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Understanding a Decade of Syria-Hamas Relations, 2011-2021

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Introduction

In a statement released on the 15 September 2022, Hamas announced its decision to restore full diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime after a decade of turbulent relations between the two sides which saw Hamas previously cast its lot with the predominantly Sunni opposition movement in its attempts to bring down the minority-led Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad (*Middle East Monitor*, 16 September 2022). Expressing the movement's solidarity with the regime after Israel stepped up its attacks on Syrian targets with the bombing of Damascus and Aleppo airports (*Atalayar*, 1 September 2022), the statement declared Hamas' appreciation 'to the Syrian leadership and people for their role in standing by the Palestinian people and their just cause,' and expressed its hopes that Syria would 'restore its role and position in the Arab and Islamic nations' (*Middle East Monitor*, 16 September 2022; *Middle East Eye*, 18 September 2022; *Al-Monitor*, 22 September 2022). Given, however, the scale of Hamas' earlier opposition towards the Syrian regime, a government responsible for the deaths of over 3,600 Palestinian refugees through medieval tactics of starvation and siege, and forcing a further 120,000 Palestinian refugees to flee their homes (Abdullah, 2020: 194) – in addition to the tens of thousands of Syrians killed and

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displaced in the conflict – why has Hamas then sought to normalise relations with the Syrian regime when this only risks undermining its credibility among the Palestinian population and the Syrian opposition movement at large?² Tracing the trajectory of Hamas’ policy towards Syria in three distinct phases, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Syria-Hamas relations over the course of the past decade and identifies the various factors that have led us to this point. The argument put forward here suggests that it is only through a combination of geo-strategic factors and issues pertaining to identity that can help to fully explain the shifts and changes in Hamas’ policy towards Syria, which has inevitably also had repercussions for its relations with the other members of the Axis of Resistance, Iran and Hezbollah.

Phase I: Constructive Ambiguity, March 2011-February 2012

² Hamas’ intention to re-establish full relations with the Syrian regime was criticised by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces which argued that the movement would gain nothing by aligning itself with a ‘criminal sectarian regime’ that continues to harbour ‘deep-seated hatred’ for the Palestinians, reflected through years of ‘displacement, arrest and massacres, the last of which was revealed by the Tadamon massacre (in December 2013)’ (*Middle East Monitor*, 1 July 2022; *The New Arab*, 30 June 2022). The Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas’ parent organisation, also criticised Hamas’ decision, with a statement by Muslim scholars urging Hamas to rethink rapprochement with the Syrian regime which was out of step with the movement’s ‘principles, values and legal norms’ (*Atalayar*, 12 July 2022). Within Gaza itself, Hamas was criticised by many from within the movement, with one political commentator describing the re-establishment of ties with the Syrian regime as a ‘moral sin’ that ‘reflects the imbalance of strategic priorities and political confusion of the movement’ (*Al-Monitor*, 24 September 2022).

If we look at Hamas' initial response towards the Syrian uprising, one would have expected Hamas to have come out in open support for the Syrian regime. Like Hezbollah, Hamas was after all, a member of the Axis of Resistance, and for many, Hamas owed just as much loyalty to the Syrian state as Hezbollah arguably did. It was Syria that provided Hamas with a base for its political bureau after its ignominious expulsion from Jordan in 1999, and Syria that afforded greater social and economic rights to the Palestinian refugees living in its midst than any other Arab state in the region (Napolitano, 2013:74). Yet, in marked contrast to Hezbollah, Hamas' initial response to the Syrian uprising was one of strict neutrality (Abdullah, 2020: 187-188; Seurat, 2022: 90). Perhaps mindful of becoming too embroiled in the domestic affairs of any other Arab state given the fate of the PLO in Jordan (1970), Lebanon (1980s), and Kuwait (1991), where Yasser Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War had led to the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian workers from the country (Napolitano, 2013:75), in its first public statement in April 2011, Hamas sought to position itself squarely between the Syrian leadership, which had supported it in its endeavours against Israel, and the Syrian people in what was seen as their legitimate demand for basic civil and political rights,³ arguing that what was happening in Syria was 'strictly an internal affair' and that 'Hamas does not interfere in Syrian internal affairs' (Berti, 2012:27).

³ Even before the Arab Spring had spread to Syria, in February 2011, following the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, Hamas attempted to use its good offices to mediate between the two sides, cautioning the Syrian regime to implement basic reforms, and urging the opposition to engage in dialogue in order to diffuse growing tensions, prevent instability, and avoid giving foreign powers a pretext to intervene (Abdullah, 2020: 180-183; Seurat, 2002: 90).

Hamas' reticence regarding Syria, however, did not imply any kind of tacit support for the regime in its massive human rights violations. Instead, far from condoning the actions of the Syrian state, as the regime increasingly resorted to the use of violence and a security solution to the Syrian conflict, Hamas sought to distance itself from Damascus. Thus, despite considerable pressure from the Syrian regime, Hamas refused to organise any pro-Assad rallies in any of the Palestinian camps inside Syria, even though it had allowed anti-Ghaddafi protests to take place inside the Gaza strip (*The Guardian*, 27 July 2012); it failed to participate in a march orchestrated by the pro-Syrian PFLP-GC on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights to commemorate the *Naksa* in June 2011 (*The National*, 8 June 2011), unwilling to allow itself to become a 'pawn' for the Syrian regime that sought to distract international attention away from its human rights abuses (Black, 2017: 436);⁴ and much to the chagrin of the Syrian authorities, when the Muslim Brotherhood's spiritual leader, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, condemned the actions of the Syrian state for opening fire on unarmed protestors outside the al-Omari mosque on the 23 March 2011, stating in a Friday sermon that the 'revolution train which has passed Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen ha[d] arrived at the station to which

⁴ Hamas did, however, participate in an earlier demonstration in May 2011, to commemorate the *Nakba*, or 'Day of Catastrophe,' marking 63 years since the founding of the state of Israel. Organised by a number of Palestinian factions, including Hamas itself, this was the first time the border with Israel had 'been breached in three decades' (Black, 2017: 436). In contrast however, the June march, organized by the pro-regime PFLP-GC, only provoked widespread resentment among many Palestinians, angered that unarmed Palestinian civilians had needlessly been sent to their slaughter simply to further the regime's interests. As a consequence, the PFLP-GC headquarters in Yarmouk was attacked and burnt down by Palestinian refugees living in the camp (*The National*, 8 June 2011).

it was bound to arrive – Syria' (*Ma'an*, 21 December 2011),⁵ Hamas failed to disavow these statements, despite reports in the Syrian press to the contrary, in what could only be construed as a deliberate campaign of 'disinformation' designed to force Hamas' hand (Napolitano, 2013:76; ICG, 14 August 2012: 6).

Perhaps unsurprisingly though, Hamas' refusal to come out in open support for the Syrian regime, depriving the regime of much needed Sunni cover, only evoked mounting hostility from the regime towards the movement which many in Hamas had perhaps feared. At the political level, as early as March 2011, Bashar's political and media advisor, Bouthaina Shaaban, issued a statement falsely accusing Palestinian refugees living in the al-Raml camp of 'opening fire on [Syrian] security forces and protestors alike,' in a deliberate attempt to scapegoat the Palestinian community in Syria for much of the violence in the country (Napolitano, 2013: 76; *Al Jazeera*, 27 March 2011).⁶ By April, according to reports in *Al-Hayat*, following the failure of Khaled Meshaal to participate in a meeting with Bashar in front of the Syrian press (accompanied by recommendations by the regime 'about the format that this meeting would take, who the participants would be, and what they would say afterwards') in a 'last ditch' attempt by the regime to co-opt the movement (Abdullah, 2020: 188), Hamas was asked by the regime to leave the Syrian

⁵ See, The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (2011), *Hamas' Difficult Position on the Syrian Revolt*, 11 April, accessed at, <https://www.crethiplethi.com/hamas-difficult-position-on-the-syrian-revolt/islam-fundamentalists/hamas-islam-fundamentalists/2011/>

⁶ A similar sentiment would be expressed almost a year later when Syria's then Foreign Ministry spokesman, Jihad Makdissi, cynically described Palestinians as 'guests' on his Facebook page, and stated that the Palestinians in Syria were free to 'depart to the oases of democracy in Arab countries if they continued to 'misbehave' (*The Guardian*, 27 July 2012; *The New Republic*, 29 July 2012).

capital, Damascus (*Al-Hayat*, 30 April 2011).⁷ With Egypt and Jordan both refusing to host the movement in its entirety however, this led to a gradual dispersal of Hamas' political base, with Khaled Meshaal, the head of Hamas' political bureau, relocating to Qatar; Mousa Abu Marzouk, Hamas' deputy leader, operating from Cairo; and the head of Hamas' military operations, Imad al-Alami, one of the last to leave the Syrian capital for the Gaza Strip (*Haaretz*, 5 February 2012), with all subsequent attempts to re-establish relations between the two sides effectively rebuffed by the regime.⁸

Similarly, on the economic front, Hamas' refusal to submit to Syrian pressure, only brought about negative repercussions that impaired the ability of the movement to provide for its own people. In a sign of its growing displeasure at Hamas' policy of neutrality, Iran, Hamas' principal financial patron and sponsor, was thought to have either cut or suspended much of its bilateral aid to the movement in August 2011 worth an estimated \$245-\$300 million a year (*Financial Times*, 31 May 2013).⁹ With no other Arab state stepping in to fill the funding shortfall, being perhaps preoccupied with their own domestic upheavals, and with no let-up in international sanctions in place since 2007 following Hamas' forcible take-over of the Gaza strip, Hamas was forced to take ever more drastic measures, increasing taxation, reducing public expenditure, and withholding the salaries of some

⁷ Instead, Hamas' statement of neutrality in April seemed to be the final straw for the regime.

⁸ The last direct meeting between Khaled Meshaal and Assad was reported to have occurred on the 12 February 2011, even before the Syrian uprising had begun in earnest (Hamas official, interview with author, November 2013, Beirut).

⁹ As Hamas' deputy political leader, Musa Abu Marzouk, was to later attest, 'the Iranians are not happy with our position on Syria, and when they are not happy, they don't deal with you in the same way' (*BBC*, 28 February 2012).

40,000 state employees and public sector workers in the Gaza strip in July 2011 (*Reuters*, 21 August 2011). Any hope that Hamas had of compensating for the loss of Iranian aid through its own efforts appeared highly implausible, with revenue from local taxation on goods smuggled in through a network of subterranean tunnels only providing Ismail Haniyeh's authority with some \$55 million of the total \$540 million needed to run the Gaza Strip (*Haaretz*, 21 August 2011).

In view of the very real negative economic and political consequences of its Syria policy, why then did Hamas refuse to openly side with the Syrian regime at the start of the Syrian uprising? One obvious answer has to do with ideological factors and Hamas' desire not to tarnish its reputation with too close an association with the minority-led Alawite regime in much the same way that Hezbollah had done. While Hamas had certainly never let issues of identity or sectarian concerns preclude its previous ties with the Syrian state, in the face of the government's brutal crackdown against in the predominantly Sunni towns of Homs, Hama and Deraa, Hamas could hardly have remained supportive of the regime without significant damage to its own credibility. According to the opinion of one senior Hamas official, had the conflict been between Syria and an external enemy, there is little doubt that Hamas would have rallied to the aid of its long-term resistance ally.¹⁰ As it was, the fact that this was a bloody civil war 'between brothers,'¹¹ reviving recent memories of the government's brutal crackdown against Muslim Brotherhood dissent in 1982 – the very movement from which Hamas had its origins – made Hamas' position increasingly untenable. This dilemma was made all the more acute following the government's brutal crackdown on the

¹⁰ Hamas official, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Palestinian community itself with a massive naval bombardment of the al-Raml camp in the coastal city of Lattakia in August 2011, forcing some 10,000 Palestinians refugees to flee their homes – not for the first time in Palestinian history (*The Independent*, 17 August 2011). Stuck between a rock and a hard place, and unwilling to turn a blind eye or bear ‘false witness’ to what was happening in Syria,¹² it is against this background then that Hamas was finally forced to break with the Assad regime, bringing an end to more than a decade of strategic co-operation between the two sides (Abdullah, 2020: 189).

Phase II: Open Opposition, February 2012 – July 2013

This brings us to the second phase of Hamas’ response towards the Syrian uprising, with Hamas’ open opposition towards the Syrian regime from February 2012. Standing before a crowd of worshippers outside Egypt’s al-Azhar Mosque to impromptu chants of ‘No to Iran. No to Hezbollah. The Syrian Revolution is an Arab revolution,’ on the 24 February, Hamas’ Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, stated in no uncertain terms, Hamas’ unequivocal support for the ‘the people of the Arab Spring or Islamic winter,’ publicly lauding for the first time the ‘heroic Syrian people who are striving for freedom, democracy and reform’ (*YNet News*, 24 February 2012; *Huffington Post*, 31 January 2014). Appropriating the discourse of popular protests unleashed by the Arab Spring with its own struggles against Israeli oppression, Hamas placed itself firmly on the side of the Arab masses (Milton-Edwards, 2012:61; Baconi, 2018: 175; Berti, 2013).¹³

¹² Hamas official, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013.

¹³ Interestingly, Iran also attempted to appropriate the discourse of the Arab Uprising, claiming it as part of an ‘Islamic Awakening’ inspired by the 1979 Islamic revolution. A more appropriate analogy perhaps would have been the ‘Green Movement,’ a mass uprising against the contested election of the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, in June 2009.

In looking at Hamas' shift away from Syria during this period however, it is important to understand that Hamas was not simply motivated by certain 'push' factors, such as increased pressure from Damascus and the opposition, also important were those so-called 'pull' factors and new opportunities that had opened up as a result of the dramatic events of the Arab uprising which gave Hamas alternative options for forging alliances, less incongruous with that of its own Sunni identity. Thus, in a policy of strategic outreach, in December 2011, Ismail Haniyeh embarked on a tour of newly elected Muslim Brotherhood-backed governments brought to power in Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan and Turkey, in what was his first trip outside the Gaza Strip in almost five years, with the Turkish authorities pledging to provide the movement with some \$300 million in aid (*The New York Times*, 26 December 2011). Even Jordan, which had at one time arrested Meshaal, and expelled the movement from its base in Amman, sought to re-establish ties, with the Jordanian Prime Minister, Awn Khasawneh, describing Hamas' 1999 expulsion as a 'political and constitutional mistake' (*The New York Times*, 22 November 2011).

But it was Egypt, with the dramatic fall of the pro-Western Mubarak regime, and the election to power of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) under Mohammad Morsi in June 2012 that arguably did the most to transform Hamas' strategic environment. While it is true to say that the new Egyptian authorities failed to rescind the 1979 Camp David Agreement,¹⁴ reluctant to antagonise the

¹⁴ For more on possible sources of tension between Hamas and the Morsi administration, see Omar Shaaban, 'Not so Easy between Brothers,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 1 October 2012. Accessed at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/10/01/hamas-and-morsi-not-so-easy-between-brothers-pub-49525>

US, still the largest single provider of aid to the Egyptian state (Milton-Edwards, 2013:66),¹⁵ the early actions of the Morsi government did nonetheless give Hamas great cause for optimism. Under Morsi for example, Egypt allowed the opening of a fledgling Hamas office in Cairo; restrictions on the movement and people and goods at the Rafah crossing were eased, raising hopes for Hamas for an end to the debilitating blockade of Gaza, hemmed in by a previously hostile Egyptian state on the one side, and the full force of Israel's military-security apparatus on the other (ICG, 2012: 3); and Egypt played a vital role in attempting to bring about intra-Palestinian reconciliation (*musalaha*) between the rival Fatah and Hamas factions with the signing of the Cairo Agreement (May 2011), that paved the way for the possibility of Palestinian elections and an interim government of technocrats, without it first having to accede to any of the demands of the International Quartet (the United Nations, the European Union, the United States and Russia)- recognising the state of Israel, renouncing the use of violence, or accepting any of the previous agreements signed between Israel and the PLO (Shabaneh, 2013: 5).

Egyptian activism was also apparent in its success in mediating the release of 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in return for the single captured Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, that helped Hamas to raise itself in its international stature (*The Guardian*, 11 October 2011),¹⁶ in contrast to the declining fortunes of Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority which had lost an 'important ally in Mubarak' (Milton-Edwards, 2013), and suffered a significant blow to its legitimacy following the

¹⁵ US aid to Egypt was worth an estimated \$1.3billion a year.

¹⁶ Among those released was Yahya Sinwar, one of the founders of Hamas' military wing, who later went on to succeed Haniyeh as the leader of the Hamas' authority in Gaza. See Macintyre (2017:194).

publication of the Palestine Papers (Baconi, 2018: 174),¹⁷ and the failure of Abbas' bid to win international recognition for Palestinian statehood at the UN Security Council (*The Guardian*, 11 November 2011).¹⁸ Moreover, when Israel launched its deadly attack on Gaza under Operation Pillar of Defence in November 2012, Morsi was quick to recall Egypt's ambassador to Israel in a remarkable show of solidarity (*The Guardian*, 15 November 2012), and dispatched the Egyptian Prime Minister, Hisham Qandil, to the territory to broker an early ceasefire between the two sides that 'seemed to leave Hamas with greater access to the outside world' (Karmon, 2013:113); extended its zone of fishing rights; and appeared to bring an end to Israel's policy of targeted assassinations, marking a decisive shift away from the culture of impunity that had been allowed to pervade when Israel launched its earlier assault on the territory under Operation Cast Lead in December 2008 (Shabaneh, 2013:5).

Similarly, Qatar, locked in a struggle with Saudi Arabia to improve its own strategic influence, also went to great lengths to bring Hamas out of its regional isolation. Flush from its diplomatic success in helping to bring about the fall of the

¹⁷ Published in January 2011 by *Al Jazeera*, the Palestine Papers were a trove of over 16,000 leaked documents, that showed just how far Palestinian negotiators were prepared to go in order to placate Israel during diplomatic negotiations between 1999-2010 (Baconi, 2018:174). Among other things, the papers revealed that the PLO was willing to make key concessions over illegal Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem, give up the right of return of Palestinian refugees, and act as Israel's enforcer by suppressing any opposition to the peace process with the use of violence.

¹⁸ In a vote passed by 138 nations at the UN General Assembly in November 2012, Abbas did however manage to claw back some credibility by upgrading the status of Palestinian entity to 'non-member state' with observer status, similar to that accorded to the Vatican, giving it the right to access international organisations, including UNESCO and, crucially, the International Criminal Court (ICC) (*Reuters*, 1 December 2012).

Ghaddafi regime in Libya, in January 2012, the Qatari crown prince, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, accompanied Meshaal in his first ever trip to Jordan since the expulsion of the movement in 1999 (*Al Jazeera*, 30 January 2012; Ulrichsen, 2014). Qatari mediation was also apparent in its attempts to kick-start the stalled Palestinian reconciliation process with the signing of the Doha Agreement in February 2012, which held out the possibility for Hamas' participation in a restructured PLO, and seemed to move a step further closer towards achieving a government of national unity (Baconi, 2018:188).¹⁹ Moreover, in a move that was billed as 'breaking Israel's debilitating blockade of Gaza,' in October 2012, the Qatari emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, became the first Arab head of state to visit the territory since Hamas' takeover in 2007, pledging some \$245 million in aid to the Hamas authority, that went some way towards compensating for the loss of Iranian aid to the movement (*The Guardian*, 23 October 2012; Milton-Edwards, 2013:68).²⁰ The fact that al-Thani entered Gaza from the Egyptian side of the border, much to Israel's dismay, and failed to make a corresponding visit to the Palestinian Authority President in Ramallah, can only have strengthened Hamas' claim to be the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people (Abdullah, 2020: 196; Milton-Edwards, 2013:68).

Buoyed by the success of Sunni Muslim Brotherhood backed parties brought to power by the events of the Arab Spring – a group to which Hamas sought to acquire formal membership of in November 2011 (Milton-Edwards, 2013: 67; *Al-*

¹⁹ Like the 2011 Cairo agreement however, the Doha Declaration was never put into practice.

²⁰ This was to have formed the first instalment of a much larger package of aid worth around \$500 million (Milton-Edwards, 2013:68)

Monitor, 22 March 2012)²¹ – and with the regional winds blowing very much in Hamas’ favour (*The Economist*, 31 December 2011), Hamas was encouraged not only to move away from Syria, but also to shift further away from its remaining allies in the Axis of Resistance, Shi’ite Iran and Hezbollah too.²² In March 2012 for example, in a controversial statement made by a senior Hamas official in Gaza, Salah al-Bardaweel, Hamas claimed that in the event of any Israeli airstrike on Iran’s suspected nuclear weapons sites, Hamas would not intervene on Iran’s behalf, unwilling to allow itself to be dragged into a wider war simply at Iran’s behest (*The Guardian*, 6 March 2012).²³ In June 2013, in a rare public admonition that appeared on the Facebook page of Hamas’ Deputy Political Leader, Moussa Abu Marzouk, Hamas urged Hezbollah to ‘take its forces out of Syria’ and keep its ‘weapons [solely] directed against the Zionist enemy’ (*The Times of Israel*, 17 June 2013).²⁴ Things seemed to take a turn for the worse in May 2013 when Palestinian refugees at the Ain

²¹ This meant that Hamas would no longer act merely as ‘a subsidiary branch of the Muslim Brothers in Bilad al Sham... led by the Islamic Action Front in Jordan,’ but would exist as an entity in its own right (*Al-Monitor*, 22 March 2012). Hamas also declared a shift in its strategy during this period away from armed struggle (*muqawama*), towards peaceful resistance against Israel ‘acceptable to the international community’ (*The Economist*, 31 December 2011), bringing it more in line with the ‘social-reformist’ norms of the global Brotherhood movement (Milton-Edwards, 2013: 67).

²² Interestingly, the Syrian regime also seemed to be moving further away from Hamas’ position, after the Syrian Foreign Ministry issued an unexpected statement in August declaring for the first time its decision to recognise a separate Palestinian state within the June 1967 border, in contrast to Hamas’ stated goal of retrieving the whole of historic Palestine ‘from the river to the sea’ (*Al-Akhbar* 18 August 2011).

²³ This was a far cry from Hamas’ position only two and half years earlier when Meshaal, for example, had stated that ‘all Islamist militant groups [would] form a united front with Iran’ (ICG, 2012:13)

²⁴ In a further sign of protest, Hamas was also reported to have withdrawn its diplomatic representative from Tehran (*The Telegraph*, 31 May 2013).

al-Hilweh camp in Lebanon burnt Hezbollah food aid in protest at Hezbollah's military involvement in the Syrian conflict, which seemed to many Palestinians, to do little other than increase the suffering of their Sunni Muslim brethren (*The Daily Star Lebanon*, 31 May 2013).²⁵

In Syria itself though, according to reports that appeared in the *Times*, by April 2013, Hamas had stepped up its support for the Syrian opposition, with members of Hamas' military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, said to have been actively involved in the Syrian conflict, fighting alongside Syrian rebels in Palestinian camps in Damascus and Aleppo (*The Times*, 5 April 2013),²⁶ including Khaled Meshaal's own former bodyguard, Bahaa Sakr (*Al-Monitor*, 14 June 2013). Ismail Haniyeh's attendance at the funeral held in Gaza of a suspected al-Qassam fighter, Mohammed al-Qneita, killed in the Syrian city of Idlib (Seurat, 2022: 93), only added to suspicion of Hamas' involvement in the Syrian conflict. And when further reports surfaced in the pro-Hezbollah newspaper, *Al Akhbar* in June 2013, accusing Hamas of providing advice and training to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the construction of booby-trapped tunnels, utilising key Iranian technology that Hezbollah had itself transferred to the movement, meant to have been used in the conflict against Israel, which contributed directly to a number of Hezbollah deaths in the decisive battle for Qusayr, this caused consternation among many of Hezbollah's rank and file members (*Al*

²⁵ When Hamas security carried out a crackdown against Shi'ite worshippers commemorating the end of the holy Shi'ite month of Ashura in Gaza, attacking 30 and arresting 12 others in January 2012, this may have antagonised Hezbollah and the Iranian clergy further (*Haaretz*, 17 January 2012).

²⁶ In addition, according to Abu Musab, a senior official from the Syrian opposition group Ahrar al-Sham, Palestinians also provided advice to rebels in Idlib in how to repair damaged tunnels via the use of video tutorials from the Gaza Strip (*Middle East Eye*, 22 May 2015).

Akhbar, 21 June 2013; *Al-Monitor*, 18 June 2013. While Hamas was quick to deny these claims,²⁷ with up to 200 of its fighters thought to be actively engaged on the Syrian front (*Middle East Eye*, 22 May 2015), this put Hezbollah and Hamas firmly on opposite sides of the strategic divide.

Although the Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, himself publicly refrained from criticising the movement, when allegations appeared on Iran's *Tabanak* news site implicating Hamas in a series of deadly car bomb attacks in Lebanon (*Al-Monitor*, 22 August 2013),²⁸ in June 2013, Hamas was reportedly given a 48-hour ultimatum to leave Hezbollah's stronghold in the Dahiye (*Al-Montior*, 18 June 2013), with all subsequent security and intelligence co-operation between the two sides effectively suspended (Karmon: 2013: 114). Neither was Iran averse at taking punitive measures against the movement, cancelling a much-anticipated visit by Khaled Meshaal to Tehran in October 2013; continuing to withhold vital aid to Hamas; and increasing its support to Islamic Jihad, in an attempt to build up an alternative receptacle for Palestinian loyalty, one which would owe its complete allegiance to the government of Tehran (*Al Monitor*, 28 October 2013).

²⁷ Hamas official, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013.

²⁸ By the end of the year, these bombings culminated in a double suicide attack, claimed by the al-Qaeda affiliated Abdullah Azzam Brigades, outside the Iranian embassy in Beirut, killing 22 people, including the Iranian cultural attaché, Sheikh Ibrahim Ansari, and wounding more than 140 others (*BBC*, 19 November 2013; *Guardian*, 1 January 2014). In February 2014, a further double suicide bombing, also claimed by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades in retaliation for Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, took place outside the Iranian cultural centre in Beirut, killing eight and wounding 120 others in what was 'the sixth suicide bombing in Lebanon in less than four months' (*The Guardian*, 19 February 2014).

But it was Syria, perhaps unsurprisingly, that demonstrated the greatest level of vitriol towards the movement. In an extraordinary rebuke launched against Hamas in general, and Meshaal in particular, on the Syrian state-sponsored television channel in October 2012, only a day after Meshaal's public appearance at a congress of the ruling AKP party in Turkey, berating Hamas in much the same way that a parent would an ungrateful child (*The New York Times*, 3 October 2012), Meshaal was accused of having a 'romantic emotional crisis' over the suffering of Syrian people, and charged with 'treachery' or 'treason' (*hiana*) for having sold out the 'resistance for power,' with Syria casting itself as the only Arab state that had been willing to take in Hamas after its expulsion from Jordan (*Reuters*, 3 October 2012). In April 2013, following Meshaal's re-election as the head of Hamas' political bureau for an unprecedented fifth term in office, the pro-regime newspaper, *Ath-Thawra* followed suit, accusing Hamas of shifting 'the gun from the shoulder of resistance to the shoulder of compromise' in its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and the so-called moderate Sunni Arab states, sponsors of the Syrian opposition (*The Times*, 5 April 2013). In October, Assad himself publicly took aim at Hamas for the first time in an interview with *Al Akhbar*, claiming that Hamas had 'sided against Syria from day one' in its refusal to condemn the statements of Sheikh Qaradawi, similarly citing the movement's history as 'one of treachery and betrayal' (*Al Akhbar*, 14 October 2013).

Syria's response, however, went beyond merely the rhetorical level. As well as closing down the movement's offices in and around Damascus in November 2012 and seizing its assets (*Reuters*, 7 November 2012), Hamas' existing personnel in Syria were increasingly targeted, with the killing of the Hamas official, Kamal Ghanaja in June 2012, officially attributed to Israel, but widely thought to have been carried out by

Syrian security services (*BBC*, 28 June 2012).²⁹ In June 2013, Hamas' worst fears about the safety and security of the 500,000-strong Palestine community in Syria came to pass with the aerial bombardment and subsequent siege of the Yarmouk refugee camp, home to the largest number of Palestinian refugees living in the country.³⁰ Justified by the regime as a legitimate act of self-defence to flush out rebel fighters from the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra who had sought sanctuary there from the neighbouring districts of Yalda and Tadamon (*The Guardian*, 18 December 2012), in reality, this was more an act of collective punishment, reminiscent of Syria's actions in Tel al-Zaatar (1976), bringing the Palestinian population of Yarmouk to the brink of starvation, and transforming the camp into what UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, described as 'the deepest circle of hell.'³¹ Conversely, in an attempt to burnish its own Arab nationalist credentials, in an altogether familiar strategy of divide and rule, in October 2013, the regime welcomed a historic visit by Hamas' rival and Mahmoud Abbas' personal representative, Abbas Zaki to Damascus,³² bringing an end to over three

²⁹ Also notable was the death in mysterious circumstances of Ahmad Qounita, a member of Hamas' military wing, in December 2012 (Napolitano, 2013:78).

³⁰ In a further atrocity, many of the 41 victims of the Tadamon massacre killed in gruesome circumstances by Branch 227 of the regime's military and intelligence service were also thought to have been Palestinian (*The Jerusalem Post*, 9 May 2022).

³¹ For the full extent of the horrors committed at Yarmouk, see Amnesty International, *Syria: Squeezing the Life Out of Yarmouk: War Crimes Against Besieged Civilians*, 10 March 2014. Accessed at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE24/008/2014/en/>

³² According to the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), 'the centrality of the Palestinian cause and upholding the Palestinian people's legitimate historical rights' would remain the 'country's priority.' See, *Palestinian Media Watch*, 'Abbas Representative Zaki: Attacks on Syria are part of Conspiracy to Divide Arab World,' 8 October 2013. Accessed at: https://www.palwatch.org/pages/news_archive.aspx?doc_id=10388

decades of hostility with the PLO (*Middle East Eye*, 30 June 2015).³³

Phase III: Towards Rapprochement, July 2013- Present

With relations between Syria and Hamas at an all-time low, this should have marked the end of the Axis of Resistance. But the period after July 2013 saw yet another shift in Hamas' position towards Syria with attempts by Hamas to re-establish ties with its former allies.³⁴ Tentative at first, an early indication of this came in a series of meetings between Hamas and senior Hezbollah officials in June 2013, the first such public encounter between the two sides since March 2012 (*Al-Monitor*, 8 August 2013). This culminated in a high-profile meeting between Hamas' representative in Lebanon, Ali Baraka, and Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary-General, Naim Qassem on the 31 July, sponsored by the Iranian Ambassador to Beirut, Ghandanfar Rukun Abadi (*Al-Monitor*, 8 August 2013). Setting aside their previous differences over Syria, all sides agreed on the need to form a common front against Israel, and to 'prevent any attempts to foment Sunni-Shiite strife in Lebanon' which only risked 'dragging Palestinian factions in Lebanon into domestic conflicts' (*The Daily Star Lebanon*, 3 August 2013).

³³ Improved relations between the two sides came in the wake of a conciliatory speech by Abbas to the UN General Assembly in September 2013, in which he failed to hold Assad culpable for the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta and called for a political, rather than a military solution, to the Syrian conflict (*The Times of Israel*, 26 September 2013).

³⁴ It should be stressed however, that even at the height of tensions, a significant faction within Hamas' internal leadership, led by Mahmoud Zahar, was careful to maintain close personal ties with Iran (*Al-Monitor*, 15 July 2013).

Further gestures soon followed. Thus, in an interview with the pro-Syrian Al-Mayadeen channel in October 2013, Hamas' Deputy Chief, Moussa Abu Marzouk, asserted that Khaled Meshaal was 'wrong' to have raised the flag of the Syrian revolution during his historic visit to Gaza in December 2012 (*Al-Monitor*, 21 October 2013).³⁵ While Marzouk was only referring to the literal act of raising the flag, an inadvertent error during an exuberant rally marking the 25th anniversary of the founding of Hamas in which a number of other flags were also raised, subsequent remarks by Marzouk during the course of the interview describing Syria as the 'beating heart of the Palestinian cause,' and acknowledging the previous 'favours' of the Syrian regime towards the movement, seemed to be more indicative of a change in Hamas' stance (*Al-Mayadeen*, 14 October 2013; *BBC*, 8 December 2012; Akhter, 2014).³⁶ By October, even Meshaal himself appeared to backtrack somewhat, stating at a conference on Jerusalem that while Arab peoples have the right to fight for their freedom and independence, this must be a struggle 'far from bloodshed and tribal conflicts,' in reference to the escalating sectarian violence in the Syrian civil war (*YNET News*, 15 October 2013).

³⁵ Defiant comments by Ismail Haniyeh in October stating that 'Hamas does not flirt, nor does it plead with anyone. It does not regret, nor does it apologize, for honorable positions just to placate others' (*Al-Monitor*, 21 October 2013), did not necessarily undermine this growing trend towards rapprochement, but was largely aimed at appealing to Hamas' domestic audience.

³⁶ In addition, in June 2013, Hamas turned down an invitation to attend a conference in support of the Syrian revolution organised by Qaradawi's General Union of Muslim Scholars (*Al-Monitor*, 22 July 2013), and chose to participate instead in a number of events organized by Iran, including rallies to commemorate al-Quds Day, and a 'visit by a Hamas delegation led by Khalil el-Hajj and Ali Moussa, to the tomb of Hezbollah's former military commander, Imad Mughniyeh' (*Al-Monitor*, 8 August 2013).

Given the level of animosity in the previous period, what factors then account for this sudden turn-around in Hamas' position in this the third phase of Hamas' response towards the Syrian uprising? If Hamas' initial response towards the Syrian conflict was largely precipitated by changes in the regional geo-strategic environment, and the success of Sunni Muslim Brotherhood-backed parties brought to power by the events of the Arab uprising, it is possible to argue that it was the very collapse of these governments and the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood movement that led Hamas to once again rethink the nature of its strategic alignments. Above all, it was the dramatic fall of the Morsi government in Egypt in July 2013, in which Hamas had vested its hopes of bringing the movement out of its political and economic isolation, that dealt a devastating blow to the group. With the return of Egypt's secular, pro-Western old guard under General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, almost overnight, Egypt went from being a powerful ally to an implacable opponent (*Al-Monitor*, 20 September 2013).³⁷ Tarnished with the same terrorist brush as the now proscribed Brotherhood movement, many of whose members were arrested or sentenced to death, in a vitriolic campaign of hostility waged by the Egyptian media, Hamas was itself accused of inciting terrorism and said to have been behind a plot to help Morsi to escape from prison at the start of the Egyptian uprising,³⁸ and carrying out an attack at the Kerem Shalom border crossing in the Sinai Peninsula that left 16 Egyptian soldiers dead in August 2012 (*Al-*

³⁷ The death of Morsi in prison on 17 June 2019 removed any last vestiges of hope that Hamas may have had for a return of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (*BBC*, 17 June 2019).

³⁸ In September 2013, Egypt's largest newspaper, *Al-Ahram*, also accused Hamas of carrying out an attempted assassination of Egypt's Minister of Interior (*Reuters*, 12 September 2013).

Monitor, 3 July 2013; Karamon 2013: 116; Seurat, 2022: 105).³⁹

In the subsequent backlash that followed, Hamas was banned as a terrorist movement under an Egyptian court order in March 2014; Hamas' funds were frozen and its headquarters in Cairo closed (*Al-Monitor*, 5 March 2014); and over 13,000 Hamas members who had been granted Egyptian citizenship under Morsi had their citizenships revoked for being 'affiliated' to the now outlawed Brotherhood movement (*Al-Akhabar*, 6 March 2013), including the senior Hamas official in Gaza, Mahmoud Zahar (*Jerusalem Post*, 2 December 2013).⁴⁰ In what was undoubtedly one of the worst acts of collective punishment, by August 2013, the Egyptian authorities had closed down the Rafah crossing,⁴¹ and destroyed over 80 percent, or 1,350 of the tunnels that had been used to smuggle fuel, food, and building materials into Gaza – Hamas' lifeline to the outside world (*Al-Monitor*, 5 March 2014) – transforming the territory into what has often been described as 'the world's biggest open air prison' (Black, 2017: 439; Shitrit and Jaraba, 2013).

For a movement already suffering under the weight of debilitating international sanctions, and still reeling from the aftermath of Israel's Operation Pillar of Defence (November

³⁹ One of the three Hamas members accused by Al-Ahram of carrying out the Sinai attacks was Raed Attar, who was also thought to have been among those responsible for the abduction of the Israeli corporal, Gilad Shalit in 2006 (Seurat, 2022: 105).

⁴⁰ In addition, Egypt reportedly 'refused to renew the residence permit' of Hamas' deputy leader, Musa Abu Marzouk (ICG, 25 March 2014: 14).

⁴¹ According to Donald Macintyre, in the 'first full year of Abdel Fatah el-Sisi's presidency, Rafah was open for just thirty-two days, with average monthly passages falling to 2,396.' This compared to the 40,000 or so people passing through the Rafah crossing a month in 2012 when Morsi was in power (Macintyre, 2017:200).

2012), this brought Gaza's fragile economy to a grinding halt. Absent the lucrative income from its tunnel trade, depriving the Hamas authority of some \$230 million in lost revenue a month from taxes that had been levied on goods passing through these tunnels, forming up to 60 percent of the government's annual income (*Al-Monitor*, 15 July 2013; *The Guardian*, 19 July 2013; ICG: 2014:10; Shitrit and Jaraba, 2013), in January 2014, Hamas found itself once again unable to pay for the salaries of some 50,000 public sector employees for a fourth consecutive month (*The New York Times*, 30 January 2014). Unemployment, already high, soared to a staggering 39 percent, 'the highest level in three years' (ICG, 2014: 10), with around 20,000 workers laid off in the construction industry alone (*The Guardian*, 19 July 2013; *Al-Monitor*, 15 July 2013). Over 80 percent of Gaza's 1.7 million inhabitants were dependent on food aid or humanitarian assistance (*The Guardian*, 22 November 2013), with almost a quarter of the population living below the poverty line (*Al-Monitor*, 10 July 2013). And electricity supply, intermittent at the best of times, became even more precarious with power cuts lasting anywhere between 12 to 18 hours a day (Thrall, 2014), a problem only made worse by the closure of Gaza's one remaining power plant due to a lack of diesel fuel (*The Guardian*, 22 November 2013). This had knock-on effects for all of Gaza's faltering infrastructure, affecting schools, hospitals, and water treatment facilities, with 90 percent of Gaza's aquifer contaminated by raw sewage and untreated pollutants (Thrall, 2014).

Unable to deal with this worsening socio-economic crisis or alleviate the suffering of its own people, this led to an unprecedented wave of opposition against Hamas' rule in Gaza. Manifest in the rise of a new youth movement, the Palestinian Tamrod, or 'Rebellion,' which took its inspiration from the movement of the same name that had helped to bring

down the Morsi government in Egypt, on the 11 November 2013, the group called for a popular protest to bring down the Hamas authority in Gaza, coinciding with the 9th anniversary of the death of the former Palestinian President, Yasser Arafat (*Al-Monitor*, 3 September 2013). Conversely, it was Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority that now seemed to be enjoying a resurgence of popular support. Feted by the international community for whom Abbas constituted a legitimate partner for peace, despite his lack of democratic credentials, Abbas was welcomed by the US with the resumption of peace talks with Israel brokered by the US Secretary of State, John Kerry in July 2013, following the collapse of the previous round of negotiations almost three years earlier in September 2010 (*BBC*, 30 July 2013).⁴²

In this vastly altered geo-strategic environment, neither did Qatar prove to be much of a reliable ally.⁴³ Much of the aid that had been promised to Hamas in 2012 simply failed to materialise (*Christian Science Monitor*, 9 April 2013).⁴⁴ Instead, under enormous pressure from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to relinquish its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, officially designated as a terrorist organisation by these states in 2014 for fear of popular Islamist movements

⁴² Elections for the Palestinian Authority President were last held in January 2005, while elections for the Palestinian parliament, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), were held in January 2006. Although PLC elections were supposed to have been held in May 2021, they were cancelled, yet again, by Abbas after Fatah was on course to lose. No elections have been held at the national level since Abbas unilaterally dismissed the Hamas-led unity government in 2007.

⁴³ As a firm US ally and home to the largest US military base in the region at Al-Udeid, there were always perhaps limits as to how far Qatar could go in support of Hamas (*Al-Monitor*, 22 April 2013).

⁴⁴ According to one report, Qatar failed to provide even '10% of what Syria [had given] ... to the movement between 2000 and 2011' (*Al-Monitor*, 22 April 2013).

challenging their own dynastic political orders (*BBC*, 7 March 2014),⁴⁵ Qatar was forced to scale back the extent of its support for Hamas, reportedly restricting the movements of Khaled Meshaal in the Qatari capital, Doha (*Al-Monitor*, 7 October 2013), and forcing the expulsion of several members of the Brotherhood movement, including its acting head, Mahmoud Hussein in September 2014 (*The Guardian*, 16 September 2014).⁴⁶ With a new leader at the helm, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamid al-Thani, who took over the reins of power following the abdication of his father in June 2013, Qatar seemed to shift its focus very much toward its own domestic political priorities (Neuber, 2014). However, this new re-focus in Qatar's outlook did not just signify the retrenchment of Qatar's regional ambitions, but also implied the pursuit of policies that were in fact inimical to Hamas' very interests.

Acting in its capacity as the head of an Arab League delegation, in a meeting with Kerry in April 2013, Qatar, for example, agreed to the idea of 'mutually agreed land swaps' between Israel and the Palestinians, incorporating for the Israeli state illegal settlements constructed in violation of Article 49 of the fourth Geneva Convention, marking a decisive shift away from the principle of full withdrawal in return for full normalisation that had been enshrined under the 2002 Arab Peace Plan (*Al Monitor*, 13 May 2013). Similarly, Turkey, pre-occupied with its own domestic troubles following the spill over of the Syrian conflict, also appeared to move closer towards Israel, re-establishing diplomatic relations with the Israeli state in a deal brokered by the US in May

⁴⁵ In an unprecedented move, in March 2014, Saudi Arabia joined Bahrain and the UAE in expelling the Qatari ambassador in response to Qatar's alleged 'interference in [the] internal affairs' of regional states (*The Guardian*, 5 March 2014),

⁴⁶ In September 2018, there was no mention of Gaza at all in Qatar's address to the UN (*The Arab Weekly*, 23 June 2019).

2014 that ended a four-year rift over the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident,⁴⁷ without Israel having to first lift its debilitating blockade of Gaza, in an agreement that seemingly abandoned the Palestinian population very much to their own fate (*Al-Monitor*, 15 May 2014).

Isolated abroad and facing mounting pressure at home, Hamas's predicament only encouraged Israel to act with greater belligerence. Taking every advantage of Hamas' regional isolation, in 2013, Israel stepped up its land grab and settlement building activity in the West Bank, fully secure in the knowledge that no Arab state would intervene on the Palestinians' behalf. According to the Israeli anti-settlement lobby, Peace Now, in the first half of the year, the number of illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories increased by a massive 70 percent compared with the same period in the previous year, rising from 992 housing units to 1,708 units (*The Times of Israel*, 17 October 2013). In October, the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, announced the construction of a further 1,500 new homes at Ramat Shlomo in East Jerusalem in a bid to assuage right-wing voters angered at the release of 26 Palestinian prisoners ahead of the resumption of peace talks with the Palestinian Authority (*BBC*, 30 October 2013; *The New York Times*, 30 October 2013).⁴⁸ With the total number of illegal Israeli settlers living beyond the green line increasing at a rate

⁴⁷ This was an Israeli attack on a flotilla carrying 100,000 tonnes of aid to the besieged Gaza Strip in May 2010. Israel's storming of the Turkish vessel left nine dead and at least 50 injured, and was condemned by the UN Human Rights Council for the 'disproportionate' use of force that 'betrayed an unacceptable level of brutality' (*The Guardian*, 31 May 2010; *BBC*, 27 June 2016).

⁴⁸ Prior to this, in December 2012, Israeli authorities had approved the construction of 3000 homes, only a day after a decision by the UN to upgrade the status of the Palestinian entity to non-member observer state (*BBC*, 3 December 2012).

exponentially higher than that of the population of Israel itself (*Haaretz*, 15 December 2013), doubling from 262,500 settlers to 520,000 by September 2013 – twenty years after the signing of the Oslo Accords – ‘including 200,000 in East Jerusalem ... home to more than one-third of all (Israeli) settlers’ (Black, 2017:441), this created new facts on the ground, making it virtually impossible for a moth-eaten Palestinian state to achieve any kind of geographic contiguity.

But it was Israel’s devastating attack on Gaza under Operation Protective Edge on the 8 July 2014 – the third full scale military assault on the territory in only three years – that was intended to deal a decisive blow to the movement, achieving what Israel had failed to achieve with its earlier attack on the territory in November 2012. Ostensibly launched in retaliation for the kidnapping and killing of three Yeshiva students in the occupied West Bank,⁴⁹ which in turn prompted the gruesome murder of the 16-year old Palestinian teenager, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, burned alive by Israeli settlers in a brutal act of revenge (*The Guardian*, 5 July 2014), in reality, Israel’s deadly assault and ground invasion (16 July) was aimed at derailing the Fatah-Hamas unity government announced by Abbas on the 2 June 2014, following the collapse of the latest round of peace talks with Israel.⁵⁰

For Hamas, the costs of the conflict were undoubtedly great. According to the United Nations, some 2,251 Palestinians were killed in the 50 days of fighting, 75 percent of whom

⁴⁹ There was nothing to suggest that Hamas was behind the kidnapping, and Hamas itself denied any involvement. In fact, according to the PA, the abductions were carried out by the Qawasameh clan, a group within Hamas that ‘frequently acted against the party’s policies’ (*Middle East Monitor*, 8 July 2018).

⁵⁰ The government of unity was announced following the signing of the Hamas-PLO reconciliation agreement on the 23 April 2014.

were civilians, including 299 women and 765 children, compared with the total number of Israeli loses of 67 soldiers and 6 civilians (Black, 2017:452).⁵¹ Over 20,000 Palestinian homes were destroyed, reduced to rubble or rendered 'uninhabitable' by Israel air strikes, with a further 500,000 civilians, or a quarter of the entire population, internally displaced by the fighting (*The Independent*, 27 August 2014; Baconi, 2018:215). And with the damage done to the economy, estimated at some \$6 billion, that saw the complete destruction of seventeen out of thirty-two of Gaza's hospitals, twenty-six of its schools, and 30 percent of its water and sewage treatment facilities in the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure intended to bring Hamas to its knees – or what Israeli policy makers euphemistically described as a 'periodic mowing of the lawn' (ICG, 2014a: 4)⁵² – this put Gaza years, if not decades, behind in terms of its development.⁵³

Yet despite the enormous costs of the conflict, far from being defeated, unlike Abbas, whose initial response to the kidnapping of the three Yeshiva students had been to step up security co-operation with Israel, arresting hundreds of Palestinians in the West Bank, including fifty of the 1,027 who had been released in the Shalit deal (ICG, 2014 b: 6-7;

⁵¹ In one of the worst atrocities committed during the conflict, on the 29 July, Israeli forces shelled an elementary school where 3,000 people had sought shelter from the Israeli onslaught, killing twenty civilians, including three children and an UNWRA employee. A similar attack was carried out by Israeli forces less than a week later on an UNWRA school on the 3 August 2014 (Macintyre, 2017: 231-232).

⁵² This mirrored Israeli actions in Lebanon in 2006 under the so-called Dahiye Doctrine.

⁵³ Also targeted were 10 percent of Gaza's factories and many of its high-rise buildings (Macintyre, 2017:234), including an attack on the Basha Tower, one of the tallest buildings in Gaza, a day before the Egyptian-brokered ceasefire on the 26 August (*The Independent*, 26 August 2014).

Thrall, 2014; Thrall, 2014a), Hamas actually emerged from the conflict very much with its reputation intact. Against all odds and with little help from the outside world, during the course of the conflict, Hamas was successfully able to carry out some six tunnel-based operations, penetrating well beyond the 1967 border on four separate occasions (Miller, 2014; *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 July 2014),⁵⁴ and launched over 3,600 rocket attacks,⁵⁵ which, while the majority failed to reach their targets, intercepted by Israel's formidable Iron Dome system,⁵⁶ nonetheless succeeded in causing significant disruption to Israeli society, forcing the closure of Israel's Ben Gurion International Airport for the first time on the 22 July, and bringing about the evacuation of Israeli border settlements in the south, with Hamas continuing its barrage of missiles right until the announcement of a ceasefire on the 29 August (White, 2014:9).⁵⁷ Other firsts included Hamas' use of drones to infiltrate Israeli airspace, and its deployment of a naval unit for the first sea-borne infiltration, all the while preventing Israel's incursion of ground troops deep into the Gaza Strip (*Christian Science Monitor*, 25 July 2014).

And it is this fact alone, Hamas' ability not only to absorb the Israeli aggression, but to go on the offensive, taking the fight

⁵⁴ The most successful of these tunnel-based operations was a surprise attack on an Israeli security post on the 29 July that killed five IDF soldiers, with only one Hamas fighter killed or possibly wounded (White, 2014: 10-11).

⁵⁵ This put some 5 million Israeli citizens within Hamas' reach (*Al-Monitor*, 16 July 2014).

⁵⁶ Israel intercepted 735 rockets fired into its territory (White, 2014:10).

⁵⁷ Hamas rejected an Israeli offer for an early end to the fighting under Israel's so-called 'quiet with quiet' formula, stating that missile attacks would continue until Israel agreed to lift the blockade of Gaza, release Palestinian prisoners, and remove all obstacles to the formation of a Palestinian unity government (*Al-Monitor*, 9 July 2014).

to Israel itself, inflicting ‘six times the number of IDF [casualties]’ than in the previous two rounds of fighting put together (Miller, 2014; *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 July 2014),⁵⁸ that led to Hezbollah and Iran to welcome Hamas firmly back into the resistance fold.⁵⁹ In a rare public address delivered on Jerusalem Day on the 25 July, Nasrallah vowed to provide the Palestinians in Gaza with ‘all means of support’ and to ‘stand behind the Palestinian people and the Palestinian resistance without an exception’ (*The Daily Star Lebanon*, 25 July 2014).⁶⁰ For its part, Iran, keen to shore up its own position against the West ahead of the signing of a nuclear deal with the P5+1 countries (November 2015), welcomed a delegation of Hamas officials to Tehran in December 2014 in a public show of solidarity with the movement (Abdullah 2020: 191). These overtures were reciprocated by Hamas itself, which expressed its condolences to Nasrallah following the death of Jihad Mughniyeh, the son of Hezbollah’s infamous former operations chief, Imad Mughniyeh, and a commander in the Syrian Golan Heights, killed in an Israeli airstrike in January 2015 (*Ynet*, 18 January 2015), with similar sentiments also expressed following the death of Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran’s powerful IRGC-Quds Force, killed in a US drone strike in January 2020, controversially described by Haniyeh as ‘the martyr of Jerusalem’

⁵⁸ Israel lost sixty soldiers compared to the ten killed in 2009, four of whom were killed by ‘friendly fire’ (Thrall, 2014).

⁵⁹ Although it should be stated that Hezbollah and Iran were rather belated in their response towards Israel’s invasion. Perhaps in a sign of residual hostility towards Hamas, Iran only expressed its solidarity with the movement for the first time on the 17 July, almost two weeks after the start of the Gaza war, while Nasrallah spoke to Meshaal a full three days later in a telephone conversation (*Al-Monitor*, 4 August 2014).

⁶⁰ Despite Nasrallah’s rhetoric and repeated requests made by Hamas’ Deputy Leader, Moussa Abu Marzouk, Hezbollah however, failed to open up a second front against Israel as it had done in 2006 (*The Times of Israel*, 30 July 2014).

(*Middle East Eye*, 6 January 2020; *Al-Monitor*, 28 September 2018).

Syria, by contrast, was far more intransigent in its approach. Taking a leaf very much from his father's playbook, just as Hafez-al-Assad had sought to punish the PLO for its refusal to succumb to Syrian diktats in the 1980s, so too did Bashar seek to exact retribution against Hamas for its refusal to support the regime from the very start of the Syrian uprising and openly aligning itself with the Syrian opposition. Speaking at an inaugural address to Parliament following his re-election to the presidency with an improbable 88.7% of the vote on 16 July 2014, Bashar urged a 'distinction between real resistance fighters,' who Syria supports, and amateurs who wear the mask of resistance according to their [own] interests, in order to improve their image or to consecrate their authority,' in reference to Hamas' leadership (*Al-Monitor*, 25 July 2014). In this regard, unilateral gestures made by Hamas, including the replacement of Khaled Meshaal with Ismail Haniyeh as the head of Hamas political bureau in May 2017 (*New York Times*, 2 May 2017),⁶¹ and the removal of all reference by Hamas' to its parent organisation, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood movement in its newly-created policy document, that emphasised the goals of Palestinian nationalism over political Islam (*BBC*, 1 May 2017), while

⁶¹ Meshaal had attracted the particular ire of the Iranian authorities when he failed mention Iran in the list of countries thanked for their support to the resistance in a speech in Doha following the Gaza War on the 28 August 2014, that included Qatar, Kuwait, Turkey, Sudan, Yemen, Algeria, Morocco and Malaysia. Iran was only acknowledged 'in relation to the solidarity it had offered before 2013' (Abdullah, 2020: 192). In what was taken as a further snub to Tehran, in July 2015 Meshaal met King Salman in a visit to Saudi Arabia, which prompted an angry response from the official Iranian News Agency and accusations that Hamas had been asked by Riyadh to contribute fighters in the Saudi-led war against Houthi insurgents in Yemen, claims that Hamas vehemently denied (Seurat, 2022: 98).

important as first steps for improved relations with Syria, were insufficient in themselves to lead to a full restoration of bilateral ties.

Instead, it was only later that there were some signs of a shift in the regime's position. In April 2019, following a statement of support by Ismail Haniyeh that the Golan Heights would always 'remain an integral part of the Syrian territory,' in the wake of US recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the area in a proclamation signed by the US President, Donald Trump, in March 2019 (*BBC*, 25 March 2019; *Al-Monitor*, 3 April 2019),⁶² Hamas' Deputy Leader, Saleh al-Arouri, met with Syrian officials in what was the first public encounter between the two sides since 2011 (*Al-Monitor*, 3 April 2019). While these talks, mediated by Iran and Hezbollah, ultimately failed to make much headway, collapsing in the face of impossible demands set by the Syrian regime for Hamas to relinquish its ties with Turkey and Qatar, that provoked a renewed bout of hostility in the Syrian press, with Hamas denounced as a 'terrorist' organisation with 'Brotherhood blood flowing through its veins' (*The Arab Weekly*, 23 June 2019), Israel's latest 11-day assault on Gaza in May 2021 seemed to bring the two sides closer together. Speaking to a delegation of Palestinian groups in the wake of Israel's brief but brutal bombing campaign, according to reports on the *Al-Mayadeen* channel, on the 20 May, Bashar was said to have praised all Palestinian factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, engaged in the resistance struggle against Israel, and had reportedly left its doors open to *all* Palestinian resistance groups, 'irrespective of their names' (*Al-Monitor*, 29 May 2021). This then created the circumstances for Hamas to move ever closer towards Syria, with reports in June 2022

⁶² Under UN Security Council Resolution 497 passed unanimously in December 1981, Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights was declared 'null and void and without international legal effect' (*BBC*, 2 June 2019).

of Hamas' intentions to re-establish full relations with the Syrian regime following a series of high-profile meetings, that was confirmed by the movement in September 2022 (*Middle East Monitor*, 4 July 2022; *Middle East Monitor*, 16 September 2022).

But if Hamas' motives appear readily apparent, largely driven by changes in the geo-strategic environment,⁶³ what factors account for the shift in Syria's position, and why was the regime more willing to countenance rapprochement with Hamas after May 2021, when it failed to do so earlier? Any attempt to understand Syria's motives has to do with the regime's own security interests. While the Assad regime may effectively have won the war in Syria – in no small part due support from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russian military intervention since 2015 – it has yet to win the peace and is still very much in a vulnerable position. Externally, Israel stepped up its attacks on Syria, carrying out hundreds of airstrikes on Iranian and Hezbollah targets inside the country, undermining Syrian sovereignty with relative impunity, including a missile strike on Damascus Airport in June 2022 (*Al Jazeera*, 11 June 2022; *Al Araby*, 17 June 2022). The US did nothing to rein in its Israeli ally, with the Biden administration still failing to reverse Trump's decision to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, in contravention to international law (*Al Jazeera*, 25 March 2022).⁶⁴ This only

⁶³ Bashar's visit to the UAE in March 2022, in what was his first trip to an Arab state since the start of the Syrian uprising, breaking the diplomatic blockade of the regime (*The Guardian*, 18 March 2022), and Turkey's shift towards greater normalisation with the regime in August, would only have cemented Hamas' decision to follow suit (*The Guardian*, 23 August 2022).

⁶⁴ Neither has the Biden administration reversed Trump's controversial decision to relocate the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May 2018, effectively endorsing Israel's illegal claims to Jerusalem the indivisible capital of the Israeli state. A pledge by Biden to re-open a consulate for

emboldened Israel to act with greater belligerence, with the announcement by the Israeli Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, that Israel would double the number of illegal Israeli settlers living in the occupied Golan Heights from 50,000 to 100,000 with the construction of 7,300 new housing units in December 2021 (*Al Jazeera*, 27 December 2021). All of this, no doubt, gave Syria common cause with Hamas, embroiled in its own struggle against Israeli occupation. And with Arab states – the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco – all rushing to normalise relations with Israel since the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020, and Russia’s retrenchment from the region, refocusing its efforts on the war in Ukraine (February 2022),⁶⁵ Syria needed all of the allies that it could get.⁶⁶ Domestically too, with the regime mired in corruption and economic crisis, turning to Hamas, which had emerged as the principal defender of the Palestinian cause, is a convenient way for the Syrian regime to distract attention away from its domestic problems and flag up its own Arab and Islamic credentials among its predominantly Sunni population.

Palestinian affairs in Jerusalem has yet to be fulfilled (*Al Jazeera*, 20 January 2022).

⁶⁵ It should be noted however, that Russia played an instrumental role in facilitating Hamas’ rapprochement with Syria, which came about after a high-profile visit by a Hamas delegation to Moscow on the 10 September 2022, shortly before Hamas’ official announcement of the restoration of bilateral ties with the Syrian regime. The delegation included Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas’ political bureau, Hamas’ deputy chief, Saleh Arouri, and ‘members of the political bureau, Mousa Abu Marzouq and Maher Saleh’ (*Middle East Eye*, 11 September 2022). Russia’s intervention in strengthening the Axis of Resistance may have come about as a consequence of its own worsening relations with Israel following the fallout of the war in Ukraine (*The Arab Weekly*, 29 August 2022).

⁶⁶ Despite some improvement in Syria’s relations with Sunni states (the UAE and Turkey), Syria is still very much in the diplomatic cold, and has yet to be readmitted into the Arab League, facing as it does continued opposition from Qatar (*The Guardian*, 18 March 2022).

Conclusion

This paper has examined Syria-Hamas relations over the course of the decade. Tracing the evolution of Hamas policy towards the Syrian uprising over three distinct phases, from a position of neutrality in March 2011, to outright opposition (February 2012), Syria-Hamas relations appear to have come full circle with Hamas' attempts to re-establish relations with the Syrian regime since 2013. Various factors account for the shifts in Hamas policy over this period, including issues of identity and geo-strategic concerns. Whether the current phase in Syria-Hamas relations is likely to endure remains uncertain. What is clear though, is that it is certainly in the regime's interest to establish closer ties with Hamas, playing the Palestinian card to bolster its own internal and external position. Hamas, however, would do well to reconsider its decision to re-establish relations, given the risks to its own reputation of aligning with a regime responsible for committing massive human rights violations and the death of hundreds of thousands of its own citizens.

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