

Palestinian National Interest: The Hamas Vision

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the vision of Hamas on Palestinian national interest. It focusses on the vision of Hamas foreign policy to appreciate its strategic strengths for Palestine's liberation as a country under occupation by the Zionist regime. Data were collected through face-to-face interview with five key persons in Hamas Government, secondary data were collected from books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and other relevant resources. The analysis was done through descriptive-analytical method. The findings revealed that Hamas' vision on Palestine's national interests was based on the interests of the Palestinians, which centered on their fundamental rights and the right to claim their land that has been occupied by the Zionist.

Keywords: Palestine, national interest, Hamas

1. Introduction

Palestinians have struggled for more than a century in the hope of achieving their national aspirations: the right for liberty, self-determination, and the right for returning to their occupied homeland (Palmer & Palmer, 2007; Khalidi, 1991). The Palestine crisis has been getting more complicated as the Fatah-led Palestinian government has continuously failed in its negotiations, thus failing to achieve the goals of liberation, self-determination, and the right of returning home (Sadeddin, 2014; Ganim, 2010; Khalidi, 2007). As a result of the absence of a strong policy to protect the national interest, which eventually led to the crisis, a change in the strategy is required (Sadeddin, 2014). The Palestinians never believed that negotiations alone could restore their national rights and ensure the return of the refugees to their homes and properties (Weiner, 1997; Tamari & Tamearei, 1996). They believe that armed resistance is required and this was the basis for the formation of the Hamas movement; it began its armed struggle from its first day, in addition to announcing its existence as an army resistance (Hroub, 2006). The Hamas government came into power after a landslide victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections on January 2006 (see, Scham & Abu-Irshaid, 2009 and Abu-Helal, 2014). The central research question underpinning this study is: What is the vision of the Hamas on the Palestinian national interests?

It is important to bear in mind that Hamas holds a key role in the Palestinian politics, just as a hard number that cannot be bypassed in any politics equation. Some studies in the Palestinian politics and international relations seem to have only focused on the pretext against Hamas of being a government that supports resistance and being against Quartet conditions (Saleh, 2013; Zweiri, 2006). Others have focused on Hamas' commitments to its initial goals and demands (Abu-Helal, 2014; Lovlie & Knudsen, 2013). What are not yet clear are the Hamas vision of Palestinian national interests. This study was carried out the Hamas vision in the context of Palestinian national interest during the period of 2006-2013. This paper is based on research conducted with a qualitative approach based on case study method to collect data through interviews. A total of five key persons in Hamas Government were interviewed (the Prime Minister, two ministers from Foreign Affairs, a head of foreign relations, and one scholar in Palestinian studies).

2. National Interest

International relations scholars use different terms to describe national interests. This is due to the fact that the concept of "national interest" is very complex and dynamic in nature. However, scholars, such as Pham (2008); Kaplan (2005); Hill (2003); Morgenthau (1978); Rosenau (1967); Nuechterlein (1976) have put forward various definitions of the concept based on their own understandings. Morgenthau (1978) defines national interest as a generalised category of purposes or critical values that provide direction to foreign policy formulation. He notes that the national interests are "causes" or motive forces that obliged the foreign policy-makers to adopt a certain course of action. However, others terms are also used, such as "social values", "true concerns", "public good" or "core values", to describe national interests. For instance, Morgenthau (1978) views "quest for power" as the main cause for, or source of, national foreign policy.

Conversely, Kaplan (2005) views national interests in terms of "national needs". He also maintains that states formulate foreign policies in pursuit of national needs. Indeed, power theorists would argue that the state could satisfy its needs and wants only through the maximum use of power. In this view, power and needs become one. There are some states that usually enforce this particular interest and claim it as being implemented "in the name of national interests" so that their actions are justified regardless of it being good or bad (Adar, 2006). Despite the multiplicity of terms, scholars argue that national interests provide the theoretical and analytical bases for a state's certain behaviour or foreign policy.

In addition, Hill (2003) confirms that "national interests" cannot be a director to foreign policy goals

since they are “tautologous”. He suggests that the term “national interest” can be a “measuring stick” in pinpointing whether a certain policy is national or international, or private or public. It shows that specifically sought goals, in fact, emanate via the people’s interests, which is a nation. It is thus difficult to understand if one particular actor would prioritise regional growth in its foreign policy when it is not related to its national interest (Alden & Soko, 2005). According to Nuechterlein (1976), national interests can be defined as the needs and desires of one sovereign state in relation to the other states and are the “result of a political process in which a country's leaders may hold different views on what that interest is, but ultimately come to a conclusion about the importance of a specific issue.” He also asserts that this definition refers to independent sovereign states and excludes non-state and sub-state actors.

Moreover, Nuechterlein (1976) groups the interests of a state into four categories: defense, economy, world order and ideology. Defense interests are “the protection of the nation-state and its citizens against the threat of physical violence directed from another state and/or an externally inspired threat to its system of government”. Next, economic interests refer to the enhancement of the state's economic well-being in its relations with other states. As for world order, the interests involve the maintenance of an international political and economic system in which the nation-state may feel secure and in which its citizens and commerce may operate peacefully outside its borders. Lastly, ideological interests relate to the protection and furtherance of a set of values that the people of a nation-state share and believe to be universally good.

Therefore, in this paper, national interest refers to the bedrocks upon which a government constructs its foreign policy’s aims. In other words, foreign policies are shaped in order to advance the national interest.

3. The Political Vision of Hamas

Hamas, through its political party Change and Reform, won the majority seats in the Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006 (Rudolph & Van Engeland, 2013). The electoral platform document of the Change and Reform is the broadest and most detailed presentation of the political vision of Hamas, which informs us of a comprehensive, structured and detailed political thinking on governance (Bogdan & Sprincenatu, 2011; Pettersen, 2009; Hroub, 2006).

In order to understand Hamas' visions for the Palestinian issue, the following section discusses the political ideologies as well as the domestic and external policies of Hamas.

3.1 The Political Ideology

Apart from being a national liberation movement seeking the elimination of the Israeli occupation, Hamas is also an Islamic Movement. Its outlook is inspired by the principles of Islam. Scholars such as El-Hamad and Al-Bargothi (2010); Hroub (2007) emphasize that Islam is Hamas’ total ideological frame of reference, from which it draws its ideas and conceptions from the Holy Qur’an and Sunnah. Subsequently, this deep religious thinking is the primary motive for Hamas and its affiliates and supporters. Tapping this huge source of ideology, however, did not limit the Movement’s ability to practise a considerable amount of pragmatism and flexibility without necessarily having to deviate from its basic Principles. The first article quoted from the Hamas charter states: “The Islamic Resistance Movement draws its guidelines from Islam; derived from it its thinking, interpretations and views about existence, life and humanity; refers back to it for its conduct; and is inspired by it in whatever step it takes” (Charter, 1988). Furthermore, the electoral platform of the Change and Reform (2007) indicates that “[t]he true religion of Islam and its civilization achievements are our reference and a way of life in all its aspects: politically, economically, socially and legally”.

Since the establishment of Hamas, it defines its mission as the liberation of Palestinians and cessation of Israeli aggression against them (Hroub, 2007). Hamas considers the liberation of Palestine as a strategic objective of its programs and the establishment of the state is a result of that liberation (Haniyyah, 2014; Mish’al, 2012; El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010; Sham & Abu-Irshaid, 2009; Mish’al & Sela, 2006). Hence, Hamas believes that Palestine, spanning from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River and from north to south, is the land of the Palestinian people, their homeland, and their legitimate right. Hamas’ view towards Israel is also based on a fundamental belief that Israel has occupied land that is inherently Palestinian and Islamic. As such, it is the believe of the Palestinian that Israel has no legitimacy to Jerusalem nor do they have any legitimacy to any part of Palestine.

According to the electoral platform of the Change and Reform (2007), “we have to exploit all our energy to support the resistance of our people and to provide all abilities to end occupation and establishing the Palestinian state whose Jerusalem is its capital”. Additionally, it indicates that “historical Palestine is a part of the Arab and Islamic land; it is a right for the Palestinian people that does not made ineffective by prescription. Any other military or allegedly legal procedures cannot change such a fact” . Similarly, article No.11 in the Hamas charter states: “The Islamic Resistance Movement believes that the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day. It, or any part of it, should not be squandered: it, or any part of it, should not be given up” (Charter, 1988).

There is no doubt that resisting occupation is a religious and national duty, which is also approved by international laws and UN charters. However, it is a known fact in mankind's history that armed resistance and force are the only means to liberate the land and oust the occupiers. Levy (2014) states that "it is the duty of Palestinians to resist the occupation, it's their right and it's their duty". Hamas viewed resistance as both the primary principle and strategic choice in the way to liberate Palestine from the occupation and the most effective line of achieving the goal of liberation (Mish'al, 2012; El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010). Hence, Hamas believed that occupation breeds resistance. It held that divine and legal laws as well as international charters allow any nation under occupation to adopt all possible means to defend itself and its land. Moreover, the electoral platform of the Change and Reform (2007) proclaims that "[o]ur Palestinian people are still living a stage of national liberation, they have the right to work for regaining their rights as well as ending the occupation by using all available means including armed resistance". The charter's Article No. 15 further declares that "the jihad to liberate 'Palestine' is the personal duty of every Muslim" (Charter, 1988).

3.2 The Domestic Policies of Hamas

According to Rudolph and Van Engeland (2013), Hamas had set its domestic and external policies according to its ideological principles. Hamas domestic policies included the preservation of Palestinian national principles, the release of prisoners who were the symbols of Palestinian sacrifice, unity through dialogue was the only accepted way to solve domestic disputes, and the prohibition of internecine violence as Palestinian blood was prohibited.

Hamas supported the Palestinians' strong stand in asking for the Right of Return to their home Palestine (El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010). According to Hamas' political platform, Palestinian refugees have the "right" to return to their homes and property, and that the "right" is individual and collective, and it is not to be ceded. Likewise, Khalid Mishaal states, "We stand firm on the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees and displaced individuals; their right to their homes from which they were expelled or were prevented from returning to, including in the occupied territories of 1948 or 1967, i.e. to all of Palestine. We refuse to compromise on this right in any way. At the same time, we reject all land resettlement and alternative homeland projects".

In addition, Hamas emphasized that the right of self-determination was an essential component of the rights of the Palestinian people that was acknowledged by international laws and conventions. Implementing this right would not be possible without the withdrawal of Israeli occupational forces (El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010). According to the electoral platform of the Change and Reform, "the right of self-determination and all our national rights are not negotiable; such rights are also fixed and they cannot be diminished by any political concessions". Hamas also aimed at releasing all prisoners and preventing further aggressions against Palestinian civilians (Haniyyah, 2014; El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010). Moreover, the electoral platform of the Change and Reform (2007) stresses that "the issue of prisoners and detainees is one of the priorities of the Palestinian work and is part of the national sovereignty. So Hamas will do its utmost efforts to secure their release and liberation".

Besides that, Hamas resolutely advocated national unity, as well as Arab and Islamic unity, where Hamas called for unifying the potentials and capabilities of the Palestinian people and retaining their national unity. Hamas ardently believed that unifying the nation and mobilizing its capabilities will serve the objectives for liberation (Haniyyah, 2014; Mish'al, 2012). Subsequently, Hamas actively worked on the internal level to preserve national unity and confront the Israeli policy of "Divide and Conquer". Moreover, the Movement always stressed its commitment to its humanitarian and tolerant stance toward non-Muslims and its respect for other organizations. Its official statements and communiqués always pointed out that it was a movement for all Palestinian masses, Muslims and Christians alike (El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010). According to Rudolph and Van Engeland (2013), "With respect to its relations with other Palestinian groups, Hamas has maintained a policy of cooperation and dialogue. Its policy toward other Islamic movements is characterized by respect, appreciation, and the goal of maintaining unity. Its policy toward other nationalist movements is also one of respect, support and coordinated assistance for liberation from occupation and the creation of a Palestinian state."

Similarly, article No. 25 in the Hamas charter states: "The Movement assures all the nationalist trends operating in the Palestinian arena for the liberation of Palestine, that it is there for their support and assistance. It will never be more than that, both in words and deeds, now and in the future. It is there to bring together and not to divide, to preserve and not to squander, to unify and not to throw asunder. It evaluates every good words, sincere efforts and good offices. It closes the door in the face of side disagreements and does not lend an ear to rumours and slanders, while at the same time fully realizing the right for self-defence" (Charter, 1988).

3.3 The External Policies of Hamas

Hamas' early international relations started late in 1992, after it developed good political stature and influential popularity base as well as a reasonable Arab and Islamic relations. However, Hamas' relations with foreign countries were still in their infancy. This can be attributed to the subjective reasons that were related to the

Movement itself as well as the objective reasons that were connected with the position of each foreign country (El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010).

By developing relations with the Arab and Islamic countries, Hamas aimed at establishing its presence in the Arab political scene, obtaining official recognition and understanding of its viewpoints, opening new horizons for its political activities and, finally, gaining material and moral support for the Palestinian people's struggles. Having a firm belief that the Palestinian issue is an Arab and Islamic concern in essence, Hamas adopted, in its Arab and Islamic relations, certain policies which emphasized cooperation with the Arab and Islamic countries indiscriminately to serve the common cause, regardless of political systems or ideological backgrounds (El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010; Carroll, 2005). Hamas also insisted on non - interference in the internal affairs of any countries and refused any interference in its own affairs. It also committed itself to the principle that the scene of the conflict with Israel was limited to the Palestinian territories. It refused the policy of conflicting poles and axes (El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010). Likewise, Misha'al (2012) states, "We will not intervene in the affairs of other countries and we will not engage in discussions, conflicts or alliances with other nations. We have adopted the policy of opening up to the different countries of the world, especially the Arab and Islamic countries."

In building political relations with the foreign countries, Hamas aimed at projecting itself very clearly and directly to such countries so as to correct the wrongful image of itself depicted by the media. It also strived to find supporters in these countries, avoiding foreign measures against it, gaining some representations abroad, and obtaining political and material support for its struggle against the occupation. In so doing, Hamas endeavored to communicate and cooperate with all countries regardless of their political or ideological backgrounds. Additionally, it was anxious to avoid transferring the scene of the conflict into foreign countries or to create enmity with any foreign powers. Instead, Hamas sought to partake in any international effort that aims at supporting the Palestinian people (El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010).

After positioning itself as an important part of the Palestinian political scene, Hamas decided to move onto the outside world and establish political relations with the neighboring countries in order to introduce itself to these neighbors (El-Hamad & Al-Bargothi, 2010; Hroub, 2000). As a result, it managed to open several offices in some Arab and Islamic countries. International interest in Hamas, and from the Americans in particular, increased after the Israeli deported 413 Hamas members and supporters to the Marj al-Zohour - in Arabic, 'field of flowers' - area in Lebanon in late 1992. Hamas then intensified its direct contacts with the ambassadors and diplomats of several Western countries, thus confirming its general foreign policies of openness to, and dialogue with, all countries and organizations abroad.

After joining the Palestinian Government in 2007, it resumed its communications with some of the Europeans albeit in a covert manner. The movement and its government then participated in many Islamic and Arab official meetings in third world countries. Indeed, the Russian initiative to receive Hamas officials and held talks with the movement at the Russian foreign minister's level reflected both sides' desire to reinforce the connections amongst themselves (Al-Khazendar, 2009). In its first statement as a newly-formed Palestinian government, Hamas expressed the orientation of its foreign policy and its perspectives on the international institutions. Such directions were based on moving towards more involvement and openness in the regional Arab and Islamic surroundings and the international community along with all of its institutions and international forces. They also emphasized the necessity of dialogue with the external environment and the rejection of all forms of political, intellectual, or cultural self-inflicted seclusion (Al-Khazendar, 2009). Ismail Haniyyah confirms this when he asserts that "the government's assiduity in establishing healthy and strong relations with the various world countries as well as with the international institutions, including the United Nations and Security Council. According to what facilitates peace and world stability, we are engaged in a solid and strong relationship with the European Union, although we expect from it to reconsider some of its followed policies regarding the conflict in the region." "The Prime Minister's Speech to the Legislative Council to Gain the Confidence Motion for his Government" (Al-Quds, 2007).

4. Hamas Vision of Palestinian National Interest

The Palestinian national interests remain one of the cardinal responsibilities of any government to protect. This objective aimed to explore how Hamas perceived the national interests of Palestine and how these national interests influenced its foreign policy at the international level. The current study found that the protection of the national rights of the Palestinians, namely the right of return and the right of liberating the land is central to Hamas regime. To substantiate this insight, almost all the respondents showed their commitment to it. For instance, informant C describes that the national interest is the interests of the land, people, and power. And any actions to liberate the land or any part thereof, and everything to achieve the Palestinian right of returning to the homeland, are located in the political circle of Hamas's national interest vision, (Informant, C). This is in line with the previous observations by Abu-Helal (2014) and Mish'al (2012).

In the related flow of ideas, informant A stresses that national interests remained one of the main paths

that the Hamas movement used to achieve the political and economic objectives. The respondent described that, from the Hamas point of view the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, the ultimate aim. Interestingly, the informant B seemed to extend the scope of the description regarding this topic. The shared point was that it is in Hamas' interests that Palestinian factions to unite peacefully without disputes and internal conflicts. The communications between Fatah and Hamas are continuous and have on several occasions reached an understanding to end all forms of internal violence, (Informant, B).

Taken together, these findings from these three respondents underline the central idea of Hamas that the attainments of the national interest of the Palestinians should not be compromised. This is the main gate to reach a formula and a national project that tends to meet all the political forces and handles all the conflicts with the occupation. These findings match those observed in earlier studies that the Palestinian national interest should be given much attention (Saleh, 2014; Abu-Helal, 2014). In this respect, no wonder that Hamas is consistent to work with political strategies to fit the fluctuating realities in order to fit the desires of the Palestinians. In fair description it is not difficult from the findings to note that the life lived experiences of Hamas and its supports are far from the suspicious distortion of many writers against the essence of the attaining the agenda of the Hamas.

From this description, one could see the hard work of love, commitments and passions that Hamas has succeeded to share with Palestinians. From this understanding it can simply reads that talking about the Palestinian national interest is equal to the defense of the interests of the Palestinian people. This finding has an important implication to our understanding that Hamas is aware with the Palestinian peoples' interests both at the national and international levels. From such level of awareness, Hamas believes that Palestinian interests ultimately are the things of the valuable importance that count. These findings confirm earlier findings by (Saleh, 2014; Hamdan, 2013) that Hamas has its clear mission consistent to the desires of the Palestinians.

The paper found that Hamas' vision on Palestine's national interests was based on the interests of the Palestinians, which centered on their fundamental rights and the right to claim their land that has been occupied by the Zionist. On this note, understanding the foreign policy of Hamas can never be overemphasized without understanding their vision on the Palestinians' national interests. This is because Hamas is a political movement established to protect the Palestinian national interests. For Hamas Palestinian national interest means free from occupation, resistance and external domination and this statement can be found in the Hamas Charter (Charter, 1988). For example, Article 11 declares that Hamas honours Nationalism (*Wataniyya*) as part of the religious duties. Nothing is deeper in nationalism than waging jihad against the enemy and opposing them when they set foot on the land of the Muslims. Also, Article 10 of the Charter states that the Islamic Resistance Movement, while charting its own course, will do its utmost best to constitute support to the weak and defend all the oppressed simultaneously. Muslih (1999) adds that even though the movement seems aspiring on the ideological level to Islamic principles, it also derived its strength from specific contexts of the Palestinian nationalism. The findings also confirmed previous observations by Abu-Helal (2014) and Mish'al (2012) that the national interests in Hamas' vision were anything. This is the considerable level of awareness that is shared by this respondent. One meaning is that Hamas is aware of its context and its readiness to capitalize on available opportunities to provide extensive community services and responding to the political reality consistent to the expectation of Palestinian cannot be compromised.

In a study by Bondokji (2013), Hamas was shown to have become the main Palestinian actor when it won the Palestinian democratic legislative elections in 2006 and, in recent years, went from holding a religious ideology to becoming a nationalist movement that focused on national rights. Another study by Hroub (2005) reports that Hamas' traditional projections of itself as an uncompromising resistance movement the popularity is derived from its resistance to the Israeli occupation. This is in addition to strengthening and defending the Palestinian national unity among other priorities of its national interest. Objectively, it can be reasoned that there is a distinct difference between how Hamas whose core interests is that of capitalizing on available opportunities to protect Palestinian national interests and how the critics who are blind and do not hold this conviction writes about this movement. However, its vision of the national interests differed from Fatah's stance in the sense that Hamas focused on the Umma (people) first before any other things (Alshaer, 2009; Tamimi, 2007; Halliday, 2002) while Fatah considered its party manifest as the main focus (Deane, 2009).

5. Conclusion

The main goal of the current study was to explore the vision of Hamas on Palestinian national interest. This paper has argued that Hamas is a movement that struggles to protect the right and interest of Palestine's citizens at the international level. It was also shown that the Hamas perceived the Palestinians' national interest as the liberation of the land through the adoption of arm resistance. Hence, Hamas played a more significant role in protecting Palestine's national interest than their rival party Fatah because Fatah had completely lost the aim of Palestine's national interest (Friedman, 2008). This gave an upper hand to Hamas to rule and control the PLO. Since this paper only explored the Palestinian national interest from Hamas vision during the period of 2006 to

2013, other researchers can analyze the same issue in another government in power and compare the similarities and differences between their visions.

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