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Hamas 'left behind' by Arab Spring

Media Mention of Hussein Ibish in The National - June 13, 2012 - 11:00pm

<http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/hamas-left-behind-by-arab-sprin...> [1]

When Hamas won control of the Gaza Strip after a brief but vicious round of factional fighting in 2007, it earned a degree of influence unprecedented in its short history.

Its clashes with its archrival Fatah that culminated in military victory five years ago today emboldened Islamists, rattled Israel and the West and divided Palestinians between rival leaders in Gaza and the West Bank.

Yet the reputation of the Islamist group is today in tatters. Gaza residents describe their rulers as corrupt dictators, and the organisation has little if any political sway in the West Bank.

Once on the cutting edge of radical Islam, Hamas today seems doddering and out of sync, overtaken by the successes of Islamist political parties in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

For both Palestinian supporters and critics of the group, this signals crisis.

"When people look at Hamas these days, they see Hamas as talking about 'resistance' but doing nothing," said Zakaria Al Qaq, a lecturer at Al Quds University in Jerusalem. "People look at them now and ask, 'What is it are they trying to do, exactly?'"

The Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, was born in 1987 as a pious alternative to the secular Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and its largest, most influential member, Fatah.

The group rose to prominence on the failure of the 1993 Oslo Accords to produce a Palestinian state, its campaign of suicide bombings against Israeli buses and cafes and its opposition to what many Palestinians viewed as the venality of Fatah, the PLO and the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Hamas's reputation for incorruptibility and its unstinting opposition to Israel led to its stunning victory in parliamentary elections in 2006. Eighteen months later, it took control of Gaza. Since then it has been unable to reconcile its success as a movement with the demands of government, observers said.

Under unrelenting Israeli pressure, including an economic blockade imposed on Gaza after the takeover, Hamas leaders have often demonstrated some of the same traits as their

predecessors.

Despite the blockade against Israel, Gazans widely accuse Hamas's leaders of carving out lucrative businesses, leading to claims of cronyism. "Why is that we've gotten poorer and they have suddenly become rich?" said a resident of the Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza who declined to give his real name.

He and his neighbours complained that the cluster of upscale apartments being built next to them belong to a member of Hamas's military wing.

"He had nothing before the takeover," said the man, a day labourer.

Meanwhile, Hamas seldom mounts attacks against Israel. After Israel's devastating three-week war on Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009, many Gazans accused it of miscalculating Israeli intentions and bringing down unnecessary destruction on the coastal enclave.

"Hamas is trying to be both a governing authority and a resistance movement, which you can't do because they're contradictory things," said Akram Atallah, a columnist for *Al Ayyam* newspaper who lives in Gaza.

But he said Hamas still profits from imposing stifling taxes on Gazans and forcing the public to suffer the consequences of Israeli attacks when it does decide to fight.

Mr Atallah added: "In both cases, Hamas asks the public to pay and gets all the benefits in return."

Meanwhile, in the West Bank, Hamas members are targets of police operations carried out jointly by Israeli and Palestinian security forces. Hundreds of Hamas members have been arrested, while others have been forced underground.

The result is loss of support in both Palestinian territories.

An opinion poll conducted last month found that 42 per cent of the 1,188 Palestinian respondents in the West Bank and Gaza Strip would support Fatah if national elections were held. Less than 20 per cent supported Hamas, according to the survey, carried out last month by the Jerusalem Media & Communications Centre.

Last month, student supporters of Hamas staged a protest at Birzeit University against arrests and alleged intimidation of their fellow Islamist students by PA security forces. Their demonstration seemed to evoke little more than pity from fellow students. "You just feel sorry for them," said Raghda Alan, a 20-year-old business student, as she looked on.

A growing problem for Hamas is how to distinguish itself from Fatah and other Palestinian rivals, said Hussein Ibish, senior research fellow at the Washington-based American Task Force on Palestine.

Hamas has been under pressure to moderate its policies by Islamist parties that have come to power in Tunisia and Egypt. But giving in to that pressure could weaken its resistance credentials, leaving it with little more than a conservative religious agenda to attract support.

"The issue for Palestinians is about national liberation, the occupation, jobs, security and all those things," Mr Ibish said. "The social conservative stuff is very secondary."

While a Sunni Muslim organisation itself, Hamas is having trouble winning the trust of the Sunni Muslim movements and parties that have been at the vanguard of change in North Africa.

Although it has closed its headquarters in Damascus, in the minds of its potential allies Hamas is still too wed to Hizbollah and Shiite-led Iran, perceived foes of Sunni Islam, Mr Ibish and other analysts said.

Instead of tilting toward Hamas at the expense of the western-backed Fatah and the PA, officials in Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood have called for dealing with them on an equal footing. Cairo also has yet to fully open to trade its main crossing point into Gaza.

Hani Habib, a Palestinian writer in Gaza, said that the group fears that friendlier Egyptian ties to the Gaza Strip could damage its recent efforts to improve relations with the United States and European Union, which consider Hamas a terrorist organisation.

"They see Hamas as tarnishing the reputation of the Muslim Brotherhood movements elsewhere in the region," he said. "The Brotherhood movements look at the Hamas experience of ruling Gaza and they think 'That's how not to run a country'."

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