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A Critical Assessment of Hamas' 'Democratic Transformation' and its Impact on Palestinian Politics

Dr. Nehad Khanfar

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Abstract

Keywords: *Hamas, democratic transformation, Palestinian politics, Islamic movement.*

Hamas is one of the largest Palestinian political movements in Palestine although it is considered to be a fairly new political and military movement being established in 1988. In 2006 Hamas participated in the Parliamentary elections and gained the overall majority. This was considered to be a turning point for Hamas, as well as the history of Palestinian politics. Many argued that this event meant that Hamas, as an Islamic movement, has acknowledged the democratic mechanism as a legitimate vehicle to rise to power and be part of the ruling political force in Palestine. Some also argued that Hamas' participation in the elections as a political Islamic movement is a strong signal that they were witnessing an ideological transformation.

Allegedly, Hamas has been part of the ruling authority for the past eleven years, but its democratic practices and commitments have always been questionable. This paper intends to examine whether Hamas' stance on democracy has remained the same since winning the 2006 elections. The paper will also assess whether Hamas has undertaken a democratic transformation and the effect of this Phenomenon on Palestinian politics? The paper will also critically investigate whether Hamas is going through an ideological and structural process regarding democracy and how this can impact on the Palestinian political development.

Introduction

Hamas is classified as an Islamist party, more accurately, Islamic movement (*Harakah*) according to Hamas' political and ideological literature. Historically, Hamas and its co-founders, proudly and publically affiliated themselves to the global Society of the Muslim Brothers (*Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*). With the exception of the new constitutional charter which has been issued recently and the electoral manifesto of 2006, it is difficult to spot any indication or serious tendency in which the organisation introduced itself in one of its programs, policies, and teachings as believing in democratic values or even an inclination towards democracy. Hamas, with some exceptions, did not seem as though there were any serious attempts to give an impression or proof that the movement is pursuing democracy as part of its culture. Historically, democracy was not something Hamas would promote or even mention when it comes to its involvement in politics as if not part of their interests. Furthermore, it would seem that Hamas would not even use any language or statements to praise democracy or democratic methods or values. On that note, (Malka, 2005) argued that Hamas's decision to participate in the national parliamentary election in 2006 "is evidence of the organization's adaptability and durability within Palestinian society and politics".

Some have argued that Hamas proved on many occasions that the movement is considering democracy to be part of its political culture which was practically materialised in participating in the local and parliamentary elections of 2004 and 2006 respectively. This has not convinced many observers and political players, both externally and internally. The contradicting messages both theoretical and actual, coming from Hamas and its leaders regarding democracy and its values have always sent a confusing message even amongst Hamas' supporters and sympathisers.

In this paper there will be an examination as to what extent can Hamas be entrusted on democratic values, in addition to an assessment as to whether Hamas is witnessing a democratic transformation in the first instance. The contributing factors towards Hamas' democratic inclination or alienation will also be examined.

Hamas is not a stranger to Democracy

Despite being accused to be nondemocratic or antidemocratic, and not adopting democratic approaches (Fogg, Salam, Shikaki (2009). Hamas, arguably, "have more than a nominal acceptance of democratic norms, and have an empirically verifiable electoral record", and as such, Hamas showed some signs of adapting itself "to the reality of democratic contestation" (Sadiki, 2010). The Islamic Block, Hamas' students arm has regularly and actively participated in most of the students' unions elections year after year in most of the Palestine universities and colleges (Breitsman & Thahir, 2015). In addition, this can be said about Hamas' active

electoral participation in trade unions, municipal and other civil societies and organisations (Heil, 2006). It is worth noting that Hamas would participate in both, by nominating its own candidates or indirectly by supporting some of the sympathetic independents who are usually coming from an Islamic background. Hamas enthusiastically participated in domestic elections (students' unions and professional bodies) as long as "entirely domestically initiated and not associated with the peace process" (PACE, 2012).

Therefore, it can be concluded at this stage that Hamas has a strong record of accepting and dealing with democratic tool to reach, or perhaps share power as a result of democratic process. However, some argue that Hamas' decision to participate in the parliamentary elections of 2006 would serve its interests rather than boycotting, as was the case in 1996 (Dunne, 2010). Supporting this trend of analysis (Provencher, 2011) added that participating in the election, according to Hamas, is very crucial in order to keep the public support alive. The election was not reflecting a change of Hamas' mentality towards democracy, it was rather a reflection of fears that the movement would lose its popularity among Palestinians if it lost the electoral platform which might have resulted in marginalising its role as a significant political player in Palestine politics. "It represents a fundamental shift in strategy; Hamas would seek to achieve its agenda through political participation". However, we have to draw the line between the political participation and the political partnership where the latter entails the practical sense of democracy and accepting it to be part of the political culture of a party or organisation. Political partnership is also about accepting others who don't necessarily agree with the elected party views and in that sense, give every citizen a chance, in a way or another, to be part of the decision making process. That is to say, every "one is a free and equal partner, with a shared responsibility for collective action" (Dworkin, 1998).

One would argue that participating in the election is an indication of accepting the democracy as a concept. In principle, this may be true but in practical political terms it may be the opposite. It can be argued that participating in an election does not reflect a democratic culture and it may be a mere method to use democracy simply to gain legitimacy and power (Brown, 2012). Nonetheless, on the one hand, it is difficult to recognise whether participation in an election is a sign of accepting democracy or its rules (Eeckelaert, 2014). On the other hand, it would be unfair to say that the participation does not prove and pave the way to democracy. Furthermore, it could be a strong signal of Hamas' readiness for democracy, or at least to be part of it at some point. It must be admitted that there is a clear difficulty to identify whether the participation in the election can lead or be part of a democratic transformation or a commitment towards the democracy at all (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). Hamas's participation after long and firm boycott of the election left many observers buzzed about the real reasons that stood behind Hamas decision (Løvlie, 2013).

Nevertheless, in principle Hamas has accepted the theoretical terms of democracy by being an important part of the democratic and political process although it has not shown yet, a real utilisation or reflection of the democratic values after winning the election and becoming a ruling power. This, again, may lead to a harsher conclusion that Hamas, as claimed numerously, participated in the election to take over power and not to adhere to the democratic values and demands. In this context, it is evident that whereas Hamas approves democracy, there is a serious argument that suggests, Hamas' fundamental participation in democratic elections of the legislative council in 2006, represented a tactical step rather than a reflection of their commitments to democratic values. It is a case where Hamas found itself being forced to accept in order to protect its supporters and members who were persecuted by the security Fatah led forces of the Palestinian Authority. Participating in the election and becoming part of the government departments, Hamas would have a lot to gain (Tuastad, 2013).

Can participation in political elections mean a democratic transformation?

(Brown, 2006) argued that Hamas' participation in the parliamentary election of 2006 could have been a serious opportunity to create a viable two-party system. This could have contributed to a long-term process of democratic transformation. On the same note, and based on a statement of the former head of Hamas' of political bureau, Gerges (2009) indicated that the participation in this parliamentary election may signal some democratic changes within Hamas.

For Hamas, participating in major elections on the parliamentary level is a significant step towards an active involvement in the democratic process and partnership with other political opponents in Palestine (Youngs, 2006). The significance has two dimensions, in addition to its political/democratic one, the other is on religious ideological front as one of the prominent Hamas leaders issued a Fatwa (religious opinion) prohibiting the participation in the first election on 1996 (Haloli, 2009). Also, Late Nizar Rayan, one of Hamas' senior leaders who was a professor of Sharia in Gaza Strip, the strongest academic hold of Hamas, the Islamic University. He strictly refused the idea of democracy initiating his view on religious and ideological justifications, and as a result he was strongly against Hamas' participation in the election (Sayigh, 2011). He was even quoted to have said, using firm and definite terms, that Hamas is fighting its opponent secular party of Fatah to "uproot secularism in Gaza." (Ghattas, 2007).

Therefore, the participation created a discrepancy within Hamas, where, Nizar Rayan as mentioned earlier, showed a strong opposition to the involvement in the democratic transformation believing that the election gives a negative impression on the movement's religious principles. Whereas, other senior officials within Hamas did not believe that pursuing democratic methods would enhance the legitimacy of the movement. (Eklind & Angenfelt, 2015). In spite of the religious opinions that objected to Hamas' participation, Hamas decided to be part of the political democratic game. Therefore, this participation in 2006 could be, precariously speaking, an important sign on the possibility of ideological change in Hamas' culture and mentality. This comes in light of knowing that the same prominent leader issued the same Fatwa on the 2006 election, but did not find listening ears among Hamas leadership. It is evident that Hamas faced a greater challenge on its ideological and religious front which mean that participation encompassed a serious hesitation towards participation.

It is worth mentioning that Hamas would encounter a serious challenge to how it is going to combine Islamic ideologies and democratic requirements. According to (Hossain & Shobaki, 2014) this is a mere theoretical challenge and can be practically and realistically met by Hamas as its road to political power has been established through democratic means. (Hossain & Shobaki, *ibid*) also argued that this did not contradict Hamas's ideological background with a strong support coming from many Islamist thinkers who did not think that Hamas' adoption of democracy opposed Islamic methods or principles.

I would argue that we have to draw a clear line between the political transformation and the democratic one. In my view, there is a clear failure in highlighting the differences between both of them within Hamas and its pragmatic approach towards the changing in politics internally and externally. Generally, despite agreeing with the fact that taking part in the parliamentary elections could be a sign of accepting democracy and its values, yet this may not necessarily be the case with Hamas as such, we have to look into Hamas' structure with its practices on the ground.

It is about examining Hamas based on a logical supposition that is built on the fact that the democratic transformation necessarily needs cultural, social, and economic changes, not just changes in the structure of the political institutions. (Ottaway, 2008). (Malka, 2005) suggested that Hamas has to comply with democratic demands once enters the political arena, such as practically proving that the movement is willing to adhere to the rule of law and to respect the existed governing institutions of the PA. Hamas' interaction and involvement in Palestinian politics has to introduce and encourage a wider political involvement that is based on democratic values, instead of being a bridge for imposing an authoritarian theocracy rule.

In contradiction to that after participation in the democratic election, Hamas, established its own security bodies and entities out of the existing Palestinian law with a complete abandonment of the legally formed forces. Furthermore, it showed no interest, whatsoever, to be part of any political partnership with other Palestinian factions, let alone Fatah movement. (Shikaki, 2015). Hamas rushed to form the Executive Force that was declared illegitimate by PA president Abbas. This force was instrumental in taking retaliatory actions against many of Fatah security officials. These actions were fully justified by Al-Qassam Brigades of Hamas military arm as legitimate considering this as a response to the actions and tortures practiced in the past against Hamas members by PA security forces (Nasrallah, 2007). These practices never been condemned by

any of Hamas political leaders, or its government officials. Revenge and retaliatory actions do not comply with democratic values and indicate a disrespectful culture to the rules of law, the main pillar of democracy.

Based on my own personal observation, Hamas does not have a clear policy in encouraging its members and followers to adopt democratic value. Hamas, while recognizing the existence of other political parties and movements, it restricts their activities with tough procedures usually taken against them when carrying out political or social activities. This indicates that Hamas accepts political pluralism in theory, but it does not respect the practical implications of this concept. Knowing about the political situations, Hamas would not be in a position to hold any election that imply political meaning or indication. Having this fact in mind, Hamas imposed a strict prohibition of elections on other levels as there were almost no elections being conducted within Gaza strip in any of the trade unions or universities. It is as though we are witnessing a clear practical reflection of denying the right of the public in participating in political life or decision making. There is no indication, whatsoever, that this could change in near future. Nothing appears from the situation in Gaza Strip that Hamas is willing to compromise its individual style of political rulings over Gaza and its institutions. This raises very serious questions on Hamas' willingness for starting the process of democratic transformation.

Democratic transformation does not happen overnight. Hamas, in order to show some signs of going through the democratic transformation, needs to start the process within its movement and institutions, beginning from the grass roots. If this does not happen, it would be very deceiving to take seriously any announcements or declarations from Hamas promoting democracy or the tendency towards it. In that respect, it has been noted that Hamas encouraged, for example, one of its affiliated grass roots organizations known as "Dawa branch" to strictly promote the Sharia traditional perspectives especially those related to dress code of women "and gender mixing". This would be applied by Hamas' ministries and other affiliated groups. (Shikaki, 2015). Equally, it has been observed that Hamas' government, unofficially, seemed to show tolerance towards a coexistence of the liberal and conservative perspectives. (Shikaki, *ibid*). However, (Byman & Goldstein, 2011) argued that the situation was more extreme, where Hamas even imposed a certain dress code on women rather than providing any room for the community to decide. This was implemented in the courts and for the TV presenters with emphasis on "gender segregation" in specific public spaces. Following the same practice, the strict position on gender mixing was reflected in form of a strong condemnation against (UNRWA) because they organized a mixed youth summer camp in Gaza. The condemnation came from Da'wa arm of Hamas. (Sayigh, 2010).

It may be suggested that, the situation in occupied Palestinian territory needs "real stability" according (Pace, 2009), where Israel, as an occupation force, does not allow this to happen and plays a crucial role in destabilizing the Palestinian situation. Under such situation, talking about democracy promotion under occupation, "did not make any logical sense". The American position was not an exception from the Israeli one, where Americans demotivated Hamas to be part of a democratic process through participating in the election, therefore, threatened not to recognize its results if Hamas had won. (Eklind & Angenfelt, *ibid*)

Examining the democratic culture within Hamas

It is fair to say that democracy should be judged based on practical commitment to the democratic values. Words, statements, and slogans do not form democracy, no matter how beautiful they are. Although there are no specific standards on which we can measure democracy, yet certainly a set of thoughts and practices can provide an overview on whether a party or a society is committed to the democratic values. One can argue that the social and political commitment towards democracy may vary depending on long standing traditions within a specific social group. Certain practices can give an idea to what extent democracy is pursued in the community's structure such as the rule of law, power separation and independency of the judiciary.

It is believed that elections, practically approved, surely can and in many cases do motivate communities to build up a democratic system. Though, it has been proven that elections, occasionally, do the extreme opposite by ending up with anti-democratic systems, "especially through the manipulation of the franchise" (Bisharat, 2013). It would be firmly argued that to achieve democracy it needs something much more than participating

in elections, it requires a clear respect and commitment towards “rights and the rule of law”. Democracy means not just “electoral majoritarianism”, it means that “individuals and minorities have their equal rights respected”. (Ibrahim, 2007). On that matter Hamas, at least officially and theoretically, recognized the equal rights “for all citizens” regardless of their religion, both Muslims and Christians. In contradiction to this, however, it does not accept that a Christian for example, can become a president or the army chief. Despite this attitude, it seems that Hamas is very pragmatic when it comes to ordinary politics, where it accepts having a political partnership with Christians (Shikaki, *Ibid*).

It can be simply concluded that Hamas acts pragmatically when it comes to its position in relation to democracy and democratic requirements. It also appears as if there are two faced discourses, one directed for outsiders and the other is meant to be for internal or domestic audiences. The pragmatic political discourse that Hamas adopts, is promoting a moderate democratic face to the West and international community, while the other is completely the opposite when it comes to practices within the Palestinian community.

It may be normal to ask; to what extent is Hamas pluralistic and what is its position in relation to political pluralism, especially on the grass roots level. Remarkably, the answer can be referred to Hamas’ late co-founder and spiritual father Ahmad Yasin who was quoted stating that he wants a democratic state with political parties and political power should be peacefully passed to whoever wins the election. He added, that even he would accept to be ruled by the communist party if it wins the election (Ayoub, 2006).

Ahmad Yousef, insisted on the previous view by emphasizing that Hamas, is a movement of peace, welcoming partnership with the West based on “dialogue, equality and mutual respect”. Remarkably, opposing the typical portrait of Hamas, Yousef stated that the party is not a religious or fundamentalist movement, it is rather a civil organization using the consultative method and follow democratic procedures to elect its leaders. He added that “Hamas believes in the peaceful transfer of power in Palestine, partnership on the basis of its citizens, cultural diversity, political pluralism and respect for human rights and international conventions relevant to the teachings of Islam, with honouring one another as the greatest human goal” (Yousef, *nd*). It is important to mention that the previous statements of Hamas leaders, never found its way to Hamas social and political literature that are commonly circulated with the grass roots bases.

Nonetheless, it may be evident that Hamas is not a democratic party, and there is no such claim whether from Hamas or its supporters. Observing Hamas’ practical approach on ruling or governing Gaza strip from 2007 being the *de facto* ruling power, practically speaking, Hamas has not shown any indication or enthusiasm to implement democracy or to use democratic instruments during this period. In other words, there was no elections in Gaza strip in any of the institutions or organisations including the universities and trade unions. It is a simple conclusion to say that democracy is not incorporated in Hamas’ structure or practices. This can also be said about the governing methods followed by Hamas in running Gaza, where serious abuses of democratic values are regularly committed by Hamas’ governing bodies and institutions.

Democracy as it is known in the modern time, has no place in Hamas’ political and social literature. Despite the fact that Hamas, as a political party, came to power through democratic means by participating in a democratic process, yet has not followed the democratic rules or values when controlled Gaza since 2007. The case was not different when Hamas formed the Palestinian government and its minister of education instructed his team to confiscate all copies of a folk tales’ book that contains a collection of 45 Palestinian folk tales from schools’ libraries. The reason behind this, as has been justified, that the book included some of tales against the religious beliefs. This was one of the strongest signals of what can be expected from Hamas, in addition to its position towards the democracy as a ruling party (Patience, 2007). Concerns expanded beyond this, as suspicions were raised that Hamas intended to carry out Islamization of the textbooks. This was triggered as Hamas expressed its intention to allocate more times for religious classes and employ more teachers to focus on religious education (Shikaki, 2015). The further concerns would be the Ideologization of faith by employing it in political context, whilst deviated from its real context.

Adding salt to wound, Hamas was accused of taking over Gaza by “conducting a military coup”, then started a new phase of struggle in order to prove its legitimacy, with an argument of being democratically elected by comfortable majority of Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It is needless to point out that the way that Hamas took over Gaza and imposed its rule and governance would be described as undemocratic implying an aim of anti-democratic methods of governance. Nevertheless, Hamas pledged that it would adhere to “Palestinian law in its conduct of governance” (Hovdenak, 2010).

It has been confirmed that Hamas acted extremely the opposite. Many violations of the Palestinian basic law (the constitutional deed) were documented where Hamas ignored the separation of the powers and established its own judicial system that is controlled by the executive authorities. It also has given the presidential power to its prime minister after creating new public institutions that is not constitutionally compliant. (Shikaki, *ibid*). These elements combined, prove the legitimacy of fears and concerns at early stage before the participation in the parliamentary election 2006. It can be summarised in reading Hamas’ intention to exploit “the democratic process for absolutist goals rather than strengthening Palestinian democracy” (Malka, *ibid*).

Mushir Al Masri¹ has confirmed Hamas intention in using the democracy as a vehicle to power by stating that Islamists can accept the opposition on one hand and refuse it in another. Accepting the opposition and building partnership with them is something religiously justified based on the Shariah politics that is established on the balance between interests. He added that, this is not a strict rule to be followed under all circumstances, it all relies on achieving interest. But when the Islamists are steadily stable in power, it would become a necessity and part of Sharia implementation to prevent the seculars or communists from spreading their parties’ thoughts and ideologies. This is in order to prevent the deviation from Shariah and divine methods and instead believing in manmade law that may lead to apostasy. He concluded that an Islamic State must not be in a position that encourages this kind of deviation as it is against Islam and logic (Masri, 2008). It is remarkable to find that Ismail Haniyeh (Hamas prime minister, now Hamas newly elected leader) writing the book preface, which means, theoretically at least, that he admired and agreed with this book content. Masri’s statement carries an obvious indication as to what extent Hamas can democratically transform or to what extent it can digest the democratic change. From this book, Hamas’ position does not look promising with regards to pluralistic approach, political partnership, freedom of speech, rule of law and other democratic values. It is worth noting that this book was a master thesis written by the author in 2003, then published as a book in 2006, and again republished with another publisher in 2008. It is an explicit and firm refusal of democracy when knowing that the writer is One of Hamas’ leaders and the introducer is Hamas’ prime minister.

It is needful to say that Hamas did not adopt Masri’s view on democracy in public especially after winning the parliamentary election 2006. In the political manifesto of the Tenth Palestinian government which was formed by Hamas, there was a clear message that Hamas’ discourse on democracy is very mature and focused on main trends. That is to say, Hamas’ government concentrated on equality, justice, partnership, political pluralism, rule of law, separation of power, protecting the judiciary and enhancing its independence, respecting and protecting basic human rights and freedom. It has also emphasized on the peaceful alternation of power in order to protect democracy (Shadid, 2010).

Hamas between two charters, tendency towards democratic interaction!!

Reading carefully through the first charter (constitutional document) of Hamas in 1988 proves that the movement has not considered the democracy or democratic means to be part of its political culture and did not show any interest of doing so. In addition to the fact that there exists no single mention to democracy in this charter, also there were no implicit indication whatsoever that the movement would even use any similar mechanism to democracy. The charter has not mentioned how the movement would elect, select, or appoint its leaders and seniors who run the movement. Logically, in common terms, this would be counted

¹ One of the young leaders of Hamas. He acted as Hamas’ spokesman for many years and was elected as one of Hamas representatives at the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).

as undemocratic or even anti-democratic. One might argue that Hamas has a special circumstance where its formation or existence are not natural compared to normal political or ideological parties who are living under well established and stable systems.

(Swiney, 2007) argued that in its founding Charter of 1988, Hamas has not mentioned the terms “freedom” and “right” unless in reference to the Israeli occupation. (Swiney, *ibid*) Also suggested that after winning the parliamentary election in 2006 there was an emergence of “new Hamas” that has “developed a sophisticated understanding of, and seemingly sincere commitment to, the democratic ideology”. This conclusion came according to Swiney, based on the fact that Hamas “presented democracy as a stand-alone objective important in its own right”. That is to say, democracy is a very important colour of the new picture of Hamas and it has to be seen in light of potential democratic entity. In 2007, theoretically, this may have been proven right yet after a few years of sole control over Gaza Strip and the way Hamas took over, practically contradict the democratic argument.

Despite the previous argument on the founding charter of 1988, Hamas in its new charter 2017 has clearly adopted an evident approach of democratic direction and a tendency towards using democratic and pluralistic language. In doing so, in a formal constitutional document, Hamas is moving forward, in its theoretical framework at least, towards more fixable and liberal democratic trends. Article 26 of the new charter of 2017 stated that Hamas conducts its relations with other Palestinian elements based on pluralism, democratic choice, national partnership, accepting the other, and dialogue. This is in order to enhance the unity and joint national efforts to achieve the national aspirations of the Palestinian people. Practically speaking, Hamas has improved its discourse on a theoretical level, but it needs to prove this discourse practically.

Taking the language used in the charter into consideration, yet, the human rights record of Hamas is not a bright one, neither its record on the freedom of speech (Robinson, 2015). Hamas *de facto* government that governs Gaza Strip is reported to have been imprisoning and torturing people for political reasons or because they are loyal to its political rivals, namely Fatah. This is a continuation of trampling press freedom with a clear tendency to act like “petty tyrants” as has been described before the issuance of the new charter (Bisharat, 2013). Breaking the law becomes a norm rather an exception due to Hamas’ security forces practices which are all covered by the new formed bodies against the existed Palestinian law. Regular cases continued to be documented such as arresting people without warrants, committing torture, ill and inhumane treatment of the prisoners, violating the right to defense for the detainees. A notable increase of the number of civil cases presented before the military courts with arrest warrants issued against civilians. Therefore, there is a serious claim that the criminal justice system is failing as a whole under Hamas’ government in Gaza Strip (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Thus, when there is a ruling authority breaking the rule of law through a consistent practice, and using its power, regardless of the way it’s been obtained, in undermining its political opponents is a glaring reflection of a deep and structural animosity against democracy and its values.

Can Hamas’ leadership structure serves democratic transformation

It is worth noticing that Hamas succeeded to renew its leadership structure peacefully and efficiently by appointing the young generation to take senior positions within the movement structure. This proves that Hamas does not rely on the charismatic credit and influence of its historic leaders. It is rather a proof that Hamas enjoys a certain level of democratic exercise within its internal leadership structure. To some, this indicates the democratic active mechanism within Hamas, and also clear evidence that Hamas has the capability to adopt a democratic approach, at least, from within. (Mhamad, 2007). Some argued otherwise, they see the picture in a different way, there is a suggestion that keeping the internal election or leadership appointments away from the public eyes would reflect a “lack of transparency and accountability”, and as a result, it negatively affects the sufficiency and sensitivity of Hamas’ institutions and leaders in responding to “public concerns and demands” (Shikaki, *ibid*).

Security reasons are the explanations used by Hamas to justify the lack of transparency. Theoretically this could be true, yet technically it is not clear to us, as observers, what is the exact form of mechanism or process that Hamas follows when it selects its leaders or appoint them. This, of course, is due to the fact that Hamas does announce the result of, what is supposedly called elections, after being secretly carried out by unknown committees and/or secretly formed bodies.

There is no way that anyone, Hamas members included, would be in a position to confirm the integrity or transparency of this kind of claimed election. In addition, there is no information from Hamas or its literature identifying who is the head of the movement or what kind of leadership ranking that could be relied on to know what are the criteria of candidacy or qualification. The scrutiny is missing throughout the process as it would be the case under a democratic election. Despite of this, some would argue that evidence shows that Hamas, relies on democratic and organised mechanism when dealing with its internal affairs, and even far more than other “secular nationalist Palestinian organizations” (Bisharat, *ibid*).

Some of Hamas’ leaders claim that the movement is democratic and it adheres to democratic procedures when selecting their leaders. Hamas’ legislator Salah Bardawil has been referred to saying that Hamas is a democratic movement, and it takes its decisions through a certain decision making process based on clear mechanism where no one or level can solely take decisions or produce policies on behalf of the movement (Swiney, 2007). This is described to be “democratic centralism with an Islamist twist.” (Crisis Group interview with Salah Bardawil, November 21, 2006, as quoted in *ibid*). It is very difficult to digest that a democracy with “hidden procedures” can be considered as a real democracy when lacking transparency and carried out behind closing doors. Integrity would be missing or, at least, would be impossible to know whether integrity was there in the first place. Based on Bardawil’s argument it can be argued that Hamas’ structure is “neither a democracy, nor a theocracy, but a combination of both” (Bader, 2013).

Conclusion and findings on obstacles and political impacts

Popular vote has been overwhelmingly given to Hamas and its electoral manifesto. Hamas is a mass political movement and always accused, usually by the West, of being in an ambivalent relationship with democracy on the one hand. Yet on the other hand, when Hamas, as an Islamic movement, won the parliamentary elections in 2006, the West and Europe strictly opposed this victory to a shocking level of condemnation. Under this situation, it would be logical to predict that Hamas found itself in a critical position, and its declared commitment towards democracy is strongly questioned, and has no further appetite and desire to pursue the democratic process.

The fact the EU insisted not to recognise the significant democratic victory of Hamas in the elections has created a serious disappointment within its moderate leaders and led to loss of faith in the credibility of the EU discourse on democratisation amongst Hamas bases and supporters. This feeling deepened when the EU went further and stopped the aid to the Palestinian people, which seemed as a punishment against the democratic votes of Palestinians that resulted in a formation of a Hamas led government. To Hamas, this would have been considered as if the EU was manufacturing obstacles before Hamas’ tendency towards democratic transformation. The situation became worse when Europe and USA continued to treat Hamas as a terrorist organisation and deprived them from the opportunity to govern and providing the chance for appropriate integration in the democratic process.

In spite of reaching power through a fairly transparent, free and democratic elections, Hamas has faced a very difficult situation when Europe and USA aggressively, in addition to opposing the results, tried to bring Hamas’ government down and to block it politically and economically within the international arena. This supported some of Hamas’ leaders to claim that EU and USA have no intention to respect the free will of Palestinian voters. Namely, EU and USA are theoretically promoting something and doing the opposite. It was widely believed that EU and USA wanted a democratic process according to their taste and measures rather the one that realistically reflect the free will of the people.

The way the international community reacted to Hamas' victory in the democratic elections might have discouraged Hamas from continuing in the democratic path, and caused a miscarriage to the democratisation within Hamas' structure and policies. These reactions from the international community towards Hamas' victory with the instable political and social situation makes it very difficult to realise what Hamas' position is on the democratic transformation, bearing in mind the pressurised situation, in addition to being in a mixed nature at the same time by carrying the status of a political party and a semi militant organisation. In this authors' view, the international community's attitude, mainly EU and USA, pushed a wide spectrum of Hamas' supporters, members and leaders to take steps back from democratic process or the transformation. Being part of a democratic transformation was not rewarding to Hamas as it may have been promoted by the West. It is crucial to mention that Israel has played a crucial role in bringing down the Hamas democratically elected government through withholding the Palestinian tax payment that are to be collected by Israeli authorities according to the Oslo accords. In addition, Israel regularly arrested Hamas ministers and its Parliamentary representatives in the West Bank, this was happening side by side with other daily Israeli abuses against the Palestinians. It is also worth mentioning that Hamas' elected government suffered an internal sanction and boycott by other Palestinian factions and NGOs. This happened while Hamas was trying to recover from the side effects within Hamas itself for its participation in the election, which may have badly affected its tendency to go further through the democratic transformation.

In my view, in order for any movement or political organisation to be part of a democratic system, it needs a gradual process of inclusion. The opposite has happened with Hamas, the party has to some extent been alienated, which meant pushing Hamas to the hostile narrative against democracy. Although inclusion could have taken time, but it could have sparked the starting point and initiated the democratic transformation, or at least, thinking about it and its advantages. One can argue that pressurising Hamas with too many conditions has pushed Hamas to think differently about the democratic values and the benefits to pursue them. Meanwhile, EU should have reassessed its attitude that appeared to carry inconsistent positions (double faced policy) regarding democracy when it comes to Hamas and its elected government. As such, for Hamas, which may have been in a transforming mode towards democracy or the democracy in waiting, felt that the taste of fruits of the promoted democracy were bitter.

Hamas does not seem to have started a structural ideological transformation towards democracy. It looks as if it participated in the elections out of necessity rather than a serious change of mentality. However, Hamas should be credited for participating in the electoral game and breaking the ideological ice. Instead, Hamas was punished instead of being awarded an incentive for its positive steps towards democracy. Hamas' involvement in the elections impacted rather positively on Palestinian politics and established, in a way or another, a pluralistic political system. After Hamas became part of the democratic arrangement in the Palestinian territories, despite the current stagnation, a real democratic competition will take place whenever election is to be held. This may also be reflected positively on democratic culture of the political parties'. Having said that, it is important to note that the ambiguity of Hamas' position on democracy prior and post elections of 2006 formed a shaking image of Hamas. As a result, external and internal players have lost faith in Hamas' commitments towards democracy as the party has sent confusing messages regarding its adherence to the democratic values.

It has to be said that the suspicions about Hamas commitments towards democracy were legitimate and proven to be fully justified. After the election of 2006, while many believed that a democratic political system was in formation process, and as such, Hamas was going into democratization operation. Yet all this has come to a shocking end when Hamas, practically, failed to keep its commitments as in 2007 Hamas' armed wing took over and forced Fatah out of Gaza. To many observers, this impacted deeply and negatively on the whole Palestinian politics as it assured all players that Hamas cannot be considered part of democratic Palestinian circles, and consequently, the hope of building an integrated Palestinian political system collapsed. The confusion and uncertainty on Hamas' stand towards democracy and democratisation pushed Hamas and Fatah towards more exclusivity and more polaristic movements, in addition to considering their opposing

player as a foremost obstacle to their own national political aspirations. It has to be well remembered that Hamas participation, as a sign of democratic transformation, brought Hamas to be part of an institutionalised politics in Palestinian political system. This will make it much easier to Hamas, and other political players, to encourage and accept the fact that Hamas become, democratically, a legitimate element of the democratisation of the Palestinian political system.

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Dr. Nehad Khanfar

Nehad Khanfar has a PhD Degree in Comparative Contract Law (mainly the Law of Islamic and English financial contracts) awarded by the University of Abertay in Dundee, Scotland. He acquired robust experience in teaching while being employed by the An-Najah University in Palestine as a lecturer in Islamic Financial Contracts, Islamic Law, Islamic Corporate Law, Islamic Judicial System, and International Islamic Banking Operations. He is currently teaching Islamic Law, Islamic Economics, and various subjects of Islamic studies. He is also teaching Islam and politics and Politics in the Middle East at the Islamic College in London.