

“Moderate” Hamas Statements Are an Old Ploy

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Brief Analysis

Hamas leaders have recently tempered their fiery rhetoric with more moderate-sounding statements about a ceasefire along the 1967 lines, but this is merely a tactical move designed to advance the group’s main goal—establishing an Islamist state “between the river and the sea.”

Since October 7, Hamas leaders have issued a steady stream of statements promising war until Hamas destroys Israel and replaces it with an Islamist Palestinian state. Recently, however, some Hamas officials have issued more moderate statements, even suggesting the movement would consider a five-year truce with Israel based on the 1967 ceasefire lines. While some see such statements as “[a significant concession \(https://apnews.com/article/hamas-khalil-alhayya-qatar-ceasefire-1967-borders-4912532b11a9cec29464eab234045438\)](https://apnews.com/article/hamas-khalil-alhayya-qatar-ceasefire-1967-borders-4912532b11a9cec29464eab234045438),” Hamas has a long history of hinting at moderation as a means of gaining international support so it can continue “resistance” through political means.

From Massacre to Moderation?

From the outset, Hamas intended its assault on southern Israel to draw an Israeli response and spark a war, one it hoped Hezbollah and other allies would quickly join. Even if the attack proved less successful than planned, Hamas [anticipated \(https://www.memri.org/tv/hamas-leader-abroad-khaled-mashal-october-seventh-elimination-israel-opportunity-for-china-russia\)](https://www.memri.org/tv/hamas-leader-abroad-khaled-mashal-october-seventh-elimination-israel-opportunity-for-china-russia) it would “pave the highway towards removing Israel,” as senior

official Khaled Mashal put it a few days later. Political bureau member Ghazi Hamad vowed (<https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-official-ghazi-hamad-we-will-repeat-october-7-attack-time-and-again-until-israel>) that Hamas would “repeat the October 7 attacks, time and again, until Israel is annihilated.”

Within a month of the attack, Hamas Shura Council member Khalil al-Hayya acknowledged that the group wants to join the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). To that end, he floated the idea of a truce with Israel that could last five years or more based on the 1967 ceasefire lines, envisioning a unified Palestinian government that includes Hamas and governs both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Last month, senior Hamas official Ismail Haniyeh proposed (<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-april-30-2024>) restructuring the PLO to include all Palestinian factions.

These positions are not as contradictory as they may seem. The key is to understand that Hamas’s moderation is always tactical and temporary and never a replacement for its strategic commitment to destroy Israel.

Pragmatism as a Ploy

Two years before the October 7 attack, senior Hamas figure Yahya al-Sinwar emphasized (<https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-leader-gaza-yahya-al-sinwar-salutes-al-jazeera-tv-iran-and-yasser-arafat-adds-we-have>) that Hamas strives for the “eradication of Israel through armed jihad and struggle,” but could reach a long-term truce if Israel agreed to a list of demands including dismantling all settlements, releasing all Hamas prisoners, and allowing a “right of return” for Palestinian refugees. This truce, however, would be temporary and driven by a desire to achieve Palestinian unity and a recognition of “international positions.”

Indeed, Sinwar’s feint toward moderation was apparently little more than an effort to make Israel believe that Hamas prioritized governance over “resistance.” Just four days after the October 7 assault, Hamas official Ali Baraka told (<https://www.memri.org/reports/senior-hamas-official-ali-baraka-we-have-been-secretly-planning-invasion-two-years-russia>) *Russia Today* that the group had been secretly planning the operation for two years, stating: “We made them think Hamas was busy with governing Gaza, and that it wanted to focus on the 2.5 million Palestinians [in Gaza], and has abandoned the resistance altogether. All the while, under the table, Hamas was preparing for this big attack.”

Over the years, senior Hamas members have been asked under what conditions they might lay down their arms and consider a two-state solution. As early as 1993, Hamas founder Ahmed Yassin expressed readiness to reach a temporary arrangement with Israel if it withdrew to the 1967 ceasefire lines. Yassin distinguished between a full peace with Israel (*salah*), which he deemed a sin, and a temporary ceasefire (*hudna*), which is used when the enemy is strong and Muslims need time to gather strength until the next confrontation. According to his approach, the ceasefire would not extend beyond ten years.

Hamas’s idea of peace is completely different from the Israeli or Western concept. For Hamas, peace with Israel cannot be permanent because it violates the basic principle of jihad. A ceasefire is merely a tactical move on the long road of war.

Pragmatism to Broaden International Appeal

In the mid-1990s, the European Commission approached Hamas and asked it to clarify its “objectives, values and ideals (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/road-october-7-hamas-long-game-clarified>).” Hamas responded with a document downplaying its commitment to militancy. In 2000, it issued another memorandum that made it appear more moderate than its charter did. Both documents, however, expressed Hamas’s commitment to “the liberation of Palestine” and rejection of Israel’s right to exist.

In 2017, Hamas released a document (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full>)

updating, but not superseding, its 1988 charter, which famously asserted that “jihad is the only solution for the Palestinian problem” and explicitly opposed negotiated peace settlements. The new document allowed for the possibility of a Palestinian state along the 1967 ceasefire lines but “without compromising [Hamas’s] rejection of the Zionist entity and without relinquishing any Palestinian rights.” It added, “ Hamas rejects any alternative to the full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea.” The group’s apparent moderation, which included distancing itself from the Muslim Brotherhood, was intended to widen its international appeal at a time when it faced multiple challenges, including a dismal [economic situation \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-america-and-its-allies-can-stop-hamas-hezbollah-and-iran-evading-sanctions-and\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-america-and-its-allies-can-stop-hamas-hezbollah-and-iran-evading-sanctions-and) in Gaza and strained relations with Egypt.

Around the time the new document was leaked, Mashaal [emphasized \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamass-moderate-rhetoric-belies-militant-activities\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamass-moderate-rhetoric-belies-militant-activities), “We were and we still are in an open war with the criminal enemy [Israel].” Hamas may engage in politics, he continued, “but it insists on the choice of jihad and resistance...[This choice] is Hamas’s greater and first strategy... Hamas is not changing its skin.”

Short-Lived Pragmatism with a Long-Term Purpose

When Hamas entered Palestinian politics and participated in elections leading to the 2006 national unity government, some expected it to moderate. Instead, Hamas tried to change the Palestinian political system from within. As senior official Mahmoud al-Zahar [clarified \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/road-october-7-hamas-long-game-clarified\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/road-october-7-hamas-long-game-clarified) at the time, “Some Israelis think that when we talk of the West Bank and Gaza it means we have given up our historic war. This is not the case... We will join the Legislative Council with our weapons in our hands.” Similarly, the 2006 “prisoners’ document,” formulated by Hamas and Fatah prisoners in Israeli jails to reach a consensus on key issues, skipped over sensitive topics and failed to mention Israel’s nonnegotiable demands, including cessation of terrorism, recognition of Israel and its right to exist, and recognition of previous agreements between Israel and the Palestinians.

To be sure, Hamas leaders have debated for years whether they should genuinely adopt more pragmatic positions on issues such as temporary acceptance of a Palestinian state within the 1967 lines. In the current war, such debates have [exacerbated \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growing-internal-tensions-between-hamas-leaders\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growing-internal-tensions-between-hamas-leaders) longstanding tensions between Hamas leaders in Gaza and those abroad, who seem more interested in ending the war and negotiating with other Palestinian factions to incorporate Hamas into the PLO. But Sinwar, who commands Hamas forces inside Gaza and holds most of the cards, is fixated on ensuring that the group survives and can declare “[divine victory \(https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/22/world/middleeast/23lebanoncnd.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/22/world/middleeast/23lebanoncnd.html),” akin to what Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah did after the 2006 Lebanon war. He reportedly considers such reconciliation talks “outrageous” as long as there is no ceasefire on Hamas’s terms. These tensions have directly affected the movement’s ability to negotiate hostage-for-prisoner swaps, pauses in fighting, and, ultimately, a full ceasefire.

Conclusion

Hamas was and will remain a “liberation” movement with a cohesive identity, which includes a national component that defines its goal (a state) and a religious component that defines both its borders (“between the river and the sea”) and character (Islamist). This is not a classic Muslim Brotherhood movement that works to build an exemplary religious society from below, but a terrorist movement that advocates activism and violence to promote “redemption” through the weapons of “resistance.” Even Hamas’s post-October 7 situation will not change its policy, which is a function of the group’s fundamental identity and purpose and thus inflexible. Hamas’s statements about a Palestinian state are an attempt to demonstrate pragmatism without changing its basic

conceptual framework.

Going forward, Hamas will seek to turn its wartime gains, particularly in public support, into political dividends. Specifically, it seeks to relinquish governance of Gaza while maintaining its weapons and functioning as a state-within-a-state, much like Hezbollah in Lebanon.

In the long term, Hamas will not easily forgo its ultimate goal of leading the entire Palestinian arena. As Israel seeks to delegitimize and isolate it, the group is focused on becoming part of the PLO and moving Palestinian society away from a two-state solution toward permanent opposition to Israel's existence.

To prevent Hamas from advancing this goal by seizing a role in running Gaza, Israel must articulate a plan for "the day after" and begin taking action to make it possible long before the war ends. Indeed, Israel should formulate a long-term policy not only for Gaza, but for the West Bank as well. In the context of a possible U.S.-Saudi-Israeli [normalization deal \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/president-bidens-middle-east-squeeze-play\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/president-bidens-middle-east-squeeze-play), an opportunity exists to carve out a new regional structure that could empower moderate Palestinians to cooperate with Israel, make Hamas and the wider "axis of resistance" unattractive, and provide legitimacy to regional and international actors to play a part in stabilizing Gaza.

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