From resistance to state-building: Dealing with the ambiguities of the Hamas experiment in Gaza

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Abstract: In the past eight years, 8,000 rockets and mortar bombs fired from the Gaza Strip have hit Israeli territory. Compared to the suicide bombings of the past, they seem an almost negligible threat. However, the rocket fire may well turn into a strategic threat which may also prevent external pressure on Israel to end the occupation of Palestinian territory. Based on this assessment, this article discusses various options to cope with this variety of guerrilla warfare. Taking the possession and firing of rockets as a prominent case of militancy, the article shows that the approaches taken so far do not provide satisfactory answers to the problem, then suggests alternatives, namely engaging Hamas, to deal with the threat, and links them to Palestinian institution building as part of the peace process.

Keywords: Middle East conflict, Palestinians, Israel, Gaza Strip, rockets, Qassams, Hamas, ceasefire
Nahostkonflikt, Palästinenser, Israel, Gazastreifen, Raketen, Qassams, Hamas, Waffenruhe

1. Qassam rockets, Palestinian divisions, and the peace process

The Gaza War of late 2008/early 2009 not only brought death and destruction upon the densely populated strip at the Mediterranean Sea, it also sent aground the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which had been interrupted after the Palestinian elections of January 2006 and revived at the Annapolis summit of November 2007. Whether the Israeli government, with Benjamin Netanyahu from *Likud* as Prime Minister and Avigdor Lieberman from *Yisrael Beitenu* as Foreign Minister, is committed to dividing the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea in an equitable manner is not at all certain.

However, not only an Israeli government that relies on a right-wing militaristic majority in the Knesset can be expected to hamper progress towards an agreement which would put the establishment of a Palestinian state within reach. Also the Palestinian side is not able to present itself as a reliable counterparty capable of delivering the commodity that Israel most urgently wants from a negotiated agreement, namely security. Two problems stick out as particularly harmful to the Palestinians' negotiating credibility: first, the rocket threat emanating from Palestinian paramilitaries, and second, the split between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, leaving *Hamas* and *Fatah* at loggerheads over who should legitimately exercise control in the Palestinian territories.

After the Gaza War, whose outcome has strengthened the hawkish positions both on the Israeli and on the Palestinian sides[1], the USA and the EU, committed to the principle of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are caught in a dilemma. If the Israeli government goes on undermining the only formula for conflict settlement arguably capable of serving the vital interests of both parties to the conflict, they

may consider putting pressure on Israel. However, as long as Israeli towns are threatened by rockets, neither the Americans nor the Europeans will be prepared to force Israel to compromise, to stop colonizing the occupied territories at once and to prepare for withdrawal from them in the context of a peace agreement. This dilemma needs to be addressed and the external actors ought to try a new approach in dealing with the power struggles within the Palestinian political class and influencing the cost-benefit calculations of protagonists that oscillate between resistance and government. The appointment by U.S. President Barack Obama of George Mitchell, who in his former capacity of U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland and particularly through the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning paved the way to power-sharing in Northern Ireland[2], as U.S. Special Envoy for the Middle East has raised expectations that a fresh look at the complexities of the Palestinian pre-state dynamics may indeed replace the simplistic views of the past inspired by the ideologies of the war on terror.

The rocket threat and the internal Palestinian divisions are intricately connected. Sure enough, the rockets physically hit Israeli territory, but they also politically target the respective rivals in the Palestinian arena. In both capacities, they can be employed to spoil the negotiating process. However, the rockets can only serve this function because in the context of the Palestinian identity construction as David fighting Goliath they are viewed as legitimate weapons of resistance against the occupation of Palestinian territory that has entered its fifth decade.

Taking the possession and firing of rockets as prominent case of militancy, the article attempts to show that the approaches taken so far do not provide satisfactory answers to the rocket problem. It suggests alternatives to deal with the threat that, rather than seeking a technological fix, take into account the political context. Finally, it links them to Palestinian institution-building as part of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. It argues for engaging *Hamas*. Otherwise, the rocket threat's

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1 Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, *Joint Israeli-Palestinian Poll*, 15 March 2009, http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2009/p31ejoint.html.

2 George Mitchell, *Making Peace. The insight story of the making of the Good Friday Agreement*, London: William Heinemann 1999.

elimination (in Israel's interest), the overcoming of the intra-Palestinian split (in the interest of the Palestinians) and the reanimation of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to save the two-state solution would not be possible.

2. The threat from Gaza

On 16 April 2001, Palestinian militants fired a rocket across the fence which separates the Gaza Strip from Israel. It was a first and it landed in a field, hurting nobody. But many more were to come, and some of them hit populated areas. The favourite weapon of the Gaza militias has profoundly changed the face of the armed resistance, which at the height of the second *Intifada* had been dominated by suicide bombers coming mainly from the West Bank, spreading fear in Israel.[3] Compared to the bombings of the past, the firing of rockets and mortars onto Israeli territory seems an almost negligible threat. On closer examination, however, and the small number of fatalities notwithstanding, the contrary is true and the rocket fire may well turn into a strategic threat.

Out of the home-grown rocket varieties, the *Qassam* is the one best known. It is produced by *Hamas* and named, like its armed branch, after Sheikh Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, an Islamic preacher and Palestinian militant, who was killed by the British during the Arab revolt in the 1930s. This manner of labelling contributes to the construction of a common identity and helps to legitimize the possession and usage of these weapons.[4] Other Palestinian militias have named their rockets in a similar fashion, with *al-Quds*, *al-Aqsa*, *al-Nasser* and *Sumud* testifying to differences in the groups' ideological orientations. A minority of the weapons are imported, in particular *Katyusha*-type *Grad* rockets, which have a range of slightly over 20 kilometres.

As yet, most of Israel remains out of the range of these weapons. Compared to the suicide attacks, which terrorized the whole urban population of Israel, let alone military operations against the Gaza Strip, which have been far more lethal[5], the number of casualties is low. For over three years, the projectiles did not cause fatalities. But on 28 June 2004 two rockets landed near a school and shopping centre in Sderot, a city of 24,000 in the Western Negev, barely a mile beyond Gaza's perimeter fence. It killed a man and a three-year old child. In the wake of Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, the number of rocket strikes quintupled. Until the Gaza War, which began on 27 December 2008 with Israeli air strikes, almost 8,000 rockets and mortar bombs were fired at Israeli territory.[6] Altogether,

16 Israelis were killed[7] and hundreds injured in these attacks, along with significant property damage. Sderot, which was always well within the range of the Qassams, has suffered most from the rocket attacks. Recently, however, some rockets have landed as far as the edge of Ashkelon, a city 16 kilometres north of the Gaza Strip with a population of 120,000. The rocket fire has a devastating effect on the sense of security of the some 200,000 residents of the western Negev.

Up to now, rockets fired by Palestinians onto Israeli territory have solely been launched from the Gaza Strip. However, Palestinian militants in the West Bank were also reported of developing and importing rockets, which would pose a threat not only to the Jewish settlements but also to large Israeli cities and the industrialized areas in the densely populated coastal region.[8] Without a solution to the rocket threat, more than the security and well-being of a small portion of Israel's population will be at stake. As Weiss noted, the Palestinian militant groups can be expected to "continue to improve the range, accuracy, and lethality of their rockets. [...] Eventually, arsenals will be composed mainly of rockets with a range of more than twenty kilometers, compared to earlier arsenals limited to ten kilometers or less. This will greatly expand the number of civilian population centers vulnerable to sudden attack."[9]

3. Israeli counter measures against the rocket threat

Options to deal with the rocket threat include a wide array of military and non-military counter measures. Israel has refrained from reoccupying the Gaza Strip, from which it withdrew in 2005, evacuating the Jewish settlements and military installations. A return to Gaza would run counter to the rationale behind the withdrawal, namely to preserve Israel as the democratic state of the Jewish people. Instead, Israel has repeatedly launched military operations against the Gaza Strip, ranging from short-dated entries of small forces with limited missions to the *Operation Cast Lead*, the largest military operation since the Six Day War in 1967 that left behind more than 1,400 killed and large-scale destruction of civilian infrastructure. Other military measures include targeted killings, which are based not only on Israel's military edge but also on its extensive network of informers. However, neither did these offensive measures stop the rocket attacks nor did they seriously hamper *Hamas'* military build-up or improvements in its operational capabilities.

Defensive measures include early warning systems in conjunction with the fortification of public buildings and private homes in the most affected towns within a range of up to 4.5 kilometres from the Eastern or Northern border of the Gaza

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3   Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Suicide and Other Bombing Attacks in Israel Since the Declaration of Principles (Sept 1993)*, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-+Obstacle+to+Peace/Palestinian+terror+since+2000/Suicide+and+Other+Bombing+Attacks+in+Israel+Since.htm.

4   For the employment of arms in the construction of a collective identity, see Marie-Christine Heinze, *Guns and collective identity: a theoretical contribution to the concept 'gun culture'*, Hamburg, July 2006, unpublished Master Thesis, Master of Peace and Security Policy Studies, M.P.S., pp. 20-25.

5   See the statistics of the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, http://www.btselem.org/English/Statistics/Casualties.asp.

6   Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center (IICC), *Summary of rocket fire and mortar shelling in 2008*, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/ipc_e007.pdf.

7   Another eight people died due to attacks on Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip.

8   Aaron Klein, "Israeli fences don't stop rockets", *World Net Daily*, 14 January, 2006, http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=48334.

9   Margaret Weiss, *Weapon of Terror: Development and Impact of the Qassam Rocket*, The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, Policy Watch #1352, 2008, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/print.php?template=C05&CID=2728.

Strip.[10] They are not meant to provide a comprehensive solution but rather to buy time and protect against rockets whose flight time is too short to allow interception. Whether the various systems under development to destroy rockets in flight will provide sufficient protection is a matter of contention. In February 2007, the Israel Ministry of Defence opted for the missile defence system *Iron Dome* designed to detect incoming rockets and fire small missiles to destroy them in mid-flight. In March 2009, it announced that a series of tests had been successfully completed. Some sources expect the system to be ready for deployment as early as 2009, others as late as 2011. Whether defence based on an interceptor such as *Iron Dome* will eventually rid Israel from the threat posed by the *Qassams* and their brethren is doubtful. Due to the short distances, the speed of the rockets and the time needed to prepare for launching the intercept missiles, *Iron Dome* may not be able to protect locations in short distance to the *Qassam* launching sites.[11] In addition to the technological challenges, *Iron Dome* also faces severe economic constraints. Given the high costs of the interceptor and the ease at which *Qassams* are manufactured, Israel might very well lose this arms race sooner or later.[12]

A third and powerful counter measure is the closing of the borders to Israel as a response to rocket attacks. Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip since 2007 has had grave humanitarian consequences for the strip's roughly 1.5 million residents, who rely on imports of food, medicine and energy. The West and some Arab states tacitly approved of the blockade, hoping that, in conjunction with the "West Bank first" approach in support of the Ramallah-based government[13], it would separate the organization from its frustrated constituents. Whether the approach worked or failed is not easy to decide. In spite of having consolidated its control over the Gaza Strip,[14] *Hamas*, a year after the blockade had been imposed, was willing to trade a truce with Israel for a partial reopening of the borders of Gaza. The blockade arguably did make an impact on *Hamas'* strategic calculations.

The six-month truce of 19 June 2008, which in spite of its premature breakdown[15] was by and large the most successful of all ceasefires concluded since the beginning of the second *Intifada*[16], allowed *Hamas* to focus on internal matters. It did not only improves security in the streets, but also successfully delivered the message to its internal rivals that at this point it was bent on eclipsing any political opposition. It consolidated

administrative control and, with the formal economy in crisis, employed new business structures in the struggle for economic survival, thereby creating new stakeholders and loyalties. After the Gaza War, the situation is basically the same as before, with *Hamas* demanding an opening of the borders as its price for concluding a truce with Israel and enforcing it not only on its own brigades but also on rival Palestinian militias. In a situation where *Hamas* has to choose between consolidating its rule or emphasizing its character as a resistance movement, thereby risking to jeopardize the political achievements it has reached so far, *Hamas* has chosen to stay in power. The destruction of the Gaza Strip notwithstanding, *Hamas* seems intent on restoring law and order and determined to reign in Gaza militants, including its own combatants.

The movement's interests in Gaza to preserve its gains on the ground may buy some time for Israel. However, considering the internal power shifts within the movement that have recently translated into gains of the hardliners at the expense of the more pragmatic members, Israel would be well advised to look for a more sustainable strategy to cope with the rocket threat.

4. Past strategies towards Hamas: blacklisting Hamas as a terror organization

Israel initially facilitated the expansion of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood so as to undermine the nationalist PLO.[17] However, soon after the outbreak of the first *Intifada* Israel adopted a policy of incarcerations and expulsions. In 1989, most of *Hamas'* senior leadership was imprisoned and in 1992, several hundred alleged *Hamas* leaders were expelled to Lebanon. This policy not only contributed to an increase of *Hamas'* popularity, but also enabled the leadership to bridge their differences with other resistance movements and learn first-hand from their experience. The policy of targeted killings weakened the organization, particularly its military wing, but did not achieve a change of *Hamas'* strategy. Border closures after suicide attacks did not turn the population against *Hamas*, but contributed to the frustration with the peace process. It had not delivered an economic peace dividend but on the contrary had triggered an economic decline in the territories administered by the Palestinian Authority.[18]

The U.S. State Department put *Hamas* on its Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) List, which was first compiled in 1997 as a tool in overseeing the implementation and effects of U.S. legislation designed to sanction terrorists. The terror attacks on 11 September 2001 caused the EU to follow suit. Based on UN Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) of 28 September 2001, which called upon the member states to freeze all money, other financial and economic resources of individuals who were actively involved in or facilitated terrorist acts, the EU on

10 Barak Ravid/Mijal Grinberg/Nadav Shragai, "Gov't to fund fortification of 3,600 homes near Gaza, instead of 8,000", *Haaretz*, 18 February, 2008, http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasen/spages/955071.html.

11 Reuven Pedatzur, "*Iron Dome* system found to be helpless against Qassams", *Haaretz*, 22 February 2008, http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/956859.html.

12 Yiftah S. Shapir, *Anti-Rocket Defense: A Waste of Taxpayers' Money?*, INSS Insight No.18, 2007, http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=146.

13 Muriel Asseburg, *European Conflict Management in the Middle East*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs/Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, SWP Research Paper, RP 4, Berlin, February 2009, p. 33.

14 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Round Two in Gaza*, Middle East Briefing No. 24: Gaza City/Ramallah/Brussels, 2008, http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle_east___north_africa/arab_israeli_conflict/b24_round_two_in_gaza.pdf.

15 "Gaza militants fire four Qassam rockets into western Negev", *Haaretz*, 6 November 2008, http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1034659.html.

16 Nancy Kanwisher, "Reigniting Violence: How Do Ceasefires End?", *The Huffington Post*, 6 January 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nancy-kanwisher/reigniting-violence-how-d_b_155611.html.

17 Joseph Croitoru, *Hamas*, *Der islamische Kampf um Palästina*, München: C.H. Beck 2007, pp. 48-53.

18 Radwan A. Shaban, "Worsening Economic Outcomes Since 1994 Despite Elements of Improvement", in Ishac Diwan/Radwan A. Shaban (eds.), *Development under Adversity: The Palestinian Economy in Transition,* The International Bank for Reconstruction/The World Bank: Washington, D.C., 1999, pp. 17-32, http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2000/04/20/000094946_99042805372856/Rendered/PDF/multi_page.pdf.

27 December 2001 drew up a list of initially 29 persons and 13 organizations that it regarded as participating in terrorist acts, among them *Hamas' Qassam Brigades*. Following a suicide attack in West-Jerusalem on 19 August, 2003, which killed 20 Israelis and three foreigners, the EU extended its list to include *Hamas* as a whole. One of the effects of this decision was to interrupt formal contacts with the organization and effectively render them off-limits.

5. An alternative approach: engaging Hamas

The approach that is suggested here as an alternative political strategy is based on two premises: first that *Hamas* is here to stay, and second that it sees itself as a Palestinian movement committed to the goal of ending foreign occupation and strangulation. Although *Hamas* appreciates the difference between armed operations against the Israeli military and attacks against civilian targets, it considers the targeting of civilians not as terrorism but as legitimate resistance. This view is shared by the majority of the Palestinians.

Stating these fundamentals is not to claim that rocket attacks are solely motivated by resistance. But it is important to note that *Hamas* would be badly misunderstood if it was perceived only in the light of the war on terror. *Hamas* has goals that are negotiable whereas *al-Qaida*, for that matter, has not. To suggest an approach of engaging *Hamas*[19], however, does not imply turning a blind eye to dynamics behind the violent struggle in general and the rocket attacks in particular. The assumption that Israel can be defeated by a strategy of attrition still resonates particularly among the armed wings of the resistance movements that view the Israeli withdrawals from South Lebanon and Gaza as proof that Israel can be brought down militarily. Some other motives behind the rocket attacks may also transcend the logic of warfare. This does not make them less forceful. For those who identify with the heroic past of the Palestinian people it seems compelling to take over the armed resistance movement represented by the PLO before it resolved to seek a diplomatic solution with Israel in the early 1990s. The perception that the rockets create a "balance of fear"[20] obviously satisfies a deeply ingrained need among the population of the occupied territories to see the enemy suffer, too. Military operations that exact a high price from the enemy contribute to the image of an organization willing to stand up against great odds and can, in an atmosphere of disillusionment regarding ongoing negotiations, be useful in the competition with other Palestinian factions for popular consent. Finally, given the difficult economic situation that Gazans are faced with and taking into consideration that kinship networks play an important role in administering scarce resources, producing and launching rockets can be seen as an important source of income, contributing at the same time to the social standing of the clan.[21]

Taking the various motives behind the rocket attacks into consideration, it is important to note, especially at times of a lull, that the dynamics of violence have by no means been eradicated and can easily be revived under the proper circumstances. So they need to be put into perspective. If with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, *Hamas* were viewed as a "total spoiler" bent on absolutist goals with no intention ever to lay down its arms, engaging *Hamas* would indeed be a futile exercise.[22] However, as Gunning has pointed out, from the point of view of *Hamas* it is rather Israel that is a spoiler, prevaricating indefinitely in the peace process when it comes to the main issues so as to consolidate its control of Palestinian territory. If, as Gunning puts it, "*Hamas* deems violence necessary to force Israel to compromise, since security is the one 'commodity' that Israel desires and the Palestinians can withhold"[23], *Hamas'* resort to violence is situational and changes in the political environment are likely to induce a turnabout. Gunning's in-depth analysis[24] of the organization's strategy in the peace process concerning the use of violence against Israeli targets and the conclusion and observation of ceasefires indicates that the movement's behaviour is much better understood if it is perceived as a limited spoiler that does not wilfully squander away its achievements both as a resistance movement and a political party in Palestinian politics. A limited spoiler will respond positively if its grievances are addressed and will change its behaviour if subjected to a mixture of inducements and coercion. Socialization by participation in the political system will affect its calculations of costs and benefits regarding escalatory resistance operations on the one hand and ceasefire arrangements on the other.

6. The transformation of Hamas and the logic of ceasefire arrangements

Rhetorically, *Hamas* has not compromised its vision of a liberated Islamic state in all of Palestine. However, its behaviour on the ground has been ambiguous, phases of high terror activity alternating with phases of restraint. Since 2003, when President Arafat's hold on power was weakening and the newly appointed Prime Minister Abbas opted for a dialogue with *Hamas*, the organization has been undergoing a process of transformation from a rebel movement to a political party, with its popularity proving an asset in local and national elections.[25] This process includes the possibility to redefine resistance and moving from violent to non-violent means by means of a long-term ceasefire (*hudna*). *Hamas* sees a *hudna* as a way to trigger a political process, to test Israeli intentions, to demonstrate political leadership and stand on equal ground with internal political rivals. A *hudna* is not to be equated with disarmament, on the contrary: in the face of what it sees as Western and Israeli hostility, *Ha-*

19 ICG, *After Mecca: Engaging Hamas,* Middle East Report No. 62, 2007, http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4677.

20 Greg Myre, "Rockets Create a 'Balance of Fear' With Israel, Gaza Residents Say", *New York Times*, 9 July 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/09/world/middleeast/09rockets.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print&oref=slogin.

21 See ICG, *Inside Gaza. The Challenge of Clans and Families*, Middle East Report No. 71, 2007, http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle_east___north_africa/arab_israeli_conflict/71_inside_gaza___the_challenge_of_clans_and_families.pdf.

22 Stephen Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes", in *International Security* 22 (1997) 2, pp. 5-53.

23 Jeroen Gunning, "Hamas: Socialization and the Logic of Compromise", in Marianne Heiberg/Brendan O'Leary/John Tirman (eds.), *Terror, Insurgency, and the State*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2007, pp. 123-154 (132).

24 See Jeroen Gunning, *Hamas in Politics. Democracy, Religion, Violence*, London: Hurst Publishers:, 2007.

25 Helga Baumgarten, *Hamas. Der politische Islam in Palästina*, Kreuzlingen/München: Heinrich Hugendubel 2006, pp. 163-181.

mas will remain armed during negotiations. For the West and its notion of legitimate use of violence, this is hard to swallow. However, a retreat in the face of Western hegemony and acquiescence to the Western rules is not an option to *Hamas*, because the movement would lose legitimacy and authority as well as its only bargaining power.

The conclusion of the Egyptian-mediated bilateral ceasefire on 19 June 2008 and the efforts to restore it after the Gaza War demonstrate that Israel no longer considers unilateral counter measures sufficient to deal with the rocket threat. However, to take this change of mind for recognition of *Hamas* as a legitimate political actor would mistake tactical considerations for a profound policy change. After all, Israel talked to *Hamas* before, e.g. during the preparations for its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, in order to avoid a withdrawal "under fire". Still, the logic of this approach is auspicious. Instead of viewing the relationship exclusively in zero sum terms, it facilitates accommodating the interests of the other side, allowing it to continue its transformation from a rebel movement to a political party.

7. Conclusion: Don'ts and do's in containing Hamas

As a result of the "West Bank first" approach and the ongoing blockade of Gaza , the political split between *Hamas* (Gaza) and *Fatah* (Ramallah) has deepened, with dire consequences for the peace process. *Hamas* is still reserving the right to retaliate, as they see it, to Israeli provocations. Having practically given up suicide operations within Israeli territory and thereby removed one obstacle to recognition by the international community, *Hamas* is still viewing the capability to threaten Israel with rocket attacks as a tool not only to demonstrate that it will not surrender but also to achieve a better position in the Palestinian political framework. If any Israeli government ever seriously considered ending the occupation, the firing has nourished Israeli reluctance to redeploy in the West Bank, let alone to withdraw from the area as a whole. In view of the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, which on the Palestinian side are conducted by the *Fatah*-dominated PA, *Hamas* can hope, by de-legitimizing *Fatah*, to improve its standing in the intra-Palestinian contest for national representation.

However, intra-Palestinian violence and the split of the Palestinian Authority are not conducive to the transformation of *Hamas* – and, for that matter, of the overall Palestinian political system, whose factions have not yet parted with their heroic past and are still maintaining their military wings to be prepared for the worst. Of course, first and foremost *Fatah* must engage *Hamas*. As long as *Hamas* is prevented from participating as a legitimate force in the Palestinian state-to-be, it will not shed its features as a resistance movement reserving the right to resume the armed struggle.[26] In light of these observations, a ceasefire agreement between Israel and *Hamas* would hold the potential of finally moving away from the policy of boycott and isolation that has so far prevailed in most Western capitals when trying to come to grips with *Hamas'* electoral vic-

tory. With the truce of 19 June 2008, Israel again demonstrated that it was willing to talk to *Hamas* if this served its own interests. By doing so, it did nothing less than accepting *Hamas* as the "de facto government"[27] in Gaza. Whether this exercise in pragmatism will be repeated by the right-wing dominated Israeli government sworn in on 31 March 2009 is a matter of speculation.

However, if the Palestinians fail in their efforts at a renewed power-sharing agreement between the competing Palestinian factions, this kind of pragmatism vis-à-vis *Hamas* may very well lead to a further entrenchment of the split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Blocking these efforts, in the hope of having to deal with two weakened quasi-states that are neither willing nor able to pursue the goal of a peace treaty based on the two states-formula, could easily backfire, because two authoritarian regimes in the making, one in Gaza, one in Ramallah, are not necessarily a formula for stability. It is high time for the Middle East Quartet to depart from its ill-conceived strategy of isolating *Hamas*. With its back against the wall, the movement can be expected to entrench instead of coming to grips with the pluralistic Palestinian society by agreeing to power sharing arrangements. This goal would be well served by supporting Egypt's efforts at mediating Palestinian national reconciliation talks through signalling acceptance of the outcome which in all probability would mean participation of *Hamas* in a national unity government.

Finally, and as a caveat, a traumatized society such as the Palestinian one will find it very difficult to make violence stop overnight and transcend the "culture of violence" that comes with armed struggle of such long duration. Therefore, gradual demilitarization may be the more promising path to follow. Some of the previous agreements between Israel and the PLO call for *Hamas'* coercive disarmament and dismantlement. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that *Hamas* has as yet refused to commit to these agreements beyond declaring to honour them. One way of getting out of this impasse would be the integration of the *Qassam Brigades* into national security structures. Development-related external assistance can enhance this process of institution- and capacity-building as well as help provide appropriate training for the security forces. Security sector reform in the Palestinian territories without addressing *Hamas* is bound to fail. Strengthening the pragmatic forces within *Hamas* cannot be achieved by means of isolation and boycott. As has been shown by Hauswedell and Brown, the case of the Irish Republican Army laying down its arms demonstrates that "constitutional participation, or other forms of political empowerment provide the space in which disarmament can more easily be undertaken. Exclusion, while it can act as a lever that pressures the representatives of armed groups, simultaneously cuts away at their political room for manoeuvre."[28] Obviously, as long as *Hamas* is threatened with annihilation, it will not dispose of a weapon which it sees as an equalizer of some sort as well as a tool to be employed in intra-Palestinian power struggles. As

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26 Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*, London-Ann Arbor: Pluto Press 2006.

27 Muriel Asseburg/Patrick Müller, *Saving the Two-State Solution*, SWP Comments 24: Berlin, 2008.
28 Corinna Hauswedell/Kris Brown, *Burying the Hatchet. The Decommissioning of Paramilitary Arms in Northern Ireland*, BICC Brief 22, 2002, http://www.bicc.de/uploads/pdf/publications/briefs/brief22/brief22.pdf, p. 71.

part of the national security structures it may part with the sole control of this weapon. As long as the occupation of Palestinian territory persists, only "nationalized" rocket arsenals can be negotiated away. Of course, there is no guarantee for this policy to succeed. But since the opposite policy has backfired, it is worth trying. In the run-up to the elections in Lebanon, a number of European governments signalled support of a future Lebanese government that would include *Hezbollah*, hoping that its pro-

motion from an opposition party to a governing party would eventually result in the Shia movement putting its formidable paramilitaries under the control of the regular Lebanese armed forces. This turnabout, viewing the Lebanese resistance movement as a potentially constructive force in Lebanese politics, could signify that a policy change vis à vis the Palestinian *Hamas* is also in the making.

Zimbabwe still at the Crossroads?

Domestic Stalemate, Regional Appeasement, and International Half-Heartedness

Martin Welz*, Julian Junk

Abstract: This article examines the larger political picture of Zimbabwe, focusing on last year's developments at the domestic, regional and international level. It finds that Zimbabwe is on a downward spiral of domestic stalemate, regional appeasement and international half-heartedness, and that there is need for a coherent strategic effort to replace this triad with domestic change, regional active engagement and international steady commitment. Otherwise, both Zimbabwe and the region risk long-term instability with devastating national and regional consequences. In the end, the article outlines and assesses various scenarios for the future development of Zimbabwe, of which the most likely is *status quo* conservation.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, South Africa, SADC, African Union, United Nations
Simbabwe, Südafrika, SADC, Afrikanische Union, Vereinte Nationen

1. Introduction

The political and economic situation in Zimbabwe attracts extensive international attention when elections are held, farmland is seized or the hyperinflation reaches yet another peak. Media coverage was particularly high in the last 14 months. In this period, elections were held in March and June 2008, followed by a negotiated settlement of the dispute between the ruling and opposition party which ultimately led to the formation of a 'Unity Government' in February 2009. It was argued that Zimbabwe reached an important point in its post-colonial history when Mugabe seemed willing to share power after almost 30 years in office. In fact, Zimbabwe appeared to be at the crossroads in February 2009.[1] However, looking closer at the political landscape in Zimbabwe, the conclusion seems rather that the *status quo* is prevailing for the time being and that the crossroad might still be ahead.

This article sheds light on the larger political picture of Zimbabwe by focusing on last year's developments on the domestic, regional and international level and by including very recent events like the election in South Africa into the analysis. The

study is based on both extensive field research in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Ethiopia[2] as well as a review of literature, government documents and newspaper reports.

On the international level, we find that there is an urgent need for the 'international community' not to lose sight of Zimbabwe while other crises appear to gain more volatile attention. Moreover, there is a need to match rhetoric (though it is a very important political tool) more frequently with delivered action. However important the broad international pressure on Zimbabwe might be, the key to the solution seems to lie on the regional level, particularly on the two pivotal and intertwined players South Africa and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The new South African President Jacob Zuma has not positioned himself publicly on the issue of Zimbabwe, but he seems to be willing to engage regionally. On the domestic level, the political stalemate between the 'partners' of the Unity Government needs to be resolved. It appears to be

1 See, for instance: The World, 18 April 2009, "Zimbabwe at the crossroads", http://www.theworld.org/node/8849 (accessed 03 May 2009).

2 Interviews in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, were conducted in October and November 2008. Interviewees include AU Commissioners, AU officials, several Ambassadors to the African Union, academics and think tanks. In February 2009, interviews were conducted in Harare, Zimbabwe. Various political actors like high rank officials from the MDC-Tsvangirai, MDC-Mutambara, allies of Simba Makoni, influential figures in ZANU-PF, high representatives from western Embassies and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions and a number of persons from important lobby groups like the Commercial Farmer's Union and Justice for Agriculture as well as academics were interviewed. Moreover, a former Press Secretary of President Mugabe provided interesting insights into Mugabe's governing style. Additionally, in March and April 2009 a number of interviews were conducted in Midrand and Pretoria, South Africa, at the NEPAD Secretariat as well as with members of the Pan-African Parliament election observer mission to Zimbabwe. Moreover, high rank members of the South African diplomatic corps provided insights into the topic. As many of the interviewees asked for anonymity, we will only occasionally make explicit references to names and positions