Waving, Not Drowning: Strategic Dimensions of Ceasefires and Islamic Movements

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In the arena of ethno-national conflict, the adoption of a ceasefire is regarded as a key trigger for allowing the development of subsequent political initiatives in peacemaking. Armed elements within Islamism, however, are often understood as ruling out ceasefire and promoting a counter-agenda of armed struggle without compromise. Thus, in Israel and in the international community, most regarded the Hamas and Islamic Jihad ceasefire (*hudna*) of June 2003 with suspicion. Yet, in this respect, there was a failure to recognize that Islamists were waving, not drowning, with respect to signalling a new attitude towards the political process that animates Palestinian–Israeli encounters. This article seeks to analyse the contradiction inherent in current demands on contemporary Islamists and the part that they can play in reaching the strategic goal of peace and security. Principally, the concept of ceasefire and Islamist discourse on contemporary security issues will be examined in order to illustrate the relevance of these issues to wider dimensions of regional and global security debates.

Keywords ceasefire · Islamism · Palestinian–Israeli conflict

A ceasefire is acceptable, but not if we deny our rights to exist in the process. If the West deny us security and safety, we have to seek it for ourselves.[1]

THE ANNOUNCEMENT IN JUNE 2003 of a unilateral ceasefire (*hudna*) by armed Palestinian elements, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, was seen as a breakthrough in the scaffolding of Israeli–Palestinian relations through the so-called road map sponsored by the international quartet of the USA, the UN, Russia and the EU. The product of years of internal discourse and months of secret negotiations within the Palestinian body politic, the *hudna* offered a glimmer of hope for all parties involved in

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[1] Interview with Hamas leader Ismail Abu Shanab, Gaza City, August 2002.

conflict resolution and security efforts in the Middle East. With Palestinian willingness to meet the first demand of the road map document – to 'immediately undertake an unconditional cessation of violence against Israelis everywhere' – it appeared that the way was being paved for a new political momentum to work towards the elusive negotiated solution.[2] As the quote at the start of this article illustrates, however, the signal that Islamists were prepared to give was not one of surrender. The signal grew out of a uniquely Islamist perspective on conflict resolution methods, combined with the tactical and pragmatic approach to security and dialogue that is commonly ascribed to the role of armed elements and political prisoners in the transition from conflict to peace in deeply divided societies (Kriesberg, 1998; Rupensinghe, 1998).

The Abode of Peace – Dar al-Salam/Dar al-Islam

The Muslim discourse on peace and security issues has a long history and considerable depth. Some of the earliest discourse on governance and rule in Islam was preoccupied with rules of warfare and conflict resolution methods. In many respects, although contemporary analyses of Islamism have established a disconnection between conflict and its resolution within Islam, the historical reality and theological impulse demonstrate an intimate link. This connection is apparent in the desire to avoid internal disorder and conflict within Islam (*fitna*), as well as in early conflict resolution efforts related to tribal security and the extension of power (*jihad*) in the name of the new faith. In this respect, it should be acknowledged that *jihad* is not just a form of military action, but is also intimately connected to the struggle for self-improvement by Muslims. In practice, early military *jihad* entailed conflict in the encounters mounted by the followers of the new faith and its leader against the local tribal and religious elements of seventh-century Arabia. The linkage between conflict and resolution, however, is patent in the first ceasefire in Islamic history in AD 628. The description in Sura *al-Fath* (Victory) of the truce of Hodaibiya outlines the first ceasefire or truce arrangement agreed by the Prophet Mohammed and his followers as they sought to undertake pilgrimage to Mecca. Opponents of present-day Islamist truce offers relate their scepticism to later records that declared that the Prophet Mohammed broke the truce and that it was nothing more than a tactical measure in order to wage war by other means. In Pickthal's translation of and commentary on the Koran, however, with respect to a linkage between the ceasefire and a reciprocal entry into negotiations and a political

[2] See US State Department, 2003.

process, he notes that 'when the truce came and war laid down its burdens and people felt safe one with another, then they met and indulged in conversation and discussion' (Pickthal, 1960: 365). Nevertheless, suspicion has remained that the ultimate aim of such activity is the supremacy of Islam. Moreover, with respect to non-Muslim occupation and rule, the community (*umma*) is forced into a defensive position. This is one of the most important obligations upon the Muslims. Here, *jihad* is considered as *fard ayn* (compulsory obligation). The *jihad* becomes compulsory: 'The defensive Jihad . . . is obligatory to protect the religion and what is sacred. The first obligation . . . is the repulsion of the enemy aggressor who assaults the religion' (Azzam, n.d.: 8). In addition, the classical doctrine of *jihad* contains specific rules or conditions about such issues as methods of warfare, enemy persons, enemy property, captives and prisoners or war, safe conduct, ceasefire (*hudna*) and the end of *jihad*. In summary, the classical doctrine of *jihad* embraces what Donner refers to as 'a relatively rich discussion on many issues relating to war, its limitation and its justification . . . [and] this juristic tradition on war was likely subjected to continuous reshaping' (Donner, 1991: 57). *Hudna* was an important dimension of this tradition, and there is evidence that as modern Islamist movements have become embroiled in conflicts, they have been compelled to interpret and take on such issues.

Radical Islamist Doctrine on *Hudna* and *Jihad*

Radical Islamist doctrine on *hudna* has its roots in both classical and modernist interpretations of the subject. Modernist interpretations achieved a distinction between religious and political realms as they related to defensive *jihad* and associated concepts such as *hudna*, hence incorporating *hudna* as a strategic mechanism for incipient Islamism. This innovation is evident in the development of a strategic position among certain contemporary radical Islamist groups on the subject – hence the real value and acceptability of such arrangements pertaining to inter-Muslim disputes or conflicts, such as within the Afghan arena or in Egypt in the 1990s. Moreover, ceasefire arrangements have been regarded as an acceptable mechanism for regulating conflict between Muslim parties and non-Muslim elements. This is evident in the participation of Hezbollah in the 1996 ceasefire agreement with Israel. Nevertheless the apparent domination of *salafi* (fundamentalist) doctrines of *jihad* promoted by radical ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb and Abduallah Azzam and evident in organizations like al-Qaeda and Jihad al-Islami, with a foundation in an offensive *jihad* against *kufr* (non-Muslim) elements, undermines the use of the *hudna* as a negotiation tool or as a nonviolent mechanism for conflict resolution or regulation. For the *salafi* thinkers, the urgency of

jihad and the parlous state of the faith is attributed to a past fear of *jihad* and its denigration; by the modernists, to a purely defensive role in Muslim society. As radical ideologue Abdullah Azzam has written, 'Jihad and emigration to jihad have a deep-rooted role which cannot be separated from the constitution of the religion. A religion that does not have jihad cannot become established in any land, nor can it strengthen its frame' (Azzam, n.d.: 17–18). The issue here is where organizations like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad fit in the grand scheme of contemporary Islamism and internal debate and discourse on the acceptability of a truce in modern conditions of conflict with an enemy such as Israel. The primary way in which Hamas distinguishes itself from the *jihadi salafi* impulse of al-Qaeda is that it is fundamentally a local and quasi-nationalist expression and interpretation of reformist Islamist philosophies more strongly associated with Hassan al-Banna than with Sayyid Qutb. The 'radicalization' of Palestinian Islamism has historically been intimately connected to the local political arena rather than the global one (see Milton-Edwards, 1996).

A Road Less Travelled

Current Palestinian Islamism and strategies for peace and security lay in the roots of the first Palestinian *intifada* and the subsequent framing of the Oslo peace process. The phenomenon of Islamism in the Palestinian arena is deeply tied to the movement for opposition to Zionism and British occupation that grew in the early part of the 20th century (see Milton-Edwards, 1996). In the late 1980s, however, Palestinian Islamism was consolidated and given a new populist facet through the militant Islamic Jihad organization in the first *intifada* and the emergence of a larger political Islamic movement called Hamas. Rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas has become a major rival to the nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the battle to end Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In its founding covenant of 1988, the Hamas leadership, articulating its position on conflict resolution and its ultimate objective, advocated the utilization of one method – *jihad*: 'There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by jihad.'[3] This position suggested that there was a wholesale rejection of any mediated, peaceful resolution of the conflict. The Hamas leadership had an obsessive distrust of any externally and Western-inspired mediation centred on recognition of the state of Israel as a precondition for resolution. This meant that, in principle, Hamas was never comfortable with the notion of a ceasefire, because that clashed with the central concept of a historic struggle

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[3] See *al-Mithaq*, the covenant of the Hamas movement, 1988.

in which Islam and its forces were pitched against a political entity constructed as the Jewish state. The early covenant epitomized a hatred of the Jewish presence in historic Palestine and distinguished Hamas from other Palestinian groups by addressing the strategic presence of Israel as an entirely religious issue. Hamas blamed the Jews for turning the conflict into a religious one. As Hamas leader Dr Zahar asserted, 'The Jews made their religion their nation and state. . . . They have declared war on Islam. . . . They are the Muslim-killers. . . . and we are obliged by our faith to defend ourselves.'[4] This characterization of the enemy, combined with the avowed goal of liberating all of historical Palestine, was a maximal position. However, even the language of the covenant (which was soon superseded) indicated that Hamas took a 'defensive' view of *jihad*, which was about defending Muslims from non-Muslim occupation and oppression. Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin and others within the leadership have explicitly attempted to move away from earlier contentions about a religious quarrel with Jews per se towards statements about a conflict against a 'Zionist aggressor' (Hroub, 2000: 50–51).

In reality, however, there was soon evidence of an emerging compromise between the 'historical solution', which envisaged an end to the occupation in historical Palestine, and an 'interim solution' that was related to the lands occupied in the war of 1967. The Hamas leadership was quick to understand that Palestinian support was often dependent on its ability to recognize an aspiration to meet the more immediate demands of ending occupation. Realpolitik has always exerted a strong pull on strategic decisionmaking within Hamas. As early as 1988, the leadership demonstrated a willingness to consider a ceasefire as part of a security-based strategy to engage with the Israeli opponent. In 1988, in a secret meeting with Israeli leader Shimon Peres, Mahmoud Zahar presented an outline of Hamas's ideas on an interim solution that included addressing the issue of a ceasefire. This could have been a meaningful point of entry through covert negotiation with Israel, and it was referred to as a major *hudna* (ceasefire) offer. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh stated of the attempt: 'We've offered *hudna* on two occasions – a major *hudna* and interim *hudna* – and [the Israelis] rejected both. . . . Israel continued its war against us and didn't respect the major or interim *hudna* which we offered. What, then, do they want from us?'[5]

In the early 1990s, Sheikh Yassin once again outlined the terms of a proposed truce or ceasefire. This proposal was dependent on Israeli reciprocity at both the security level and the political level. Sheikh Yassin offered a fixed ceasefire lasting from 20 to 50 years if Israel agreed not to attack the Palestinians, would withdraw to the 1967 borders and allow free elections for Palestinians to take place (Yassin, 1993). The idea of the elections was that

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[4] Interview with Hamas leader, Dr Mahmoud Zahar, Gaza City, May 1995.
[5] Interview with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, Gaza City, August 2002.

freely chosen representatives, which putatively would include Hamas and other Islamists rather than just the PLO, would then enter into negotiations with Israel over a resolution of the conflict. Such a ceasefire would allow Hamas to put to one side its 'historical claims' and offer the prospect of Islamist recognition of Palestinian sovereignty arrangements alongside a sovereign Israeli state. Sheikh Yassin made plain in his correspondence from an Israeli prison at the time that the elected Palestinian representatives would be free to decide on the recognition of Israel, if they were so to choose. In effect, the *hudna* was the mechanism that could allow the 'interim solution' to become *the* solution, were the elected Palestinian representatives to prove satisfied with the outcome reached with Israel. In one respect, this can be viewed as an attempt to engage with practical political issues. But it also served to address the increasing sense of Hamas's marginalization from the centre of gravity of Palestinian popular opinion. Hamas had witnessed the effects on popular support for the PLO as the latter appeared to enjoy a degree of success in moving towards the establishment of a Palestinian state and the abandonment of the strategy of armed struggle. The Hamas leadership argued that it was folly to ostracize Hamas, as it still garnered significant popular support. Indeed, it contended that no political process would have genuine legitimacy without the organization.

Oslo Impasse

The announcement of the Oslo accords in the summer of 1993 appeared to pave the way for a new political momentum that would make armed struggle increasingly redundant. Nevertheless, some of the most vociferous opposition to this process came from the ranks of the Islamists. The Hamas leadership simply did not view the Oslo framework as a genuine step towards peace (Milton-Edwards, 1996: 199). Hamas had not been a party to the negotiations, and the PLO was now recognized at a global level as the 'sole' representative of the Palestinian people. A West Bank figure declared that 'the people in general feel that this agreement does not meet the basic needs of the people . . . so it is not a real peace'.[6] A Hamas statement in the wake of the Oslo agreement outlined the organization's opposition: 'We must mobilize all our efforts to confront the occupation. We must remain steadfast until our liberation. We must struggle against the Zionist occupation and continue our blessed *intifada*. . . . There must be withdrawal from all negotiations and an end to the rejection of our rights, our cause and the future of our homeland.'[7] Hamas also remained critical of the PLO/

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[6] Interview with Sheikh Bassam Jarrar, el-Bireh, May 1995.
[7] Hamas statement, 1993.

Palestinian Authority. Shortly before he was arrested by the Palestinian authorities in 1995, Mahmoud Zahar levelled explicit criticism against the PLO as 'corrupt . . . debauching themselves, drinking, singing and dancing, carrying on like they did in Jordan, Lebanon and Tunis. But what they forget,' he declared, 'is this is Gaza.'[8]

Finding New Momentum

With respect to a ceasefire, Hamas had always adopted a pragmatic attitude, and throughout the Oslo period it had offered or been involved in as many as nine such initiatives (ICG, 2004: 24). Moreover, after 1996 Palestinian Islamists could reflect on and share the lessons from the concrete experience of a ceasefire arrangement with Israel that had been successfully entered into by Hezbollah in Lebanon. During this period, Hamas claims that it engaged in short-term ceasefires and de-escalation activities. Ceasefire became subject to tactical considerations in respect of both Israel and the PLO-dominated Palestinian Authority. It is suggested by many Israeli commentators that the tactical dimension of such offers was linked to demands within the movement's military wing to reorganize, regroup and recover at a point of definitive weakness in its confrontation with Israel. In 1995, as the internal feuding between Hamas and the PA intensified, attempts to diffuse the tension through dialogue between Hamas and Fatah also led to a de-escalation of armed attacks by Hamas against Israeli targets. Hamas demonstrated that although it would avoid an outright feud with the PA, it would not allow itself to be manoeuvred into legitimizing Oslo.

Furthermore, offers of ceasefire and de-escalation were employed by the Hamas leadership as means to test Israeli interest or reciprocity. Popular opinion was seen as a key dimension in armed actions and ceasefire considerations – particularly as Hamas found itself in competition for Palestinian hearts and minds with its nationalist counterparts in the PLO. Polling indicates that public opinion was responsive to movement on such issues (PCPSR, 2004).

The Hamas leadership, though, has never been particularly comfortable with the tactical ceasefire, and its reasons for such actions were pragmatic rather than ideological. However, the Hamas leadership believed that a unilateral ceasefire that was not intrinsically coupled to wider political progress in peacemaking would always be liable to break down as a result of unrelenting Israeli military pressure. Political leaders argued that to implement a short-term *hudna* in isolation was to put the cart before the horse.

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[8] Interview with Hamas leader, Dr Mahmoud Zahar, Gaza City, May 1995.

De-escalation leading to a ceasefire was one way round this dilemma and became subject to considerable internal debate within Hamas and Islamic Jihad throughout 2002 and early 2003. Remarking on the issue, Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi – who was later assassinated by the Israelis – declared: 'Firstly de-escalation is contingent on moves which contribute to the ending of occupation.'[9]

Who Leads the Struggle?

The issue of the leadership of the Palestinian people re-emerged in 2002, when external mediators sought to facilitate internal Palestinian discussions on a ceasefire. As armed elements within Fatah contemplated a unilateral de-escalation of the armed conflict and sought to engage Hamas in their action, discussions were held in Gaza on the issue of temporary joint leadership by Fatah and Hamas. Two proposals were discussed. One involved expanding the PLO executive by adding extra members drawn from the Islamist factions. A second proposal was built around the issue of forming a Palestinian leadership composed of the secretaries-general of all of the Palestinian factions. This new body would function alongside an unchanged PLO executive. The Islamic Jihad leadership in Gaza indicated a willingness to participate in such a process of internal reform and democratization, but was sceptical about whether Fatah would ever agree to elections to the Palestinian National Council (PNC): 'PNC elections will never happen unless preconditions and agreement among all factions is achieved . . . [but] at present this doesn't exist.'[10] Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh outlined his views on the issue in the following manner: 'an election which the Palestinian people inside and the Diaspora can elect a new PNC, which represents a higher political source/legitimacy for the Palestinians and this election should not be bound to the Oslo or other agreements. Totally free and democratic. If this election takes place, Hamas will respect the will and desire of whatever Palestinian choice. . . . If the people choose Hamas, we are most grateful; if they choose the others, we will respect this.'[11] These proposals, however, fell through, as Hamas would not agree to grant immunity to Israeli forces within the occupied territories as part of the ceasefire announcement. Hamas had doubts about Israeli reciprocity and was concerned not to tie its hands if the Israeli military maintained its operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Hamas also would not agree to the political declaration, framed by the Egyptians, that would have had Hamas give up

 [9] Interview with Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi, September 2002.
[10] Interview with anonymous Islamic Jihad leader, Gaza, August 2002.
[11] Interview with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, Gaza City, August 2002.

some of its most basic political tenets. Hamas's objectives were to achieve internal reform without violence. They coupled this with the pragmatic approach of accepting some form of simple power-sharing. Hamas showed itself ready to accept a formula that was based on some rough proportionality of popular support for the factions but did not challenge Fatah leadership, providing they could see the path ahead towards genuine and free elections. Without some progress towards power-sharing, and without some understanding over shared Palestinian goals and objectives, it would be virtually impossible to sell a ceasefire to the Hamas and Islamic Jihad constituencies. Islamists were sceptical with regard to whether Israel would reciprocate their ceasefire gesture. As Islamic Jihad leader Muhammed al-Hindi remarked, 'a *hudna* is impossible without reciprocity. . . . Resistance continues so long as Israel occupies us and kills our innocent civilians.'[12] Islamic Jihad and Hamas were in harmony on the issue. The Hamas leadership was wary of proposals that appeared to make no demands on Israel. As Rantisi asserted, 'the Palestinian people are fighting for their survival. This isn't a minor skirmish. We do have a right to resistance in the face of such overwhelming power.'[13] Yet, by June 2003 Hamas and Islamic Jihad, despite their reservations, had signed up to a unilateral ceasefire.

Regional Versus Local

The experience of negotiating the June 2003 *hudna* between Hamas and Fatah marked a watershed in Hamas's attitude towards the tactical ceasefire. As much as it related to the suffering of the Palestinian people after nearly three years of armed *intifada* and the resultant Israeli military response, the spur to this also derived from events outside the Occupied Territories. At one level, Hamas, always sensitive to public sentiment, saw the weariness of the Palestinians and their desire to see some political progress after a long period of attrition (PCPSR, 2004). By the summer of 2002, the leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad conceded in private that Israeli actions were undermining popular support for the tactic of suicide bombings. Moreover, public debate over the efficacy of such a strategy in terms of achieving the aims of the Palestinian people had ensued. At another level, the Hamas leadership in exile was keen to distinguish itself to the West from *salafi jihadi* groups such as al-Qaeda. Hamas wished to play a part – possibly indirectly rather than directly – in the shaping of any future Palestinian state. Its concern was not limited to the shape and manner in which a Palestinian state might emerge

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[12] Interview with Islamic Jihad leader Mohammed al-Hindi, Gaza City, September 2002.
[13] Interview with Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi, Gaza City, September 2002.

from negotiations; equally importantly, it had views on the nature of civil society within that state. Input on internal political structures was as important as having a say on the outcome of any negotiations on the territorial manifestation this state might have.

Events elsewhere in the region – such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq – had also unsettled Hamas. It did not wish to be bracketed with al-Qaeda and delegitimized as terrorists whose destruction the USA and the West was bent upon. Furthermore, Hamas perceived a shift among some radical Islamists towards a global *jihad* against the USA as a threat to its interests. Hamas acknowledged the role that the USA had to play in the creation of a Palestinian state. In a wider *jihad* against the West, the Palestinian issue would be lost sight of, subsumed as simply another front in the wider conflict. Such considerations led the leadership in exile to take the initiative, jointly with Islamic Jihad, to agree a unilateral ceasefire. This revealed tensions between those who took a regional perspective on the issue as it related more generally to strategic realities and Islamist power balances and those at a local level who were in the midst of mediating daily demands from local Palestinian constituencies. This was so even though it was plain that bitter divisions within Fatah itself also precluded a joint agreement with Hamas on political objectives vis-à-vis Israel or any serious discussion of the leadership issue. Hamas has remained consistent in its demands that the PLO leadership reform from within and loosen the reins of leadership, but plainly there was no prospect of serious internal reform within a Fatah racked by dissent as a result of Abu Mazen's efforts to shift the internal balance of power within the movement. In frustration at the situation within Fatah, and out of a newfound confidence bolstered by parallel diplomatic efforts to take the political lead, the leaderships of Hamas and Islamic Jihad entered into a negotiating partnership with Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouti. There was already a well-established degree of trust with their old partner Barghouti, who, although unable to give Hamas what it desired in terms of reform of the PLO, was able to undertake that if al-Aqsa Brigade elements reneged on the ceasefire (a very real fear), he would put his political weight on the side of Hamas. Given the fractured nature of the al-Aqsa Brigades, this was probably the best guarantee that Hamas could hope for.[14] There is little doubt that the Hamas leadership in exile perceived this new alliance as a strategic grouping that could both articulate a 'vision' and show leadership at a time of weakness in other Fatah domains. The leadership of this alliance would facilitate and the articulate the 'vision' to the dominant leadership of the PA, Israel and the USA as the executors of political process.

The engine for this process at the first level of the alliance involved a key constituency in political struggle and peace processes: political prisoners. It

[14] Interviews with anonymous European diplomat and mediator involved in Hamas–Fatah dialogue, Jerusalem, 2002 and 2003.

was in the prisons that the key elements of the June 2003 ceasefire were debated and agreed. The lead played by prisoners in the Negev and Ashkelon jails prompted their own factions to be more adventurous. In particular, Hamas and Fatah prisoners in the Negev appeared to be breaking new ground by appearing to accept as an agreed premise that the new Palestinian state would be created on the basis of the lines of 1967. It was evident that the respective faction leaderships were content to see the prisoners push the boundaries of agreement at this juncture. From this partnership, forged in the prisons and through secret negotiations, the June 2003 *hudna* emerged.[15] As had been the case in Northern Ireland, the prisoners were understood among Palestinians as a key leadership group. The ceasefire agreement was a product of the prisons. Also as in Northern Ireland, prisoner releases were seen as an important element of any movement on the ceasefire issue. The alliance was designed to create a new space for all-important negotiations tied to incremental prisoner releases. Thus, as with Northern Ireland, the issue of release was critical in terms of establishing legitimacy for the process in the eyes of the Palestinian public. It demanded a reciprocity of sorts from Israel. Barghouti effectively delivered the commitment of the al-Aqsa Brigades to the *hudna*. Each prison has a joint leadership structure, reflecting all of the organizations concerned and – according to some prisoners – reflecting a degree of democratic accommodation and power-sharing that is absent from the local Palestinian arena.

The ceasefire statements from Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah all emphasized 'national unity', along with a commitment to suspend military operations for three months. Ismail Abu Shanab, who was also a key figure in the discussions, reflected on the importance of national unity and declared that 'first of all we want to look through the common sense [*sic*] and find common ground with other groups and leave our differences aside. That's the golden rule. The common ground is *intifada*, resisting the occupation, developing better Palestinian life and reform.'[16] It was clear that there was evidence within Islamist ranks of a meaningful attempt to challenge the hegemony of the PLO manifest in the PA at a point in time of its greatest weakness.

Islamist Solidarity

The declaration of the *hudna* on 30 June 2003 met with a promising response from followers of both Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Moreover, popular support for the announcement was prevalent in Palestinian areas (PCPSR, 2003). This

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[15] Interviews with anonymous European diplomat and mediator involved in Hamas–Fatah dialogue and with Hamas and Fatah representatives, Jerusalem, Ramallah and Gaza City, 2002 and 2003.

[16] Interview with Hamas leader, Ismail Abu Shanab, Gaza City, August 2002.

constructive feedback signalled that those who had argued that a Hamas ceasefire would fatally undermine the organization's *raison d'etre* because it had abandoned the use of armed struggle (or *jihad*) were wrong. Hamas and Islamic Jihad were recognized as waving, not drowning, in respect to the prevailing political environment. This was hardly surprising. If many Islamist supporters adhered to Hamas and Islamic Jihad because of their positions on the resistance against Israel, they also approved of the pragmatic path the organizations were prepared to take on the political track – particularly if that ensured endurance in the Palestinian arena. The Hamas political leadership, in particular, has always inferred that a political product was inevitable in the fight with Israel. Moreover, elements of the Hamas leadership – both internally and externally – believed that a *hudna* would set the stage for negotiations. The *hudna* was a signal indicating a desire to enter into the political process. However, it was a signal that was regarded with deep suspicion by other actors.

Road to Nowhere

The roots of the breakdown of the June 2003 *hudna* remain a source of dispute. Fundamental conclusions, however, have already been reached by the Palestinian participants to the ceasefire. First, it has been concluded that future attempts at unilateral efforts in this direction are meaningless unless reciprocated in a meaningful fashion by Israel (backed by the international community). Indeed, it is improbable that Islamist elements will be willing to make any similar efforts unless there is the high possibility of significant Israeli reciprocity – particularly with respect to prisoner releases, targeted assassinations and the political process. Furthermore, there is likely to be a demand for some kind of external monitoring arrangements under which the 'rules of the game' are already defined and observable. Common ground also needs to be established around linkage to the actual act of ceasefire and commensurate entry and participation in a political process and conflict resolution. In the Northern Ireland context, ceasefire by both Republicans and Loyalists was highly significant as a point of entry into a negotiated political process that culminated in the 1998 Belfast Agreement on power-sharing. In Sri Lanka, a ceasefire has promoted negotiation towards a lasting peace agreement between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. With the exception of small 'spoiler' elements, which can purposely disrupt peacemaking, what these examples demonstrate is the fundamental incorporation and participation of all armed elements to a ceasefire agreement, reciprocity and a place for all at the negotiating table.

Signposts

This issue of linkage between the practical and the political depends on the ability of the Hamas leadership to signpost more clearly its political vision as part of conflict resolution or management efforts. It is unlikely that the movement is willing to throw down the gauntlet over leadership of the Palestinian people at this stage, but it has demonstrated a willingness to articulate its political vision more publicly. Demilitarization and decommissioning – bugbears of many a peace process – are also issues that the Islamist leadership is acutely aware of. Indeed, it has been indicated that these are seen as key areas for third-party assistance. There is no doubt that third-party assistance in ceasefire agreements or arrangements that have pertained to Israel and Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka, as well as in other contexts such as the Congo, have been key for taking such agreements forward into negotiation.

For the Islamists and other Palestinian elements, future attitudes and positions towards any further externally initiated ceasefire attempts will inevitably be conditioned by recent experience. For them, this has been coloured by Israeli attacks on their leadership that have drawn scant international condemnation; the recent designation of their political wings as terrorist groups by the European Union; and US pressure manifest in the designation of Palestinian Islamism as a further threat in the 'war on terror', which has impacted not only on the financing for Islamist groups and charities but regionally in recent US assaults on Syria and Iran.

At the same time, the leaderships of Hamas and Islamic Jihad are aware of growing radicalization within Islamism more generally and the emergence regionally of factions seeking to engineer a wider confrontation between Islamists and the USA. The Hamas leadership has sought to distance itself from such elements, which it also regards as a threat to its own interests.[17] Hamas leaders see any widening of the struggle from the objective of ending Israel's occupation to conflict with other parties, particularly the USA, as potentially disastrous. The leadership is aware of the key role the USA will need to play in any political outcome to the conflict that includes the establishment of a Palestinian state. Any widening of the objectives of the struggle could also introduce new external actors into the Palestinian arena whose interests could well undermine Palestinian aspirations for statehood and whose targets for military attack would not solely be related to the Israeli occupation. Hamas or Islamic Jihad would be at risk of losing control on the streets to these new agenda arrivals in the same way that the insertion of al-Qaeda and other Islamist elements in postwar Iraq has destabilized internal politics under foreign occupation.

[17] Interviews with leaders of Hamas in Palestinian territories and in exile, June–September 2003.

Atavistic Hate?

At one level, if the Palestinian Islamist leadership is aware of the danger posed by events in Iraq and the read-across to the Palestinian issue, it is also being pushed by Israeli military operations and by the pressure from the international community in a dangerous direction. The continued openness of Palestinian Islamists to pursuing a ceasefire cannot be taken for granted. Against the assessment of their own interests, Hamas and Islamic Jihad may find themselves victims of growing regional radicalism, international ostracism and Israeli military pressures.

Aside from these wider considerations, Islamist assessments of Israeli intentions will also shape their attitudes for the future. Israeli attitudes towards a ceasefire and other national security issues have been ambivalent (Arian, 2003: 11). Some political groups within the Israeli establishment have viewed ceasefire as an opportunity to try to break the mutual cycle of violence that currently characterizes the conflict and to appropriately manage the provision of an entry point into the political process for such elements. To others, however, the completion of the 'Fence' – not Islamist ceasefires – and, therefore, separation of the two peoples will provide the only satisfactory measure of security for the Israeli people. For these, a ceasefire with Hamas or Islamic Jihad is seen as irrelevant. For others, too, the prospect of reaching any political compromise with Palestinian groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad is inconceivable. Many Israelis have no faith in the potential transformation of a group like Hamas into a political organization, and any engagement with its leadership is viewed as dangerous. Indeed, some fear that an internal Palestinian bargain struck from the starting point of a *hudna* could strengthen cohesion and make the Palestinians more resistant to any settlement that falls short of something closely approximating the 1967 borders.

At an operational level, many Israeli officials are convinced that it is only by exerting heavy pressure on Hamas that any ceasefire is possible. Israeli officials claim it was their attempted assassination of Hamas leader Dr Abdel Aziz Rantisi that prompted Hamas to declare its June 2003 *hudna*. Hamas counters that the failed assassination attempt nearly wrecked the process, and shortened what was to have been a six-month ceasefire to three months. Furthermore, Hamas asserts that the targeting of political leaders such as Dr Ismail Abu Shanab, who had promoted internal debate about the acceptability of a unilateral ceasefire, demonstrates Israeli attempts to deliberately undermine such developments. Irrespective of whichever narrative one accepts, the one thing that is clear is that the mistrust between Israel and the Islamists has been deeply exacerbated.

A Pause in the Solution?

This ceasefire is not a solution, it's a pause in the solution. It's stalemate not checkmate.

(Harnden, 1999: 310)

The June 2003 *hudna* demonstrates the contradiction of a peace process that depends upon the goodwill of Islamist elements for its success. These groups have demonstrated, time and again, that without their active acquiescence there can be no viable peace process. These groups represent no insignificant strand of Palestinian opinion; on the contrary, they represent a substantial current of popular support. In the Gaza Strip, which Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon proposes to relinquish, Hamas enjoys more support than any other political group (PCPSR, 2004). Moreover, the Islamists are not an amalgam of disparate and ad hoc militias, but are a movement rooted at all levels of religious and political society. Yet, the peace process that has evolved envisages their destruction. This is the essential contradiction: the need for compliance from the Islamists for the process to unfold and the concurrent expectation that they also be an accomplice to their own decommissioning and dismantling. The current Israeli policy of systematic targeted assassinations of the Hamas leadership, already resulting in the deaths of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Dr Adel Aziz Rantisi and Dr Ismail Abu Shanab (all co-founders of the movement), is interpreted as Israel's way of eradicating the Hamas organization. Ariel Sharon, who has accelerated assassination orders against the Hamas leadership, has clearly communicated his intention of punishing those he considers responsible for acts of terrorism against Israeli targets. Israel argues the assassinations are acts of self-defence and legitimate anti-terrorism actions. Such actions, however, can be interpreted as counter-productive: they neither eliminate the military leadership of the Izz-a-din al-Qassam battalions nor diminish Palestinian support for Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The assassinated political and spiritual leadership leave a legacy of a new generation of Islamists ready to assume the mantle of power in the conflict against Israel. The Palestinian Authority, meanwhile, is left vulnerable to accusations that its strategy for a negotiated solution with Israel is futile.

The key to resolving this contradiction in the Palestinian case lies in recognizing the dynamic nature of the parties involved. The time in which one political party can dominate the Palestinian arena is past. The PLO has neither the capacity nor the will to enter into war with the Islamists, and vice versa. And Israel is unable to subdue these various elements. A ceasefire then becomes the one possible tool with which to build Palestinian consensus. Moreover, it is a tool that establishes an entry point for all elements of the political spectrum, and at more than one level. Yet, this demands that the Palestinians first engage in some internal peace process of their own, based on a meaningful recognition of principles of power-sharing. A divided

leadership will never be able to energize the 'street' to trust the path ahead. Of course, any ceasefire must transmute into political progress. This may be the only exit from the contradiction: something that Hamas has endeavoured to signal. Overlooking the strategic value of such signals, whether in relation to internal Palestinian dynamics, the resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli peace process and the manifestations of radical Islamism in the Middle East region, may well hinder efforts to forge peace in the near future. The regional and global order is at present menaced by political violence commonly ascribed to Muslim terrorism. Seeking security through dialogue, with cease-fire as a key component, seems harder than ever to achieve.

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