# *Syria Studies*

# Interventions and Spillovers:
# *External Aspects of the Syrian Conflict*

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# *Syria Studies*

An open-access, peer reviewed, &
indexed journal published online by:
The Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS)
University of St Andrews

Raymond Hinnebusch (Editor-In-
Chief) _____

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# Preface
## Raymond Hinnebusch

In the first issue of *Syria Studies* to be published in 2022, we are pleased to share several studies that provide important insights on external—regional and international--aspects of the Syrian conflict. They either represent instances in which the conflict spills over, affecting Syria's relations with other regional actors or interventions in the conflict by external actors.

In *Omnibalancing: the case of Hamas and the Syrian Regime* Ashraf Mousa  analyses the relation of Hamas with the regime through the lens of Omnibalancing theory. In *Understanding a Decade of Syria-Hamas Relations, 2011-2021*, Nasrin Akher identifies and explains the key phases and watersheds in the relation of the two. Between them, these two studies provide a thorough analysis of how the negative "spillover" of the Syrian Uprising disrupted a relation that had been a key dimension of the "Resistance Axis," with consequences for the regional balance of power.

The third study looks at two external interventions in the conflict that sought to mediate between the parties, one by the United Nations mediators focused on the Geneva process and one by Russia and its Turkish and Iranian partners in the Astana negotiations. It

compares the differing impacts of two quite different approaches to mediation. This analysis in located within—and throws new light on--the theoretical debates over approaches to mediation.

# 1
# Omni-balancing: the case of Hamas and the Syrian Regime

## Ashraf Mousa

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 se-
vere, 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 re-
gime, 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 Pal-
estinian political scientist, with experience of life in
one of the Palestinian camps in Syria, in which the Pal-
estinian factions were generally active, Hamas in

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[1]For discussion of the reasons behind the division of Palestinian refu-
gees in Syria towards the Syrian revolution see: Mousa, Ashraf, "*Pal-
estinians in the Syrian Uprising: The Situation on the Ground,"* Syria
Studies Journal*,* VOL 11, NO 2, Winter, 2019.

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. David[2], addresses one of the weaknesses inherent in the classic Balance of Power theory. According to David, the Balance of Power theory does not consider the peculiarities of so-called Third World or global south countries. Leaders in such

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

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 Hamas[3]. It is the purpose of this paper to use this ungraded form of omnibalancing to understand the relationship of Hamas and

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[3]For 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.

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 movement[4], 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 there. The regime sought help from external state

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[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/

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.

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[5]The 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 Jibril[6] 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

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

[7]An interview with Ahmed Jibril, Al-Mayadeen TV, 12/2/2020, Accessed 9/9/2013.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqQWvWNAXGA.

[8]At 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 1998[10], 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

[9]Syrian 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.
[10]Yassin 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.
[11]Based 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 Brotherhood[12] 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 regime[13], 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

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[12]When 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.
[13]For 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

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[14]According 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.

[15]This 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 Syria[16] 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

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[16]According 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.

[18]Abu 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

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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.

[19]Assad 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

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

[21]Al-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.

[22]The 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 ideological[23]differences--between an Islamist movement and a secular Arab nationalist regime did not preclude their shared interests,[24]

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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 religioun 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%
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%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8
5%D9%8A/
[24]In 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

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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.

[25]In 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

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[26]See 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-Zaatar[28] in Lebanon and, likewise, the War of the Camps[29] when the Syrian

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[27]For 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.
[28]One 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.
[29]This 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 alledged sectarian character.

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

[30]The 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% 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-Qaradawi[31] 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

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[31]Yusef 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.

[32]Meshaal 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.

[33]Khaled 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.

[34]Although 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.

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

[36]For 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 bombing[38] of Palestinian camps by the regime and demanding that the camps be regarded as neutral and outside the bounds of the conflict[39]. With the growth of the demonstrations, the regime increased pressure on Hamas to take a clear

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[37]A 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]

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[40]The 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.

[41]Khaled Meshaal's statement in an interview on Al-Jazeera, Op.cit, 26 /11/ 2012.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8No8ORHa7ZI.

[42]Abu 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=PLE63F88 2968B9C04C&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]

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[44]Syrian 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.

[45]Later 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 regime[46], 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 neutrality[48] had been exhausted.

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[46]Hamas' 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.
[47]Napolitano, Valentina, Op.cit.
[48]The 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 Iran[49], 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

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

[49]Merisi, 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.

[51]Osama 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

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

[53]In 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.

[54]Marzouq, 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]

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[56]Al-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.
[57]Ibid.
[58]Ghaith, 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.
[59]On 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 Mahmod 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

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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.

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

[61]Khaled Waleed Mahmoud and Adnan Abu Amer*, "ln 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 about[62], 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,

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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 Berline GmbH, Berlin, 2015. P.149.
[63]Saouli, Adham, Op.cit, 2013, PP.41-42.
[64]Thubias, 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

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

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

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[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 -

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[75]Abu 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.

[76]Hamas. *"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.

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[77]Media 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

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[78]Ibid, P.28.
[79]Ibid, 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 reproachment, 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

[80]The 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

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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.

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[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.

# 2
# Understanding a Decade of Syria-Hamas Relations, 2011-2021

## Nasrin Akhter

### 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 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?[82]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

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[82] 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).

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

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,[83] 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).

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

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[83] 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).

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 *Nasksa* 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);[84] 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 it was bound to arrive – Syria' (*Ma'an*, 21

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[84] 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).

December 2011),[85] 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).[86] By April, according to

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[85] 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/

[86] 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).

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 capital, Damascus (*Al-Hayat*, 30 April 2011).[87] 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.[88]

Similarly, on the economic front, Hamas' refusal to submit to Syrian pressure, only brought about negative repercussions that impaired the ability of the

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

[88] 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).

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).[89] 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 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).

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[89] 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).

In view of the very real negative economic and po-
litical 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 an-
swer 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 bru-
tal 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 offi-
cial, had the conflict been between Syria and an ex-
ternal enemy, there is little doubt that Hamas would
have rallied to the aid of its long-term resistance
ally.[90] As it was, the fact that this was a bloody civil
war 'between brothers,'[91] reviving recent memories
of the government's brutal crackdown against Mus-
lim Brotherhood dissent in 1982 – the very move-
ment from which Hamas had its origins – made
Hamas' position increasingly untenable. This di-
lemma was made all the more acute following the
government's brutal crackdown on the Palestinian
community      itself      with      a      massive      naval

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[90] Hamas official, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013.
[91] *Ibid.*

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,[92] 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).

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[92] Hamas official, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013.

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).[93]

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

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[93] 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.

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,[94] reluctant to antagonise the US, still the largest single provider of aid to the Egyptian state (Milton-Edwards, 2013:66),[95] 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,

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[94] 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

[95] US aid to Egypt was worth an estimated \$1.3billion a year.

and the full force of Israel's military-security appa-
ratus on the other (ICG, 2012: 3); and Egypt played
a vital role in attempting to bring about intra-Pales-
tinian 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 in-
terim government of technocrats, without it first
having to accede to any of the demands of the Inter-
national 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 prison-
ers 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),[96] in contrast to the declining fortunes of
Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority which had
lost an 'important ally in Mubarak' (Milton-Ed-
wards, 2013), and suffered a significant blow to its
legitimacy following the publication of the Palestine
Papers (Baconi, 2018: 174),[97] and the failure of

[96] 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).
[97] Published in January 2011 by *Al Jazeera*, the Palestinian Papers
were a trove of over 16,000 leaked documents, that showed just how

Abbas' bid to win international recognition for Palestinian statehood at the UN Security Council (*The Guardian*, 11 November 2011).[98] 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).

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 supressing any opposition to the peace process with the use of violence.

[98] 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).

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 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).[99] 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

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[99] Like the 2011 Cairo agreement however, the Doha Declaration was never put into practice.

2012; Milton-Edwards, 2013:68).[100] 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- Monitor*, 22 March 2012)[101] – 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

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

[101] 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).

Iran and Hezbollah too.[102] 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).[103] 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).[104] Things seemed to take a turn for the worse in May 2013 when Palestinian refugees at the Ain 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

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[102] 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).

[103]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)

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

do little other than increase the suffering of their Sunni Muslim brethren (*The Daily Star Lebanon*, 31 May 2013).[105]

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),[106] 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

[105] 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).

[106] 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).

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 Akhbar*, 21 June 2013; *Al-Monitor*, 18 June 2013. While Hamas was quick to deny these claims,[107] 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),[108] in June 2013, Hamas was

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[107] Hamas official, interview with author, Beirut, November 2013.

[108] 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).

reportedly given a 48-hour ultimatum to leave Hezbollah's stronghold in the Dahiyeh (*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).

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).[109] 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.[110] 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.'[111] 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

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

[110] 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).

[111] 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/

Mahmoud Abbas' personal representative, Abbas Zaki to Damascus,[112] bringing an end to over three decades of hostility with the PLO (*Middle East Eye*, 30 June 2015).[113]

## 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.[114] Tentative at first, an early indication of this came in a series of meetings between Hamas and senior Hezbollah officials in June

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[112] 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

[113] 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).

[114] 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).

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).

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).[115] 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

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[115] 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.

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).[116] 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).

Given the level of animosity in the previous period, what factors then account for this sudden turnaround 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

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[116] 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).

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).[117] 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,[118] and carrying out an attack at the Kerem Shalom border crossing in the Sinai Peninsula that left 16

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[117] 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).

[118] 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).

Egyptian soldiers dead in August 2012 (*Al-Monitor*, 3 July 2013; Karamon 2013: 116; Seurat, 2022: 105).[119]

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-Akhbar*, 6 March 2013), including the senior Hamas official in Gaza, Mahmoud Zahar (*Jerusalem Post*, 2 December 2013).[120] In what was undoubtedly one of the worst acts of collective punishment, by August 2013, the Egyptian authorities had closed down the Rafah crossing,[121] and destroyed over 80 percent, or 1,350 of the tunnels that had been used to smuggle fuel, food, and building

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[119] 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).

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

[121] 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).

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 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).[122]

In this vastly altered geo-strategic environment, neither did Qatar prove to be much of a reliable ally.[123] Much of the aid that had been promised to Hamas in 2012 simply failed to materialise (*Christian Science Monitor*, 9 April 2013).[124] 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 challenging their own

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[122] 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.

[123] 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).

[124] 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).

dynastic political orders (*BBC*, 7 March 2014),[125] 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).[126] 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

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[125] 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),

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

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 2014 that ended a four-year rift over the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident,[127] 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

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[127] 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).

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).[128] With the total number of illegal Israeli settlers living beyond the green line increasing at a rate 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.

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[128] 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).

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,[129] 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.[130]

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 were civilians, including 299 women and 765 children, compared with

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[129] 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).

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

the total number of Israeli loses of 67 soldiers and 6 civilians (Black, 2017:452).[131] 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)[132] – this put Gaza years, if not decades, behind in terms of its development.[133]

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[131] 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).

[132] This mirrored Israeli actions in Lebanon in 2006 under the so-called Dahiye Doctrine.

[133] 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).

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; 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),[134] and launched over 3,600 rocket attacks,[135] which, while the majority failed to reach their targets, intercepted by Israel's formidable Iron Dome system,[136] 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

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[134] 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).

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

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

south, with Hamas continuing its barrage of missiles right until the announcement of a ceasefire on the 29 August (White, 2014:9).[137] 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 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),[138] that led to Hezbollah and Iran to welcome Hamas firmly back into the resistance fold.[139] In a rare public address delivered on Jerusalem Day on

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[137] 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).
[138] Israel lost sixty soldiers compared to the ten killed in 2009, four of whom were killed by 'friendly fire' (Thrall, 2014).
[139] 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).

the 25 July, Nasrallah vowed to provide the Palestin-
ians 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).[140] 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 Jan-
uary 2020, controversially described by Haniyeh as
'the martyr of Jerusalem' (*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

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[140] Despite Nasrallah's rhetoric and repeated requests made by Ha-
mas' 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).

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),[141] and the removal of all reference by Hamas' to its parent

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[141] 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).

organisation, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood move-
ment in its newly-created policy document, that em-
phasised the goals of Palestinian nationalism over
political Islam (*BBC*, 1 May 2017), while important
as first steps for improved relations with Syria,
were insufficient in themselves to lead to a full res-
toration of bilateral ties.

Instead, it was only later that there were some signs
of a shift in the regime's position. In April 2019, fol-
lowing a statement of support by Ismail Haniyeh
that the Golan Heights would always 'remain an in-
tegral 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),[142] 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, ulti-
mately failed to make much headway, collapsing in
the face of impossible demands set by the Syrian re-
gime for Hamas to relinquish its ties with Turkey
and Qatar, that provoked a renewed bout of hostil-
ity in the Syrian press, with Hamas denounced as a

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

'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 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,[143] what factors account for the shift in Syria's position, and why was the regime more

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[143] 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).

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).[144] This only 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

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

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),[145] Syria needed all of the allies that it could get.[146] 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

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[145] 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).

[146]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).

problems and flag up its own Arab and Islamic credentials among its predominantly Sunni population.

## 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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The Independent
The National
The New Arab
The New Republic
The New York Times
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The Times of Israel
Ynet News

# 3
# Mediation in Syria: A Comparative Analysis of the Astana and the Geneva Processes[147]

# Magali Michiels and Zafer Kızılkaya[148]

## Introduction

This paper compares and contrasts the UN-led Geneva process and the Astana framework on three key dimensions: inclusivity, leverage and strategy. The Astana talks included more militarily relevant actors, both locally and regionally. In terms of strategy, it focused on conflict management. The hard power of the Astana trio provided the leverage to dictate the conditions on the battlefield which led to a frozen conflict situation.

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[147] A working version of this article was presented and published at the proceedings of the 4th International Academic Conference on Research in Social Sciences in Barcelona, Spain on 10 December 2021 Available at: https://www.dpublication.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/45-5094.pdf

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Contrastingly, the Geneva process initially excluded a key actor, Iran, and focused on regime change. Later, the UN mediators prioritized conflict settlement geared at positive peace. Without a clear mandate and external leverage, however, the UN-mediation has increasingly been side-lined by the Astana process. This paper argues that the UN needs to enhance its capability leverage in order to remain credible in conflict resolution. Moreover, on the dimension of inclusion, the UN has to define more precise conditions for involving the relevant actors.

The Syrian civil war entered its twelfth year in March 2023. For more than a decade, the country has been torn between the government led by President Bashar al-Assad and numerous armed militias supported by different regional and global powers. The destruction and violence caused by the war, together with human rights violations by the regime and extremist groups like Daesh, have taken a high toll. The conflict is estimated to have caused nearly half a million battle-related deaths and resulted in the displacement of more than half of the Syrian pre-war population (Asseburg, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2019; Lundgren, 2019).

Conflict resolution attempts to prevent, contain, reduce or end the violence in Syria started from the very beginning of the conflict. To avert a security and humanitarian crisis, the Arab League proposed peace plans at the end of 2011 without achieving much success (Lundgren, 2019). Due to internal disagreement on the

fate of Assad – which would become a thread throughout all successive mediation attempts – the League called upon the United Nations (UN) to take over (Lundgren, 2015; 2016; 2019). Since 2012, four UN special envoys, i.e., the UN mediators, have been in charge of coordinating international efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis. On a parallel track, since 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey have engaged in the Astana process to manage the conflict in line with their own national security interests.

The mediation literature is replete with studies that summarize, analyse, and assess different peace-making efforts in Syria. The methodology has been either to provide an analysis of the initiatives, opportunities or challenges within a selected time period (Lundgren, 2016; 2019), or to focus on the characteristics and effectiveness of a specific mediation framework (Hill 2015; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Asseburg, 2018; Talukdar & Anas, 2018; Cengiz, 2020; Abboud, 2021) or to delve into certain terms/concepts that relate to the mediation theory – consent (Hellmüller, 2021), ceasefires (Sosnowski, 2020), and inclusion of civil society (Helmüller & Zahar, 2019). This paper adopts a comparative approach by examining and contrasting the UN-led Geneva process and the Astana framework. The objective is to contribute to the literature on mediation effectiveness by adopting a comparative approach and by focusing on three key determinants: inclusivity, strategy and leverage.

The UN mediators are guided by the Geneva Communiqué (United Nations General Assembly Security Council, 2012) and the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), which call for the cessation of violence, a political transition and the establishment of an inclusive government that would 'exercise full executive powers' (United Nations General Assembly Security Council, 2012). However, due to differentiating visions within the UNSC – in particular, the US and Russia being at loggerheads on what a political transition in Syria should or would entail – no tangible progress has been made in realizing a 'Syrian-led and owned' political process (UN News, 2021a). As the room of manoeuvre for the UN mediators is essentially determined by the UNSC, the disagreement within that entity left them without any leverage to take coercive measures.

Unlike the UN-led Geneva process, the Astana framework has provided leverage in the mediation attempts primarily due to the military presence of the trio – Russia, Iran and Turkey – on the Syrian battlefield. Owing to this leverage, they were able to establish four de-escalation zones, provide relative stability in them and restrain the use of force by the conflicting sides (Lundgren, 2019). Nevertheless, the Astana process failed to achieve a durable peace in Syria and has been criticized by the international community for serving as a means to prolong the life of the Syrian regime (Asseburg, 2018; Lundgren, 2019; Interview Yüksel; Talukdar & Anas, 2018).

While no permanent solution has been found to the Syrian crisis, the mediation efforts achieved a certain level of success by enabling temporary ceasefires and providing conditions for the continuity of humanitarian assistance. Since 2019, the UN's fourth Special Envoy has focussed his efforts on enabling the Constitutional Committee. The Committee consists of delegates representing the government, the opposition, and the civil society. It is considered to be a first step in further political process as it aims to come up with a new constitution that is drafted by the Syrians. As of August 2022, eight rounds of negotiations took place without any positive outcome due to the disagreement on the core principles and the way forward for building a new Syria (Anatolian Agency, 2022).

The existence of two parallel tracks, Geneva and Astana, has been criticized by some for undermining and obstructing each other (Asseburg, 2018; Lundgren, 2019). Nevertheless, as witnessed in the creation of the Constitutional Committee, which originated in the talks of the Astana trio and was then facilitated by the UN special envoy, the two processes have also contributed to paving the way for achieving some common objectives. Moreover, both platforms rely on the same UN documents, i.e., the Geneva Communiqué and the UNSC Resolution 2254. To assess whether the Astana trio's efforts undermine or advance the UN efforts, this study looks into the differences between the two processes. The paper is centred around the research question: *'How does the Astana process differ from the*

*Geneva process and what lessons could be drawn from the Astana example to improve the effectiveness of the UN mediation?'*

The paper is structured as follows. First, it explains the concept of mediation in peace studies and details the main characteristics of successful mediation. Then, it develops a framework to use in the comparison of the Astana and Geneva processes. Here, the study relies on and extends the current research which provides several criteria to measure the effectiveness of international conflict mediation, and then utilizes three major attributes: leverage, inclusivity and strategy. The paper concludes by highlighting the key challenges awaiting the international community in finding a durable solution to the Syrian conflict and reflects on the potential lessons provided by the contrasting experiences of Astana and Geneva.

## Mediation in Peace Research

Mediation is a technique for settling conflict – from neighbourhood or family disputes to interstate war – that has been in use for ages. Since the Cold War, it has become a more prominent feature of international conflict management (Asseburg, 2018; Butler, 2009). Exemplifying this is the significant increase in the budget of the UN Department of Political Affairs, which handles most of the UN mediation efforts (Lundgren, 2016). But how can we define mediation and what exactly are the principles of effective mediation that can guarantee or predict a successful outcome?

Unfortunately, there are no definitive responses to these questions. On the concept of mediation, there is not a single definition that scholars can agree upon.

Bercovitch, Anagnoson and Wille understands mediation as 'a form of conflict management where disputants seek the assistance of, or accept an offer of help from an individual, a group, state, or organization to settle their conflict or resolve their differences without resorting to physical force' (1991, p. 8). Likewise, the UN distinguishes mediation from other forms of third-party involvement in conflicts because it does not rely on direct force and ideally demands the consent of the parties involved in the dispute (United Nations, 2012). Nevertheless, involvement through physical or direct force does not prevent mediation. Svensson even argues biased, or 'power' mediators are more effective because of their ability to exert pressure and coerce the involved parties into making concessions compare to more 'pure' mediators (2007). While pure mediators such as small or distant states or international, regional, or non-governmental organizations do not have a direct stake in the conflict, power mediators like great powers, colonial states or neighbouring nations have higher stakes hence they have the incentive to be more active in mediation attempts to safeguard their interests (Svensson, 2007). In the end, both types of mediators try to come up with a solution that the conflicting parties cannot find on their own, by facilitating or improving communication (Kelman, 2007; Zartman, 1995a; Zartman & Touval, 2007).

Just as there is not one definition of mediation, there is not a single objective. One can distinguish between two broad strands: namely conflict management and conflict resolution. The first focuses on the cessation of violence, whereas the latter prioritizes finding political solutions that respond to the root causes of the conflict (Kelman, 2007; Bercovitch, 2011; Butler, 2009; Susskind & Babbit, 1992). Practically, without addressing the underlying problems that initiate violence, it is not easy to establish a durable peace. Strategies that concentrate on conflict management rather than conflict resolution risk creating protracted conflicts that last for generations (UN News, 2021b).

Most often, a peace agreement stipulates the cessation of violence and provides solutions for the roots of the conflict. Establishing such an agreement, however, is not an easy task. According to Zartman (1995b), it requires both a policy of recognition and a policy of dialogue adopted by the mediators: recognition in the sense that the conflicting parties need to recognize each other as legitimate actors to engage with each other, and a dialogue that seeks to address the root causes of the conflict.

Establishing a peace agreement is one thing, getting it implemented is another. A peace agreement might look very good on paper but if it is not applied on the ground or not adhered to, it is not very pertinent. This mostly happens in a complex and insecure context characterized by strong distrust and wariness among the warring parties. To make sure the conflicting parties do not

resort to force again, the mediator must provide some guarantees to ensure adherence. These may involve the deployment of peacekeeping or third-party military troops or the enforcement of trade or economic sanctions (Bercovitch & Simpson, 2010).

Considering the difficulty in achieving peace agreements and implementing them, how can we ensure that conflict resolution attempts restrain or end violence; deal with the root causes of the disputes; and pave the way for a peaceful future? How can we make sure mediation can play a role in responding to these challenges by applying a sensible set of criteria? More importantly, what are the key attributes of successful mediation?

### *Conditions for Effective Mediation*

The assessment on the success of any mediation attempt is related to the expectations and objectives associated with the particular mediation mission (Bercovitch, 2011). When a complete resolution is expected, a conflict settlement or the cessation of violence might be considered as a failure. Susskind and Babbitt (1992) identify successful mediation as the cessation of violence, coming to an agreement with all parties, the implementation of the agreement and improved relations among the previously warring parties. In reality, it would be complicated to achieve even one of these four elements. The mediator's success in realizing all or a combination of them, nonetheless, will reduce the likelihood of a relapse into violence and ensure the sustainability of post-conflict peace.

In the evaluation of international conflict mediation, different criteria have been offered or utilized by the international organizations and the scholars in the field. The *UN Guidance for Effective Mediation* (2012) lists the following fundamentals to ensure effectiveness in mediation: 'preparedness; consent; impartiality; inclusivity; national ownership; international law and normative frameworks – the mandate; coherence, coordination and complementarity of the mediation effort; and quality peace agreements'. Bercovitch (1991) identifies the contextual variables of 'the nature of the parties; the nature of the dispute; and the nature of the mediator' and adds the process variable of 'strategies of mediation' as the determinants of fruitful mediation. Mancini and Vericat (2016) assess the effectiveness of UN mediation in Libya, Syria and Yemen based on the five key challenges faced by the mediators: 'mandate; impartiality and inclusivity; entry and consent; strategy; and leverage'. The same five features are utilized by Hinnebusch and Zartman (2016) in their analysis of the UN mediation in Syria during the terms of the first two UN special envoys: Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi. This paper builds on these dimensions, explores other factors such as the characteristics of the mediator, adds an analysis of the period under the leadership of the third and fourth UN envoys, Staffan de Mistura and Geir O. Pedersen, and examines the Astana process in comparison to the UN-led Geneva process.

The first attribute that affects mediation outcome is the *mandate* which embodies 'the power or authority to

perform various acts or duties' given by the authorizing agency to the mediator (Nathan, 2018, p. 319). The mandate encompasses the goal of the mediating mission that has been set by the authorizing agency – and hence determines the room of manoeuvre of the mediator (United Nations, 2012; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). The UNSC, for example, prescribes the mandate for UN mediators and indicates which decisions or steps taken by the mediator will be supported (Butler, 2009).

The second feature is the *strategy*. Deciding on a strategy entails deciding on which course of action to follow to achieve the prescribed goal in the mandate. The strategy of a mediator often aims at either the cessation of violence – to facilitate trust-building – or to reach a peace agreement, as a means to stop the violence (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). The type of mediator – i.e., an individual, a state, or an international organization – and the capabilities at its disposal may have an impact on the strategy adopted (Asseburg, 2018; Svensson, 2007). A smaller state or organization will rely more on a bottom-up approach through establishing trust and enhancing the perceived impartiality at the local level. Big powers or organizations, on the other hand, will rely more on a top-down strategy by exerting international pressure to force concessions by the parties to the conflict.

The role of the mediator can also be examined under the dimension of strategy (Butler 2009). Zartman and Touval (1985) identify three distinct types of roles:

communicator, formulator and manipulator, respectively, approaches ranging from passive to more active. The communicator role is concerned with facilitating communication through bringing parties together and planning interaction. A formulator goes further than this by controlling the information shared with the negotiating parties as well as the international media. Where a formulator can control information, a manipulator actively shapes the content. A manipulator directs the mediating effort by shaping and changing the expectations of the parties involved through substantive suggestions that allow for a conducive environment for progress (Zartman & Touval, 1985).

The roles in mediation and hence the strategy employed by the mediating party are not limited to the above-mentioned three types. Bercovitch (2011) mentions additional roles such as the bearer of bad news, translator, educator, resource expander, agent of reality and scapegoat. The role of bearer of bad news, for example, can be implemented in a passive way by simply transferring the difficult messages between the sides, or can happen in an active manner in which the mediator filters information, chooses messages to deliver and exerts pressure (Perez, 1959). Serving as a scapegoat makes it possible to lower the tensions by diverting blame that would have gone to the other warring party and augments the chances for the continuation of the talks between the different sides (Polley, 1989).

The third dimension is the initiation of mediation, which points to the *timing of mediation* efforts and

relates to the consent given by the conflicting parties (Bercovitch, 2011; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). Bercovitch (2011) found that the ideal timing to initiate mediation is halfway through the lifecycle of a conflict. Zartman (1995a) mentions ripeness instead of timing. A conflict can be considered as 'ripe' when there is a mutually hurting stalemate that can be signalled by a bloody standoff leading to rising costs, the loss of foreign support, increasing foreign pressure, etc. This ripeness does not guarantee successful mediation, but it does guarantee an opening for a potential agreement to be established (Zartman, 1995a). A mutually hurting stalemate is seldom clearly perceived by the conflicting sides. Therefore, the mediator may need to raise awareness and convince the warring parties of the benefit of a peaceful mediated solution instead of a prolongation of violence that seeks an unrealizable one-sided victory (Zartman 1995a).

The conflict parties' decision to enter into negotiations and their consent or willingness to cooperate with the mediator increases the chances of achieving a more favourable outcome. Bercovitch (2011) found that mediation attempts were successful 62.3% of the time when mediation was requested as a voluntary process by both parties, whereas it was only successful 41.3% of the time when it was requested by only one party. Ideally, the mediator should seek a joint request/consent from all conflicting parties before initiating mediation (Bercovitch, 2011; Zartman, 1995a). A joint request,

however, rarely happens. To bring the different parties to the table, some external pressure might be necessary.

This external pressure in mediation is known as *leverage*, i.e., the fourth dimension, and is the means of power or persuasion of a mediator. Zartman and Touval (1985) indicate two sources of leverage: power or persuasion, corresponding with Nye's (2004) distinction between hard and soft power. Reid (2017) develops this further by renaming these two sources of leverage as capability leverage and credibility leverage.

Capability leverage is associated with the hard power or coercion the mediator could apply in order to 'alter the costs of non-agreement and expand the number of mutually acceptable alternatives to fighting' (Reid, 2017, p. 10). Credibility leverage, on the other hand, consists of three components: historical ties, cultural ties and offering post-agreement monitoring – and as such corresponds with soft power or persuasion (Reid, 2017). Capability leverage can contribute to short-term success by increasing the cost of non-compliance whereas credibility leverage alters the incentives for compliance and thereby may lead to a more durable peace (Reid, 2017). Similarly, Svensson (2007) argues that more powerful mediators relying on their capability leverage are better at achieving an agreement. This is opposite to Bercovitch, Anagnoson and Wille's understanding of mediation who do not see a role for physical force and only focus implicitly on credibility leverage (1991). Ideally, both forms should be combined as the first allows for a better climate resulting in

political and/or territorial power-sharing agreements, while the latter ensures pressure and compliance conducive to military pacts (Svensson, 2007).

Relying extensively on capability leverage may create perceptions of lacking in *impartiality*, the fifth key challenge that affects mediation outcome. Being impartial implies being neutral or without having any stake in the continuation of violence. Yet, being impartial should not serve as a prerequisite for all mediation attempts. In some circumstances, having an appetite for involvement and an interest in mediation can increase the likelihood of success. It might increase the motivation and the commitment of the mediating party to the process and the outcome – and according to Svensson even increases the quality of an agreement (2007; Butler, 2009; Clayton & Gleditsch, 2014; Zartman & Touval, 1985).

Impartial mediators establish agreements quicker than biased ones as their only interest is to end the war. For biased mediators, their interests are rather different. They need to balance between concessions and gains and since no one likes to compromise on one's interests, this entails a lengthy and arduous process. Therefore, while having biased mediators might prolong the agreements for peace, their inclusion could increase the quality and enhance peace and democratic development in the long term (Svensson, 2009). Reid (2017) confirms that biased mediators are more effective than unbiased ones. In civil wars, biased or powerful mediators can strengthen the position of the weakening side,

put pressure on their favourable side and enhance commitment to conflict resolution attempts. According to Svensson (2007), this has particularly been the case for mediations that favour the government side, whereas no similar impact is found in opposition- or rebel-biased mediations.

Independent of the inclination for or against a particular party or position, it is necessary for the mediator to demonstrate a level of perceived impartiality. In the end, the mediating party should generate an outcome that is acceptable to all sides of the conflict (Zartman & Touval, 1985). The mediator should prioritize managing the conflict or settling the disputes over realizing its own interests. By demonstrating technical impartiality, mediators can come up with solutions that are acceptable to all conflicting parties without leading to a definitive gain or victory for one of the sides (Butler, 2009).

*Inclusivity* is one other key factor that influences mediation outcome. It deals with the questions of who should be represented in and who should be excluded from the peace talks. The mediating party has a key role in decisions about representation at the negotiation tables; however, due to the highly internationalized nature of contemporary conflicts, unilateral decisions taken or dictated by the mediators are becoming increasingly rare (United Nations General Assembly, 2012). The international organizations and the UNSC have a dominant position in the choices about inclusion. Likewise, regional powers and external patrons that have intervened and supported local parties in the

conflict influence the setup at the negotiation tables (Asseburg, 2018; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Zartman, 1995b).

The scholarly debate is inconclusive on which kind of actors should be involved for concluding peaceful solutions. Some argue for only including a limited set of local actors since having too many actors with diverging interests may lead to an impasse at the negotiation tables (Asseburg, 2018; Bercovitch, 2005). By contrast, others contend that inclusive mediation has a higher likelihood of success (Zartman, 1995b; Cengiz, 2020). An inclusive process is believed to have higher chances of identifying and addressing the root causes of the conflict and satisfying the demands of all segments of the population that is affected by the violence (United Nations General Assembly, 2012).

A critical challenge for inclusion is to decide which local actors to invite to the negotiations. Military strength or relevance is an important determinant since the mediation process is highly influenced by the realities on the battle fronts (Asseburg, 2018; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Lundgren, 2016). Yet, judgements based solely on military strength can be misleading and unfair. They could signal that violence pays off and risk ruling out major stakeholders without weapons. Moreover, the groups that take up arms do not necessarily prioritize responding to the legitimate claims or needs of the wider population. The involvement of civil society is therefore crucial. It provides the internal legitimacy by representing a broader section of the

population, which often leads to the international legitimacy of the mediation process itself (United Nations General Assembly, 2012).

The rise of extremist or terrorist groups is also complicating the decisions on inclusion. The international community mostly holds on to its policy of non-engagement with radical or terrorist groups even though they are often relevant military actors. Their exclusion from negotiations has the potential to produce resentment and resistance against any established peace agreement or ceasefire (Asseburg, 2018; Simons, 2021; Zartman, 1995b). Furthermore, they can also act as spoilers and prefer to continue violence if they feel threatened and fear losing power as a result of the implementation of an agreement.

In addition to the above-mentioned six important dimensions that determine the success of mediation, other parameters such as conflict intensity; disunity within the opposition; the ethnic, sectarian or religious identities of the conflicting parties; and the conflict issues or incompatibilities play a determinant role in the success of the mediation processes and outcomes (Bercovitch, 2011; Clayton & Gleditsch, 2014). Nevertheless, as Clayton and Gleditsch contend, 'peace agreements are often attributed to the tireless efforts of diligent mediators […] rather than the structural conditions that facilitated the onset of the process' (2014, p. 279). Structural factors might shape the willingness to participate in mediation but the personality and the skills of the mediating party as well as the strategy and

resources it utilizes play a vital role in influencing mediation outcomes (Clayton & Gleditsch, 2014).

This brings us a final dimension to assess mediation efforts: the **mediator itself**. The mediator must have a certain set of skills and commitment to ensure effective mediation (Zartman, 1995b). In addition to knowledge about conflict and an ability to comprehend the positions of the main antagonists, several other attributes are identified as ideal for a mediator to possess such as active listening; communication and procedural skills; intelligence; a sense of humour; trust; credibility; and crisis management skills (Wehr, 1979; Bercovitch, 1991; Bercovitch & Houston, 2011). Bercovitch (2011) highlights the importance of a mediator's rank as he argues that the higher the rank, the more potential leverage a mediator can exert. While all these attributes are important, what ultimately influences the success or failure of a particular mediation attempt are the conflicting parties' acceptance of mediation and their commitment to reaching an agreement (United Nations, 2012).

## Mediation in the Syrian Crisis

The Syrian civil war proved to be an extremely difficult conflict to mediate: a fractured opposition with leaders in exile, highly internationalized characteristics of the conflict with the armed intervention of several regional and global powers, and the deepening sectarian divides which have impeded constructive talks between the warring sides (Lundgren, 2015; Asseburg, 2018). The original peace initiative of the Arab League did not last

long. At present, the diplomatic track to resolve the Syrian crisis follows two major paths: one led by the UN and the other by the trio of Russia, Iran and Turkey.

The *Geneva* process is the name for all the UN-mediation attempts since 2012. Initially, due to the antagonism against the Syrian regime shared by the Western and Arab countries as well as Turkey, the peace talks focussed on establishing a transitional government – essentially dictating the removal of Bashar al-Assad, which obstructed the progress of the peace talks. Despite his reputation as a skilled and experienced diplomat, Kofi Annan, the first UN mediator, was viewed by the Syrian government as not impartial. What contributed more to the distrust of the pro-regime camp was the non-inclusion of Iran in the Geneva peace negotiations.

Additionally, the conflict was not yet considered ripe when Annan started his mediation efforts in February 2012. The Syrian regime maintained its position to view all opposition as terrorists that needed to be defeated. When Damascus lacked the resources to fight, it received support from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. The opposition, on the other hand, insisted on the removal of Assad and on the fulfilment of a political transition. It held onto optimism around a military victory (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). The UN's strategy especially during the terms of the second and third special envoys, Brahimi and de Mistura, focused on ripening perceptions of a mutually hurting stalemate, but to no avail. Both envoys also tried to enforce some leverage

by trying to create unity in the international community and specifically between the US and Russia (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). Nevertheless, these efforts made little progress, resulting in the resignation of both Brahimi and de Mistura, following in the footsteps of the former UN mediator, Kofi Annan.

Following its heavy military involvement in the Syrian conflict after September 2015, Russia initiated the parallel track of *Astana* – together with the two other major armed actors, Iran and Turkey – because of its dissatisfaction with the UN process and its willingness to lead the diplomatic efforts. Initially, the Astana process focused primarily on establishing ceasefires and resolving the disputes on the battleground. Increasingly, it became a political platform that tried to bring together the regime and selected opposition groups. Ankara's support for the process has mitigated the doubts and distrust among the Syrian opposition towards the pro-regime camp, Russia and Iran in particular. Despite the criticism about contradicting or derailing the Geneva process, the Astana trio insisted on the fact that they were guided by the same UN documents, i.e., the Geneva Communiqué and the UNSC Resolution 2254.

How exactly does the Astana process differ from the UN-led mediation framework? In what ways has it produced more concrete, favourable or unfavourable results in resolving the conflict or settling the disputes? Among the seven criteria listed in the literature review, *inclusivity*, *leverage and strategy* have been the most significant factors that created differences in the

processes and outcome of the Geneva and Astana frameworks. The impacts of *mandate and the mediator characteristics* have become visible in the capability leverage and strategies of the mediators whereas the attribute of *impartiality* has been linked to the credibility leverage enjoyed by the mediators.

Concerning the dimension of *timing*, different from the UN-led process that began with the onset of war, the Astana process was initiated after 5 years of heavy conflict and after Russia's intense militarily intervention, which completely altered battlefield dynamics. Additionally, the groups that gave their *consent* for the two processes differed in some ways. The government of Assad had ostensibly agreed to UN mediation, some opposition groups also accepted and called for UN mediation – however the Syrian government and various opposition factions acted in ways that undermined the Geneva process. On the contrary, the Astana process was welcomed by the Syrian government and due to the inclusion of a greater diversity of opposition groups and with Turkey's primary role at the table, the Astana platform garnered the support of a broader of the Syrian opposition.

In the Geneva and Astana peace initiatives, different actors are represented at the diplomatic tables, creating differences on *inclusivity*. As Astana is organized by the three most relevant external military actors, they are able to exert *leverage* on the conflicting parties. The UN mediation, on the other side, had only a limited UNSC mandate, restricting the leverage that could be

employed by the mediators. Lastly, *strategies* adopted in the two mediation platforms are not the same. The Geneva process has focused more on the political issues and has sought to address the root causes of the conflict whereas the Astana process has prioritized conflict management by creating de-escalation zones, geared at the cessation of hostilities between the fighting groups. The following sections will compare the Geneva and Astana platforms according to these three key criteria, namely, *inclusivity* (at international, regional and local levels), *leverage and strategy*.

## Inclusivity

Inclusivity is all about who gets to sit at the negotiation table. Ideally, the mediator who is assigned to find a peaceful solution should determine who needs to be included or excluded. In reality, however, this is prone to political cherry-picking, interference from third parties and reconcilement of interests (United Nations General Assembly, 2012). It is critical for the mediating party to involve relevant local, regional and international actors without overloading the process and complicating decision making. Research has suggested that a higher inclusivity has a higher probability of success (Cengiz, 2020). Yet, a higher inclusivity brings the challenge of reconciling divergent interests, restraining possible spoilers, and demonstrating creativity in the formulation of common principles or positions that actors at three different levels can agree on: international, regional and local (Bercovitch, 2005).

*The International Level*: In the Syrian conflict, the organizing actor of the Geneva process, the UN, receives its mandate from the UNSC. Despite the presence of regime supporters Russia and China in the UNSC, the Geneva process is predominantly perceived as a Western-led process. The initial emphasis on a transitioning governing body, the presence of the EU's High Representative, and the US' and Saudi's reluctance to invite Iran contributed to this stance.  It took until 2015 for Iran to be invited despite its military boots on the ground and its intervention via Hezbollah.

Basing their political propaganda on anti-Westernism, challenging the dominance of the West in international diplomacy and more importantly, realizing the ineffectiveness of the Western-led efforts in dealing with the Syrian crisis, Russia, Iran and Turkey started and pursued their own diplomatic track, the Astana process, in 2017. Despite the trio's denial of having ulterior motives, the Astana framework has largely been considered as a way for Moscow to circumvent the UN and the US in steering the political process in Syria (Asseburg, 2018; Cengiz, 2020; Lundgren, 2019; Simons, 2021; Talukdar & Anas, 2018; Thépaut, 2020). To address criticismover the issue, Russia extended an invitation to the US and the UN. The US has participated in an observer status, the UN mediators have been represented, and they have consulted the organizing actors both separately and collectively (Lundgren, 2019). Moreover, the Astana process has confirmed its commitment to the Geneva Communiqué and UNSC

Resolution 2254, the guiding documents for UN mediation, to enhance a 'Syrian-led and Syrian-owned' political transition (United Nations General Assembly of the Security Council, 2012).

At the international level, the Astana framework was more effective in satisfying the demands of the key conflicting parties and stakeholders. From the opposition's angle, lacking the required Western support to defeat Assad, Astana gave them a chance to remain relevant despite military losses. On the side of Damascus, the process created an opportunity to reclaim credibility in the eyes of the international community and to demonstrate its willingness to become part of a political solution. Finally, in the view of guarantors, the trio, Astana provided the means to increase leverage, strengthen their position at the negotiation table and to prove to the international community that they were the only ones who could curtail the violence in Syria (Cengiz, 2020).

*The Regional Level*: If military relevance would be the criterium to decide who gets to participate in mediation, the Astana process would score better theoretically than the process of Geneva. Initially, Iran, a key supporter of the regime, was excluded from the Geneva talks. Being a close ally of the Syrian regime and exerting significant influence on decision making in Damascus, Iran had no incentive to comply with something that it did not work on or agree with (Asseburg, 2018; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Lundgren, 2016). Recognizing the mistake in the exclusion of a crucial

regional actor, the UN eventually invited Iran to the Geneva talks despite the reluctance from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries which were more "concerned with weakening the regime in Tehran than displacing the one in Damascus" (Lund, 2013).

In its selection concerning involvement of regional actors, Russia considered military relevance and boots on the ground as the primary condition in the Astana framework. By inviting both Tehran and Ankara, Moscow aspired to reflect an image of a neutral mediating party despite its strong support in favour of the Syrian regime. It was in Russia's interest to portray its efforts as having the good intention to balance the demands from the two major conflicting parties, the regime and the opposition. Instead of directly engaging with the conflicting parties, Moscow preferred a framework that put Tehran and Ankara at the negotiating table. Together with Hezbollah, Iran played a critical role in keeping Assad in power. Inviting Turkey and giving it a crucial role ensured the participation of a broader camp of oppositional armed groups and caused the mediation process to be perceived as less biased (Cengiz, 2020; Dalay, 2021). It also enabled Russia to delegate all the troubles to Turkey concerning the necessity to deal with the radical groups in north-western Syria.

*The Local Level*: Including the relevant parties at the local level proved difficult due to the fragmentation of the opposition, a lack of civil society representation and the existence of several terrorist organizations. Within the framework of the Geneva process, UN

mediators tried different strategies to respond to the fractured nature of the Syrian opposition. They encouraged the establishment of umbrella organizations for the opposition to channel their demands through, such as the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SNC) and the High Negotiations Committee (HNC). While these organizations usually received legitimacy from abroad, they did not have much relevance among the Syrian population (Cengiz, 2020; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). They were composed of leaders who lived abroad and thus were not representative of the armed groups that continued fighting on Syrian soil. Moreover, there was a hesitation on the UN side about including Salafist groups that were not labelled as terrorists but were approached with caution due to their fundamentalist religious views.

The Astana process, on the other side, prioritized military relevance when it came to representation of the opposition. In the view of Cengiz, Astana managed to 'bring together the oppositional figures fighting on the ground, rather than actors from outside the area who are detached from the realities on the ground' (2020, p. 11). In the later stages of the civil war and particularly after its first military intervention on Syrian soil in August 2016, Ankara became the main actor in organizing both the political and the military structure of the Syrian opposition, hence its inclusion in the Astana talks. Moreover, the Astana framework has enjoyed a wider participation and involved key actors among the armed opposition – including the militarily important Salafist

groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam (Stepanova, 2018; Lundgren, 2019).

In both Geneva and Astana, a major problem was the definition of terrorism and decisions of the inclusion or exclusion of selected armed groups that were labelled as terrorists by one or more actors. There was not much controversy about the exclusion of internationally recognized terrorist groups such as Daesh or Al-Nusra. A challenge was dealing with the offspring of Al-Nusra, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which broke its alliance with Al-Qaeda. The Astana process delegated to Turkey the mission to deal with and deradicalize this group. HTS did not want to attend Astana but rather reluctantly, had to comply with the decisions due to the strong presence of Turkish military in the Idlib province. On the other side, the West – the US in particular – has started reconsidering its approach to grapple with this strongest rebel group of the Idlib province (Khalifa & Bonsey, 2021).

Concerning some other opposition armed groups, who falls under the label of terrorist is controversial and arbitrary (Lundgren, 2019). The regime, on the one side of the pendulum, considers all oppositional groupings as terrorists, creating doubts about its sincerity to continue engagement with them in the constitution-writing process. On the other side, Ankara labels the key Kurdish group as terrorist and prevents their participation in the talks in Geneva and Astana. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing the People's Protection Units (YPG) are all seen as offshoots of the

Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and hence considered as terrorists by Turkey. Under the umbrellas of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the PYD and the YPG exert political and military control over a large part of north-eastern Syrian territory. Their exclusion from the negotiation processes plays a detrimental role in ensuring inclusive and comprehensive solutions to the Syrian crisis.

Finally, on the subject of civil society representation, the initial Geneva mediators and Astana have largely failed. In the build-up of the Geneva Communiqué, civil society representation was considered (United Nations General Assembly, 2012; Helmüller & Zahar, 2019). During the terms of the first two envoys, civil society representatives were consulted but they were not invited to participate in formal negotiations. It was only under de Mistura, the third UN mediator, that their participation became institutionalized and formalized (Asseburg, 2018; Helmüller & Zahar, 2019). The fourth UN special envoy for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen, enhanced engagement with civil society representatives and placed particular importance on the participation of women to take part in shaping Syria's future in the Constitutional Committee (Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria (OSES), 2021). As such, one third of the participants in the committee represented civil society. These members, however, cannot be considered as fully neutral. Somewhat indirectly, the Astana trio and Damascus play a key role

in the selection of these members as well as the messages they carry in the constitution-writing talks (Hauch, 2020; Lundgren, 2019).

Despite the inclusion and relatively equal representation of both government and opposition, the Committee has not been able to make any progress. Regardless of the initial hope of progress in October 2021 when both co-chairs of the government and of the opposition sat together at the same table for the first time, the rift could not be overcome (Kenny, 2022). While Moscow might have pressured Damascus to participate in the Committee, the latter's territorial gains enabled by the former hampered an actual flexible position in the negotiations. By 2021, the Syrian government was only interested in consolidating its position and discussing the membership of the delegates from the opposition.

In the Astana process, there is no direct civil society representation. The trio has not demonstrated any open willingness or expressed any clear statement on their inclusion in the negotiations. Russia and Iran stick to their official position which sees the government in Damascus as the only legitimate representative of the Syrian people whereas Turkey has preferred to work with the opposition leaders that comply with Ankara's interests and position in northern Syria.

**Leverage**

Leverage is about the capacity to create persuasion or pressure to shape a political reality. In mediation literature, it entails leading the process in line with the

interest or the position of a particular party (Zartman & Touval, 1985). In the Syrian conflict, among the two major mediation frameworks, Astana has enjoyed sufficient leverage to achieve the cessation of violence, create de-escalation zones and hinder a relapse into large-scale violence due to the organizing parties extensive military involvement on the ground. What the Astana trio's capability leverage could not accomplish was the realization of a durable peace by responding to the political and socioeconomic grievances of the Syrian people, primarily the anti-Assad camp. This corresponds with Svensson's findings on the ineffectiveness of power mediators in achieving success in territorial or political power-sharing agreements (2007).

When it comes to the UN side, due to the disunity at the UNSC level, the mediators had no capability leverage. Russia used its veto power as one of the five permanent members next to the US, China, the UK and France, to prevent coercive measures to be taken against the Syrian regime (Asseburg, 2018; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Interviews Yüksel and Zartman; Lundgren, 2019). Such coercive measures could take the form of sanctions, the establishment of no-fly or safe zones, a broad arms embargo, and prosecution of war crimes or crimes against humanity, thereby pressuring the conflicting parties to make concessions at the negotiation table (Asseburg, 2018).

In terms of credibility leverage, the Astana guarantors were considered as credible only by the parties they were sponsoring, with the opposition trusting Turkey

and Damascus having faith in Iran and Russia. The UN mediators appeared to be in a more favourable position in terms of credibility due to their experience as renowned diplomats. Nevertheless, this was not how the main negotiating parties perceived the situation. The Syrian regime was suspicious of the UN mediation especially during the terms of the first two envoys when there was a demand from the international community for Assad to step down. The opposition became more wary about the mediations under de Mistura and Pedersen who have both viewed cooperation with Moscow and directly or indirectly with Damascus as essential to proceed in conflict settlement.

Deprived of both capability and credibility leverage, the UN mediation under de Mistura and Pedersen prioritized technical improvements such as establishing local ceasefires, facilitating humanitarian access and proceeding with a constitution-writing process. Owing to its capability leverage, the Astana trio defined the rules on the battlefield and ended large-scale bloodshed. Lacking trust by the opposing camp and in order to appear credible, the Astana trio complemented the UN efforts by supporting the continuation of the works of the Constitutional Committee. Nevertheless, trust or credibility leverage remains to be a key challenge for the Astana framework. Damascus does not trust Ankara and the opposition is suspicious of the motives of Moscow and Tehran. In other words, the impartiality of the sponsors of the Astana process is highly questionable.

Problems associated with impartiality, however, does not reduce the effectiveness of the Astana framework. First of all, capability leverage and the ability to influence the behaviours of the conflicting parties have proved to be a more important asset for the Astana trio than their neutrality (Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014). Second, the trio convinced the conflicting sides to proceed with the negotiations. Russia delivered Damascus and Turkey delivered the opposition to the negotiation table without creating an image of 'selling an agreement' that favoured their friends (Zartman, 1995a). Finally, the Astana trio has placed less emphasis on liberal issues and cared less about being perceived as impartial. Their primary concern was responding to the more urgent issues on the battleground, namely the cessation of the violence and the normalization of life in the ceasefire areas. This does not mean that Astana has a better chance of providing a durable peace to the Syrians. Instead, the trio adopted a strategy which was 'more attuned to political realities in Syria, warts and all' (Lundgren, 2019, p.15).

**Strategy**

In both mediation processes, there was an overreliance on a top-down strategy. The strategy adopted is interlinked with the leverage of the mediator in question. A top-down approach requires the authority and capability to take coercive measures to force of concessions or impose agreed conditions. Without this leverage, one is limited to a bottom-up approach that focusses on confidence-building measures.

The top-down approach of both Geneva and Astana prioritized the cessation of violence as a condition to bring together the regime and opposition in line with the desired end state envisioned by the mediating side. The UN mediators hoped that ceasefires could prevent deepening sectarian animosities in the short run, paving the way for building trust and continuing constructive engagement in order to achieve a political transition in Syria (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Lundgren, 2016). The Astana trio, on the other side, aimed to produce a ceasefire that could actually hold by clearly delineating the opposition armed groups and the pro-regime fighters (Stepanova, 2018). They established de-escalation zones and created a 'no war and no peace' environment in Syria (Younes, 2019). As a matter of fact, the emergence of a frozen conflict situation satisfied the interests of not only the Astana sponsors but also the main antagonists of the Syrian civil war – the regime and the opposition armed groups.

On the regime's side, the existence of pockets of territories which are under the rule of Turkish-backed opposition or the Kurdish-led AANES provide a constant mobilization topic around a national cause to retain public support and to justify recruitment and training of the military in order to reclaim full sovereignty over Syria. For the opposition, the liberated territories have given them regions to administer – albeit with extensive external support – and the longer the stalemate continues, the closer they get to the unrecognized partition of the country. The frozen state of the Syrian

conflict, in Zartman's words, has become a 'stable, viable, bearable compromise rather than a constraining burden that forces both sides to negotiation' (1995a).

While the Geneva Communiqué and Resolution 2254 called for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, this was not much reflected in the UN's mediation attempts (United Nations General Assembly Security Council, 2012). The first two envoys gave precedence to engagement with the international and regional powers in establishing a nationwide ceasefire. Under his term, de Mistura attempted to broker local ceasefires instead of imposing a top-down national ceasefire in the hope that this could be more realistic and would aid in confidence building at the local level (Lundgren, 2015; 2016). To ensure the continuation of these local ceasefires, limited cooperation among the warring parties emerged, but due to the lack of external monitors and the incapacity of internal actors to cease the fighting, the positive trend did not endure (Lundgren, 2015). Hence, the special envoys had to rely again on the military powers and the Astana trio in containing violence in a top-down manner (Asseburg, 2018; Lundgren, 2015; 2016; 2019; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016).

Different from the Geneva process, the Astana framework did not prioritize finding a political solution to the Syrian civil war. It has mostly served as a platform for resolving problems on the battleground and for steering the situation in line with the interests of the Astana trio (Asseburg, 2018). The de-escalation regime created by

Russia, Turkey and Iran allowed the Syrian regime to strengthen its military position and expand its territorial control in the country. Moreover, Moscow achieved pushing forward topics like elections and constitution writing, replacing the precedence given to political transition or the establishment of a new representative government. In other words, the Astana process legitimized Assad and suppressed questions about his right to rule the Syrians.

The parallel tracks of Astana and Geneva have also differed on the role of mediators as well as on the type of mediating actors. The UN mediators, de Mistura and Pedersen in particular, have played the role of communication facilitator by contacting the parties; arranging interactions and transmitting messages between them; and creating a platform that allows the conflicting sides to elaborate on their interests and positions. Likewise, in the constitution writing process that has involved both governmental and opposition representatives, the UN's role has also been mostly procedural, seeking facilitation rather than formulation of the content. The Astana framework, however, has both been formulative and manipulative in character. The trio in general and Russia in particular have been able to define the agenda; control the timing, pace, formality and physical environment of the meetings; adding incentives; pressing the parties to make concessions or to show flexibility; and keeping the process focused on the issues determined by the sponsors (Beardsley, Quinn, Biswas & Wilkenfeld, 2006, p.66).

Finally, on the mediators themselves, major decisions in the Astana process were taken and announced by the leaders of the three sponsor countries, Russia, Iran and Turkey. With the main issues concerning mostly northern Syria in the last couple of years, it has been primarily Putin and Erdoğan who have called each other or met in person in order to call the shots and define the framework of the peace talks in Astana. In the Geneva process, the UN mediators have been top diplomats with substantial international experience. By selecting renowned and highly skilled diplomats, the UN hoped to achieve impartiality and effectiveness to resolve the Syrian civil war which was highly sectarian in character. Nevertheless, lacking external leverage and as a result of the disunity within the UNSC, three UN mediators had to resign, leaving the fourth one, Geir Pedersen, in a rather procedural role to carry on with the drafting of the new Syrian constitution.

## Geneva vs. Astana?

The creation of the parallel track of Astana evidently added complexity and coordination problems for the mediation attempts. The Astana guarantors argue that they do not have the intention to create duplication or confrontation with the UN-led Geneva process (Asseburg, 2018; Cengiz, 2020; Interview Hiltermann; Lundgren, 2019; Talukdar & Anas, 2018). They highlight the fact that the Astana process is also guided by the same principles outlined in the core documents: the Geneva Communiqué and UNSC Resolution 2254.

Contrary to the claims of the Astana trio, there are doubts about the complementary aspect of the Astana framework, regarded by some as an alternative or competitive diplomatic track that tries the undermine the Geneva process (Asseburg, 2018; Dalay 2018). It cannot be denied that the Astana trio is focused on carving out spheres of influence and establishing de facto borders in north and eastern Syria rather than formulating policy proposals that could lead the way towards a democratic transition (Interview Hiltermann). The creation of de-escalation zones proved helpful in containing violence but as Dalay (2018) emphasizes, the establishment of these areas were a 'done deal' and was neither discussed nor approved by the UN. The de-escalation zones allowed the regime to use its force more efficiently and eventually Damascus recaptured three out of four while expanding its territorial control in the fourth, in Idlib. The establishment of these zones was not geared towards the broader conflict resolution in the war-torn Syria and hence did not contribute to it (Dalay, 2018; 2021; Lundgren, 2019; Thépaut, 2020).

The Astana trio avoided extensive discussions about a political transition or the creation of a transitional body. For Russia and Iran, demanding such a transition implied toppling the Syrian government and creating chaos and fragility. The initial international and hence UN insistence on Assad's removal led to an impasse because 'one cannot mediate a suicide' (Quote Interview Zartman). With Damascus gaining the upper hand on the battleground, and realizing the futility in

persisting towards regime change, de Mistura refrained from explicitly using the word 'transition'. Instead, he referred to the text of the Geneva Communique or the UNSC Resolution 2254 (Collins & Tahhan, 2017; Interview Zartman; United Nations Security Council, 2015). Following in the footsteps of de Mistura, Pedersen has followed a similar approach and has prioritized progressing on constitution writing in collaboration with the major stakeholders and the Astana trio.

A positive aspect of Astana has been bringing Turkey, Russia and Iran together around a table despite their divergent interests in Syria. The process proved that mediation attempts can produce some results if there is an understanding among the key regional or relevant powers (Cengiz, 2020). Furthermore, despite not coming up with a tangible political solution, the Astana process has held the topic of constitution revision on the table and facilitated later efforts of the UN mediator to lead this process (Lundgren, 2019). Neither of the mediation processes has succeeded in progressing in drafting a new Syrian constitution, but the ongoing talks continue to provide a procedural framework to guide interaction (Interviews Barkey and Hiltermann; Lundgren, 2019).

Despite certain achievements, the Astana process is not likely to establish a sustainable peace in Syria. It is ill-equipped to address the dire socio-economic conditions in Syria (Kizilkaya, Hamdi & Salman, 2021). The deteriorating economic situation has the potential to catalyse extremism, create additional refugee flows and hence cause regional instability. The Astana trio lacks

the resources to respond to these challenges, to rebuild Syria and to achieve reconciliation among the Syrian population who are divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. Therefore, in spite of the disappointments in finding common grounds on the drafting of the constitution or on other humanitarian or political issues, it is still critical to keep the Geneva format in place (Interview Zartman; Köstem, 2020).

## Conclusion

The Geneva and Astana processes are the two primary diplomatic tracks geared at ending violence and finding a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis. Both have realized some accomplishments such as providing temporary ceasefires, ensuring the continuation of humanitarian assistance and enabling medical evacuations. The main difference between the two frameworks has been the precedence given by the Astana trio on conflict management whereas at least on paper, the UN has been determined to resolve the conflict and establish a durable peace.

This paper highlighted other differences on three attributes: inclusivity, leverage and strategy. On inclusion, the Astana talks included actors, both local and regional, who have been more relevant militarily speaking. This hard power dimension has also provided leverage to the Astana trio to dictate the conditions on the battle fronts and to create de facto borders which separate the regions controlled by the regime, the opposition and the AANES. The exclusion of the PYD from the talks, due to Ankara's insistence, did not

prevent Russia and Turkey from coordinating military developments in the north and east of Syrian soil. Nevertheless, it added an extra layer of complexity to the international community's efforts to resolve the conflict and achieve reconciliation.

In stopping the bloodshed and creating relative safety in the de-escalation zones, the Astana framework achieved considerable success, offering several lessons to learn for a more effective UN mediation in the future. First of all, the UN needs to enhance its capability *leverage* in order to remain credible in conflict resolution. Without formulating a clear mandate and strengthening the hands of its mediators by substantial external leverage, the UN mediation may become side-lined by alternative frameworks as seen in the Astana example in the Syrian conflict. Second, when the opposition is fractured and does not have a clear and strong representative, mediation *strategies* should not be fixated on regime change. Likewise, strategies that seek transcending incompatibilities and addressing the root causes of the conflict are idealistic aspirations which may prove unrealistic in actual situations. It is true that without establishing positive peace, a relapse into violence is highly likely. Nevertheless, as witnessed in the Syrian case, more than anything else, civil wars necessitate ceasefires which end the bloodshed and the corresponding human suffering.

Finally, on the dimension of *inclusion*, the UN has to define more precise conditions when involving the relevant military actors. It cannot be denied that including

too many actors – regional powers, spoilers, radical or extremist groups – may hamper mediation efforts. Wider participation, however, may also bring about positive results as seen in the favourable outcome of the Astana talks in calming the situation in the frontlines. Just as importantly, Russia's move to delegate Turkey the responsibility to deal with the armed opposition – including the engagement with the Salafist groups as well as the task to clear and deradicalize the extremists in the Idlib province – offers useful lessons to learn from when coping with the militarily relevant radical or terrorist groups in civil war mediation.

Since 2017, the capability leverage imposed by the Astana trio, Russia in particular, has been a key determinant of the mediation strategies that have been adopted. The top-down approach in announcing cease-fires or creating de-escalation zones resulted in diplomatic negotiations which were orchestrated in the capitals of Moscow, Ankara or Tehran, leaving little room of freedom for the main conflicting parties of the civil war. Decisions about the date, location and content of the peace talks were all imposed top-down, leading to a lack of commitment and constructive participation from the Syrians themselves.

The UN attempts particularly under the fourth envoy, Geir Pedersen, have tried to address this gap and involve civil society and women in a more active manner in the peace negotiations. This bottom-up involvement was perhaps not that crucial when the fighting was intense, necessitating instead an emphasis on the

cessation of violence. Nevertheless, as the battle fronts have become relatively calm in the last couple of years, engaging civil society becomes much more critical to achieve an inclusive peace. Establishing a durable and positive peace is not an easy task. Nevertheless, the UN remains the primary actor that can accomplish this. The Astana trio succeeded in creating a rather frozen conflict situation in Syria. It is high time for the UN to build on this and formulate creative but realistic solutions that can pave the way for a lasting peace.

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