

## Hamas' choice: Recognition or resistance in the age of Obama

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In a major policy speech on 25 June 2009, Khaled Meshal, the head of Hamas' political bureau, tried to do what may be impossible: present the Islamist Palestinian resistance organization as a willing partner in a US-led peace process, while holding on to his movement's political principles and base. [1]

This is the dilemma that every Palestinian leadership, and perhaps almost every liberation movement, has eventually had to confront. It is a choice, as political scientist Tamim Barghouti has pointed out, between recognition and legitimacy.[2] According to Barghouti, the old-guard Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership, when confronted with the same dilemma, chose recognition and forfeited its legitimacy, opening the way for Hamas to emerge. Now it is the turn of Hamas: the price demanded by the US and its allies for Hamas to be taken as an interlocutor is the abandonment of the very principles on which the movement built its mass support.

Meshal's nearly hour-long "address to the Palestinian people and the world" was billed as a response to the speeches of US President Barack Obama in Cairo and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier in June.

In his Cairo speech, Obama called for Americans and Muslims to engage in a "sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground." If he is serious about that, he -- and others -- should pay close attention to what Hamas is saying to domestic, regional and international audiences. Meshal's goals -- very much in tension -- were to show that his movement is ready to do business with the US, set out political red lines, reassure the movement's supporters and Palestinians generally and deal with internal Palestinian divisions.

To begin with, the speech sought to present Hamas as a nationalist movement whose Islamism fits within a mainstream Palestinian consensus. Meshal used an explicitly ecumenical message to counter Netanyahu's exclusivist Jewish claims to the land of Palestine. According to Meshal, Palestinians' roots stretched back thousands of years "in this blessed land of prophets and messages, of [Muhammad's] night ascension, of Muslim and Christian holy sites -- al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock, the Nativity Church and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre."

More generally, he sought to portray Muslims as representing the very values Westerners claim to cherish most and dissociate Hamas from lurid and false comparisons to such groups as the Taliban. "We [Muslims] are the ones who introduced the world and

humanity to science, civilization, culture and lofty humanitarian values," Meshal declared, "values such as justice, freedom, equality, compassion and tolerance, and the values of interaction between civilizations and not a confrontation between them."

Meshal welcomed a "change of tone" from President Obama but emphasized repeatedly that only a change of policy would matter. He nevertheless claimed the new tone as the fruit of the "stubborn steadfastness of the people of the region, while resisting in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan." Such resistance, according to Meshal, frustrated the former US President George W. Bush administration's plans for regional domination, prompting American voters to seek a different path to extricate their country from mounting crises and quagmires.

He chided regional leaders who had "marketed and promoted" Bush's policies. "Had the people of the region listened to them," Meshal said, "the policy of Bush and the neoconservatives might have succeeded and the region's situation would be worse than imaginable." Meshal voiced the widespread skepticism and perhaps hopes that Obama's promises amounted to more than the similar words about Palestine heard from the Bush Administration.

Responding to Obama's recital of history, Meshal did not seek to deny the Nazi Holocaust but to appropriate it. He took Obama to task for dwelling in detail on the "suffering of the Jews and their holocaust in Europe, while ignoring our present suffering and Israel's holocaust against our Palestinian people that has been continuing for decades."

Meshal emphasized that even though Palestinians have heard only words, they were prepared to judge the US by its actions, which would have to "begin with reconstruction of Gaza and the lifting of the blockade, lifting the oppression and security pressure in the West Bank, and allowing Palestinian reconciliation to take its course without external pressures or interference."

The "only thing" that can convince Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims, Meshal stated, "is genuine American and international will and efforts to end the occupation and lift the oppression from our people, to allow them to exercise their right to self-determination and the fulfillment of their national rights." When the Obama administration makes such an initiative, Meshal said, "then we and all our people's forces will be ready to cooperate with it and with any international effort in that direction."

Obama's "new language toward Hamas," Meshal underlined, "is the first step in the right direction towards direct dialogue without conditions." And that is the crux of the matter. Dealing with Hamas, Meshal said, must be based on the recognition of its democratic mandate and not via the imposition of arbitrary conditions such as those of the Quartet which call on the movement to recognize Israel, abandon violence and commit by previously signed agreements.

Meshal reasserted Hamas' political red lines while maintaining a sense of flexibility. In particular, Meshal:

\*Rejected the Palestinian state envisaged by the Israeli leader as a "deformed entity, a large prison for detention and suffering, and not the national home a great people deserves.\*

\*Rejected Israel's demand to be recognized as a "Jewish state" -- and warned against any Arab or Palestinian acquiescence -- "because it means canceling the right to return to their homes of six million refugees, and the forced expulsion of our people in the 1948 areas [Palestinian citizens of Israel] from their cities and villages." Israel's demand, according to Meshal, is no different than racist demands made by fascist Italy and the Nazis. \*

\*Reaffirmed Hamas' previous acceptance of "the program that represents the minimum demands of our people," for "the establishment of a Palestinian state whose capital is Jerusalem with complete sovereignty on the borders of 4 June 1967, after the withdrawal of the occupation forces, and the dismantling of all the settlements, and the realization of the Right of Return." \*

\*Reaffirmed that "the refugees' Right of Return to the homes from which they were expelled in 1948 is a national right and an individual right held personally" by the refugees "and no leader or negotiator can waive it or compromise on it."

Meshal also offered a nuanced response to Obama's call on Palestinians to abandon "dead end" violence in favor of nonviolent resistance. "We reaffirm our adherence to resistance as a strategic choice to liberate the homeland and restore our rights," Meshal said, citing armed European resistance to Nazi Germany, American resistance to British rule and the Vietnamese and South African anti-colonial struggles as precedents for Palestinians.

"Nonviolent resistance is appropriate in a struggle for civil rights," Meshal argued, "But when it comes to a military occupation using conventional and nonconventional weapons, such an occupation can only be confronted with armed resistance." Palestinians were forced to take up arms, Meshal said. He could also have been implying that if Palestinians changed the definition of their struggle as being one for civil rights then the appropriate means of resistance would also change.

"Resistance is a means and not an end," Meshal said, "and it is not blind. Indeed it perceives the changes underway." Yet, while staunchly defending the right to armed resistance -- and even threatening new operations to take Israeli soldiers prisoner if it was the only way to free Palestinians prisoners -- Meshal also recognized other forms of struggle. He called for increased Palestinian, Arab and international solidarity efforts, including ongoing efforts to break the siege on Gaza, to resist the apartheid wall and settlements and to prevent home demolitions and "Judaization" in Jerusalem.

For Hamas leaders, the dangers of submitting to western preconditions can be seen

merely by looking at the trajectory of the Palestine Liberation Organization leadership which recognized Israel in 1993, renounced armed struggle and signed the Oslo accords. Since that time, Meshal argued, the occupation and its oppression deepened as the number of Israeli settlements and Palestinian prisoners grew.

As Meshal put it, "These conditions do not end; as soon as the Palestinian negotiator commits to one, more conditions are imposed. For example, first the condition was to recognize Israel, now it is to recognize the Jewishness of Israel. Then, that Jerusalem is its eternal capital, giving up the Right of Return, accepting that settlement blocks will remain. Then [Palestinians] must not only abandon resistance, but themselves work to oppress, pursue and disarm the resistance."

The latter point was a reference to the arrest campaign in the West Bank and what Meshal called other "oppressive measures undertaken by the [Palestinian] Authority and the government of Salam Fayyad and its security forces under the supervision of the American General [Keith] Dayton." Meshal presented this ongoing cooperation between the Ramallah security forces, Israel and the US as the biggest obstacle to Palestinian reconciliation talks in Cairo aimed at restoring a unified national leadership.

After Hamas won the 2006 legislative election, the Bush administration began a program overseen by Dayton to arm and train anti-Hamas militias nominally loyal to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The campaign has been accompanied by what Hamas and some human rights groups have described as a systematic crackdown on politicians, professors, charities and journalists suspected of sympathy or links with Hamas. Hamas has often retaliated by arresting Fatah-linked individuals in the Gaza Strip. In recent weeks, the Dayton-supervised militias have killed several members of Hamas in the West Bank ostensibly while trying to arrest them. Meshal cleverly drew attention to the external role in fueling Palestinian divisions -- and how little has actually changed from the Bush Administration -- by "calling on Obama to withdraw Dayton from the West Bank and return him to the United States, in keeping with the new spirit of change."

Throughout the speech, Meshal sought to reassure Palestinians that Hamas would not abandon its core principles in pursuit of recognition and power. "The land is more important than authority, and liberation before a state," he said at one point, and "no Palestinian leadership has the right to waive Palestinian national rights and interests as the price for recognition."

Some Palestinians worry that despite such assurances, Hamas has already set off down the very path Meshal warned about and risks squandering the sacrifices Palestinians made, especially in Gaza. Haidar Eid, an independent analyst in Gaza, wrote before Meshal's speech that some of the early enthusiastic Hamas responses to Obama's Cairo speech, as well as acceptance of the two-state solution, indicated "the beginning of a process of deterioration -- even Osloization -- not only in rhetoric, but also in action." This writer has heard similar fears voiced by Palestinians from the West Bank and recently in Amman. Given that many Palestinians consider that a previous generation of

resistance leaders turned their backs on their people's most fundamental interests and rights -- all the while claiming to uphold them -- such fears are far from irrational or uncommon.

Another analysis of Hamas' shift currently circulating argues that Hamas has accepted the Palestinian "consensus" position of a two-state solution on every inch of the 1967 occupied territories with removal of all settlements and with the Right of Return. But it knows that no potential peace deal coming from the Obama initiative will ever reach even these minimal conditions, and that if Abbas and former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert could not reach even the outlines of an agreement after two years of negotiations, the chances of any deal with a Netanyahu-Lieberman government are even tinier. In this scenario, Hamas need not stand in the way of a two-state solution because it will fail anyway. But by saying it would accept that minimalist outcome, it would avoid blame for the failure and its adherence to resistance would be vindicated.

What we do know is that Hamas' leaders, and the Palestinians generally, have been laced under intense pressure, occupation, blockades, starvation sieges and recurrent Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the vast majority so far has not submitted to Israeli conditions. But while emphasizing the role of resistance and struggle to achieve liberation, Hamas has not offered a clear vision of what liberation looks like other than the unconvincing and increasingly unrealistic two-state vision (leaving aside its long, outdated, though much-cited charter that offers no guide to the movement's current thinking).

Meshal's speech confirms Hamas' long-term shift away from Islamist rhetoric toward mainstream Palestinian nationalist discourse. It indicates that Hamas is highly sensitive to international and Palestinian public opinion and is aware that Palestinians need to build real international solidarity as part of a strategy to level the glaring power imbalance with Israel. But it is not prepared to seek recognition at any price. All this has implications for the movement's message and methods.

This leaves the field open for an urgent debate among Palestinians about what that future vision should be and what role resistance in all its legitimate forms should play. No group of leaders, whether from Hamas or any other organization, could or should carry the burden of restoring Palestinian rights by itself. Hamas, like other Palestinian organizations, can only be a guardian of fundamental rights to the extent that it is embedded in a broader movement mobilized in Palestine and globally to defend those rights.

And if Hamas' potential interlocutors are sincerely seeking ways to recognize the democratic mandate of the movement without trying to force it to forfeit its legitimacy, there are precedents. South Africa's African National Congress and the Irish Republican Army were both able to take part in successful political negotiations that got their respective countries out of disastrous political and military stalemates without being required to submit to unacceptable preconditions. That took a measure of leadership,

foresight and political courage by others that has been notably absent in international dealings with Hamas.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this article was published with the last two lines in the second paragraph inadvertently deleted.

Co-founder of The Electronic Intifada, Ali Abunimah is author of *One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse*. Abunimah also co-founded The Electronic Intifada. This analysis was originally published by the Palestine Center.

Endnotes:

[1] The speech is in Arabic. All excerpts quoted in this article are the author's translation. A transcript and recording of the speech were made available by the Palestinian Information Center, a Hamas-affiliated website. See: <http://bit.ly/mK7kS>.

[2] In a paper given at the Annual Symposium of the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University on the theme: "Palestine and the Palestinians Today," 2-3 April 2009, Washington, DC.