the Resistance Axis?"* Middle East Policy Council, Volume XIX, Number 3, Fall 2012.

²¹Al-Khattab, Shadid, and Afif, Amer, *"The political rhetoric of Hamas before and after the 2006 elections: the limits of stability and change,"* Faculty of Graduate Studies at Birzeit University, Palestine, 2010, p.128.

²²The name "Axis of Resistance" was given to those countries and factions that stand against US and Israeli policy in the Middle East. Those parties included Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and some Iraqi factions loyal to Iran and the Houthis.

attend and participate in these activities, held in the Palestinian camps, where there was less support for the other Palestinian factions. On account of this, the regime was able to use Hamas to increase its popularity within the Sunni community.

Thus, the historical ideological²³ differences--between an Islamist movement and a secular Arab nationalist regime did not preclude their shared interests,²⁴

23 The rift between the two currents emerged during the fifties and sixties of the last century after the adoption of by the emerging nationalist parties (the Arab Nationalist Movement, the Baath Party...) of the secular nationalist thought and the socialist economics , while the Muslim Brotherhood movement objected to the nationalist parties exclusion of religion from public life. For further details, see: Al-Shawashi Rashad, *Between Islamists and Nationalists... Does Convergence Become Impossible?* noonpost website, 23/05/2020. Accessed 29/4/2022.

<https://www.noonpost.com/content/37100>. The ideological hostility between the Arab nationalist regime and the Muslim Brotherhood was embodied during the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, as well as the regime of Hafez al-Assad in Syria in the seventies and early eighties of the last century. For more details see Mohamed Fathy El-Nadi, *"The struggle of ideologies in the Islamic world."* Egyptian Institute for Studies, 23/10/2020, Accessed 28/3/2022.

<https://eipss-eg.org/%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A/>

²⁴In response to a question about the ideological contradiction between Hamas and Syria, the Syrian President answered: "This is true, but the thing that they do not understand in the West, especially in the United States, is that when I support you, it does not mean that I love you or

most importantly the common interest in balancing against the shared external enemy, Israel. For the Syrian regime, the alliance with Hamas would enable it to neutralize internal Islamist opposition, enhance its regional standing and entitle it to Pan-Arab support against the threat from Israel. For Hamas, the alliance allowed it to effectively compete with Araft's PLO in inter-Palestinian politics and acquire resources for its struggle with Israel. The desire of both these parties for closer relations arose under specific political circumstances and mutual interests, which drew them together. Regardless of their ideological differences, each had need of the other. Shared interest trumped all else. In short the alliance allowed both parties to more effectively "omni-balance" against both internal and external threats.

From Alliance to Enmity

The Syrian uprising took the regime by surprise.²⁵ Hamas, on the contrary, had sensed what was coming and had specifically warned the regime that it would need

agree with you, but because I believe in your cause." He added: "We do not support organizations, but rather the Palestinian cause, and Hamas is working for this cause, so we support it."

Bashar Al-Assad's Interview with Charlie Rose, US BBC television network, 27/5/ 2010, Accessed 2/9/2020.

<https://charlierose.com/videos/28203>.

²⁵In responding to questions, it was apparent that Bashar Al-Assad did not expect any protests to take place in Syria. See: An interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, The Wall Street Journal USA, 31/1/2011, Accessed 4/6/2020.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894>.

to begin to implement internal reforms, even before the start of the uprising. Hamas had pointed out that to rely exclusively on the strength of the military and security forces to deal with internal opposition would be a dangerous course.²⁶

This warning reflected Hamas' desire to avoid the emergence of chaos in Syria, which would negate the advantages of its presence there and threaten its stability. For this reason, in the first months of the revolution, Hamas' leadership exerted considerable effort towards reconciliation and finding a solution to the crisis, hoping to avoid foreign intervention and the regime's resort to military or security solutions. The circle Hamas had to square was that, while its leadership did not wish to see the winds of change in Damascus, most of its grassroots supporters in the Palestinian camps wished for exactly that.

At the beginning of the events, when the researcher had an opportunity to contact some activists, close to or belonging to Hamas in some Palestinian camps, many of them expressed, directly or indirectly, their desire for change. This indicates the inconsistency between the official positions of the movement and its grassroots members. This emerged after the outbreak of events, when Hamas, and its security services in Gaza, were

²⁶See Khaled Meshaal's statement in an interview on Al-Jazeera: Meshaal: "*This is what happened between us and the Syrian regime after the revolution*," 26 /11/ 2012, Accessed 15/4/2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8No8ORHa7ZI>.

preventing any demonstrations supporting the Syrian revolution. Hamas allowed demonstrations for the first time on Tuesday 21st February 2012, indicating, observers believed, that Syria's relationship with Hamas had changed.²⁷

These demonstrators believed the Syrian regime, despite its support for Hamas, to be no different from the other Arab regimes that had traded away the Palestinian cause. As Palestinians, many of them recalled their experience of the events of Tel al-Zaatar²⁸ in Lebanon and, likewise, the War of the Camps²⁹ when the Syrian

²⁷For further details, see: Al-Farra, Shawqi, "*The people of Gaza support the 'Syrian revolution': tension in Hamas's relationship with Damascus*," DW website, 25/2/2012, Accessed 12/2/2020.

<https://www.dw.com/ar/%D8%A3%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%BA%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82/a-15768828>.

²⁸One of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon was besieged in late June 1976 by the Syrian army and the Lebanese Maronite forces. The siege ended after massacres were committed on 14th August 1976, and thousands of Palestinians were killed. For further details, see Shtayeh, Muhammad and others, "*Encyclopedia of Islamic Terms and Concepts*," Dar Al-Jalil, Amman, 2011, p.149.

²⁹This is the name given to the battles that took place between May 1985 and July 1988 between Amal Movement forces, the Syrian army, the Lebanese army, and some Palestinian factions, supported by Syria, against Fatah forces and the fighters of the Al-Mourabitoun

regime and PLO clashed militarily. Their memories, as Muslims, also invoked what the regime had done during the massacre of members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palmyra prison.³⁰

Since the beginning of the uprising, the regime had wanted to fortify itself by mobilising all sources of leverage at its disposal. Liquidating its portfolio of political investments, it began to amass all the capital available to it. At that time, Hamas would have been viewed as a blue-chip stock for the regime, particularly after it became clear that the demonstrations were taking on a Sunni complexion. Enormous pressure was placed on Hamas by the regime, to adopt a position in line with its interests. The regime was convinced that this position would serve to refute many of the accusations levelled against it by Sunnis that its repression of the uprising reflected its alleged sectarian character.

Movement. In these battles, some Palestinian camps in Lebanon were besieged and bombed. For more details, see Ibid, P. 233.

³⁰The massacre was committed by the Syrian army in June 1980, when 700 to 800 members of the Muslim Brotherhood were killed in Palmyra prison. This came after the failed assassination attempt on Hafez al-Assad. For more details, see Muhammad, Firas - Syria TV. "*Details of the prison massacre in Palmyra on its 39th anniversary*," 27/6/2019, Accessed 15/8/2020.

<https://www.syria.tv/%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B0%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%80-39>

Based on the researcher's experience, the regime asked the Palestinian factions in the camps to stage demonstrations in support of its position. Hamas' supporters did not participate. Some were subsequently arrested, and most left the camps for Turkey or Europe. Others took part in military actions against the regime, joining the Free Syrian Army or other Islamic opposition factions.

When Yusuf al-Qaradawi³¹ a TV preacher close to the Muslim Brotherhood, issued his condemnation of the regime's crimes, it put Hamas' feet to the fire. The regime demanded Khaled Mishaal denounce al-Qaradawi's speech and defend the regime's position. Mishaal, however, did not accede to this demand.³² To the regime, this refusal represented a clear indication that Hamas had chosen its loyalty to the Muslim Brotherhood over its alliance with the regime. Yet at the same time, Hamas was trying to demonstrate a more positive attitude towards the regime while trying to avoid the appearance of explicitly taking its side.³³ On

³¹Yusef al-Qaradawi is considered one of the most important theorists of the Muslim Brotherhood. For more details about Al-Qaradawi's sermon see: Sheikh Al-Qaradawi and the events of Syria, 3/25/2011, Accessed 5/5/2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQq0a9wEUEs>.

³²Meshaal suggested holding a meeting between the Syrian ambassador in Qatar and Al-Qaradawi, to explain the regime's point of view and what was going on in Syria. For further details, see Kleib, Sami, *"Assad between departure and systematic destruction, Syrian war with secret documents,"* Dar al-Farabi, Beirut, 2016, pp. 256-257.

³³Khaled Meshaal offered to mediate between the regime and tribal leaders in Daraa. He also met Hassan Nasrallah, to justify his position and stress the need to find a political solution. Moreover, he asked the prince of Qatar to put pressure on the Al-Jazeera channel, to reduce its

2nd April 2011, fifteen days after the outbreak of the revolution, Hamas issued its first statement addressing the Syrian events and confirming its neutrality.³⁴ In this announcement, Hamas confirmed that it supported Syria – both its people and its leaders - and that what was going on in Syria was an internal Syrian affair.³⁵ The next Hamas statement, on 12th September 2011, was issued in order to deny rumours, spreading on social media, that the regime had asked the Hamas leadership to leave Damascus.³⁶ Hamas insisted that it had received no such demand, nor had it any intention of moving its offices. Hamas's third announcement, in December 2011, came after two explosions in Damascus.

campaign against the Syrian regime. For more details, see Hanini, Abdul Aziz Hakim, Op.cit, 2018, P.153.

³⁴Although the Muslim Brotherhood understood Hamas' position of neutrality in Syria, it strongly criticized Hamas when Khaled Meshaal decided to play the role of mediator between the Arab League and the Syrian regime during a visit to Cairo in January 2012.

For further details see: Napolitano, Valentina, "Hamas and the Syrian Uprising: A Difficult Choice," Middle East Policy, Vol. XX, No. 3, Fall 2013, P 77.

³⁵A press statement about the current events in "sisterly Syria", Hamas website, 1/4/2011, Accessed:15/11/2020.

<https://hamas.ps/ar/post/1238/%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AD-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9>

³⁶For further information, see the Hamas press release in response to published allegations regarding Hamas's intention to move from Damascus. Hamas website,12/9/2011.

It seems that Hamas had started to feel that events were beginning to follow an irreversible trend. It still insisted on its unchanged position of neutrality, stating: "We are still making strenuous efforts to mediate for the sake of bringing our beloved Syria out of this difficult crisis."³⁷ At the same time, in a reversal of its previous claims that it was committed to remaining in Damascus, the movement was forced to relocate. By November 2012, the political bureau had moved to new offices in Doha. This was followed by several more statements, in December 2012, denouncing the bombing³⁸ of Palestinian camps by the regime and demanding that the camps be regarded as neutral and outside the bounds of the conflict³⁹. With the growth of the demonstrations, the regime increased pressure on Hamas to take a clear

³⁷A press release about the two criminal bombings in Syria. Hamas website, 24/12/2011.

³⁸ The emergence of militias affiliated with the General Command, led by Ahmed Jibril, with a desire to control the camp militarily, led to the entry of the Free Syrian Army in late 2012, under the pretext of protecting civilians in the camp. The regime took the Free Army's entry into the camp as a pretext to besiege and bombard it for years, before the organization entered the camp. ISIS came to the camp in April 2015, which was another reason for the regime to completely destroy the camp. For further details, see: Amin, Muhammed, *Destruction of Yarmouk Camp: A Great Service to Israel*, Alarabi Aljadeed, 25 /4 /2018.

³⁹ A press statement on the bombing of the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus by "MIG" warplanes, Hamas website, 16/12/2012, Accessed 22/2/2021. .

position on what was happening.⁴⁰ As a result, Hamas could no longer maintain a neutral position.

The relationship fractures

The declarations made by the Hamas leadership seeking to justify its reasons for leaving Syria, appeared contradictory, and possibly indicative of internal differences. At the time, Khaled Mishaal explained that the move to Doha had been on account of the security situation and because of Hamas' refusal to accept being used as a cover for the regime's actions.⁴¹ Hamas, he claimed, preferred to pay the high price of leaving Syria, being convinced of the right of the Syrian people to struggle for freedom.⁴² On the other hand, we find Sami Abu Zuhri, the official spokesman of Hamas, insisting that Hamas' departure from Syria was limited only to the upper echelon of its leadership, and only for security reasons, confirming that the Hamas offices remained open in Damascus. Moreover, he denied that the departure of Hamas' leadership represented a change in their position toward the Syrian regime.⁴³

⁴⁰The regime sent an official to meet Mishaal in the presence of a Lebanese media figure. Kleib also recounts the details of that meeting at Mishaal's house in Damascus in late December 2011. For further details, see: Kleib, Sami, Op. cit, P 260.

⁴¹Khaled Meshaal's statement in an interview on Al-Jazeera, Op.cit, 26 /11/ 2012.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8No8ORHa7ZI>.

⁴²Abu Marzouq, Musa, and others, Op.cit, p. 316.

⁴³" *An Open Agenda: the Hamas leaders' exit from Syria,*" BBC News Arabic, 4 /3/ 2012, Accessed 10/11/2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tb166HcexYg&list=PLE63F882968B9C04C&index=20>

Subsequent events, however, would give the lie to both justifications.⁴⁴ Abu Zuhri's statement, which represented a final attempt to continue the position of neutrality, was unsuccessful. Soon after, a flurry of mutual accusations would bring out the ruptured relationship for all to see.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Syrian TV accused Khaled Meshaal of being a traitor and ungrateful. "Syrian Arab TV launches an attack on Khaled Meshaal," Syria Channel, 18 /4/ 2013. Accessed 1/5/2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOrZTpPZLHg>. The Syrian regime also accused Hamas members of being involved in supporting the armed opposition forces. To prove the validity of its allegations, Syrian TV showed a Hamas member admitting to his involvement in activities against the regime, and the formation of what is known as Aknaf Beit al-Maqdis.

For further details, see an interview with a Hamas leader, Mamoun Al-Gendy, who was arrested by the Syrian security. The Syrian satellite channel, 1/10/2015,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIRRfbA7Wck>. On the other hand, Hamas accused the Syrian regime, in a statement, of raiding and storming the office and home of Khaled Meshaal. For further details, see: "Hamas accuses Damascus of raiding its offices, and Syria warns against dragging the factions into the conflict," France 24 website, 07/11/2012.

⁴⁵Later statements by Hamas officials indicate that there was a willingness to restore relations between the two sides. This came after Hamas found that the chances of the fall of the regime were meagre. A member of the Hamas political bureau, Mahmoud al-Zahar, said in a statement that efforts had been exerted previously, and were currently being made, to restore relations between Hamas and the Syrian President.

For further details, see Amer, Muhammad Hassan, "The return of Hamas to Damascus. Will time fix what has been spoiled by politics?" Al-Watan Newspaper, 7/11/2019, Accessed 15/7/2020.

<https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/4256836>.

These contradictory positions can be explained if we take into account the confused situation. The significant changes that the Arab Spring revolutions brought about made it difficult for regional parties and actors to reformulate their strategic positions, given the speed with which the revolutions were moving. As the internal situation in Syria grew worse for the Assad regime⁴⁶, Hamas was prompted to further distance itself from it. Hamas decided that the decision of the Syrian regime, to suppress peaceful protests, would ultimately precipitate its total collapse. Hamas did not want to bet on a losing horse – especially while it had other options.⁴⁷ If it continued to support the Assad regime, that would disqualify it from any relationship with a post-Assad order. It would also jeopardise relationships with the countries that were now supporting it (see below for an account of the alternative sources of support becoming available).

Thus, Hamas did not choose to leave Damascus until all possibilities of neutrality⁴⁸ had been exhausted.

⁴⁶Hamas' departure from Syria came just months after the bombing of the Crisis Cell in the Syrian National Security building on 18th July 2012. At that time, indications were that the regime was going to collapse. Hence most of the movement's leadership believed Bashar al-Assad's regime would fall within two to three months.

For more details, see Hanini, Abdul Aziz Hakim Op.cit, p182.

⁴⁷Napolitano, Valentina, Op.cit.

⁴⁸The speech of Ismail Haniyeh, the Palestinian Prime Minister in Gaza's deposed government, during the conference entitled "*Saving Al-Aqsa and supporting the Syrian people*", came as the last straw between Hamas and the Syrian regime. See Ismail Haniyeh's speech in Al-Azhar Al-Sharif. Al Jazeera Mubasher Channel, 24-2-2012, Accessed 12/4/2020.

It also found itself between a rock and a hard place. It was under pressure from the regime, as well as Hezbollah and Iran⁴⁹, to take a position against the revolution. Then, from its grass root supporters, who formed its popular base, and from the Muslim Brotherhood, it was under pressure to take a position against the regime. Syrian Intelligence spotted some messages from Sheikh Al-Qaradawi to Hamas leaders, calling on them to leave Syria and announce Hamas' position against the regime and Assad.⁵⁰ Thus, Hamas began to feel it was risking not only its popularity among Palestinians, but that it was also gambling with its Sunni credentials among the Arab and Muslim people, which threatened its very political credibility.⁵¹

As to the Syrian regime, according to President Assad, it held that Hamas had been conspiring against it from the beginning. Assad accused the Hamas leadership of allowing the participation of its rank-and-file members in anti-regime events. He sought to back up this claim by alluding to information he said the regime

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWX8d9ln8tk>.

⁴⁹Merisi, Ahmad, *"Iran's conditions on Hamas and the Mishaal crisis. Will the rapprochement see the light?"* Arabi 21 website, 15/2/2015. Meshaal also stated, in an interview with "France 24", that the crisis between Hamas and Assad affected the relationship with Iran. The latter had responded by reviewing the movement's financial support, despite having been, for some time, one of its main supporters. For further details, see *"Mashaal: Iran has reduced its support for Hamas due to its refusal to support Assad,"* Aljazeera Net, 3/15/2016.

⁵⁰ For further details see: Kleib, Op.cit, p. 258.

⁵¹Osama Abu Irsheed, *"Hamas's dilemma in Syria,"* Al Jazeera Net, 16/1/2021, Accessed 12/3/2020.

<http://www.aljazeera.net/knowledgegate/opinions>

possessed, but which he did not wish to divulge at the time.⁵²

With Hamas no longer supported by the Syrian regime,⁵³ it was other countries, notably Turkey and Qatar, that the movement turned to. As a result, relations between Hamas and these two countries developed rapidly from 2012-2013, as they moved to back the Arab Spring revolutions.⁵⁴ The level of Turkish support for Hamas reached such an extent that a political analyst, at the newspaper *Yediot Aharanot*, accused Turkey of using Hamas to build a military front in the Gaza Strip.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, Al-Hussaini, a Lebanese journalist and political analyst, alleged that Turkey was doing with Hamas what Iran had done with Hezbollah. At the beginning of 2012, Erdogan promised the Hamas leadership that Turkey would provide extensive

⁵²Kamal, Khalaf, "*Al-Assad explains the reasons behind the estrangement with Hamas*," *Al-Rai Al-Youm* newspaper, 16/12/2014.

⁵³In mid-July 2013, it was reported that a high-level Hamas delegation, headed by Musa Abu-Marzuq, Deputy Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, met with a high-level Iranian delegation and Hezbollah officials in Beirut. The meeting's goal was to mend fences between the three parties, following Hamas' abandonment of the "axis of resistance" and positioning itself in the Sunni coalition against the Assad regime in Syria. For further details, see Karmon, Ely, "*Hamas in Dire Straits*," *Terrorism Research Institute*, Vol. 7, No. 5, October 2013, p.111.

⁵⁴Marzouq, Musa, and others, " *Op.cit*, pp. 350-351.

⁵⁵"*Yediot: Hamas, with Turkish support, is close to building its military arm outside the Gaza Strip*," *Al-Hadath* newspaper, 14/7/ 2018, Accessed 14/9/2020.

covert support to the tune of 250 million dollars.⁵⁶ Erdogan saw in Hamas a chance for Turkey to replace Iran as the guardian of the Palestinian Islamic movement, whilst at the same time upholding the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood worldwide. Indeed, between 2012 and 2013, Ankara covertly sent 60 million Euros to the military wing of Hamas.⁵⁷ As for Qatar, its prize, according to Ghaith Fatra, was in prising Hamas' headquarters from Damascus. Khaled Mishaal's relocation from Syria to Doha was rewarded with considerable financial support. In 2012 alone, this was estimated at 400 million dollars.⁵⁸ Qatari contributions, whether material or logistical, became the movement's mainstay, replacing those provided by Iran. The support from Qatar, Egypt, and Turkey opened the door for European countries to consider removing Hamas from their lists of terrorist organizations.⁵⁹

⁵⁶Al-Husseini, Mourshe, *"Turkey is doing with Hamas what Iran is doing with Hezbollah,"* Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper, Issue No.13029, 31/7/ 2014, Accessed 10/11/2020.

<https://aawsat.com/home/article/149381>.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ghaith, May, *"The Qatari role and the future of relations with Hamas,"* Arab Center for Research and Studies, 12/29/2013, Accessed 10/11/2020.

<http://www.acrseg.org/2258/bcrawl>.

⁵⁹On 31st December, Gal Berger, the official in charge of the Palestinian file at the Israeli TV Broadcasting Corporation, revealed that Hamas leaders held meetings with European and American parties in Qatar, in early December 2019, to overcome the international isolation imposed on it, open new dialogue channels with the West, and discuss future recognition of Hamas. A member of Hamas' International Relations Office, Bassem Naeem, confirmed that "the Doha meetings are part of the frequent meetings that Hamas holds from time to time, and

With the arrival of the Muslim Brotherhood into positions of power in Tunisia, Egypt, and Turkey, Hamas found it had an opportunity to end its political isolation and dependence on Syria.⁶⁰ These changes, from Hamas' point of view, would position it within an alliance, which, unlike its former situation in Damascus, would not be a marriage of convenience, but represent a convergence of both ideological and political interests. As Hamas saw it, it would be welcomed in Egypt after the overthrow of Mubarak. As Mahmud Abu Amer observed: "After the revolution of 24th January 2011, Hamas – and increasingly its leadership in Gaza – relied on the Morsi government in Egypt, seeing him as a substitute for its partnerships with Damascus and Teheran, on account of the strength of its organisational and ideological relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt."⁶¹ Hamas believed the Arab Spring had

at various leadership levels, with expanded European and Western delegations". For further details see: Abu Amer, Adnan, "*Hamas intensifies its Western dialogues to break its political isolation*," Almonitor website, 13/1/2020, Accessed 12/11/2020.

<https://www.almonitor.com/pulse/en/contents/articles/originals/2020/01/palestinian-eu-relations-international-diplomacy.html>.

⁶⁰Saouli, Adham, "*Hizbullah, Hamas, and the Arab Uprisings: Structures, Threats, and Opportunities*", Orient Journal, Volume 54, Issue number 2, 2013, p.41.

⁶¹Khaled Waleed Mahmoud and Adnan Abu Amer, "*In reflecting on Hamas' behaviour towards its internal and external challenges*", the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, March 4102. p13. Leaders in the West Bank and exile tended to believe that, with the rise to power of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in particular, and the West's rapprochement with Islamists in general, it was time for bolder steps toward Palestinian unity, thereby facilitating Hamas' regional

heralded the birth of a new regional paradigm, to be led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Adapting to this new reality, that the Arab Spring revolutions had brought about⁶², required Hamas to revise its attitude to the secular Syrian regime.⁶³ Moreover, this could lead to a gradual resetting of its relationships with the countries of the West, especially after America and Europe accepted the rise to power of Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia.⁶⁴

Hamas and the Counter-Revolution

The fall of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule in Egypt in 2013 and the failure of the Islamic movement to sustain access to power in the Arab Spring countries, came as a devastating blow to Hamas. This was followed by the military progress of the Syrian regime's army and its recovery of large parts of its territories, restricting the Syrian opposition to narrow enclaves. As time passed,

and wider international integration. The Gaza leadership, by contrast, was wary of large strategic steps amid a still uncertain, regional future.

⁶² Hamas left Syria in December 2012, following elections held in Tunisia in October 2011 and in Egypt in both November 2011 and January 2012. Thus, Hamas left Syria after the access to power by political allies in the region, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in particular. From Hamas' point of view, Egypt, under the Brotherhood, was a better choice than Syria, both for Egypt's geographical proximity to Gaza and for the support that Hamas was expecting from the then Egyptian government and people. For further details, see Radoslaw Fiedler and Przemyslaw Osiewicz, Eds, "*Transformation processes in Egypt after 2011: the causes*," Logos Verlag Berlin GmbH, Berlin, 2015. P.149.

⁶³Saouli, Adham; Op.cit, 2013, PP.41-42.

⁶⁴Thubias, Pak, "*Hamas and Damascus alliance facing increased tension*", Al-Hayat, Issue 17792, 12/21/2011.

the possibility of overthrowing Assad receded, manifested in the moves of some Arab countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, to begin restoring relations with the regime. These developments once again put Hamas in a critical position and increased its isolation. Its gamble had failed. It was forced to reconsider its strategy, both towards Damascus and the entire axis of resistance. This was confirmed by the Al-Jazeera channel when it revealed that a discussion had taken place within the political bureau of Hamas concerned with restoring the movement's relationship with the Syrian regime and calculating the gains and losses that would result from such a relationship. This was notwithstanding the contradictions in the relationship that lay behind its breakdown in the first place.⁶⁵

This dilemma created new challenges for Hamas. Some analysts argued that Hamas would be hesitant to restore ties with the Syrian regime.⁶⁶ Loyalists among its base continued to resist such a rapprochement. Nayef Rajoub, a prominent leader in the Hamas movement in the West Bank, stated that "the current Syrian regime no longer has any weight or value, and it is wrong to rely on it or seek a rapprochement with it" adding: "The Syrian regime has been completely consumed and has become a losing bet....We will not restore the

⁶⁵Moussa, Raed, "Iranian statements, signals, and mediation: is it the time for Hamas to return to Damascus?" Al-Jazeera Net, 7/21/2019.

⁶⁶Haddad, Manar, "Signs of rapprochement between Hamas and the Syrian regime. Will they end up as they used to be before 2012?" Al-Hall website, 11/5/2019.

relationship with Syria as long as it is ruled by a regime that has lost its value and weight."⁶⁷ Moreover, restoration of relations with the Assad regime would be a "stab in the Syrian revolution's back".⁶⁸

On the other hand, there was a current within the Hamas movement that believed that restoring relations with Damascus had become an urgent necessity. Sources in the Hamas movement in the Gaza Strip asserted the importance of mending the fence between Hamas and the Assad regime.⁶⁹ The leader of the Hamas movement, Mahmoud al-Zahhar, stated: "It is in the interest of the resistance to have good relations with all countries that are hostile to Israel and have a clear and frank position on the occupation, such as Syria, Lebanon, and Iran."⁷⁰ Consequently, there was no internal consensus among the Hamas leadership on restoring relations with the Syrian regime.

Yet, the behaviour and statements of Hamas' leaders pointed to the restoration of its relationship with the Syrian regime. Many factors prompted Hamas to reconsider its relationship with Damascus. It seems that

⁶⁷For further information, see Nader Safadi, "*What did Hamas say about its relationship with the Syrian regime?*" Gulf Online, 8/6/2019.

⁶⁸Moussa, Raed, Op.cit.

<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2019/7/12>

⁶⁹"*After a break of 9 years, Hamas is close to restoring relations with Syria*", Dunia Al-Watan newspaper, 5/1/2021, Accessed 3/4/2022.

<https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2021/01/05/1391416.html>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Iran has been instrumental in this. During the years 2017 and 2018, delegations from Hamas visited Iran several times, signalling the end of the estrangement between the two parties. The British Al-Monitor website, citing an Iranian official, revealed that Tehran has been mediating between the Syrian regime and Hamas since the beginning of 2017.⁷¹ It asserted that several meetings had been held between Iranian officials and Hamas to achieve rapprochement.⁷²

The crucial moment of change in Hamas' rhetoric came in 2018, with a speech by Hamas political bureau president, Isma'il Haniya, declaring that the movement had never been in a state of enmity with the Syrian regime, who had "stood by our side at many crucial moments and gone through much with us, just as the great Syrian people." He described the Syrian revolution as a "fitna"⁷³ that had negatively impacted the countries of the region.⁷⁴ Similarly, Hamas political bureau member, Mahmoud Zahar, denied that ties had been severed with the Syrian regime, expressing the

⁷¹ "Hamas leadership seeks to restore ties with Syria," Al-Monitor, 3/4/2019. Accessed 2/3/2020.

https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/hamas-support-syria-golan-heights-relations-as-sad.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *Sectarian Strife*

⁷⁴ "Head of Hamas: "Our relationship with Iran is strategic, and we have never been hostile to the Syrian regime for one day," Zaman Al Wasl website 11/6/2018, Accessed 15/6/2020.

<https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/87830/>.

wish that the regime would grow stronger.⁷⁵ So too, a member of Hamas's leadership, Khalil al-Hayya, issued a statement saying: "No one denies the profound role Syria has to play in the destiny of the Palestinian people, both in the future and at present; that Hamas has no reservations in saying that the relationship with Syria is a necessary one for it, and to others as well; and that the Palestinian people wished for Syria to continue and resume its natural role in the region".⁷⁶ With the issuing of its new charter in 2017, Hamas finally severed its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. It had realised that its original 1987 charter had become a liability and it now divested itself of its identity as a part of the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, the Syrian regime, through its news agency, SANA, announced that "all the reports that have been circulating concerning the restoration of relations between these two parties have not and will not change the position of Syria with regard to those whom the Syrian people pronounced against since the beginning of the war. It accused Hamas of supporting terrorists and acting according to its own narrow interests -

⁷⁵Abu Amer, Ahmad, "Hamas leadership seeks to restore ties with Syria," Al-Monitor, 3/4/2019, Accessed 28/2/2021. https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/hamas-support-syria-golan-heights-relations-as-sad.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter.

⁷⁶Hamas. "Positive statements towards Damascus." Arabic sputnik website, 29/5/2019.

and to the pleasure of Israel".⁷⁷ From this, it was clear that the regime would set tough conditions for any restoration of relations. Hamas had become *persona non grata*, having failed to repay the regime's favours. The regime's rebuff of Hamas was in part because it had, meanwhile, restored its relations with Fatah and the Palestinian authority, as regime survival overshadowed differences with the latter over relations with Israel and displaced the Arab-Israeli conflict from the centre of Syrian foreign policy. This made Hamas a much less attractive ally for Damascus that had been the case when Syria was positioning itself as a leader of an "axis of resistance." In line with omnibalancing theory, the acute internal threat to the regime posed by Sunni Islamic movements, with which Hamas enjoyed ideological kinship, far outweighed, in its alignment calculations, any increased credibility a return of Hamas might give to the "Axis of resistance, as the struggle with Israel slipped far down in the scale of regime priorities.

⁷⁷Media source: "All statements that are circulated and published about the return of any relations with Hamas are not true." SANA, 6/7/2019, Accessed 8/8/2020.
<https://www.sana.sy/?p=958619>.

The Strategic Failure of Hamas

Hamas again fractured internally as a result of several issues, inter alia, the disappointment of the Palestinian people in the failure of the Arab Spring revolutions in general, and the Syrian conflict in particular. Internal tensions reached an unprecedented level and left it at a loss as to how to respond to the changes that have swept through the region in recent years, notably the resilience of the Syrian (and Egyptian) regime and the decline of the Muslim Brotherhood. On the one hand, one current in Hamas believed it necessary to invest in the positive developments arising from the Arab Spring - especially the rise in the authority of the Islamist movements. "For we all live now in the shadow of the Arab Spring - if we fail to deliver the aspirations of our people, our fate shall become the fate of others"⁷⁸, as one of the Hamas leadership put it. On the other hand, another leader disputed that the political order of the entire Arab world was necessarily being overturned. He cautioned that "we must wait to see what the outcome of the revolutions will be before responding, lest we be caught like a fish in disturbed waters".⁷⁹

It would seem clear that the senior leadership of Hamas had not yet responded to those voices, calling for it to reconsider the situation which had led to its strategic failure. There were many mistakes in the way events were handled. Abrupt changes placed Hamas in

⁷⁸Ibid, P.28.

⁷⁹Ibid, P.27.

difficult straits. Firstly, it never managed to unify its rhetoric with regard to the Syrian revolution, neither among its leadership nor between the leadership and its grassroots. Just as there had been contradictory pronouncements about the decision to abandon Damascus, so the same contradictions emerged about whether to seek to restore relations. This clearly demonstrates the underlying lack of a clear long-term vision. The policy was entirely reactive to immediate and rapidly changing events. It did not allow for contingencies to hedge against losses to its interests. It had presupposed the fall of the Syrian regime and the success of political Islam, especially in Egypt. Even allowing that at a certain point in time this did indeed seem plausible, Hamas did not contemplate the possibility of its failure. The most flagrant contradiction was that at the very same time it was developing a position against the regime, premised on the rights of a free people, and condemning the regime's atrocities, it was also issuing pronouncements that expressed a longing for the resumption of relations and after a few years of alienation began to bid for a rapprochement, and even entered negotiations with the regime, which however had, by 2021, borne no fruit. This threatened its support among Sunni Arabs in general, and Syrians in particular, both supporters and opponents of the regime.⁸⁰ It may, moreover, prove to

⁸⁰The researcher was in touch with some Hamas supporters, who had left the Palestinian camps. They categorically stated that they were not interested in any rapprochement with the regime. Likewise, Assad's Palestinian backers expressed their indignation and unwillingness to accept any rapprochement between Hamas and the Syrian regime. The

have been premature given the dire economic situation in Syria and the consequent possibility that the Syrian regime might yet collapse.

Conclusion

Omnibalancing theory provides an appropriate explanation for the behaviour of both the parties considered here. Alliances, according to this theory, are designed to balance against both external and internal threats and since the first are frequently more acute, alliance decisions will prioritize keeping regimes in power, even if this means sacrifice the capacity of the state to balance against external threats. Similarly non-state actors engaged in sharp conflicts with stronger states (Hamas vs Israel) are caught between pressures from their constituencies to take principled stands and their need for alliances with external state patrons (Syria and Iran in this case) needed to balance against the enemy (Israel). One clear indication of Hamas' pragmatism has been its willingness to consider restoring its relations with a regime that continues to oppress its people, in direct contradiction of its own principle - a movement dedicated to a people's right to self-determination. The regime for its part, made an overnight change to its relationship with Hamas, sacrificing an alliance that had helped it balance against Israel when Hamas ceased, during the Syrian uprising, to be an asset in the regimes' survival

researcher also contacted some Syrian activists opposed to the regime, to find out their reaction to any rapprochement between the regime and Hamas. They were so disappointed with Hamas that some classified it as Iranian.

(instead aligning itself with Fatah and the PA which it had once denounced as traitors who had sold out the rights of the Palestinian people). The hollowness of the regime's commitment to Palestine was most evident after it turned its guns on its own helpless people whilst overlooking Israeli attacks against its own territory, which took place at the same time.⁸¹ Thus, the Syrian revolution exposed the emptiness of both the Syrian regime's nationalist commitments and Hamas's revolutionary slogans, about the right of people to determine their own destiny.

⁸¹ Israel bombed sites inside Syrian territory, either before the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, or after it. For more information about the dates of these attacks, see: The most prominent Israeli raids on Syria since 2003. Al Jazeera Net, 11/30/2016.