



**Domestic Change and Conflict
in the Mediterranean:
The Cases of Hamas and Hezbollah**

AMR ELSHOBAKI
KHALED HROUB
DANIELA PIOPPI
NATHALIE TOCCI



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Executive Summary

This report analyses the recent evolution of Hamas and Hezbollah. In particular it aims at evaluating: (1) the roles of the two resistance movements in their respective national arenas, and (2) in the conflict with Israel; (3) the impact of the two Islamist movements on regional politics, and, finally, (4) the impact of Western and mainly EU policies on them.

Chapter 1 analyses the last two years of Hamas' political experience. In particular, Hroub delves into the far-reaching ramifications of Hamas' electoral triumph and its experience in power, starting by analysing 'the road to power' which led Hamas to victory, and then looking at what this change has meant for Hamas' internal dynamics and its religious/political nature. Hroub argues that, no matter what the latest developments are, 'Hamas-in-power' has structurally changed the rules of the game in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Hamas has now become an integral part of the Palestinian leadership without which any lasting peace agreement between the two sides would be inconceivable.

Chapter 2 focuses on the recent evolution and current impasse of Hezbollah, probably the largest and most prominent Lebanese political party. The chapter analyses the different components of Hezbollah's ideology and political strategy, starting with its process of 'Lebanonisation' or *infitah* (opening) in the 1990s and the problem of accommodating the Lebanese secular state vs. the ideal of an Islamic one. It then considers the party's national identity with respect both to its relationship with Iran and Syria and to its sectarian or communal loyalties. Finally, it evaluates the party's stance towards the use of violence, resistance to occupation and, more generally, its relationship with Israel.

Chapter 3 is an account of the impact of Hezbollah and Hamas on Arab regimes and public opinion. The rise of Hezbollah and Hamas presented the Arab and regional scene with dilemmas that go beyond the borders of Lebanon and Palestine. Hezbollah and Hamas have become "models" for political and military action for a regional and Arab public that is sympathetic with both organisations, albeit not quite ready to pay the price for their political choices.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the impact of international policies on the two Islamic movements. Europeans and Americans have long recognized the key challenges presented to them by the rise of Hamas and Hezbollah, two movements whose ideologies and actions are widely perceived as being diametrically opposed to Western interests. In response, both the US and Europe have exerted much effort in recent years to influence the positions and popularities of these two movements. However, by failing to recognise both parties as mass nationalist movements and integral elements of their respective societies, the EU and the US have caused a set of negative interlocking results, which have concomitantly hampered the quest for peace, democracy and good governance, as well as inter- and intra-state reconciliation in the region.

Introduction

Recent events in the Middle East have brought to the fore two controversial political actors, namely the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and the Lebanese Shi'ite resistance movement (Hezbollah). Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006, provoking an international boycott of the Palestinian National Authority, but also demonstrating its capability of capturing the attention and sympathy of the disaffected Palestinian public. Hezbollah successfully confronted the Israeli war in July-August 2006, affirming its organisational and strategic capacity, gaining considerable regional popularity and demonstrating once again to be a crucial actor on the Lebanese political scene.

This research report sheds light on the recent political and ideological transformations of these two Islamic movements, analysing their roles with respect to their own national arenas and to the conflict with Israel (**chap. 1-2**). The report proceeds with an analysis of the impact of Hezbollah and Hamas on Arab public opinion and on the larger Middle Eastern context (**chap. 3**). Finally, a last chapter is devoted to the impact of international and particularly EU policies on the internal transformation of these two movements (**chap. 4**).

The full understanding of the recent political trajectories and strategies of Hamas and Hezbollah is in fact essential for an efficient policy of crisis management and, eventually, conflict resolution in the Middle East. The growing political prominence of Hamas and Hezbollah means that the West and the EU will have to engage with both political actors more seriously if the aim is a comprehensive and durable peace in the Middle East.

1. Hamas in and out of power

by Khaled Hroub¹

On 25 January 2006, the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, which is officially branded as a terrorist organisation by the US and the EU, won the elections and took charge of the Palestinian Authority (PA). It achieved this stunning triumph against the wishes (and efforts) of many parties – its main rival Fatah of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Israel, the US, the EU, the UN and a number of Arab countries. Two years after its electoral victory and the formation of a Hamas-led government (in March 2006) which was followed by a short-lived national unity government (in March 2007), and then a military takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, the balance sheet of Hamas' performance is mixed. Central to the tremendous difficulties that Hamas has faced is the international and regional blockade imposed on its government and the cutting off of aid and diplomatic relations with the Palestinians. This notwithstanding, 'Hamas-in-power', as opposed to 'Hamas-in-opposition', has structurally changed the rules of the game in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Hamas, acknowledged as a major party in the Palestinian political scene, has now become an integral part of the Palestinian leadership. Without its participation, or tacit approval, any lasting agreement between the two sides seems inconceivable.

The ramifications of Hamas' electoral triumph, its experience in power and the ensuing developments have been far reaching. But it is sensible to start by analysing 'the road to power' which led Hamas to victory, and then look at what this change has meant to Hamas' internal dynamism and its religious/political nature.

1.1 The road to power

Hamas has striven hard since its inception in late 1987 to harmonise two impetuses within the movement: the nationalist liberationist drive and the religious Islamist one. Hamas emerged under (and against) the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, at the same time historically projecting the Palestinian version of the rise of political Islam across the Middle East during the past four decades. The 'nationalist' and 'religious' drives within Hamas have largely overlapped, but sometimes could be seen as a continuum with more political nationalist discourses residing at the top and the more religious discourses prevailing within the lower ranking members.

Similar to other Palestinian movements, Hamas' ultimate nationalist aim is to 'liberate Palestine'. Unlike other movements however, Hamas adopted an Islamist, rather than a secular ideology in order to justify this aim. Espousing the ideological objective of Islamism, Hamas' early rhetoric emphasised that once the 'liberation' of Palestine was achieved, the resulting Palestinian state would be an Islamic one. In later years this rhetoric was toned down.

The tension between the 'nationalist' and the 'religious' tendencies within Hamas culminated in the decision taken in March 2005 to run for the 2006 elections. In the minds of many Hamas supporters (and foes), the decision contrasted severely with Hamas' rejection of any participation in similar elections in 1996. At the time, the rejection was based on the insistence that those elections were part and parcel of the Oslo Agreements which Hamas strongly opposed. The 2006 elections were organised within the political framework resulting from those agreements as well however; hence the controversy within Hamas prior to reaching the final decision to participate. In fact, the March 2005 decision was coupled with two equally significant decisions: the suspension of Hamas' suicide attacks against Israel and the agreement in principle to join the PLO. Hamas was making important leaps in the direction of playing a more political and less military role.

The decision to run for the elections was promptly translated into action. 'On the day following that decision', as one of Hamas' leaders explained, 'we immediately started practical preparation, wasting no time'.² Hamas' campaign for the 2006 elections, under the name 'Change and Reform', was based on an 'Electoral Platform' of 14 pages covering all political, social, educational, legal and environmental aspects. The most interesting dimension of this platform was the deliberate minimisation of the 'religiosity' of Hamas, allowing for more of a political and nationalist discourse to prevail. Most of Hamas' pronouncements in its electoral agenda fit neatly within the thinking of other secular Palestinian factions.³

1.2 Hamas in power

Harvesting an unexpected victory in the elections, Hamas faced a situation it was unprepared for: forming a Palestinian government. The movement had long trained its candidates to the Legislative Council to be in opposition, not a ruling party.⁴ The

unexpectedly victorious Hamas' immediate chosen option was to call upon all other Palestinian factions to join them in a coalition. Leaders of the movement spent almost two months trying to convince other parties to join. Expectedly, Fatah refused, hoping that an 'inexperienced' Hamas at the top of the PA would quickly fall. Leftist Palestinian factions and other independent personalities equally rejected Hamas' offer, protesting against the 'government's political programme'. Their position was hardened by Hamas' refusal to declare in the government programme that the PLO is the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. In the end, on 29 March, Hamas formed a government of its own members and close supporters.

In response to Hamas' government, the Quartet (the US, the EU, Russia and the UN) imposed three conditions to establish normal relations with (and provide aid to) the government: recognition of Israel, acknowledgement of all previous agreements between the PLO and Israel, and a complete stop to 'terrorism'. The three conditions were rejected by Hamas. Western and non-Western diplomatic relations with the government were either immediately severed or not established. In the following months, and apart from a very few countries, Hamas ministers were unwelcome almost everywhere. Many Arab and Muslim countries had carefully synchronised their moves with Western policies. The immediate and disastrous outcome of the embargo was felt most catastrophically by ordinary Palestinians. European and other international funding to the PA, which is one of its two main sources of income, was stopped. The second main source of income, the monthly Palestinian tax revenues controlled and collected by Israel, in accordance to the Oslo Agreements, were also frozen.⁵ Caught between the hammer of rising internal dissatisfaction and the anvil of external embargoes, Hamas' policies started to grow nervous. Yet the movement and its government also demonstrated a great level of steadfastness and remained intact and coherent.

In addition to the cutting off of all funds, the Hamas-led government endured continuous Israeli military pressure and incursions into areas of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. At the risk of erosion to their own 'resistance legitimacy', Hamas leaders pressured their own military wing to exercise restraint and to maintain the shaky truce (*'hudna'*) that had been in place months prior to the elections. But at the same time they allowed other factions, such as Islamic Jihad, to resume launching rockets and conducting other military activities in response to the relentless Israeli raids against the Gaza Strip.

At a factional level, Fatah, which had been defeated in the elections, decided to make Hamas' time in government as difficult as possible. The goal was to foil Hamas in power and force it to step down, resulting in a need for early new elections.⁶ Because of Fatah's domination over the Palestinian civil service by virtue of its control of the PA during the previous 12 years, tensions between the new Hamas ministers and their Fatah staff paralysed the work of many ministries and the public sector in general. On the security front, and particularly in the Gaza Strip, several Fatah-controlled security organisations remained outside the control of the interior ministry, making the government appear toothless. To compensate for this awkward situation of having the security forces out of government control, the interior ministry established its own 'official' security apparatus 'the Executive Force'. Predictably, a growing friction between this new force (most of its members drawn from Hamas) and the old Fatah-controlled forces continued to increase, leading to military clashes between the two parties during January and February and then again in May and June 2007, pushing the situation in the Gaza Strip to the brink of an all-out civil war. This was only briefly averted in early 2007 by the sudden heavy-weight intervention of the Saudis, culminating in the Mecca Agreement between Fatah and Hamas in February 2007 as further discussed below.

The balance sheet of Hamas' one year in power offers a melange of success and failure. Delving into the details of such an assessment lies beyond the scope of this analysis. But what is important to observe is that a considerable part of Hamas' failure can be attributed to the embargo and aid suspension imposed on the government by the international community. In the eyes of many Palestinians, Hamas was largely absolved of much responsibility for failing to deliver public services, which were largely crippled by its failure to pay the salaries of more than 160,000 civil servants. This failure was blamed on Western and Israeli policies, which were seen as a punishment against all Palestinians because of the exercise of their democratic choice.⁷ But at the level of Hamas as a political movement, the experience was, and is still, painfully formative. A frequent sentiment that one hears from Hamas' leaders about their reign in power often revolves around what Ahmad Yousef, the political advisor of Hamas' appointed prime minister Ismail Haniyya, stated: 'it was a tough year but a great one as well; like an intensive course in politics where we had to learn in one year what would otherwise require us 10 or 15 years to learn'.⁸

1 Khaled Hroub teaches at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge.

2 Interview with Osama Hamadan, Hamas' representative in Lebanon and member of its political bureau, 29 January 2006.

3 For extended analysis of Hamas' Electoral Platform, see Khaled Hroub (2006), "A 'New Hamas' through Its New Documents", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, No. 4, Summer, pp. 6-28.

4 Dr Mahdi Abdul Hadi, head of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA) told me in Jerusalem that prior to the election, PASSIA was approached by Hamas candidates in Jerusalem to organise a 'training course' for them on the Palestinian political system and the Legislative Council and its functioning, Jerusalem, interview, 6 March 2007.

5 See Tocci's chapter in this report.

6 In an interview with a European official I was told that some of Fatah's senior politicians appealed to EU officials not to deal with the Hamas government, and only giving it two months before Hamas would certainly fail and step down, interview, 11 October 2006. On the American endeavour to bring Hamas' government down see 'Elliot Abrams' uncivil war on <http://conflictsforum.org/2007/elliott-abrams-uncivil-war/>

7 Ben Bot, the Dutch foreign minister, was quoted on the record saying 'The Palestinian people have opted for this government, so they will have to bear the consequences', *Associated Press*, 10 April 2007.

8 Interview with Dr Ahmad Yousef, the political advisor of Ismail Haniyya, then the Palestinian Prime Minister and Hamas leader, Gaza 7 March 2007. Almost the same words were used by Dr Naser Eddin Al-Shaer, then deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Education when I interviewed him in Nabulus, 1 March 2007.

1.3 The Impact of politics

During Hamas' year in power, one of the remarkable and speedy transformations that took place within the movement's discourse was the shift in its *justification* of its 'hard-line' positions. Religious justifications increasingly gave way to political justifications. The increasing exposure to politics and the outside world engendered a discourse that was formulated more in accordance with external conditions than internal ideological thinking. This further confirms the predominance of the nationalist pragmatic line in Hamas over the religious one in recent years. While this could appear to have been a surface change, it nonetheless permeated deeper into the layers of the political and ideological thinking of Hamas. The impact of such a discourse proved to be most considerable among the lower ranks of the movement, where the religiosity and rigidity of thinking were stronger.

Examples of this shift are many, yet it is sufficient to highlight three major ones that have intimate relevance to current debates about Hamas and its changing fortunes. The first example is the question of recognising Israel. Hamas' 'starting position' was purely religious. Recognising Israel was perceived as tantamount to an infringement of Islam and thus considered as lying beyond the practice of politics. Hamas' Charter was blunt in denouncing any party, Palestinian, Arab or Muslim that would undertake such an anti-religious move. Palestine was declared to be a *waqf* or an endowment for Muslim generations which no one has the right to compromise upon.⁹ The justification that today's Hamas would offer is political and not religious. Hamas argues that Israel is a 'borderless' state and that it has never identified clear borders. So what is the geography of Israel that Hamas and the Palestinians are asked to recognise? Hamas' spokesmen also contend that the PLO has recognised Israel since 1988 yet this has not brought any tangible benefits for the Palestinians. Hamas leaders point to the Arab Summit Peace Initiative adopted in Beirut in 2002, which offered Israel full and collective Arab recognition and normalisation of relations in return for accepting the two-state solution. Their point is that when Israel refuses such a collective Arab recognition, how and why would Hamas' recognition change Israeli attitudes?¹⁰

The second example of the change in Hamas' discourse regards its position on military attacks in Israeli cities. This policy, rigidly and religiously speaking, is akin to stopping the '*Jihad*', the *raison d'être* of Hamas. Perhaps no other notion was so repeatedly confirmed in Hamas' early literature in the late 1980s and early 1990s, than that of *Jihad*. Yet, when Hamas now is asked why it has frozen its '*Jihad*' against Israel, it resorts to political and not to religious justifications. Its leaders link this decision to the delicate calculations that account for the unfavourable political conditions of Hamas' position in government. The significance of such thinking denotes the extent to which Hamas is willing to subjugate its ideological, and seemingly inflexible, convictions to its political pragmatism and goals. Hamas' rhetoric still stresses the concept of 'resistance', even when this 'resistance' is idle. Even more significant is Hamas' recent position that resistance is a political means and not an objective in itself.¹¹

The third example that underlines the shift in Hamas' political thinking is the movement's stance *vis-à-vis* the PLO and the question of joining this organisation. The PLO has been the embodiment of Palestinian legitimacy and representation for many decades, recognised as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinians by the international community. Established in 1964, and controlled by Fatah, all Palestinian factions, nationalist, Marxist and pan-Arabist joined the organisation at different points in time, seeing it as the umbrella for Palestinian nationalist resistance against Zionist aggression in Palestine.

Hamas, the late-comer to the resistance scene in 1987, neither joined the PLO nor acknowledged it as 'the sole' representative of the Palestinian people. It considered the PLO only as 'a' representative of the Palestinians. One of its main objections to the PLO was its 'secular nature'.¹² Other main objections included the PLO's tacit recognition of Israel by endorsing the principle of the two-state solution. Yet the position of today's Hamas concerning the PLO is different, or at least the justification of the old positions has changed. Further, Hamas has engaged in dialogue with Fatah and other Palestinian factions to reform the PLO and include Hamas in it. In all the discussions and debates about a 'new' PLO, which would include Hamas, there has not been a single statement pronounced by Hamas about the 'secular nature' of the PLO or its 'un-Islamic essence'. Even the recognition of Israel by the PLO has been downplayed in view of the fact that Hamas' positions over the past few years have also been converging towards the idea of the two-state solution.¹³

⁹ For the full text see Khaled Hroub (2000), *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, Washington DC.: Institute for Palestine Studies, pp.267-301.

¹⁰ These statements have been repeatedly expressed by Hamas leaders' statements and written articles. For example, see Ismail Haniyya's 'A Just Peace or No Peace', *The Guardian*, 31 March 2006; Musa Abu Marzuk, 'What Hamas is Seeking', *The Washington Post*, 31 January, 2006; and statements made by Khaled Mash'al, Hamas' political bureau chief, to *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 28 February 2007. By contrast, statements that would refer to religious qualification of this position have dramatically diminished.

¹¹ Khaled Mash'al, interview, *Al-Mashhad Al-Siyasi*, 17 March 2007.

¹² In Hamas' Charter, Article 27, sub-titled 'Palestine Liberation Organisation', states that 'Secular ideology is diametrically opposed to religious thought'.

¹³ Khaled Mash'al emphasized, for example, that there is a need to reform and democratise the PLO, yet without reiterating the old Hamas' argument on the PLO, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* 28 February 2007.

At the level of Hamas as a movement and in the eyes of Palestinians at large, Hamas' victory in the elections and the subsequent formation of its government brought about new realities. For the first time in the history of the Palestinian national movement, a party that subscribes to Islamist/religious ideology has managed to eclipse secular factions, leftists and nationalists allied together, and advanced to the forefront. This dramatic change challenged the traditional leadership of 'the Palestinian nationalist liberationist project' which had been controlled almost entirely by secular forces since the days of the British mandate in the 1920s.

Hamas' triumph also accentuated the dichotomy in Palestinian politics between itself and Fatah. The weakness of other factions with either leftist or liberal orientations was further exposed. In many ways, this is an unfortunate development that can be attributed in large measure to the disorientation that many Palestinian elites suffered before, during and after the Oslo Agreements. Suffice it to say that in light of the sharp Fatah/Hamas polarity, the chances of the emergence of a popular and powerful 'third way' in Palestinian politics are slim for the foreseeable future. After one year of Hamas rule, the formation of a national unity government in March 2007 could have represented a historical milestone in Palestinian politics. In fact, the agreement could have helped create a political consensus upon which the Palestinians could deal with Israel, thus bridging the destructive gulf that has so far crippled Palestinian political thinking and strategy.

Over the past 15 years or so, Palestinian forces have been divided between two strategies for achieving Palestinian rights and self-determination: peace talks with Israel (the PLO and the PA) or military resistance against the Israeli occupation (Hamas and other factions). Both strategies worked against Israel but also against each other, yielding little for the Palestinians. Due to their working in opposing directions, these two strategies have effectively frustrated each other: what would be achieved by one of them would be wasted by the opposite party. The lack of a unified leadership that could harmonise the duality of 'resistance and negotiation' resulted in a dynamism of mutual destruction between the two opposing strategies. Sustaining a united platform as embodied in the national unity government could be seen therefore as a necessity for internal coherence of the Palestinian national movement and the resolution of the conflict with Israel. External actors certainly have helped in the early collapse of the national unity government and the potential of long-term consensus-building among the Palestinians. As analysed in depth in Tocci's chapter, the continuation of economic and financial embargos on the national unity government and the explicit policy of sustaining Mahmoud Abbas against Hamas caused the resumption of clashes between Hamas and Fatah and the collapse of the Mecca Agreement between the two factions by June 2007. Not only did Western and Israeli policies provoke the return of a destructive polarity in the Palestinian national movement, but they also encouraged the formation and re-formation of smaller militant groups that listen neither to Fatah nor to Hamas.

The ramifications of Hamas' electoral victory on the conflict could be examined by addressing two main questions. First, would Hamas-in-power help or hinder the achievement of a peace settlement; and two, would Hamas-in-power pose more or less of a threat to Israel's security and citizens?

Concerning the first question it is necessary to clarify some assumptions: before and during Hamas' taking of power there have been no genuine peace talks to be helped or hindered by Hamas in the first place. The peace track had gone astray well before Hamas' rise to power. Since the second *intifada*, which erupted in response to Oslo's failure to bring about any tangible gains for the Palestinians, the peace process had been idle. Although Abbas had been the leader of the Palestinians for more than a year before the 2006 elections, and is still at the top of the Palestinian hierarchy, Israel has not engaged with him in serious negotiations. Abbas is seen as the most moderate Palestinian leader with whom Israel could (or should) make peace. Yet, he was considered to be incompetent as a 'peace partner' by Israel, and his political capital in the eyes of the Palestinians has gradually been eroded as he failed to change their dire *status-quo*.

Furthermore and regardless of the internal make up of the Palestinian government, there have been strong doubts whether Israel is ready to make any serious moves towards concluding a peace agreement. The current Israeli leadership has been somewhat damaged politically and humiliated militarily after the Lebanon war in addition to a number of top Israeli figures facing prosecution for financial or sexual corruption. If the Olmert government were forced to resign, any potential alternative – either another Kadima-led government, potentially as weak as the current one, or a Netanyaheu/Liberman-led government, representing

1.4 Implications for the Palestinian polity and legitimacy

1.5 Implications for Israel and for the future of a 'peace settlement'

the far right – would not be expected to gear the agenda for any peace process with the Palestinians. Therefore it really remains an open question whether Hamas should be held responsible for the ‘inaction’ of the peace talks between the two parties.¹⁴

In terms of military threat or security for Israel there is an apparent irony: the period in which Hamas was either in full control of the PA or engaged in power-sharing with Fatah (March 2006 – June 2007) was almost the most peaceful and calm period that Israeli cities had enjoyed over the past few years. The year running up to the elections and the year of Hamas in power witnessed almost zero suicide attacks conducted by Hamas in Israel.

Another security scenario that could be contemplated and largely interrelated to changes within and surrounding Hamas, is the possibility of the emergence of Al-Qaeda cells within the Palestinian territories. This could be the result of a combination of several factors. Among these is the appeal within angry and frustrated Palestinian factions of the uncompromising *Al-Qaeda* model which has been embraced in Iraq and elsewhere. This might also be true for the many disenfranchised ultra-religious zealots within Hamas, who have become disillusioned by the ‘futile’ political line adopted by their leadership. These factors are exacerbated by the chaotic situation in the Gaza Strip in particular and the free market of arms. Nonetheless, so far Al-Qaeda has failed to establish its own cells in Palestine. Hamas has functioned as a bulwark blocking any newly emerging group, and *Al-Qaeda* has found it hard to infiltrate. However, things could start changing. The erroneous external policies pursued by Israel and the West in general which have placed the Gaza Strip under blockade, starving people and humiliating them, would naturally provoke more radical tendencies than the existing ones.

1.6 The Unity Government and its aftermath

The rivalry between Fatah and Hamas since the January 2006 elections has pushed the internal Palestinian situation from bad to worse. By January 2007, marking exactly one year since Hamas’ victory, the spectre of civil war had become a serious potential. Egyptian, Syrian, Qatari and Jordanian attempts to mediate between the two fighting factions failed one after the other. In early February the Saudi King Abdallah took an initiative and called the leaders of both movements to convene in Mecca.

The Saudi initiative was successful and between the 6 and 8 of February 2007 Fatah and Hamas concluded what would be known as the ‘Mecca Agreement’. Putting an immediate end to Palestinian in-fighting in Gaza, the agreement paved the way for the formation of a Palestinian national unity government which took place in March 2007. The political programme of the would-be government confirmed the pragmatic line of Hamas, in which it agreed to ‘respect’ previous agreements signed between the PLO and Israel. It also stipulated the establishment of a Palestinian state using the 1967 borders as the national aim of the government, yet without conceding a blunt recognition of Israel. The Mecca Agreement was a breakthrough, offering a potential Palestinian consensus, however shaky, on a unified political programme.

The National Unity Government did not change the Quartet and Israeli policies of isolating and boycotting Hamas. In particular the new government did not succeed in breaking the international boycott and in controlling and unifying the internal security forces loyal to Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan. The skirmishes between Fatah-affiliated groups and security forces and Hamas’ Executive Force and Al-Qassam Brigades intensified. A new round of violent internal fighting by May-June culminated in mid June with Hamas’ taking control of the security forces in the Gaza Strip. Dozens of Palestinians from both sides were killed, and hundreds wounded. The Gaza Strip fell entirely under Hamas’ control. Immediately after that Abbas nominated a non-Hamas government in the West Bank which was quickly recognised and supported by the Quartet and by Israel. Since then the Palestinian polity and geography have become ever more divided with the West Bank under the control of Fatah and the Gaza Strip under the control of Hamas, and each claiming to have the legitimate government. The international community sided with the government in the West Bank, and tightened the blockade on Hamas and the Gaza Strip and its almost one and a half million Palestinians.

1.7 In power – out of power: Hamas’ military takeover of Gaza, June 2007

The military takeover of the Gaza Strip can only be understood from the perspective of rational-players’ power politics. Hamas and Fatah were stubbornly engaged in a rivalry over power where the surrounding conditions induced the use of force more than reconciliation. Fatah and the Palestinian president have spared no tactic to bring about the failure of Hamas’ government. In the two weeks following the results of the elections, several presidential decrees were passed aimed at stripping basic powers from the Hamas’ government-in-waiting. Abbas brought back to the ‘presidency’ all the

powers that he had struggled hard to wrest away from former president Arafat when he was a prime minister in the year 2003. The 'presidency' started to accumulate excessive power that would in the absence of Hamas be criticised world-wide. Hamas' incoming government and its ministries were stripped of real authority, especially in areas of finance and security.

All security forces would, by virtue of the new decrees, fall under the responsibility of the president and would be run by the 'National Security Council' which had previously played only a consultative role. The official media was moved from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Information to that of the 'presidency'. All border points, especially the Rafah border, which used to be under the control of the national security forces, belonging to the Interior Ministry, were brought under the authority of the 'presidency' through its 'presidential guards'. The latter had rapidly been beefed-up to become a most important 'military force' assuming far more responsibilities than safeguarding the president. A number of presidential decisions were also taken in which Fatah officials were appointed or promoted to occupy key security posts. Even after the formation of the national unity government in March 2007, the failure to resolve the thorniest of issues, the control over security forces, heavily weighed in favour of Hamas' use of force.

On Hamas' side, the mounting pressures were also eliminating any alternatives but the resort to force to re-structure the *status quo*. Because of its lack of control over security forces, Hamas' government failed to maintain security for ordinary Palestinians, leaving the streets of Gaza to fall into the hands of various groups of thugs and militant gangs. The chaotic situation was partly provoked by militant elements close to Dahlan the then-strongman of the Preventative Security.¹⁵ Their aim was to prove that Hamas was incapable of delivering security, discrediting it in the eyes of the Palestinians. Also and as a result of the cutting off of external aid, Hamas had failed to provide salaries to tens of thousands of public sector employees. Exploiting the situation, Fatah mobilised widespread strikes among civil servants, especially teachers, which truly harmed Hamas' image. The compounded pressures on Hamas created panic and unrest among the rank-and-file of the movement. The wisdom of engaging in such a political process, as opposed to remaining in the 'resistance' and opposition, has become a question of essence.

Internally, anger and impatience increasingly dominated Hamas' military wing (estimated to be in the range of 10,000 and 15,000 armed men), which until then had been kept under the full control of the political leadership. In the days preceding the military takeover, Hamas' military had been caught in a feeling of compounded humiliation. On the one hand, and in order to avoid harming the government's political agenda, they had ceased their attacks against Israeli targets which had fallen easily within their reach. This had invoked criticism and mockery of their 'resistance project'; Fatah was prompt in pointing at Hamas' relinquishing of resistance for the sake of 'governmental posts'. On the other hand, the chaotic security situation spreading across the Gaza Strip was seen to be mobilised by rival groups, from or close to Fatah, which Hamas' military wing felt they could have ended if they were given the green lights. Hamas' Al-Qassam Brigades were not allowed to interfere in the daily business of the government, although it oversaw and trained the 'Executive Force' which the government established as a police force. Hamas' military wing by then had started to see itself as an impotent or put-to-pasture army, losing its respect and aura.

However, the most intolerable and decisive factor for Hamas' military leadership was the continuous arming of Abbas' presidential guards and other security forces in the Gaza Strip. Shipments of arms arrived to the Strip from Egypt, Jordan and Israel. For Hamas' military it looked as if they were merely naively waiting for the moment when their rivals would launch an all-out assault on Hamas. Thus, their calculations were to undertake a preventative blow which would save the movement from a looming and crushing Fatah attack. For many in Hamas' military leadership it was a life or death decision given that it was them, and not Hamas' political leadership, that topped Fatah's target list.

In a nutshell, Hamas' government was put under enormous pressure: externally, internally and organisationally. Cut off financially and diplomatically Hamas, after 18 months in power, lacked political capital to present to its members or the Palestinian at large. It looked crippled in delivering even the most basic services of government. On top of that, its military leadership perceived a ticking clock that would lead to the eventual destruction of the military power that they had spent years to build. All these pressures culminated in the political leadership giving way, perhaps for the first time in Hamas' political life, to its military wing to decide and implement how to deal with Fatah on the ground.¹⁶

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the post-Annapolis talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians, in December 2007, had faced intractable difficulties, not because of Hamas, but due to Israel's insistence on building new settlement units in East Jerusalem.

¹⁵ Dahlan was frequently quoted that he would 'drive Hamas' government nuts' in the Gaza Strip. A sample of statements were included in a long public letter addressed to Fatah members and distributed in the Occupied Territories written by the prominent Fatah leader and former Justice Minister Nahed Muneer Al-Rayyes in early July 2007. Al-Rayyes was one of few Fatah figures who publicly blamed Dahlan and his Security Forces for the deterioration of the situation in the Strip, namely provoking Hamas. Another prominent Fatah member who was equally outspoken is Hani Al-Hassan who gave an interview to *Al-Jazeera* in which he accused 'the corrupt tendency (*tayyar*) in Fatah leaders' for what happened in the Strip; *Al-Jazeera* 29 June 2007.

¹⁶ Hamas issued what it called 'The White Paper' [Al-Kitab Al-Abyad], in which it explained its reasons behind the 'military takeover' of the Gaza Strip. The subtitle of the book is 'out of coercion not choice'. See *The White Paper: The Military Decisive Operation – Out of Coercion Not Choice*, Hamas' Press Office, November 2007.

1.8 Conclusion: What future for Hamas?

Toning down the religious proclamations in Hamas' discourse and delivery was not an internally pain-free process. There are certainly leaders and members within the movement who have questioned the recent line adopted by the movement.¹⁷ Until very recently, they were the minority and eventually restrained their discontent in the interest of the unity of the movement. The military wing, in particular, endured tremendous pressures from its 'unemployed' members. One major source of 'moral and political pressure' was the continuous stream of accusations coming from rival groups that Hamas had given up resistance for the sake of futile politics and governmental posts and privileges; exactly what their rival Fatah movement had done in previous years. Hamas' leadership was desperate to achieve concrete results from its 'political process' so as to sell the political route to an increasing number of its dissatisfied members. Yet external players, Israel, the West and Arab governments, did not help consolidate the gradual turn within Hamas. On the contrary, a major part of the effort was directed towards bringing down Hamas' government as soon as possible, and indeed these efforts bore fruit in the West Bank, crystallizing further the political division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Their short-sighted policies may have reduced the possibility of consolidating a more politicised and pragmatic organisation. The Gaza Strip/West Bank divide has further exacerbated Palestinian weakness. With the international community only dealing with the West Bank while continuing the embargo on Gaza, positive prospects seem minimal, if any. Without reuniting both parts of the Palestinian territory under a coalition leadership that includes Fatah and Hamas, efforts to bring about peace and stability look meaningless. As for Hamas as a movement, both internal and external dynamics will determine whether the shift in Hamas' politics and thinking will outlive the experience of the last two years.

¹⁷ In an interview with the author in Gaza city, Dr Mahmoud Zahhar, prominent Hamas figure and the foreign minister during the Hamas-led government, expressed his dissatisfaction with the 'direction' that his movement was taking with the national unity government. He criticized the 'indirect' recognition of Israel, but declined to answer what he and other dissatisfied Hamas leaders and members would do if the movement continued on its 'new path'; 8 March 2007.

This chapter focuses on the recent evolution and current impasse of the largest and most prominent Lebanese political party: Hezbollah.

First known for its kidnappings of Westerners and military operations against Israeli and Western armed forces in South Lebanon in the 1980s, Hezbollah is today a fully-fledged political organisation constituted by political, social and military branches. The former widespread perception of Hezbollah as a fanatical religious organisation, surrogate of Iran, that sought to impose an Islamic Iranian republic model on Lebanese society has given way to a more complex picture in post-civil war Lebanon, thanks also to the slow political integration of the party in the Lebanese context.

However, the political crisis that started in Lebanon with the Syrian withdrawal under international pressures in 2005 and continued with the Israeli onslaught in 2006, the Nahr al-Bared crisis in 2007 and, in general, the consolidation of two opposing political blocks sustained by rival foreign patrons is increasingly polarising the Lebanese scene, endangering national political reconciliation and Hezbollah's integration into the Lebanese political system.

In what follows, we analyse the different components of Hezbollah's ideology and political strategy hoping to shed light on Hezbollah's possible role and evolution both with respect to the national political arena and to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Hezbollah's emergence as a guerrilla movement was not only due to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and Western, Syrian and Iranian interventions in the country, but also to the general Lebanese Shia community's political mobilisation that started back in the 1960s.

Hezbollah was founded in the early 1980s as a small militia with Iranian training and finance and grew in the following years thanks to a few successful kidnappings of Westerners and military operations mainly against Israeli Defence Forces. The political programme of the new organisation was first presented in the so called 'open letter to the oppressed' of 1985, a statement by the Party Spokesman (al-Sayyed Ibrahim Amine al-Sayyed) which marks the organisation's shift from secret resistance to public political work. The document states openly that the Iranian Revolution is the main source of inspiration for the new political and military organisation, which bases itself on three ideological pillars: (1) Islam is a comprehensive religion and, thus, the ideal political model is the Islamic state (in this case a republic based on the Iranian model); (2) resistance against Israeli occupation is the priority of the party (see below in § 3); (3) the legitimate leadership is bestowed to the Jurist-Theologian who is considered to be the successor to the Prophet and the Imams (following Imam Khomeini's concept of the *wilaya al-Faqih* or the 'ruling of the jurispudent'). The 'open letter' goes on to explain, however, that the Islamic state could not be imposed by one group over the others: "we call for the implementation of the Islamic system based on a direct and free choice of the people and not through forceful imposition as may be assumed by some."¹⁹

This moderate vision rests on the conviction that without appropriate circumstances like those in Iran in the wake of the revolution, any revolutionary activity towards establishing an Islamic state would result in chaos and civil war (*fitna*). The goal of an Islamic state thus remained in the intellectual realm, but was relinquished from the movement's political programme in view of the perceived unfeasibility of establishing an Islamic state in multi-confessional Lebanon.²⁰ The idea was indeed rejected not only by other faith-based communities (Sunnis, Christians, Druzes, etc.) but also by a significant portion of the Shia community itself.²¹

Hezbollah's practice was and still is in line with the party's declarations. During the civil war and before the Taif agreement, Hezbollah could be defined as an "anti-systemic and revolutionary party". In fact, not only Hezbollah believed that Lebanon's system of government was illegitimate, but also that it could only be reformed through external action.²² The party's hostility, however, rested on its opposition to the principle of political sectarianism, the rejection of Maronite sectarian privileges and Shia under-representation and the real or perceived collaboration of Amin Gemayel's government with Israel. Hostility did not rest - as some might assume - on the un-Islamic character of the Lebanese state.²³

With the 1989 Taif agreement, Hezbollah's perception of the state underwent a significant transformation. The new constitution allowed for a more equitable distribution of power among the sects by assigning 50-50 communal quotas to Muslims and Christians in Parliament, and also by reducing the power of the Maronite President of the Republic in

2. Hezbollah in a state of uncertainty

by Daniela Pioppi¹⁸

2.1 Hezbollah 'lebanonisation' or 'opening the door': Accommodating to the Lebanese state

18 Daniela Pioppi is Senior Research Fellow at IAI.
19 From a theological point of view this is based on the Quranic verse 'Let there be no compulsion in religion' (Quran, 2:256) quoted in the open letter of 1985. Open letter pp. 19-20 quoted by Naim Qassem (2005), *Hezbollah a Story from within*, London: Saqi Books, p. 31.

20 Naim Qassem, op. cit., pp. pp. 30-34 and Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), *Hizbu'llah. Politics, Religion*, London: Pluto Press, pp. 34-59.

21 In an opinion poll carried out at the beginning of the nineties, only 13% of the Lebanese Shia community was in favour of an Islamic state. Judith Harik's 1992 study, quoted by Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), op. cit., p. 35.

22 Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), op. cit., p. 26-27.

23 Ibid. Amin Pierre Gemayel was the President of Lebanon from 1982 to 1988.

favour of a multi-sectarian cabinet. Taif also foresaw a phased removal of sectarianism from the system, although the recommendation only remained on paper.

Hezbollah continued to reject the ‘sectarian essence’ of the system, but not its institutional structure. The party recognised the post-Taif Lebanese secular state and decided to participate in the first post-civil war national election in 1992, thus transforming itself from a “total refusal anti-systemic party” to a “protest anti-systemic party”.²⁴

A partial explanation of the party’s changing attitude towards a political system hitherto considered illegitimate is the necessity to accommodate the party’s growing constituency in Shia areas. In less than a decade, Hezbollah became a very structured mass-based political organisation extending its activities beyond the political and the military realms to the social and cultural ones as well. Its transformation from a guerrilla movement into a complex and large political party, resembling in its structures and institutions to post-II world war socialist mass parties, inevitably had an impact on the party’s decision-making and ideological base. The party’s constituency is interested not only in fighting Israel, but also in everyday life in Lebanon and being represented in national politics.²⁵

Hezbollah’s political accommodation with the post-Taif Lebanese state is also a strategic choice and a way to ensure the organisation’s survival: only by integrating in the political system could the party claim to represent *Lebanese* resistance against Israel as opposed to being perceived as alien to Lebanese society.

Hezbollah’s transformation continued after the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, when it participated in government for the first time. Hezbollah justified its participation in the executive in 2005-6 as an expression of responsibility towards the country’s need of stability. However, the decision to participate in the government should also be viewed in the context of the party’s sense of vulnerability after losing Syrian protection. Participating in the cabinet was a way to prevent the Lebanese government from succumbing to external pressures regarding Hezbollah disarmament or, more generally, from imposing on the country decisions against Hezbollah’s interests.²⁶

When the party decided to withdraw its ministers from the government in November 2006 and to start a political campaign against the Siniora government, it did so by following constitutional rules through the organisation of demonstrations, a strike and a sit-in in central Beirut.²⁷ Hezbollah accuses the government of being illegitimate and unconstitutional, which is open to dispute of course. However Hezbollah did not and continues not to challenge state institutions or the general rules of the Lebanese political system.

Party officials interviewed by the author in May 2007 claimed that Hezbollah’s long-term goals for the Lebanese political system are a strong sovereign state, with an army capable of defending the national territory and a strong and equitable welfare system. The state should be built on the bases of the Taif constitution, that is, on a system of ‘consensual democracy’. They also made clear that an Islamic state model is not applicable to Lebanon, which is a pluralist and multi-confessional society. A member of Hezbollah’s Politbureau specified also that Israel taught Hezbollah a lesson, demonstrating how dangerous it is to build a state and a society based on a single confession be it Jewish or other.²⁸

Hezbollah does not question the current Lebanese Constitution and does not exclude any future participation in government. It has called many times, both before and after the 2006 war, for a unity government. The party’s current aim, however is not to take the responsibility of government, but only to have ‘veto power’ or the so-called ‘blocking third’ over executive decisions.²⁹ This position could be explained by the party’s priority in resisting Israel. Full government involvement might distract Hezbollah’s energies and also, under present domestic and international conditions, it might oblige the party to make concessions and compromises that would endanger its integrity in the eyes of its constituency.³⁰ Finally, Hezbollah is – as we will see in the next section – very aware of the concerns of other Lebanese communities with respect to its possible political supremacy in the country. This is probably the main reason behind its prudent approach to power.

Thus, so far, Hezbollah has firmly accepted the rules of the game (the Constitution and the Lebanese state) and has chosen political participation as the best strategy to solve the country’s problems and ensure the party’s physical survival in a hostile environment. Yet, this strategy of ‘opening the door’ could also be reversed, and the party might find itself more inclined to revert back to the outsider position it held before Taif. This may be the case especially if Hezbollah finds itself increasingly isolated internationally and rejected by the domestic system of government.

²⁴ Ibid. Quoting Sartori.

²⁵ For the transformation of the party see for instance, Augustus Richard Norton (2007), *Hezbollah. A Short History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²⁶ Interview with a party member, Beirut 22 May.

²⁷ See Jim Quilty (2007), *A Winter of Lebanon’s Discontents*, MERIP, 26 January.

²⁸ Interviews with party’s officials, Beirut May 2007.

²⁹ Major national decisions should be passed with a two-third majority. For technical details see International Crisis Group (2006), *Lebanon at a Tripwire*, Middle East Briefing N. 20, 21 December.

³⁰ Interviews with party’s officials, Beirut May 2007.

Hezbollah 'Lebanonisation' or *infatih* came with the party's growing emphasis on its Lebanese identity, inspired by its desire of legitimisation across all sectors of Lebanese society.

This policy notwithstanding, the party is widely accused of being dependent on Iran and Syria and of serving a foreign agenda against Lebanese national interests. Hezbollah is well aware that the *Wilaya al-Faqih* concept and its close relationship with Iran could undermine its image as a true Lebanese nationalist movement. Hezbollah recognises the *wilaya* (or political authority) of Ali Khamenei (currently Grand Ayatollah and Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran) as the successor of the Imam Khomeyni, although the former does not have the same standing and charisma of the father of the Islamic revolution. As explained by Shaykh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary General, Khamenei's authority counts primarily when the party's leadership is confronted "with essential issues or overtures that might affect any of the working principles or requiring knowledge of legislative jurisprudence".³¹ In these cases, "the party would take the initiative of requesting clerical permission that would provide legal *shari'a* grounds for executing or ceasing a certain action".³² There is a certain ambiguity in this relationship, although Nasrallah cleverly compares Hezbollah's relationship with Iran to the relationship that Christian parties have with their church (the Vatican or other) or to the relationship that Communist parties had to the former-Soviet Union.³³ There is some evidence, however, that Hezbollah asks for advice only on crucial matters and only once the Party's upper echelons have already reached a decision. Khamenei's advice is given, at least officially, only on Hezbollah's request and only as a form of legitimisation of the majority decision already taken. That was the case for the party's decision to participate in the 1992 elections. Khamenei's advice was given only after an intense internal debate and a vote which had already opted for participation.³⁴

Besides ideological ties, Iran provides a very important financial contribution to Hezbollah, even if the party could also rely on different sources of domestic funding.³⁵ The exact amount of Iranian funding is unknown, but the financing itself is not kept secret either.³⁶ Walking in the Shia districts of Beirut, it is very common to see street posters mentioning Iranian funding. Clearly, the more the party is isolated from the government and from Western countries, the more it will rely on Iran for sustenance. Regarding Lebanon's post 2006 war reconstruction for example, there is an ongoing polemic between the government and Hezbollah, with the latter claiming to be cut off from Western funding received by the governing coalition.³⁷

By contrast, Hezbollah's relationship with Syria is strategic rather than ideological. During Syria's occupation of Lebanon, relations between the regime and Hezbollah were often strained. Syria protected the movement, ensuring it could retain its arms against Israel, but it also ensured the party would not become too powerful. Syria currently logistically supports Hezbollah by allowing military and financial assistance to cross into Lebanese territory.

These relationships with Iran and Syria however have not impeded Hezbollah to act as a Lebanese organisation both in its strategy and in terms of its political programme. Hezbollah's rank and file and upper echelons are all Lebanese. The party certainly refers to a regional and international environment in its political programme, but does so from a Lebanese perspective and not as an international organisation. As mentioned above, Hezbollah's first priority is its resistance against Israel's occupation of *Lebanon*. The strategic alliance with Iran and Syria is perceived as an alliance against US and Israeli hegemony in the region, which in Hezbollah's view, hampers Lebanon's full sovereignty.³⁸ Of course, as in the case of other Arab parties and regimes, Hezbollah embraces the 'Arab cause' or Arab nationalism,³⁹ but this cannot be read as evidence of Islamic or Arab universalism.

At the same time, Hezbollah is not only Lebanese, it is also a Shia party both ideologically - in its references to Shia revolutionary thoughts - and socially, as its constituency is almost 100% Shia. This is no exception in Lebanese politics where each community and, within each community, each notable (*zaim*) has its own constituency built on sectarian solidarity, a network of social services and security apparatuses, so as to create several states within the state.⁴⁰

Yet contrary to other Lebanese sectarian parties, Hezbollah has a traditionally anti-sectarian programme, its Shia composition notwithstanding.⁴¹ For example, Hezbollah's social activities in the suburb of Beirut, in the South and in the Beqaa Valley are open to all confessions and do not expose any Shia religious symbols. Up until Israel's unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah succeeded in being largely perceived as the 'Lebanese' resistance against Israel and as such it enjoyed widespread cross-sectarian support, further sustained by the party's reputation as a good and honest administrator.⁴²

2.2 Syria or Iran's long hand, sectarian party or national movement?

³¹ Naim Qassem (2005), op. cit., p. 56.

³² Ibid.

³³ Interviews with Party's officials, Beirut, May 2007.

³⁴ See Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), op. cit., cap. 3 and 4.

³⁵ Apparently very important is the contribution of well-off Lebanese abroad.

³⁶ Interviews with Party's officials, Beirut, May 2007.

³⁷ Interviews with Party's officials, Beirut, May 2007.

³⁸ For Hezbollah's perceived need to contain US influence in the region see International Crisis Group (2007), *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, Middle East Report n° 69, 10 October 2007, pp. 16-22.

³⁹ One of Hezbollah street-posters for the political mobilisation of Spring 2007 portrayed the picture of Chavez, President of Venezuela, Nasser, President of Egypt from 1952-1970 and symbol of Arab nationalism, near Nasrallah, Secretary General of the Hezbollah.

⁴⁰ As introductory readings on Lebanon political system and its contemporary historical trajectory see Elizabeth Picard (2002), *Lebanon. A Shattered Country*, London: Holmes & Meier, or Kamal Salibi (1993), *A house of many mansions. The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, London: I.B. Tauris.

⁴¹ See for instance Hezbollah 1992 Election Programme in Naim Qassem (2005), op. cit., appendix (full English translation).

⁴² Interviews with Farid al-Khazen, Talal Atrissi, Saad Kiwan, Beirut, May 2007.

Recent events have contributed to a gradual change in this perspective. Besides the issue of disarmament (see § 3), the regional chaos ignited by the US occupation of Iraq, the hostility of the US – followed by the EU – to Syria and Iran and the worsening Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has opened a new phase of regional and national confrontation largely based on sectarian politics. The sudden interest of the US (and France) in Lebanon since 2004 is only a chapter in a longer story. Since 2005, and even more so since the 2006 Israeli war, Hezbollah has feared exclusion from the national arena and international isolation. The current difficult situation has brought the party to “clearly fall back on sectarianism [...] utilising the Shia community as an insurance”.⁴³

Hezbollah’s leadership is very aware of the ‘sectarian danger’ both for Lebanon and for the region. They accuse the US and Israel of playing the old colonial card of sectarian divisions in the region.⁴⁴ The political alliance with former General Michel Aoun is important to the party precisely because of its trans-sectarian character.⁴⁵ Aoun, a Maronite who was in exile in France since the early 1990s, returned to the country just in time for the 2005 elections, held after the Syrian final withdrawal. While many Aounists were in the anti-Syrian 14th of March front, Aoun’s Christian rivals had no intention of granting Aoun a place in government, a move that would have cleared his way to the presidency. This induced Aoun’s alliance with the ‘pro-Syria’ 8th of March front.⁴⁶ The alliance was stipulated in February 2006 with a ten-point document⁴⁷ and weathered the summer 2006 war and ensuing events. Beyond its cross sectarian value, the alliance is also based on a common nationalist, anti-corruption and social-justice programme.⁴⁸

To sum up, on the one hand Hezbollah increasingly relies on its Shia constituency due to the worsening political environment, yet on the other hand it is also aware of the danger of an excessively strong sectarian affiliation. Following its political tradition, it attempts to stress a trans-sectarian, issue-based programme, rather than a sectarian one. Hezbollah is also aware of the concerns of other communities – especially Maronites – with respect to the growing ‘Shia power’, especially in view of the ‘Shia Crescent’ idea, which is increasingly used as a geo-political reference point by Western media-analysts and governments. When analysing the 2006-7 political mobilisation against the Siniora government for example, Hezbollah’s moderation and self-restraint with respect to its ‘real’ power comes to the fore. For instance, the party insists on veto power, as other communities would do in similar situation, but does not demand a clear cut majoritarian democracy (‘one man, one vote’), which would probably give Hezbollah and its allies the majority of votes.

2.3 Violence and Resistance to Israeli occupation

As mentioned above, Hezbollah’s *raison d’être* is its *jihad* against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 to destroy the PLO infrastructure in the country and occupied the South until its unilateral withdrawal in 2000, determined partly by Hezbollah’s efficient military resistance.

Military *jihad* (in contrast with spiritual or moral *jihad*) is defined by Hezbollah as a defensive war against aggression and occupation and is viewed as a duty of every Muslim. It cannot be directed internally, not even against oppressive or illegitimate regimes.⁴⁹

Hezbollah officially claims it is impossible to negotiate with Israel because negotiation would imply the implicit recognition of the ‘Zionist entity’.⁵⁰ However, the argument against negotiations is political and strategic and mainly based on a critique of the Oslo process, which did not halt Israel’s colonial expansion and create a sustainable Palestinian state. There is no mention in Hezbollah’s discourse of a divine prohibition to negotiate. A proof of this is Hezbollah’s willingness to negotiate with Israel on prisoners’ exchange and the ‘rules of the game’ in conducting the conflict.⁵¹

After Israel’s withdrawal in 2000, Hezbollah benefited from a sudden surge in popularity both in Lebanon and the region. This was immediately followed however by the question of the party’s disarmament. The Taif agreement had imposed the disarmament of all militias. Hezbollah was the only Lebanese exception (the other non-Lebanese militias being the Palestinian ones) because of its role in resisting Israel. After the withdrawal of 2000, as an ICG report put it, Hezbollah became ‘a rebel without a cause’.⁵² The party continued to justify its existence as an armed militia by mentioning the ongoing danger posed by Israel to Lebanese sovereignty (i.e., the Israeli violations of Lebanese air and sea spaces, the Palestinian refugee problem, prisoners, the Sheeba Farms, etc.) as well as the Lebanese army’s inability to defend the country. In addition, the deterioration of the situation in the occupied territories and the outbreak of the second intifada did not help the normalisation of relations.

43 Reinoud Leenders, “How the Rebel regained His Cause: Hizbullah & the Sixth Arab-Israeli War”, *The Sixth War. Israel’s Invasion of Lebanon*, Vol. 6, Summer 2006, The Mit Electronic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, pp. 38-56.

44 Interviews with Party’s officials, Beirut, May 2007.

45 Interviews with Party’s officials, Beirut, May 2007.

46 The 14th and 8th of March fronts take their names from the date of their major demonstrations in 2005.

47 Full text of the agreement: http://www.tayyar.org/files/documents/cpl_hezbollah.pdf

48 Interview with Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, Beirut, May 2007.

49 Naim Qassem (2005), op. cit., p. 39-43.

50 Ibid. p. 164; Amal Saad Ghorayeb (2002), op. cit., p. 151.

51 Interviews with Party’s Officials, Beirut, May 2007 and Naim Qassem (2005), op. cit., pp. 164-168.

52 International Crisis Group (2003), *Hizbollah: Rebel without a Cause?*, Middle East Briefing, 30 July

The issue of disarmament reemerged on the Western agenda with UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which - under the initiative of the US and France - called for Syrian withdrawal, but also for the full implementation of the Taif agreement and thus for the disarmament of all militias.⁵³

After Syria's withdrawal, the main Lebanese political actors established a *modus vivendi* notwithstanding the growing polarisation both in the region and in the country. Hezbollah participated in the government and in the 'national dialogue' with the result that the Siniora government agreed to refer to Hezbollah not as a militia, but as a 'national resistance group' thus effectively removing Hezbollah from being subject to UNSC Resolution 1559.

The unexpected Israeli attack of summer 2006 in response to the capture of two Israeli soldiers by a Hezbollah commando changed the cards on the table again. As stated by Olmert himself right after the beginning of the war, the aim of the Israeli military operation in Lebanon was the disarmament or at least the weakening of Hezbollah's militia and the 'removal' of Hezbollah from Lebanon. After 34 days of war with a naval blockade, a ground invasion and air force attacks, leading to the death of approximately 1200 Lebanese, thousands of wounded and almost a million displaced persons, the result was that Hezbollah remained in place and also emerged as politically victorious.

When a ceasefire in conjunction with the UNSC resolution 1701 was imposed on the two contenders, Hezbollah was still permitted to retain its arms. The UNIFIL II mission enjoys good relations with Hezbollah in the South and so far there have been no noteworthy incidents. Hezbollah has welcomed international intervention as long as it does not aim at disarming the resistance. As noted by Reinhud Leenders, Hezbollah has regained its cause,⁵⁴ or better, it has demonstrated that its cause has always been there.

The current situation is not promising. Hezbollah has on various occasions declared that it is willing to disarm in favour of a sovereign Lebanese state with an army capable of defending its territory and citizens. It is impossible to check the sincerity of this statement as the situation is very far from it. After the Syrian withdrawal, Lebanon is a quasi multilateral 'neo-trusteeship' in economic (e.g., foreign debt), political (external alliances of the government and opposition, international tribunal) and military (UNIFIL2, Israeli violations of sovereignty) terms.

Hezbollah reads the spring-summer 2007 crisis in the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Bared as a possible new attempt at destabilising the country and its militia. The immediate reaction after the Lebanese army's first confrontation with the Jihadist Sunni group of Fatah al-Islam, was that it could be a provoked escalation to raise the question of Palestinian and Hezbollah's disarmament and demonstrate the necessity of a UN Chapter 7 action to handle the security situation.⁵⁵

Also, the series of political assassinations and inflammatory rhetoric continue with the murder in September of Antoine Ghanem, a March 14 member of Parliament and in December of General François al-Hajj. Rumours of rearming militias have become increasingly audible, particularly among the various and rival Christian groups.⁵⁶

Mounting political tensions both in the country and in the region have translated into the presidential election crisis with the two opposing blocks not reaching a compromise despite the various postponement of voting since September 2007. At the moment of writing the two opposing blocks have agreed on a presidential candidate, army chief General Michel Suleiman, but are still divided on the make-up of the new government.

Beyond speculations, recent events do not favour a peaceful disarmament of Hezbollah or a climate of reciprocal trust between different Lebanese fronts. Hezbollah believes that its arms are the only form of Lebanese resistance against Israeli violations and the only way to ensure the party's survival in a hostile environment. Under present circumstances it is highly unlikely to disarm spontaneously.

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that Hezbollah could be defined as a large, mass-based, pragmatic political party. This simple statement implies that Hezbollah cannot be 'removed' or that its removal would dangerously imply 'depopulating' large Lebanese areas.⁵⁷

Certain characteristics of Hezbollah pose a problem for other Lebanese political groups and for external – mainly Western – actors. Those characteristics are mainly the party's Islamist ideology, its relationship with Iran and Syria, its Shia constituency, its military wing and its hostile approach to Israel.

2.4 Conclusion: Hezbollah in a state of uncertainty

The current regional and domestic stalemate however does not encourage a positive evolution on any of these sensitive issues. Hezbollah's accommodation with the Lebanese secular state and its relinquishing of the ideal of an Islamic state, although very firm at the moment, could be reversed if Hezbollah is forcefully excluded from 'legitimate' politics by the present Lebanese government with external support. Hezbollah's relationship with Iran and Syria would also be reinforced in the face of increasing isolation and political polarisation in the region. Furthermore, as stated by Leenders, Hezbollah may also rely increasingly on its Shia constituency in a hostile environment, in which it is concerned about its political and physical survival and in which all other actors play the same sectarian card. Finally, Hezbollah's peaceful disarmament can only take place in a climate of reciprocal trust and national reconciliation in which the Lebanese state can start building its national defence strategy stemming from a compromise between all political components and communities. Increasing violence and chaos in the Middle East and the re-sectarianisation of Lebanon and the region are dangerously hindering the integration of Hezbollah and any national reconciliation process.

This is even more frustrating because Hezbollah not only represents a large sector in Lebanese society, but also has certain characteristics that make it a potential moderniser of the Lebanese scene: the party is not organised around a notable family unlike all other Lebanese parties and political organisations and does not mobilise its constituency on a sectarian discourse, but rather uses a political issue-based programme. In a more peaceful environment, the party could thus contribute in an important way to a more participatory and sovereign Lebanese state.

53 UNSC resolution 1559, full text: <http://daccess-dds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/No4/498/92/PDF/No449892.pdf?OpenElement>

54 Reinoud Leenders (2006), *op. cit.*

55 Interviews with Party's members at the external relations office the first days of the crisis, Beirut, 20-22 May 2007.

56 International Crisis Group (2007), *op. cit.*, Middle East Report no. 69, p. 23.

57 Lara Deeb, Deconstructing a 'Hizbullah Stronghold', *The Sixth War. Israel's Invasion of Lebanon*, Vol. 6, Summer 2006, The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, pp. 115-125.

The rise of Hezbollah and Hamas has presented the Arab region with dilemmas that go beyond Lebanon and Palestine. Hezbollah and Hamas have become “models” for political and military action for a regional and Arab public that is sympathetic with both organizations, albeit not quite ready to pay the price for their political choices. To assess the regional influence of Hamas and Hezbollah, we must take into account several considerations.

The growing moral and political influence of Hezbollah and Hamas is largely due to the failure of moderate regimes allied with the US and the West. For example, during the Lebanon war in 2006, the Egyptian regime refused to get involved in any military escalation against Israel given that its national interests were not at stake. Yet it argued that also Syria, whose land is still under occupation, has consistently refrained from involvement in any confrontation with Israel since 1973. Critics of the Egyptian regime however did not accept this argument, pointing out that Egypt not only rejected the option of war but also failed to manage peace and offer the Arab public a moderate alternative to the course suggested by Hezbollah or Hamas. Indeed the ‘moderate’ Arab governments have failed to use peace with Israel for the enhancement of their democracy, development and international status. This is what has made armed resistance, however costly and risky, so attractive to the Arab public. It is hard for the Arab public to dismiss resistance out of hand, appreciating that Arab states have failed to achieve the necessary clout to deter their enemies.

Hezbollah’s popularity has nothing to do with how smart or practical its policies are. It has to do with its integrity, something that other regimes in the region lack. Arab regimes speak about prosperity, reform, and democracy, but fail to deliver; whereas “radical” regimes clamour steadfastness in their confrontation with Israel, but end up sending their armies into Lebanon and Kuwait. In other words, Hezbollah offers the only alternative to the failed policies of both “moderate” and “radical” Arab regimes. The steadfastness of Hezbollah’s fighters in the war with Israel was neither haphazard nor rhetorical. Hezbollah was fully aware of its military disadvantage versus Israel, yet by assessing carefully the capabilities of the Israeli army it was able to hold out. Hezbollah acted credibly and kept its word in the eyes of the public. This was quite a change from how things were done in the Arab world for the past three decades. Two models had dominated this region, and both have been deceptive. The first is that of ‘radical’ regimes that claim to be fighting Israel and imperialism, but end up fighting their own people and other Arab countries. The second is that of regimes that promise to bring prosperity, development, reform, and democracy, but fail to do so and remain as despotic as ever. It is important to understand that the phenomenon of resistance in the Arab world, as embodied by Hezbollah and Hamas, cannot be viewed in isolation of the crisis of the moderates. Likewise, the future of Hamas and Hezbollah hinges on the ability of moderate models to become effective and gain credibility. Both Hezbollah and Hamas have immense influence, albeit in different ways, on the Arab regional scene. But what kind of future and influence do Hamas and Hezbollah have?

One may assess the aftermath of Hezbollah’s battle with Israel from two angles. First of all, Hezbollah offered a model of resistance that is effective but costly in human as well as economic terms. Secondly, Hezbollah attempted to capitalize on the outcome of the war and bolster its standing within Lebanon. Hezbollah’s battle with Israel undoubtedly unleashed considerable sympathy across the Arab world

As Israeli pressures mounted against the Palestinian people, Hezbollah’s operation seemed to many Arabs as an act of protest against the events in the OTs, even if the operation did not change the balance of power with Israel and transform the Arab public into ardent supporters of the resistance model. One may say that Hezbollah’s battle with Israel ended the stagnation on the Arab scene, opening the way for larger sectors of the public to embrace resistance. But this did not lead to a change in the existing regional equations as Arab moderate countries were not inspired to adopt the model of resistance offered by Hezbollah and refrained from recognizing Hezbollah’s military achievement. Likewise, Arab public opinion, although sympathetic with resistance, was not ready to pay the price for it. As for resistance-supporting countries, such as Syria, they continued to talk tough but act pragmatically.

Hezbollah gambled everything in its war with Israel. It understood that full victory was impossible – and perhaps even undesirable – for it would upset the current Lebanese and Arab fabric. It also knew that total defeat would be devastating to the cause of resistance in Lebanon and the Arab region. In the end, Hezbollah managed to achieve something that transcended mere victory or defeat. Yet after the war, Hezbollah acted like any other Lebanese group, hoping to bank on its steadfastness in the war in order to change the way things are done in the country. That is why the demonstrations held by Hezbollah against

3. Hezbollah and Hamas: A perspective from the region

by Amr Elshobaki⁵⁸

3.1 Hezbollah’s “victory” and how it affected the region

58 Amr Elshobaki is research program director at Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, Cairo. The opinions expressed in this article are taken from al-Masry al-Yom, Egyptian newspaper; Al-Ahram, Egyptian newspaper; Al-Shark Al-Awsat, Saudi newspaper; Islamonline.net; Ikhwanweb.net

Siniora's government brought the group little Arab sympathy. As and when Hezbollah played local politics, its allure to Arab public opinion began to fade. Moreover, Hezbollah's retention of arms has also generated tensions and criticisms across the region. No Arab or non-Arab country, democratic or not, could allow such an exceptional situation to persist. The current situation is highly exceptional, considering that Lebanon is not under occupation. The fact that Israel is an "exceptional" state does not justify Hezbollah's claim to remain an "exception" too. This explains why, whereas Hezbollah's popularity may have grown in the Arab world, inside Lebanon its support has dwindled. Hezbollah has already run into much opposition over its recent policies and must reconsider its attempt to overthrow a legitimately elected government. Instead of sending its supporters on the streets and exacerbating factional tensions, Hezbollah needs to formulate a political discourse that is more open to the world around it. Hezbollah needs to find a "calculated" hard-line approach, one that is in harmony with international norms, and that appeals to non-Shiites and non-Muslims.

3.2 Hamas in "power" and implications for the region

Hamas' accession to "power" in Palestine represented a new challenge for the countries of the region. Hamas formed the first "Muslim Brotherhood" government in the Arab world. It did so through democratic means, and thus embarked on a new phase. Hamas was required to deliver "non-ideological" services to its people and take international and regional considerations into account. Yet the strategy of "undermining Hamas," which the US administration adopted, was unhelpful to serve these ends. It induced Hamas and other Islamic movements to think in terms of "conspiracy" against the Palestinian people and to harp on western hostility to Islam and all Muslims. This caged Hamas further into a mindset of extremism and conspiracy. The US sees Hamas as a threat to Israel's security, just as Arab countries see all Islamic movements, including Hamas, as a threat to their own security. No one wants to admit that Hamas came to power through a democratic process and no state in the region exerted real efforts to integrate Hamas into the international and regional scene. The desire to isolate Hamas was shared by international as well as regional powers, although regional powers were often hesitant to reveal their true intentions.

The policies of the West have also been highly contradictory debilitating further Western credibility in the eyes of the Arab public. While refusing to talk to Hamas, the US has adamantly engaged with various Sunni Islamic currents in Iraq, chief of which is the Iraqi Islamic Party, that embraces the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood. Washington even approached some of Iraq's most violent Islamic groups, including those which committed terrorist acts against innocent civilians. But in Palestine, the US rejected the outcome of the democratic process, and shunned Hamas – which is far more moderate than some of Iraq's Sunni organizations. Had Hamas reached a US-sponsored agreement with Israel, a new phase would have started in the Arab world in which other Islamic movements would have had to recognize Israel and change their doctrines in a drastic manner. Progress in the peace process would have changed the manner Hamas and other Islamic movements approach the Arab-Israeli conflict. Ways of peaceful resistance would have had to be explored, and a humanitarian way of dealing with people of other creeds established. The creation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza would have altered the doctrinal and political attitudes of Hamas and other Islamic factions, opening the door for a new Islamic humanitarian discourse, a discourse that seeks new allies on a non-religious basis and seeks a world based on justice, equality, and freedom. However, the US and Europe chose to exclude and dismantle Hamas. These are the circumstances that prompt some to argue that terror is the only way ahead for "resistance," that suffocate any attempt for a just solution of the Palestinian problem and that keep the Arab world hostage to either moderate regimes that do not dare challenge US policy or radical Islamists who are willing to engage in violence and terror, al-Qaeda included. As for those groups in between - like Hamas - they are being denied a place on the international and regional scene.

Movements such as Hamas could have offered such an in between in so far as its intellectual and political ideas represent a sequel to Arab liberation ideas championed by Abdel Nasser in the 1960s. It was the defeat of the Nasserist quest in 1967 that gave birth to political Islamic movements. The Islamists have simply inherited the mantle of leftist pan-Arabism. Indeed Hamas has reproduced the Arab discourse of liberation and given it an Islamic coating, wanting to revive the potential of the Arab and Islamic people in the face of external challenges. Hamas certainly has the potential to develop into a movement that is democratic and still hardline on the question of independence. You need to hardline to counter the policies of the US administration and Olmert's Kadima. The US and Israel are both hardline, but they have the power and the international clout to present their policies as if they were the "benchmark" for gauging the rest of the world.

However Hamas has not done enough to come up with a new political discourse capable of dialectic interaction with the international community. It needs to repackage its hardline policies in a manner that is accessible to others. Today Hamas may control Gaza, but that does not put it in the same league as other ‘enemies’ of the West, such as Iran. The latter is a country with some clout, and it can use this for political purposes. Hamas cannot achieve anything unless it can talk persuasively to the world. Also in the region, major Arab countries, with the exception of Syria, expressed reservations over Hamas’ control of Gaza. As political and media pressure mounted on Hamas, some in Egypt argued that the Hamas saga proves that Islamists are not ready for integration into the political process and that they are inherently anti-democratic. Egyptian writers spoke derisively of Gazastan, saying that Hamas’ control of Gaza is a threat to Egyptian national security. Saudi Arabia voiced similar reservations, albeit in a calmer tone. In Egypt, the conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian regime influenced the reaction to the Hamas-Fatah rivalry. Some Arabs undoubtedly hoped for Hamas to fail all along – in so far as a failure on Hamas’ part could be used to discredit other Islamic currents in the region. A Hamas failure would present the existing regimes in a better light to the West and the US. The battle for Gaza prompted Arab countries to turn their back to Hamas. Some newspaper headlines are noteworthy in this respect: “The Democracy of the Brotherhood: Hamas Drops the Mask,” “Endless Violence... for Arab Islamists.” Today, Hamas is in greater trouble than Fatah, with no end in sight to its regional and international isolation. Hamas needs a drastic revision of its policy. It needs to formulate a new political and cognitive discourse, one that can appeal to the world and interact dialectically with existing international values. Hamas can use its transparency, integrity, and appeal to the masses to develop such a discourse.

States in the region generally showed little if any sympathy towards Hezbollah and Hamas. The general view of Arab moderate countries was that Hezbollah went for an “adventure” that was too costly for the Lebanese people and that Hamas failed because the “Islamic option” was doomed. Yet Arab moderate countries did not succeed in influencing the regional scene either, with the possible exception of Saudi Arabia which offered considerable support to the Siniora government in Lebanon and firmly opposed Hezbollah’s “adventure.” Some Sunni clerics in Saudi Arabia opposed Hezbollah on the grounds that it was a Shiite group, something which the Egyptians refrained from doing. In Egypt, Hezbollah was admired by the opposition, including the conservative Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, but vilified by the government and its supporters.

The way Arab moderate regimes dealt with the Hezbollah and Hamas sagas provides further evidence that those regimes have little regional clout. Arab regimes could not stop Hezbollah or Hamas from doing what was on their mind. Conversely, Arab regimes were relatively unscathed by what Hamas and Hezbollah did. The fact that Hezbollah proved itself in the battlefield and won the admiration of the Arab street did little to threaten the legitimacy of any of the region’s moderate regimes. Likewise, Hamas acceded to “power” but failed to bring the Palestinians the liberation and prosperity they expected. Therefore, Hamas failed to ignite the imagination of the regional public or challenge the authority of conservative Arab regimes in any way. A “silent conflict” exists between Arab regimes and Islamic opposition forces. This conflict is yet to be resolved in a democratic manner, and so far has not brought victory to either side. Furthermore, the western blockade perpetuated this “silent conflict” and thus undermined the region’s chances for democracy.

The duality of extremism and moderation in the Arab world lacks a democratic solution. Meanwhile, democratization in the Arab world is hampered by the US and European support of so-called moderates in the region. Moderates, in the western lexicon, are those regimes which enjoy good relations with the West, recognize Israel, and are tolerant of the US global strategy as outlined by the Bush administration. Those moderates do not have to be democratic or credible in the eyes of their public. As for extremists – occasionally called terrorists – they are those Islamists who have relatively efficient and non-corrupt organizations. Often, they are more active and appealing to the public than moderate regimes. Hezbollah, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and some radical leftist groups, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, are often called extremists. Surely, these groups need to revise part of their discourse. But this will not happen unless EU countries engage them in talks and put pressure on them through contact. Unless serious dialogue with Hamas and Hezbollah starts, the chances for true democracy in the Arab world will remain grim. Hamas and Hezbollah are not just local groups, but role models for extremism. Many Hamas members and its sympathisers need to communicate with outsiders to discover the values of democracy, values which have been put on hold in Palestine due to the occupation. Only in this way can democracy proceed, with moderates

3.3 Conclusion

and hardliners coming to terms with each other's views. But such a scenario cannot play out until Israel pulls out of the occupied territories, Palestinian institutions are rebuilt, and the West engages Hamas and other Islamist movements in real debate.

Moderate Arab regimes should have done just that. Unfortunately, those regimes have not yet found a way to make moderation and extremism coexist within a democratic scene. This is why the region has become so ineffective in dealing with Hamas and Hezbollah. Likewise, what Americans and Europeans need to understand is that the "general mood" in the region is opposed to obedient Arab leaders who carry out "US orders," just as it is opposed to Baathist-style leaders, such as the Saddam government or the current Syrian one. The Arab public wants politicians who can interact freely and critically with the world and the US administration. The Arab public wants Latin American-style leaders, which are opposed to US policy and yet are willing to interact with the world.

The question that the West should pose itself is not how to eradicate these 'extremists', but how to include them in a democratic scene. The urgency to engage in this process is also given by the fact that Hamas and Hezbollah are part of a much wider question. There is an "Islamist problem" that has not been fully addressed. Islamist movements have grown in stature across the region. Some are now ruling in a secular framework, as in Turkey, others are making a serious bid for power, as in Morocco, while others still are engaged in a peaceful struggle, as in Egypt. But some Islamists assumed power through non-democratic means and acted despotically afterwards, as in Sudan.

This great variety of Islamist movements makes it hard to assess the Hamas and Hezbollah experiences in terms of success and failure alone. Radical groups can only be integrated into the local scene once strong state institutions are in place. This was the case of leftists in post-war Europe. It is also the case of Islamist movements in today's Turkey. The same cannot be said either of Palestine or Lebanon. One cannot speak of success and failure without taking into account the surrounding circumstances. The first condition for success on the Palestinian scene is the creation of democratic state institutions that are capable of integrating Islamist radicals in the political process. So before we ask Hamas to respect the institutions of the state, we should make sure that those institutions are transparent enough to deserve that respect. Likewise, before asking the Muslim Brotherhood to commit to democracy in Egypt, we should introduce a workable form of democracy there.

Regional moderate regimes have not allowed Hamas and Hezbollah to grow and evolve. Those regimes have not allowed similar organizations – such as the Muslim Brotherhood – to grow and evolve either. The MB has 88 seats in the Egyptian parliament, and yet it is still called an illegal group. Let's think in terms of the billiards theory, for it may offer a way out of this dilemma. The West needs to reformulate its relations with the radical, for the simple reason that the moderates in this region have run out of ideas. The major challenge is to turn the radical of this region into "moderates" of sorts, into players in a new global dualism, a dualism that is similar but not identical to the dualism of left and right in Europe. The outcome of such process may turn out to be enlightening on more than one level. And let us keep in mind that extremists in democratic countries have done more harm to the region than Islamist extremists.

Europeans and Americans have long recognized the key challenges presented to them by the rise of Hamas and Hezbollah, two movements whose ideologies and actions are widely perceived as being opposed to Western interests. In response, both the US and Europe have exerted much effort to influence the positions and popularities of these two movements. More specifically, the Bush administration has aimed at weakening or defeating Hamas and Hezbollah. Others, principally in Europe, have hoped to induce their moderation and cooptation. Both aims have failed. The sections below analyse how and why this has been the case.

4. The International dimension: Western policies toward Hamas and Hezbollah

by Nathalie Tocci⁵⁹

The West has pursued two, largely contradictory, objectives in Lebanon. First, it has rhetorically backed democracy and reform, and repeatedly recognized the need to foster intra-Lebanese unity amongst all confessional groups. At the same time, it has unreservedly backed one side of the intra-Lebanese political divide, while attempting to punish and weaken the other, represented principally by Hezbollah. In trying to achieve these contradictory aims, Western policies have failed to achieve both.

4.1 The West and Hezbollah: Trumping the aim of democracy and polarizing domestic politics

The US and in particular the EU have repeatedly asserted their support for democracy and good governance in Lebanon. Especially since Lebanon was included in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2003 and the EU published an ENP Action Plan for Lebanon in 2007, the Commission has carefully spelled out, in agreement with the Lebanese government, a wide array of reform priorities across different policy fields. The Action Plan includes priorities in the areas of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, calling for, *inter alia*, the reform of the electoral law, a human rights strategy and security sector reform. To support these nationally-agreed priorities, the EU has opened the prospect of granting Lebanon a 'stake in the single market', enhanced political cooperation and dialogue, and support in legislative approximation. As detailed below, the EU has also committed significant funds, earmarked for political and economic reforms, economic recovery, reconstruction, infrastructure rehabilitation, de-mining and assistance to Palestinian refugees.

Beyond democracy and governance, the international community and the EU in particular has repeatedly asserted the importance of securing consensus and reconciliation between all Lebanese forces, as stated, *inter alia*, in UNSC resolutions 1559 (2004), 1701 and 1680 (2006). EU High Representative Javier Solana has called upon 'the different leaders of the different forces [to] work together for all that supposes progress', while Commissioner for External Relations and the ENP Benita Ferrero Walder has advocated a 'pro-Lebanon consensus' amongst Lebanon's political class, free from external interference by great powers.⁶⁰ Intra-Lebanese consensus and understanding, including naturally Hezbollah, is viewed by the EU as pivotal both as an end in itself and as a means to achieve democracy and good governance in Lebanon. In presenting its report on Lebanon in the context of the ENP, the Commission stated that 'only if the reform process is backed by a national pact, encompassing all political forces as well as religious and ethnic groups, and thereby overcoming political rivalry, vested interests and clientelism, will it have a chance of actually being implemented'.⁶¹

This national understanding appeared to be in the making when, after the 2005 Lebanese parliamentary elections held after the assassination of Rafik Hariri and the Syrian military withdrawal, an inter-confessional governing coalition including Hezbollah was established. It was precisely during this period that negotiations over the Action Plan between the Commission and the Lebanese cross-confessional government took place. Negotiations were carried out before May 2006 (i.e., before Hezbollah's walk-out from government in November). In fact, although the Action Plan was agreed in January 2007 – three months after Hezbollah's exit from government – its substance largely reflected the priorities identified under the 'Government of Lebanon's Ministerial Declaration' of July 2005, a Declaration made when Hezbollah was in the Lebanese cabinet and parliament. More poignantly, EU officials involved in the negotiations, have privately acknowledged Hezbollah's constructive attitude in these talks.⁶²

Yet while rhetorically appreciating the need for intra-Lebanese unity, at no time did EU actors or the US express reservations regarding Hezbollah's exit from government in the

⁵⁹ Nathalie Tocci is Senior Research Fellow at IAI.
⁶⁰ Press statement of Javier Solana, EU High Representative for the CFSP in Beirut, 16 July 2006, S203/06; Statement by Benita Ferrero Walder, Commissioner for External Relations and the ENP (2006) 'Lebanon - Breaking the Impasse, 16 December, <http://www.dellbn.cec.eu.int/en/whatsnew/06/deco6.htm>.
⁶¹ European Commission (2007) 'European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, Lebanese Republic, Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013', and 'National Indicative Programme 2007-2010', p.11.
⁶² Interview with Commission official, November 2006, Brussels.

fall of 2006. No action was taken by the West to resolve the Lebanese impasse following the demonstrations and strikes organized by the 8 March opposition front in December 2006, the ensuing freeze in regular parliamentary activity and the ongoing political tensions and violence. This notwithstanding the fact that these developments blocked the functioning of Lebanese democracy and progress in those reform efforts much acclaimed in the West, they also exacerbated intra-Lebanese tensions and violence, reawakening the spectre of inter-confessional conflict.

Western policies in fact exacerbated the growing intra-Lebanese polarization and tensions. This is because Europe, and most notably France,⁶³ together with the US, have unreservedly supported Siniora's front, while attacking and attempting to weaken the Hezbollah-Aoun opposition. The support of the West for Siniora's government is evident in a series of policies and actions, ranging from the vigorous effort in deploying the UNIFIL II mission, to the positions adopted in UNSC resolutions 1701 and 1680. Most significantly, at the January 2007 donor conference for Lebanon, the EU pledged \$520m, France a further \$650m and the US \$1bn in assistance to the Lebanese government.⁶⁴ In addition, the EIB committed €960m in loans. On the contrary, the US and to a lesser extent the EU have attempted to weaken Hezbollah through the use of punishments and pressures. Hezbollah is included in the US terrorist list and neither the US nor EU member states attempted to halt without delay Israel's war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, aimed at destroying Hezbollah's capabilities. On the contrary, many in Washington fomented Israel's war effort, viewing its hoped-for success as a welcomed victory against the western fear of a rising 'Shi'ia crescent' in the Middle East. These western policies and positions have not strengthened the Siniora government against Hezbollah. Not only was Hezbollah not weakened by the West, but arguably, by supporting Israel and meddling into Lebanese affairs, the West has discredited its legitimacy in Lebanon and enhanced Hezbollah's resistance image amongst its constituencies. Hezbollah's resistance to Israel, unstopped for 34 days by the international community, at the very least left its domestic popularity untarnished, and at most it raised its popularity further.

What Western policies have achieved instead is a grave deepening of the internal political divide in Lebanon, with this divide now largely reflecting the different views on Lebanon's international alliances. Hezbollah accuses the Future Front of acting as a Western stooge and tacitly accepting Israel's attack in 2006 as a means to achieving Hezbollah's disarmament. It also resents the American and French support for Siniora's anti-Syrian coalition, and the one-sided approval by the Western media of the February-March 2005 demonstrations (dubbing these a 'cedar revolution'), in contrast to their relative silence over the 2006 Hezbollah strikes and demonstrations of similar magnitudes in terms of public participation. In turn, the Future Front accuses Hezbollah of accepting Syrian and Iranian meddling in Lebanese affairs, hindering Lebanon's much-sought independence. Indeed, amongst the triggers for Hezbollah's exit from government was the controversy over the UN Security Council resolution establishing an international tribunal for Hariri's assassination and Hezbollah's resentment towards Siniora for not having appropriately discussed the draft within the Cabinet. This resentment grew in view of Hezbollah's reservations about the broad powers for criminal prosecution the UN draft entrusted to the international community, resulting, in Hezbollah's view, in a crucial limitation of Lebanese sovereignty and a legally sanctioned forum to prosecute Syria. Worst still, by passing the resolution under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, Hezbollah is concerned that the powers entrusted to the international community would ultimately empower the West to forcefully disarm Hezbollah. This is a prospect which Hezbollah believes the Lebanese government is pushing for, given its failure to secure a stronger mandate for the UNIFIL II mission in 2006.⁶⁵ Prominent government leaders such as Walid Jumblatt have in fact openly called for a revision of UNIFIL's mandate allowing the mission to 'implement' the provisions of the Taef accords and thus Hezbollah's disarmament.

Also disconcerting is the alleged western involvement in the violence which erupted in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon the spring and summer of 2007. The external dimension in this last tragic twist in Lebanese politics is difficult to assess. Some argued that Fateh al-Islam was financed by Syria to counter the Siniora government. Others suggested that these Salafi groups were close to the Future Front and supported by Saudi Arabia and thus indirectly by the West as a means to expose the weakness of the Lebanese army and empower UNIFIL to disarm these groups as well as Hezbollah and to control the border with Syria (through which Iranian financial and material support to Hezbollah is provided).⁶⁶ The truth in these and other allegations is difficult to ascertain, and possibly both may be partly true. The only conclusion that can be drawn from these allegations is that whether Syrian and/or Saudi/Western, an international dimension of the violence in the camps is highly likely and it contributed to the further weakening and fragmenting of the fragile Lebanese state.

⁶³ Former French President Jacques Chirac had strong personal ties with the Hariri family. It is interesting to note that with the end of his mandate, the Chirac family moved from the Elysée to a residence near the Louvre generously provided by the Hariri family.

⁶⁴ 'Donors in aid boost for Lebanon', *BBC News*, 25 January 2007.

⁶⁵ The UNIFIL II mission was approved under Chapter 6 of the UN Charter and as such does not empower the mission to disarm Hezbollah's forces. On this see Amal Saad Ghorayeb (2007) 'In their own words: Hezbollah's strategy in the current confrontation', *Carnegie Policy Outlook*, January.

⁶⁶ See Seymour Hersh (2007) 'The Redirection: Is the Administration's new policy benefiting our enemies in the war on terrorism?' *The New Yorker*, 5 March; Jim Quilty (2007) 'Winter of Lebanon's Discontents', *MERIP*, 26 January. See also Jim Quilty (2007) 'The Collateral damage of Lebanese Sovereignty', *MERIP*, 18 June.

In Palestine, as in Lebanon, both the US and the EU have also advocated democracy and good governance. The Bush administration made the reform of the Arafat-led PA back in 2002 a *sine qua non* for the resumption of the peace process. Beyond declarations, the EU supported democracy and good governance in Palestine through budget conditionality and technical assistance especially in the 2002-2005 period. Yet ensuing policies towards Hamas since 2006, by trumping all other priorities, have undercut the West's lofty aims in Palestine.

Hamas is considered a terrorist organization by the EU and the US. As such, since Hamas entered the PLC and the PA, the US and the EU, in the context of the Quartet, have insisted on three 'principles': an end of violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements, which soon evolved into de facto conditions for the recognition of the Hamas government.⁶⁷ The insertion of Hamas on the terrorist lists entailed that some form of conditionality was needed in the approaches of the EU and the US towards the new government. Most evidently, for normal diplomatic relations to be established, Hamas would have had to be removed from the lists and to do so it would have had to disavow terrorism. Yet the three conditions went much further, and in doing so revealed their legally dubious nature as well as their devious political intent. The conditionality on Israel's recognition has no legal grounding in so far as only states (and at most the PLO, as the internationally recognized representative of the Palestinian people, of which Hamas is not part), and not political parties or individuals, can recognize other states. The latter's recognition or non-recognition of Israel would have no legal meaning, and so cannot be considered as a credible or irreversible political fact. Furthermore, as Palestinians promptly note, Israel and the international community have never demanded the recognition of Israel's right to exist as a precondition to establish contacts or negotiations between Israel and any Arab state. Yet this demand was placed on the PA, leaving unanswered, as Hroub notes in his chapter, the key question of which borders should Israel be recognized upon, not to mention the fact that the PLO's recognition of Israel in 1988 hardly brought with it any tangible gains for the Palestinians. Moreover, little attention was paid to the fact that the same conditions have been flouted by Israel over the years, as repeatedly affirmed in EU and US declarations that to varying degrees have condemned Israel for its disproportionate use of force, its violations of international humanitarian law and its disrespect of previously signed agreements. Regarding the acceptance of previous agreements, ironically it was the Sharon government which in March 2001 first asserted that it would limit itself to 'respecting' rather than 'accepting' previous agreements depending on the conduct of the other side.⁶⁸

Predictably Hamas, the Hamas-only and the National Unity Government (NUG) did not fully endorse the three conditions. While refraining from the use of suicide attacks against Israel since January 2005 (i.e., a year before the PLC elections), Hamas and the NUG did not renounce the principle of violent resistance and contributed to the launch of Qassam rockets from Gaza into Israel. Neither did Hamas nor the PA 'accept' previous agreements, but, much like Sharon at the time, they agreed to 'respect' them, as specified by the February 2007 Mecca agreement. Finally, while Hamas leaders have repeatedly and publicly acknowledged the existence of the State of Israel as an undeniable political fact,⁶⁹ they have also recurrently refused to recognize Israel's 'right to exist', less still its right to exist as a Jewish state.⁷⁰

In response, the US, the EU and most surprisingly also the UN⁷¹ boycotted the PA, the EU and the US withheld assistance to it, and the international community froze international bank transactions in Palestine in view of the US Congress' Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act.⁷² In addition, Israel halted the transfer of Palestinian tax revenues amounting to approximately \$50m per month (i.e., one third of the PA's monthly revenues). Israel also repeatedly arrested dozens of Hamas ministers and parliamentarians, and restricted their movement between the West Bank and Gaza and within the West Bank and Jerusalem. These illegal Israeli acts of reprisal were not countered by the EU and US. Admittedly, the EU repeatedly called upon Israel to fulfil its legal obligations with respect to the delivery of tax revenues, the easing on movement restrictions and the implementation of the November 2005 Movement and Access Agreement.⁷³ Yet words were not followed by actions. Worst still, the EU did not object to carrying out its border monitoring mission at Rafah (EU-BAM Rafah) according to Israel's decisions, thus accepting the border crossing to be closed half the time. Western sanctions, coupled with Israel's policies unfettered by the West made Western pleas for democracy in Palestine sound like a bad taste joke to Palestinians and many outside observers.

4.2 The West and Hamas: From internal violence to the end of the two-state solution

67 On the evolution of this policy see Alvaro de Soto (2007) 'End of Mission Report, May 2007, reprinted in *The Guardian*, 14 June, pp.17-19. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/frontpage/story/0,,2101676,00.html>.

68 Akiva Eldar (2007) 'The Syrian secret Sharon did not reveal to Olmert', *Haaretz*, 20 March.

69 Orly Halpern (2007) 'Experts Question wisdom of boycotting Hamas', *Forward*, 9 February.

70 Behind the headlines: Hamas-Fateh agreement does not meet requirements of the international community', *BBC Arabic Service* 16 February.

71 For a critical assessment of the UN's approach see Alvaro de Soto (2007) op.cit.

72 <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/110/h109-4681>

73 EU General Affairs and External Relations Council (2007) *Conclusions on Middle East Peace Process*, 23 April, Luxembourg, 2796th Meeting, paragraph 6.

The first evident result of these policies was to push Palestine to the humanitarian and economic brink, setting off alarm bells from UN agencies, the World Bank and international civil society organizations.⁷⁴ In response, at the EU's insistence, the Quartet agreed on a Temporary International Mechanism (TIM), through which funds would be channelled to Palestine while bypassing the PA government. The TIM supplied valuable assistance, providing social allowances (rather than full salaries) to almost 90% of non-security public sector employees and emergency assistance and food aid for approximately 73,000 low-income households. It also provided direct financial and material support to the health, education, water and social sectors as well as funds to pay fuel bills (principally to Israeli providers) after Israel's destruction of the power-plant in Gaza in the summer of 2006. The TIM, coupled with the growing need for humanitarian aid, led to a huge rise in western assistance to the Palestinians. In 2006-2007, as put by UN envoy de Soto, Europeans spent more money in boycotting the PA than what they previously spent in supporting it.⁷⁵ Indeed EU aid to Palestine rose by 30% in one year, totalling €700m in early 2007.

But not only did Western and Israeli policies paralyse the PA. The sanctions and the resumption of assistance through the TIM since June 2006 also transformed Palestine into a semi-international protectorate, in which Palestinian institutions functioned as a skeleton allowing the international community to deliver aid to a population under military occupation.⁷⁶ This meant that the PA and thus also the Hamas government, no longer remotely resembling a state-in-the-making, was largely de-responsibilized with respect to its public regarding governance and internal security. In this respect, a declaration by Hamas leader Khaled Meshal, referring to Palestine's slide into chaos and economic collapse is revealing: '[w]e firmly believe that it would have never happened had it not been for foreign intervention and the brutal sanctions imposed on our people by Israel and its allies'.⁷⁷ Indeed despite Hamas' non-delivery on its 'Change and Reform' platform, Palestinians did not hold Hamas responsible.⁷⁸ On the contrary, Hamas' endurance in power up until June 2007 may have raised its popularity further.⁷⁹ The results of Hamas candidates in several elections in universities and professional syndications over the course of 2006 and 2007 are indicative of this.⁸⁰

The sanctions and the TIM also reversed the few steps forward made in PA governance reform during 2002-05, promoted at the time especially by the EU. The bypassing of official institutions with the exception of the presidency led to a re-centralization of powers in Mahmoud Abbas' hands, a much criticized condition by the West during Arafat's rule. It also generated an increasingly unaccountable and opaque management of the available PA funds, leading Salam Fayyad, when re-nominated minister under the NUG, to repeat precisely the same fiscal reforms as those he had implemented under Ahmed Qureia's governments three years earlier.⁸¹ Finally, the TIM and its focus on humanitarian rather than development aid generated a dangerous culture of dependence in Palestine. Whereas in 2005 only 16% of EU aid to Palestine constituted humanitarian assistance, this rose to 56% by late 2006.⁸² The absence of an effective Palestinian government and Israel's asphyxiating hold over the Gaza Strip dangerously pushed Gaza into chaos and lawlessness, with the emergence of criminal mafia-style gangs and al-Qaeda-like cells operating in Gaza's open-air prison.⁸³

Yet by far the most dangerous effect of Western policies has been the polarization they induced and exacerbated between Fateh and Hamas that pushed the Gaza Strip into a bloody civil war in May-June 2007 and caused its political separation from the West Bank since then. The spectre of a Palestinian civil war had existed for a while. It was for a brief moment intercepted by the Saudi-brokered Mecca accord in February 2007. Interestingly, according to no interlocutor interviewed in the region, including declared Fateh supporters, did western sanctions have a direct impact on the incentives of the two factions to broker the NUG in Mecca. In fact, in contrast to arguments suggesting that sanctions weakened Hamas into a compromise, one should note that it was Fateh and not Hamas that refused to form a coalition government back in January 2006.

A national compromise was reached in Mecca thanks to Saudi mediation in spite of rather than due to western policies. Yet, the reaction of the West was deemed by all interlocutors interviewed in May 2007 to be pivotal in determining the fate of the newborn government. First and most intuitively, the government could only survive if it could be made to function, which required a resumption of western aid and Israel's delivery of Palestinian tax money, easing restrictions on movement and releasing imprisoned Palestinian lawmakers and ministers. Second and most challengingly, Palestinian security forces would have had to be reunited. Third, the government would have had to prove to its electorate it could deliver some, even if marginal, successes in its relations with Israel, such as for example a prisoner release.

74 See for example the Office of the Special Envoy for Disengagement (2006), *Periodic Report*, April; United Nations (2006), *Assessment of the Future Humanitarian Risks in the occupied Palestinian territory*, 11 April; or Oxfam (2007) 'Poverty in Palestine: the human cost of the financial boycott', *Briefing Note*, April. http://www.oxfam.org/en/files/bno70413_palestinian_aid_boycott.pdf/download.

75 Quoted in Alvaro de Soto (2007) *op. cit.*, p.31.

76 The principal difference between the OTs and an international protectorate lies in the fact that while the occupying power has (quite willingly) delegated its civilian obligations to the international community, it retains full control over security-related rights and obligations in both Gaza and the West Bank.

77 Khaled Meshal (2007) 'Our unity can now pave the way for peace and justice' *The Guardian*, 13 February.

78 Interviews with Palestinian analysts, Jerusalem and Ramallah, May 2007.

79 Interview with independent member of the PLC, Jerusalem, May 2007.

80 For extended discussion on this point and related ones see International Crisis Group 'After Mecca: Engaging Hamas', Middle East Report no. 62, Brussels, February 2007.

81 Chris Patten (2007) 'Time to judge Palestine on its results', *Financial Times*, 13 March (my italics).

82 Steven Erlanger (2007) 'Aid to Palestinians Rose despite Embargo', *New York Times*, 21 March.

83 On Israel's persisting control over the Gaza Strip following disengagement see Gisha Report (2007) 'Disengaged Occupiers: The Legal Status of Gaza', January.

This never happened. Europeans initially showed cautious relief and optimism following the formation of the NUG. But when the US (and Israel) made clear that the Mecca agreement fell short of meeting the Quartet principles,⁸⁴ the EU followed suit, muting its initial support for the NUG. More gravely, Israel continued to withhold taxes to the PA, with the exception of \$100m allegedly delivered by Israel to the presidential guard (Fateh).⁸⁵ It also kept movement restrictions and arrested other Hamas parliamentarians and ministers in the West Bank. Finally, the US continued to provide military assistance and training to Fateh militias.⁸⁶ Indeed since Hamas' electoral victory, strong currents in the US fomented confrontation between the two factions, hoping to see Fateh's return to power through a hard coup if necessary.⁸⁷ In early 2007, the US delivered \$60m in training and weapons to the presidential guard and the National Security Council under Mohammed Dahlan's leadership, which in practice disincentivized the unification of the security forces under the PA Interior Ministry.⁸⁸

All was set for a new round of confrontation in May-June 2007. Over the course of a few weeks, Abbas refused to unite the security forces, hundreds of US-trained forces loyal to Dahlan entered the Gaza Strip from Egypt, unprecedented street fighting and political violence re-erupted, and Hamas forcefully took control of the security forces in the Strip. The violence culminated in mid-June 2007 with Hamas' 'victory' in Gaza, and Abbas' dissolution of the NUG and nomination of a non-Hamas government in the West Bank. In response, the West, far from reversing its counterproductive strategies, persisted in them. The EU and the US immediately stated their willingness to work with the (unelected) Fayyad government in the West Bank and resumed aid and assistance to it. Israel also declared its willingness to devolve approximately \$300-400m of withheld PA tax money to the West Bank government and agreed to release a number of Fateh-affiliated prisoners.⁸⁹ By contrast, the West and Israel have remained firm in their intent to defeat Hamas in control of the Gaza Strip through a tightened boycott, isolation and sanctions. The EU monitored Rafah crossing has remained shut since June 2007. This stance, while unlikely to achieve a defeat of Hamas, has visibly re-empowered Hamas actors who were largely excluded from the NUG, and who are less prone to reconciliation with both Fateh and Israel. The future evolution in the occupied territories is hard to predict. What can be safely concluded is that, unintentionally or not, the West has contributed to this tragic outcome, having de facto fomented civil war and triggered a political, beyond the physical, separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.⁹⁰ Despite all the diplomatic furore over the November 2007 Annapolis conference, the moribund two-state solution seems to have reached its final death-bed.

Conclusion

84 Donald Macintyre (2007) 'Israel at loggerheads with allies on boycott of Palestinian coalition', *The Independent*, 18 March.

85 Adam Entous and H. Tamimi (2007) 'Palestinian Abbas forces amassing arms' *Reuters*, 28 January.

86 See Alastair Crooke (2007) 'Our second biggest mistake in the Middle East', *London Review of Books*, 5 July.

87 'Elliot Abrams' uncivil war' *Conflict Forum*, 7 January 2007. <http://conflictsforum.org/2007/elliott-abrams-uncivil-war/>

88 'Abbas faces showdown as outlawed Hamas force increases', *Sunday Herald*, 7 January 2007.

89 Adam Entous (2007) 'US, Israel plan to ease sanctions to boost Abbas', *Reuters*, 15 June.

90 Helene Cooper (2007) 'White House seems ready to let Hamas seize Gaza', *New York Times*, 15 June. See also Karma Nabulsi (2007) 'The People of Palestine must finally be allowed to determine their own fate', *The Guardian*, comment, 18 June.

Conclusions and policy suggestions

Hamas and Hezbollah have become principal actors on the Middle Eastern scene. They have gained popularity in Lebanon and Palestine and across the region, portraying themselves as relatively efficient, non-corrupt and above all movements which have not 'sold themselves' to the West. Unsurprisingly, these movements have been adamantly opposed both by regimes in the Middle East and by the US and the EU. The West has presented four principal goals vis-à-vis Hamas and Hezbollah. First, it has pressed for their 'moderation', meaning their alignment to Western policies and interests. Second, it has attempted to weaken or defeat the two movements. Third, it has called for a resolution of the internal divides in Lebanon and Palestine. Finally it has advocated for wider reform and 'democratization' in the region. All these aims have failed.

The international community and in particular the US and the EU have neither weakened nor 'moderated' Hamas or Hezbollah. They may have instead entrenched the popular legitimacy of both movements further and, in the case of Hamas, disincited the internal empowerment of the more political/pragmatic currents. Furthermore, Western policies have contributed to the stalemate in governance in Lebanon and the lawlessness and lack of governance in Palestine. More widely, Western policies have erased the last vestiges of credibility of democracy promotion strategies, bolstering the confidence of incumbent regimes. Most worryingly, they have fuelled polarization and confrontation within Palestine and Lebanon, leading most dramatically to a civil war in Gaza, the ensuing political split between the West Bank and Gaza, and with it the disappearance of any prospect of the much acclaimed 'two-state solution'. Linked to this, Western policies have reduced incentives to engage in any peace processes between Israel and Palestine on the one hand, and Israel-Lebanon-Syria on the other. In conflict situations, it is normally the international community which engages in diplomatic acrobatics and pressures to encourage conflict parties to abandon preconditions and similar delaying tactics for their engagement in negotiations. This was indeed the case in the Middle East since 2000, when Israel insisted on a set of preconditions for its reengagement. Today it is the West that has inserted preconditions to the peace process, in practice absolving the conflict parties' responsibility to deliver. In doing so, the EU in particular has out-manoeuvred itself from having effective influence on the two conflicts, influence which mainly derives from its disbursement of financial assistance and use of positive conditionalities and rules attached to its involvement. The Annapolis conference in November may be seen in this respect as the last ditch attempt by the Bush administration to salvage its tattered reputation on the Middle East. Yet as the July 2006 Rome conference on Lebanon teaches, a peace conference featuring only 'one side' of the current Palestinian divide is unlikely to yield visible reconciliation.

The failure of Western aims seems to be above all rooted in a lack of understanding or willingness to understand the nature of Hamas and Hezbollah and their roles in their respective societies. Aiming to defeat Hezbollah or Hamas through violence, sanctions and boycotts misses the key political reality that – unlike global jihadist groups – both parties are mass nationalist movements and integral elements of their respective societies. As such they cannot be wiped off the political map through external pressure, without causing mass-scale violence. By failing to acknowledge and act upon this fact, the EU and the US have caused a set of negative interlocking results, which have concomitantly hampered the quest for peace, democracy and good governance, as well as inter- and intra-state reconciliation in the region.

For the vast majority of Europeans, these results do not reflect what the EU's policy aims in the region are or should be. Many policy-makers involved in Middle Eastern affairs are also prepared to admit in private that the EU often acts against its interests in the Middle East. The reason for this is largely rooted in the reality that, when decisions must be taken, the EU is at the same time unable to influence the US and unwilling to break ranks with it. This is ultimately what has transformed the Middle East Quartet into a 'Group of Friends of the US', as pointed out by former UN Envoy de Soto.⁹¹ This has also dramatically reduced the EU's space for manoeuvre in the Middle East conundrum, confining it to work on the margins of US-dictated policies. There are several voices in Europe that push for the Union's greater prioritization of its Middle Eastern interests alongside its transatlantic priorities. It is only if these voices become louder and stronger that policy suggestions and policy reversals concerning the EU's role in the region can be meaningfully contemplated and elaborated upon.

Were this to happen, the first and primary step would require establishing an internal EU consensus regarding what the policy objectives actually are. Currently, there are contrasting voices calling, on the one hand, for moderation, reconciliation and democracy, and on the other, for the defeat of these movements. These two objectives are not only different, but have worked against one another. Attempts at defeating Hamas/Hezbollah

through coercion and isolation have reinforced the voices less amenable to compromise within these movements, reduced the willingness of their opponents to seek reconciliation and as such reduced prospects for reform and democracy. Furthermore the objective of defeat has not been accomplished and is unlikely to be in the foreseeable future.

If a European consensus consolidates to abandon the objective of 'defeat', then the overall strategy to be pursued would be that of engagement. Engagement would take different forms, beginning with formal diplomatic dialogue to financial and technical support and wider civil society development and engagement with organizations formally or informally affiliated to these movements. Engagement would come with conditions. These would relate above all to the use of violence, in actions rather than words, with a detailed specification of the necessary steps to be taken in order to be removed from the terrorist lists. Conditions would also need to relate to the imperative of intra-societal reconciliation and as such they would have to be imposed on all parties, lest conditions imposed on Hamas/Hezbollah would act as disincentives for reconciliation to their domestic political opponents. Finally, specified conditions would need to be both clear and rest on a solid legal basis in order to enjoy popular legitimacy and credibility.

Engaging with Hamas and Hezbollah is not unproblematic. Not only do the US and EU face legal difficulties in engaging these movements in view of their insertion on terrorist lists, but also – and particularly in the case of Hamas post June 2007 – the more 'radical' voices appear to be winning the upper-hand. Yet arduous and problematic as may be, if the EU and the US converge in their intent of genuinely pursuing reconciliation and reform, there is no viable alternative strategy as developments on the ground reconfirm day after day.

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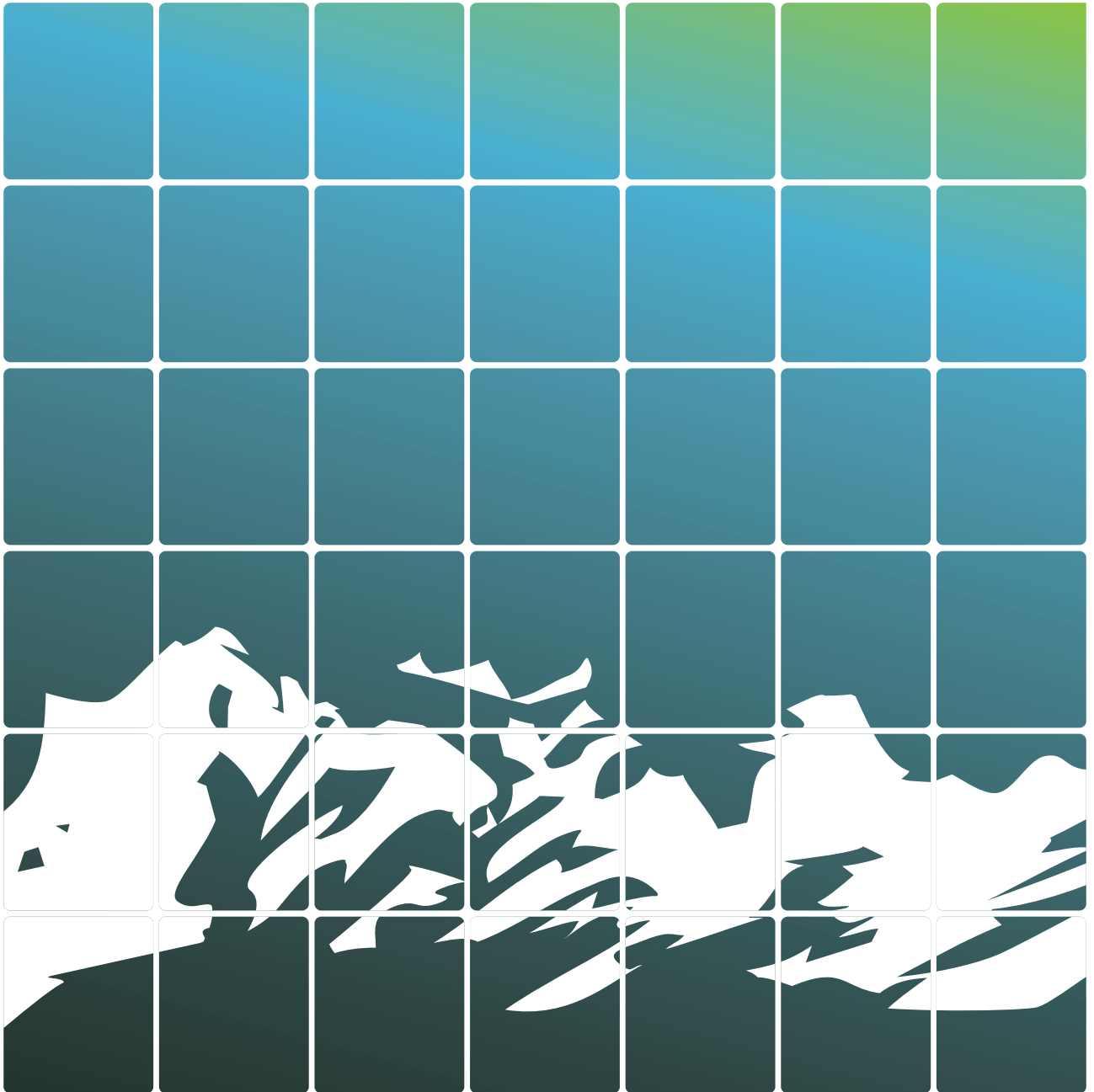
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