

## CONCLUSION

# CONTAINMENT AND PACIFICATION

In 2015, the United Nations issued a report asserting that by the year 2020 the Gaza Strip would be uninhabitable if the situation that had prevailed since the blockade was instituted in 2007 persisted.<sup>1</sup> With strong population growth, tightly controlled access of people and goods, and intermittent large-scale and immensely destructive and lethal military incursions by Israel, the Gaza Strip was deemed to be approaching the point of collapse. The report failed to compel members of the international community to take concerted measures to address this reality. In early 2017, Gaza suffered another humanitarian crisis, precipitated directly by the blockade, which remained administered by both Israel and Egypt. The strip's two million inhabitants were receiving two to three hours of electricity per day, down from about four hours which they had been receiving since 2014. Hospitals were operating on emergency generators, the risk being that life-saving equipment could falter; sewage was being pumped into the Mediterranean as treatment plants were no longer operational; and drinking water and medical supplies were facing a severe shortage. International organizations declared Gaza on the brink of "total collapse."<sup>2</sup> The estimates first put forward by the UN report were revised, and they noted that the Gaza Strip could reach the point of being unfit for human life sooner than the initial estimate of 2020.<sup>3</sup> It was the onset of an expansive military assault, weeks after the Shati Agreement had been signed in the summer of 2014, that had accelerated Gaza's swift deterioration.

### OPERATION PROTECTIVE EDGE

In the first half of June 2014, after the Shati Agreement had been signed, Palestinian factions were hammering out the details of the Palestinian Authority's administrative return to the Gaza Strip. Hamas was seeking to off-load its governing responsibilities, such as the salaries of its forty-thousand-strong civil service, as a result of the financial constraints it was facing. The blockade had finally achieved its alleged purpose of weakening Hamas's government and making room for the Palestinian Authority to return to Gaza. Yet the Ramallah leadership was driving a tough bargain, as it was unwilling to assume responsibility for a greatly dilapidated and battered Gaza Strip, particularly without effective control of the enclave, given Hamas's refusal to disarm.<sup>4</sup> This was met with a great deal of resentment inside Gaza, where people believed President Abbas was using the issue of employee salaries as a scapegoat to pressure Hamas and avoid reconciliation.<sup>5</sup> For his part, Abbas was dealing with the implications of Israel's strident refusal to allow the passage of the unity government, which were likely to take the form of measures to isolate the Palestinian Authority and withhold tax and customs revenue collected on its behalf.

The delicate balance being managed between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority against Israeli obstructionism was upended on June 12. That evening, three Israeli teenagers who were returning from their religious schools in illegal settlements in the West Bank back into Israel were kidnapped. As pictures of the students blasted on TV screens around the world, Israel launched an expansive search and rescue operation called "Brother's Keeper" throughout the West Bank, including in areas that fell under the control of the Palestinian Authority. President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the kidnapping and promised to work with the Israeli forces to locate the teenagers and arrest the perpetrators.<sup>6</sup> Behind the scenes, Netanyahu received intelligence that the teenagers had most likely been killed and that the operation had been carried out by rogue members of Hamas, most likely without the leadership's consent.<sup>7</sup> Withholding this information from the public,

Netanyahu pursued an aggressive invasion of the West Bank, ostensibly to locate the teenagers, carrying out arrests, home raids, and curfews; confiscating property; and increasing military checkpoints.<sup>8</sup>

Within days, around 350 Palestinians—many of them Hamas members who had been released in the Shalit deal—were reincarcerated; five Palestinians were killed and hundreds of sites were ransacked and destroyed.<sup>9</sup> The Palestinian Authority called on the international community to restrain Israel's actions and requested that the United Nations offer protection to the Palestinian people.<sup>10</sup> On June 30, the bodies of the murdered Israelis were discovered. On July 2, a day after their burial, Jewish Israelis kidnapped and burnt alive a Palestinian student in East Jerusalem. The Palestinian Foreign Ministry asked for international support and condemned this murder as "Jewish terrorism."<sup>11</sup> Increasing suspicions that Israel was using the pretext of this kidnapping to drive a wedge between the newly united Palestinian factions, Netanyahu pressed the international community to force Abbas to end the Palestinian Authority's partnership with Hamas, which he described as "the kidnapper of children."<sup>12</sup>

Israel's heavy-handed tactics in the West Bank, predictably, increased rocket fire from the Gaza Strip. The majority of the rockets were not initially fired by Hamas. The movement had explicitly indicated at the beginning of the year its desire to avoid another conflagration with Israel in order to give Gazans a respite. But in light of its precarious financial situation and the pressure to respond to Israel's lethal incursions into the West Bank, Hamas was compelled to act.<sup>13</sup> Its leaders assumed responsibility for the missiles and stressed they were retaliatory strikes against Israeli aggression. As a senior member of al-Qassam stated, "Al-Qassam will not stand idly by, and will not allow the enemy to isolate the West Bank and Gaza. Palestine is one, its people are one, its resistance is one."<sup>14</sup>

Hamas's leadership blamed Israel's mobilization for breaking a ceasefire that had prevailed since November 2012.<sup>15</sup> Since Operation Pillar of Defense, Hamas had been very effective at limiting rocket fire

into Israel, even establishing a police force to restrain armed operations, despite Hamas's increasingly desperate situation after the closure of the Rafah tunnels. Rather than easing access into the strip, as had been agreed upon in that ceasefire, Israel had maintained its chokehold and failed to commence procedures to ease the blockade beyond a marginal level.<sup>16</sup> Alongside the reduction in Iranian funding and the closure of the tunnels, Israel's blockade had driven Hamas to concede—in desperation and amid much internal dissent—its governing power in Gaza to the Palestinian Authority. Although this development fulfilled what was ostensibly Israel's core rationale for the blockade—to weaken Hamas's government—Israeli policies persisted unabated.

With rocket fire expanding, Netanyahu claimed the need to once again use force to weaken Hamas's military capacity. Netanyahu pointed to security concerns that had arisen after the discovery of tunnels from Gaza into Israel earlier that year and announced plans for a major offensive that he promised would reinstate the calm Israel had enjoyed over the previous two years.<sup>17</sup> “Operation Protective Edge,” as it came to be known, entailed an aerial bombardment campaign followed by a ground invasion aimed at destroying Hamas's network of tunnels, what Israel referred to as “terror tunnels.”<sup>18</sup> Israel's stated goal was to degrade the “terror organizations' military infrastructure, and [ . . . neutralize] their network of cross-border assault tunnels.”<sup>19</sup> What followed was an expanded and more devastating repeat of what had taken place intermittently since 2006: a disproportionate and highly lethal military campaign aimed at forcing Hamas into another period of calm. As with past escalations, the assault was portrayed as necessary self-defense against Hamas's consistent aggression, overlooking the movement's effectiveness at restraining rocket fire from Gaza and the violence inherent in the act of the blockade itself.

The assault lasted fifty-one days. The Israeli army attacked the densely populated coastal enclave with the full force of its military might, including F-16s, drones, Apache helicopters, and one-ton bombs. Through air raids, Israel bombed residential apartment blocks, family

homes, hospitals, ambulances, schools, mosques, power generation facilities, and even graveyards.<sup>20</sup> Many of the schools that were targeted by Israel were run by UN bodies and were functioning as shelters for refugees who had been internally displaced.<sup>21</sup> International organizations such as the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and local human rights organizations issued repeated condemnations of Israel's targeting of their institutions as well as its disproportionate use of force and its strategy of collective punishment.<sup>22</sup> The United Nations also accused Israel of carrying out war crimes and grave violations of international law.<sup>23</sup> Whole areas on Gaza's periphery were razed to make room for Israel's ground invasion, and the death toll mounted as Israel's army pressed into densely populated urban centers.<sup>24</sup>

On the same day that Operation Protective Edge was launched, Netanyahu announced that Israel's army did not target civilians. Given Hamas's alleged use of "human shields," whereby Hamas operatives presumably hid among or fired from civilian centers, Netanyahu stressed the movement must be held responsible for civilian deaths and anticipated casualties.<sup>25</sup> These assertions, consistently made by Israeli officials to justify the high civilian death tolls their operations incurred within the Gaza Strip, remain highly contentious and fail to justify Israeli actions.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Gaza's high population density and the impermeability of the blockade meant that close to 44 percent of the enclave was subject to "evacuation orders," and at the height of the hostilities almost half a million Gazans—or a quarter of the total population—were displaced and had nowhere to hide from direct crossfire.<sup>27</sup> This entrapment exacerbated the intermingling of the civilian population with the military resistance but did not temper Israel's assault. Israel's narrative of self-defense and its allegations regarding the systematic use of human shields by Hamas blurred the limits of what was an acceptable or legitimate target for Israeli forces.<sup>28</sup>

From the beginning of the offensive, Hamas and other resistance factions sustained their rocket fire into Israel. Hamas boasted of robust local manufacturing capabilities as it showcased missiles that reached

significantly further into Israeli cities than before.<sup>29</sup> The movement celebrated its ability to bring the war to Israel, whether in terms of sirens sounding over Israeli cities or through the economic impact on Israel's tourism sector. International organizations condemned Hamas's use of missiles as war crimes given their inability to differentiate between civilians and combatants.<sup>30</sup> But these rockets continued unabated for the duration of Israel's military operation. Casualties on the Israeli side due to rocket fire were limited due to the effectiveness of Israel's missile defense system, known as the Iron Dome.<sup>31</sup>

Alongside Hamas's offensive attacks, the movement's defensive strength was celebrated throughout its publications.<sup>32</sup> Hamas's network of underground tunnels provided ample shelter for Hamas's fighters. Although the majority of these tunnels were used for defensive purposes, a small portion were utilized as gateways for offensives into Israel, whereby resistance factions would ambush targets within Israel's borders.<sup>33</sup> The resistance factions took great pride in the fact that the Israeli army was struggling to advance to any significant measure into the heart of the Gaza Strip. This reinforced the narrative that Hamas produced in Gaza, that it had built a fortress of resistance and was able to secure this strip of land as "liberated" Palestinian territory.<sup>34</sup>

Despite boasting of their wherewithal, Hamas's leaders were overwhelmed by the scale of Israel's attack and by Netanyahu's willingness to expand the offensive despite the possibility of incurring losses.<sup>35</sup> As Musa abu Marzouq noted, "We are not merchants of war. . . . We are saddened by the scale of this destruction wrought by these neo-Nazis. . . . Israelis do all this to force us to accept this reality, raise the white flag and recognize them and what they have usurped. They do this so we can lay our weapons and leave resistance. The Zionist occupation began this battle. We will stay on our land. The future is ours."<sup>36</sup> Reports dispatched from the ground in Gaza conveyed feelings of bewilderment and panic at Israel's ferocious and unrelenting targeting of civilian institutions.<sup>37</sup> Gazans spoke of how despite the destruction wrought on Gaza in previous assaults, Operation Protective Edge appeared intent on maximizing

civilian harm and pressuring Gaza's population into submission.<sup>38</sup> This suspicion was magnified given the exceptionally high death toll of children under the age of sixteen, which gave rise to accusations that Israel was systematically targeting Gaza's younger population.<sup>39</sup>

Gazans hypothesized that the brutality of the offensive was a tactic to force them to turn against Hamas. In many instances this worked, particularly when Hamas showed its own merciless face. Under the heavy toll of bombing, Hamas used the chaotic environment of war to settle its own political scores and carry out extrajudicial assassinations of its domestic enemies, including members of Fatah who were held in its jails, as well as suspected collaborators or informants for Israel.<sup>40</sup> More disturbingly, in the early days of Operation Protective Edge, Hamas's Ministry of Interior called on citizens not to respond to evacuation orders by the Israeli army, asserting that these were only issued as a form of psychological warfare to create panic.<sup>41</sup> Many in Gaza criticized Hamas, not least for its role in dragging the coastal enclave into another conflagration. Others were critical of Hamas's governance record and its authoritarian streak.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, the sense of duty and support for resistance in the face of Israel's onslaught was a powerful force, one that led to greater solidarity around the notion of "resistance" against Israel's violence.<sup>43</sup> While during previous operations popular support for Gaza brought people to the streets throughout the Arab world, protests were relatively sparse during Protective Edge, as the Middle East was engaged in numerous hot wars. Criticizing the inadequate Arab response, a leader in Gaza noted that "Hamas defends the *umma's* honor with self-made weapons while all the weapons piling up in the storage warehouses of the Arab armies are rusting, and if they're ever used, they're used against their own people."<sup>44</sup>

As the death toll climbed in the Gaza Strip, so did the suffering of those who survived. Fuel shortages led to prolonged electricity cuts that caused Gaza to grind to a halt. Hospitals buckled under mounting emergency cases and the absence of medical supplies. Sewage systems faltered and spilled out into streets as Gaza's already contaminated

water supplies were depleted. The buffer zones around the strip were further tightened inward by the Israeli army, limiting access to agricultural land or fishing zones and strengthening the blockade around the coastal enclave.<sup>45</sup> Upheaval ravaged the tiny strip of land as hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people moved from shelter to shelter, desperate to avoid Israeli bombing and prevented from escaping as refugees from Gaza.<sup>46</sup> Throughout the onslaught, Egyptian president Sisi continued Egypt's crackdown on the tunnels connecting Gaza to the Sinai Peninsula and largely maintained the closure of the Rafah border, even as casualty numbers rose and humanitarian pleas to open the borders gained urgency.<sup>47</sup>

Calls for a ceasefire were relentless, and initially Hamas was the party refusing to yield to an end to hostilities. Netanyahu's formulation of "calm for calm"—suspending Israel's operation in return for the end of rocket fire—was fundamentally at odds with Hamas's disposition. As Meshal noted, before the teenagers were kidnapped there was full calm in the West Bank and relative calm in Gaza. He added that this was unnatural given the persistent occupation and Israel's unyielding stranglehold on the strip. Now that the Palestinians had achieved unity, Meshal questioned, a war was suddenly declared? "Are the Palestinians just meant to surrender and die a slow death?" he asked, noting that Palestinians were being asked to accept their fate of living under occupation in the West Bank and under blockade in the Gaza Strip with no efforts to resist the status quo.<sup>48</sup>

Hamas and other factions insisted that ceasefires would no longer entail a return to calm or to the status quo that had prevailed before this latest flare-up. Instead, they argued that a ceasefire must include the removal of the blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip since 2007, which had not been lifted throughout the ceasefire in place since 2012, despite Hamas's effective policing of the border and Israel's responsibility to do so.<sup>49</sup> Hamas's leaders portrayed the choice between a return to isolation or war as being akin to the choice between a slow death or a quick one. The movement opted for the latter and held its ground. As Meshal



said the day after Protective Edge was launched, “[Our people] can no longer accept the blockade in Gaza, under starvation . . . can no longer live in the shadow of settlements, murder, house demolition, violation of villages [in the West Bank]. It is time for the Israeli occupation to end. Our people do not like to escalate and do not seek it. . . . But you have closed all the doors, so blame only yourselves.”<sup>50</sup> Unlike previous instances when Hamas and the other resistance factions chose to de-escalate, in this case the movement appeared sufficiently cornered to enter into a dynamic of attrition with Israel. Netanyahu was unrelenting in his response and insisted that if Hamas thought Israel would stop before assurances of quiet and peace were in place, it was mistaken.<sup>51</sup>

Negotiations proceeded with Egyptian, Jordanian, and American mediation against the backdrop of several failed attempts to implement humanitarian truces. Given President Sisi’s hostile disposition toward Gaza, Hamas attempted to seek alternative mediators, including Qatar and Turkey.<sup>52</sup> But Israel, Egypt, and the PLO maintained a monopoly on the mediation channels. In the previous wars of 2009 and 2012, ceasefire discussions had circumvented the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank and proceeded indirectly between Hamas and Israel. In 2014, ceasefire talks engaged the PLO and Israel directly under Egyptian mediation. Much to Israel’s chagrin, the unity deal that had been signed between Palestinian factions before the outbreak of the war appeared to hold firm.<sup>53</sup> President Abbas reaffirmed the end of the Palestinian division, as he insisted that an attack on a specific faction signaled war against Palestinians in their entirety.<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, ceasefire demands encompassed aspects of the Palestinian struggle that extended beyond lifting the blockade off the Gaza Strip to include issues related to Israel’s continued occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank.<sup>55</sup>

Israel refused to link Gaza with the broader Palestinian demands and insisted on focusing specifically on disarming Hamas.<sup>56</sup> Hamas refused. Aware of the scale of the catastrophe in Gaza, the Palestinian delegation appeared willing to wait for an “honorable agreement” that would justify, in their perspective, the pain and bloodshed the Pales-

tinians had endured.<sup>57</sup> As Meshal noted, no colonized people ever got rid of their colonizer without paying a staggering price.<sup>58</sup> Palestinian negotiators insisted that the conditions for a ceasefire were not “ *Hamas conditions* ”; they were Palestinian conditions. Demands to end the blockade on Gaza could not be separated from the broader national goals of ending the occupation.<sup>59</sup> Senior Fatah negotiators objected to Israel’s tactics of addressing ceasefire demands from the perspective of Hamas or Islamic Jihad on one side, or Fatah on the other.<sup>60</sup> Fatah viewed Israel’s approach to the negotiations as seeking to entrench the division between Gaza and the West Bank.<sup>61</sup>

Alongside divisive negotiating tactics, Netanyahu escalated militarily to demonstrate most forcefully to Hamas what attrition with Israel entailed. The Israeli air force unleashed pulverizing attacks that led to the complete leveling of Gazan high-rises.<sup>62</sup> Netanyahu summarized quite succinctly Israel’s strategy of dealing with Hamas in Gaza: “ *Our policy toward Hamas is simple: If they fire, they will be hit, and not just hit but hit very hard. And if Hamas does not understand this today, it will understand it tomorrow. And if not tomorrow then the day after tomorrow because in the Middle East, one needs not just military power but stamina and patience.* ”<sup>63</sup> Attrition and deterrence worked from the Palestinian side as well. Noting quite clearly the failure of Israel’s military tactics to break the will of resistance, on the forty-fifth day of the war the leader of al-Qassam Brigades warned international flights not to land at Ben Gurion Airport. “ *The occupiers and all the world must know the truth about what our people are asking for. All we want is for the occupation to go away, from our supplies and the milk of our children, our fuel. But it insists, to hold on, punishing us, strangling us whenever it wants and letting us breathe whenever it wants. This cannot be allowed to go on after today.* ”<sup>64</sup>

On August 26, fifty-one days after Israel’s assault began and following endless failed ceasefire attempts, the parties accepted a ceasefire initiative from Cairo. This was an interim agreement that called for an immediate cessation of fire and commencement of reconstruction,

with discussions regarding the lifting of the blockade, including Palestinian demands for a seaport and airport in Gaza to ensure access, to begin at a later date.<sup>65</sup> Israel successfully sidestepped all attempts to link this ceasefire to broader Palestinian issues as it claimed that it had dealt Hamas a powerful blow and destroyed its military infrastructure, including its tunnel network. Netanyahu insisted that Hamas achieved none of its ceasefire demands and reiterated that the extreme use of force, particularly leveling tower blocks in the final days of the war, had finally broken Hamas's belief that it could drag Israel into a war of attrition.<sup>66</sup>

There was some veracity to claims that Israel's overwhelming force caused Hamas to pull back.<sup>67</sup> Meshal spoke of the need to act responsibly to protect the people from the "Zionist crimes" that led Hamas to achieve only portions of its demands.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, Hamas claimed its own victory. In terms of reconstruction, Hamas's leaders explained that the agreement was to remove the buffer zone around Gaza, to reduce the fishing restrictions, and to open all five crossings with Israel to allow building material into Gaza.<sup>69</sup> Hamas noted that its military infrastructure had been weakened but not destroyed. It had captured Israeli soldiers that could be used for prisoner exchange deals, as it had with Shalit. Most importantly, Hamas held firm and refused Israel's pressure regarding disarmament. The movement viewed this as a temporary ceasefire until real negotiations could commence regarding lifting the blockade.<sup>70</sup> Both Abbas and Meshal continued to stress that Palestinian unity remained a strategic choice.<sup>71</sup>

By the end of Operation Protective Edge, 2,220 Palestinians had been killed, 1,492 of them civilians, 551 of them children, with several whole families obliterated. This was the highest level of civilian casualties Israel had inflicted on the Palestinians in any one year since 1967.<sup>72</sup> From the Israeli side, deaths included sixty-six soldiers and five civilians, as well as one Thai national. Within Gaza, eighteen thousand housing units had been rendered uninhabitable and 108,000 people were left homeless. The only power plant in Gaza had been damaged, seriously crippling the heating, electricity, and water infrastructures in the strip.<sup>73</sup> As the cease-

fire held, negotiations turned to reconstruction, which was estimated to cost around \$7.8 billion. This was to proceed under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority, which now maintained ostensible control over the government in the Gaza Strip through the reconciliation agreement. After the bombs and missiles died down, the standardized approach to reconstruction discussions restarted in Cairo. As countries from all over the world and international organizations gathered in Egypt, Hamas was excluded from participating in the conference or the reconstruction effort. Without its involvement, it is not surprising that destroyed buildings continue to litter the cities and towns of the Gaza Strip.<sup>74</sup>

Following the end of hostilities, the United Nations established a commission to investigate the conflagration. While the Palestinian leadership offered full support, the Israeli government boycotted the investigation and prevented the investigators' access into the Gaza Strip.<sup>75</sup> The UN's investigation accused both Hamas and Israel of carrying out war crimes. In response, Israel retaliated that the United Nations was "taken hostage by terrorist organizations" given its anti-Israel bias.<sup>76</sup> A domestic investigation by Israel's state comptroller, released in 2017, highlighted troubling findings regarding this operation.<sup>77</sup> The report noted that in 2013, during the period of calm that Hamas had successfully instituted from Gaza, Prime Minister Netanyahu's government was warned explicitly and repeatedly that Gaza was on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe, and that the situation had to be addressed to prevent another conflagration between Hamas and Israel. Such warnings went unheeded. Rather than meeting its obligations under the 2012 ceasefire agreement with Hamas, which necessitated easing the crossings into Gaza, Israel's political leaders appeared willing to maintain the blockade while expecting calm to prevail in return.

This one-sided and unsustainable expectation underscored another finding made by the Israeli state comptroller's report, which was that Israel had no strategy for dealing with Gaza.<sup>78</sup> Through Protective Edge, it became evident that Israel was willing to rely on reactive and overwhelming military power as the primary tool for responding to threats

or perceived threats from Gaza.<sup>79</sup> Despite Hamas's increasingly effective role at policing the border, Israel had no political appetite to engage with either the movement or the broader Palestinian predicament. Prime Minister Netanyahu repeatedly asserted Israel's unwillingness to negotiate with any government that included Hamas while also protesting that the Palestinian division meant there was no representative partner with which to negotiate. This paradoxical exercise in futility ensured the absence of any prospects for diplomatic engagement. Israel's reliance on military options produced, at best, sporadic periods of calm and fit well with its approach toward Hamas: isolate and deter, manage rather than resolve. At a cost of several thousand civilian Palestinian lives, Hamas's presence in the West Bank was suppressed and its infrastructure in the Gaza Strip was powerfully bombarded. By the end of Operation Protective Edge, Hamas appeared to have been once again effectively contained and temporarily pacified within the Gaza Strip.

### **POLITICIDE, CONTAINMENT, AND PACIFICATION**

The Government of National Consensus signed before the war held despite Israel's vast military and diplomatic mobilization to ensure it received no legitimacy. But the unity cabinet that was formed remained merely symbolic as the challenge of institutional integration between the West Bank and Gaza persisted. Hamas's attempt to shed its administrative role in Gaza in an effort to avoid compromising its liberation agenda had not overshadowed the fact that it kept its firm hold over the enclave. Even with the agreement to cede the Rafah border crossing to the Palestinian Authority, there was no overlooking the reality that Hamas had developed a structure of rule in Gaza, primarily through al-Qassam, that was separate from the administrative and ministerial institutions of government. Still, Hamas's leaders believed that by relinquishing their legitimate government, including the post of prime minister, the onus would be placed on Abbas to take the next step in healing the division and including Hamas in reformulating the PLO.<sup>80</sup>

President Abbas and the incumbent leadership in the West Bank remained both unwilling and unable to provide Hamas with that official foothold in the Palestinian struggle for liberation. The extent of Israel's refusal to the formation of a unity government marked the challenge that the Palestinian Authority would have to confront were it to integrate Hamas officially into the Palestinian leadership. Taking over the administration of Gaza, particularly after the devastation of 2014, without effective control over the security front was also unappealing.<sup>81</sup> As a result, Hamas was unable to let go of its administrative responsibilities in Gaza, becoming entrenched in the coastal enclave and embroiled in the burdens of government. Simultaneously, Israel's assault had, intentionally or otherwise, offered Hamas a lifeline. Operation Protective Edge pulled the movement away from the brink it had faced in the early days of 2014, as the renegotiated ceasefire meant that border crossings into Gaza were again marginally eased. Hamas's rule and finances stabilized and the initial impetus for the Shati Agreement was removed.

At the time of this writing, in 2017, Israel remains opposed to the reintegration of the Palestinian territories, ostensibly to avoid Hamas's ability to influence the stability of the West Bank and undermine the security coordination that has been instituted between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Israel has also, however, benefited from Hamas's entrapment in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas has proven extremely adept at managing the various factions that remain committed to resistance against Israel. Since 2007, Hamas has proven both willing and able to enter into and sustain ceasefires with Israel. Equally importantly, Hamas has been successful at stabilizing the coastal enclave. This territory had always presented an exceptional challenge for Israel even though it forms only 1.3 percent of the land of historic Palestine. This is primarily due to its population density, which threatens to offset Israel's Jewish majority if placed under direct Israeli control, a formula that was a key driver in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to disengage from the strip. Gaza also contains a high proportion of Palestinian refugees who had settled there after fleeing or being driven out of their homes in 1948.

This population mix has meant that Gaza has consistently been a foundation of resistance to Zionism and to Israel's ongoing military rule over Palestinians. Gaza's defiant spirit, as this book has suggested, builds on a decades-old history. It did not begin with Hamas and neither did Israel's lethal disposition toward the small strip of land. Since 1948, Israel has waged more than twelve wars on Gaza, reoccupied the territory, isolated its inhabitants, placed the enclave under siege, and unilaterally disengaged in attempts to rid itself of the challenge it presents.<sup>82</sup> In the 1950s, decades before Hamas's creation, Israel designated Gaza a "*fedayeen's nest*," a territory that merited constant isolation and military bombardment to break the resistance.<sup>83</sup> In the late 1980s, with the eruption of the First Intifada, Israel began restricting the mobility of Palestinians from Gaza into Israel through the use of a complex permit system. This evolved into the general adoption of closure tactics throughout the 1990s as Gaza was repeatedly placed under blockade. In 1995, an electric fence separating Gaza from the rest of the territories was constructed.<sup>84</sup>

None of these policies, and no combination of them, managed to pacify the Gaza Strip. It is no surprise that Gaza has made its way into Israeli contemporary vernacular, whereby the phrase "Go to Gaza" is now the popular manner of saying "Go to hell."<sup>85</sup> Israel's intermittent closures evolved into a permanent and impermeable blockade after Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007. Hamas's very existence appeared to offer Israel the opportunity to formalize these various means of severing Gaza from the rest of Palestine, both discursively and practically. Under Hamas's rule, Gaza moved from being a "*fedayeen's nest*" to becoming a "hostile entity" and an "enclave of terrorism." Israeli leaders consistently present Hamas as nothing more than an irrational and bloodthirsty actor seeking Israel's destruction. This framing is part of a longer history of sidestepping the political concerns that animate Palestinian nationalism by labeling movements such as Hamas and the PLO as terrorist organizations. In Hamas's case, its Islamic nature facilitates a greater conflation of its actions with groups such as al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State.

Whether inadvertently or cynically, Hamas is often described as the local manifestation of global terror networks.<sup>86</sup> The fact that the word “terrorism” can accommodate both al-Qaeda and Hamas marks the scale of its imprecision and failure to communicate valuable information about political violence. While al-Qaeda is part of a transnational network that wages a global violent struggle against Western hegemony, Hamas adopts armed resistance on a localized front to end an occupation that is deemed illegal by international law. More importantly, unlike networks such as al-Qaeda, Hamas has not rejected democratic politics or implemented a repressive Salafi regime in Gaza. It has also openly clashed with the local manifestations of these transnational networks. Hamas neither espouses an ideology of global terror nor does it seek to create a transnational Islamic caliphate.<sup>87</sup> It is a movement that utilizes Islamic discourse to deal with contemporary ailments and that is geographically tethered to the specific political and social environment of the occupation.<sup>88</sup>

In that sense, Hamas is akin to a religious and armed anticolonial resistance movement.<sup>89</sup> Understanding Hamas’s political drivers and motivations, however, would complicate Israel’s efforts to present the movement as little more than a terrorist organization committed to its destruction. Such a portrayal has been extremely useful for Israel on several levels. First, it excuses and justifies the forceful marginalization of a democratically elected government and the collective punishment inherent in besieging two million Palestinians. As the preceding chapters have shown, operations carried out by the Israeli army against Gaza are then understood as a legitimate form of self-defense, most often preemptive. For each of the three major operations of the last decade—Cast Lead, Pillar of Defense, and Protective Edge—a clear pattern has emerged whereby Israeli provocations, often after Palestinian unity deals are signed, trigger opportunities for Israel to claim self-defense and launch spectacular attacks on Gaza. By preventing unity and containing Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Israel has effectively cultivated a fig leaf that legitimates its policies toward the strip. Rather than



positioning Gaza's marginalization as a result of Hamas, it is perhaps more accurate to state that Hamas has become marginalized as a result of Gaza, as evident in its failure to overcome its entrenchment there.

Second, with Hamas's dismissal as a terrorist organization, the thread linking the early days of Palestinian nationalism, from al-Qassam to the PLO and through to Hamas, gets eclipsed. Central to this continuity from *fedayeen* to "Islamic terrorists" are key Palestinian political demands that remain unmet and unanswered and that form the basis of the Palestinian struggle: achieving self-determination; dealing with the festering injustice of the refugee problem created by Israel's establishment in 1948; and affirming the right to use armed struggle to resist an illegal occupation.<sup>90</sup> In this light, Hamas is the contemporary manifestation of demands that began a century ago. Israeli efforts to continue sidelining these demands, addressing them solely from a military lens, have persisted. From antiguerrilla warfare to its own War on Terror, Israel merely employs contemporary language to wage a century-old war.

Israel does not have a Hamas problem; it has a Palestine problem.<sup>91</sup> The fixed fundamentals that Hamas consistently reiterates form the bedrock of Palestinian identity and are a reflection of demands to deal with the tragedy of 1948 as well as the ongoing implications of Israel's occupation following 1967. Many Palestinians reject the rhetoric and action within which Hamas couches its political thought, or even its ideological intransigence. But while Hamas's discourse is exceptional to the movement, much of its politics are at the heart of popular concerns. This is evident in the rallies against Israeli military operations in Gaza. During Operation Protective Edge, backing for Hamas was around 40 percent. But support for the notion of "resistance" writ large claimed a majority of 90 percent or more.<sup>92</sup>

In other words, the political reality that makes Gaza "a hostile entity" extends beyond that strip of land and animates the Palestinian struggle in its entirety. Gaza is one microcosm, one parcel, of the Palestinian experience.<sup>93</sup> Instead of addressing this reality or engaging with Hamas's political drivers, Israel has adopted a military

approach that defines Hamas solely as a terrorist organization. This depoliticizes and decontextualizes the movement, giving credence to the persistent “politicide” of Palestinian nationalism, Israel’s process of erasing the political ideology animating the Palestinian struggle for self-determination.<sup>94</sup> This approach has allowed successive Israeli governments to avoid taking a position on the demands that have been upheld by Palestinians since before the creation of the State of Israel.

Hamas’s ideology was shaped by a desire to sustain the perceived “purity” of the Palestinian struggle that the PLO had begun conceding in 1988. Centrally, this meant the liberation of the entirety of the land of historic Palestine and the reversal of the impact that Zionism has had, and continues to have, on Palestinians. As this book shows, Hamas’s cofounders did so by articulating the tenets of Palestinian nationalism in an Islamic framing, imbuing it with religious reasoning. This restricted any ideological maneuverability for the movement’s leaders and defined limitations that would make concessions appear blasphemous. In this manner, Hamas protected itself from following the PLO’s trajectory and maintained, rhetorically at least, an untarnished narrative of liberation despite immense challenges.

Apart from its Islamic nature, two other factors have undergirded Hamas’s ideological strength. The first is the failed precedent of the PLO. Like Hamas, the PLO was ostracized until it accepted formulaic conditions that had been dictated by the United States: the renunciation of armed struggle, and the recognition of Israel. The PLO believed, rightly, that ideological concessions would allow it to negotiate with Israel. It also imagined, mistakenly, that diplomacy would lead to Palestinian statehood. Hamas has learned this lesson and is unlikely to concede on any of its core ideological tenets without guarantees that such compromises would lead to the fulfillment of Palestinian rights. In Hamas’s view, the PLO’s concessions were its ticket into the corridors of diplomacy at the cost of its legitimacy. Far from securing Palestinian rights, these concessions have weakened the Palestinian struggle and entrenched the Israeli occupation to previously unimaginable levels. The second fac-

tor is that Hamas has what it sees as two resounding victories that justify armed struggle. Israel's withdrawals from south Lebanon in 2000 and from the Gaza Strip in 2005 were both unilateral Israeli measures taken after years of armed resistance in each of these locales. Rather than the byproduct of diplomacy or negotiations, these instances of "liberation" are perceived by Hamas as the vindication of resistance.<sup>95</sup>

While remaining ideologically inflexible, Hamas has offered pragmatic concessions when dealing with the three conditions imposed by the international community: renounce violence, recognize Israel, and accept past agreements.<sup>96</sup> As various chapters in this book demonstrate, Hamas has issued repeated offers to end its violence in return for Israeli reciprocity. Throughout the years of the Second Intifada and afterward, Hamas intermittently held fire unilaterally in the face of rapid Israeli militarization. Israel has consistently ignored these overtures. Even after its takeover of the Gaza Strip, Hamas became increasingly effective at policing Gaza's borders, yet calm interludes were systematically ignored by Israel, which maintained its violent chokehold and incursions into the strip. Hamas also made great strides with regard to accepting past agreements, offering to abide by whatever outcome a reformed and representative PLO puts forward. This concession has been made even as successive Israeli governments have themselves failed to respect or uphold past agreements. By 2007, when Hamas accepted the Mecca Agreement, the movement declared its willingness to respect international agreements and defer to the PLO in negotiations with Israel. These political concessions have consistently been deemed insufficient.

The issue that has proven most intractable is Hamas's refusal to recognize Israel. In many ways, this is the backbone of Hamas's ideology. It is both the final trump card before reaching a settlement and the last line that must be defended to safeguard the imagined purity of Palestinian nationalism. For decades, Hamas has explicitly and repeatedly indicated its willingness to accept the creation of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, most recently by issuing a revised political manifesto in 2017. Even prior to its election victory in 2006, Hamas consistently

explained that its use of armed struggle was limited to forcing Israel to end its occupation rather than the destruction of the state as a whole. Hamas's leaders believe this would offer a peaceful settlement between Israel and the Palestinians and end the bloodshed. Israel is convinced this would be a temporary solution before Hamas rearms and attacks from a strengthened position. While Hamas may indeed continue to harbor ideological aspirations for the liberation of the entirety of Palestine after such a peaceful settlement, the likelihood that the movement would have popular backing for such a step is likely to be nonexistent if a just settlement is offered. Khaled Meshal has even offered written guarantees to international mediators underscoring this, noting that Hamas would abide by the outcome of any referendum to a peace deal delivered to the Palestinian people, including deals that entail mutual recognition, while stressing that Hamas would not accept those outcomes until the deal is implemented.<sup>97</sup>

It is more likely the case that Hamas is simply maintaining this ideological intransigence as a negotiating tactic and a matter of principle, tying into the movement's legitimacy and its effectiveness as an interlocutor.<sup>98</sup> The movement believes that conceding the remaining cards that Hamas still clings to would ensure that Palestinian rights continued to be forfeited, as had happened following the PLO's recognition of Israel. As one leader explained, "Why should we be forced to explicitly recognize Israel if we've already indicated we have a *de facto* acceptance of its presence?"<sup>99</sup> Hamas's implicit acceptance of Israel has gone far beyond what many Israeli political parties, including the dominant ruling Likud party, have offered Palestinians within their charters. With their refusal to recognize the right of Palestinian self-determination, their insistence that the Palestinian people never existed, and the intermittent resurfacing of the "Jordan option," several Israeli political parties have long opposed the notion of a Palestinian state.<sup>100</sup> In 2013, Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly reneged on his highly touted 2009 Bar Ilan speech in which he spoke of the possibility of a demilitarized Palestinian state.<sup>101</sup>

Hamas leaders consistently reaffirmed how their acceptance of the 1967 line is a negotiating tactic made in the full conviction that Israel itself refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of this border. Israel's refusal to countenance Hamas's repeated offers around the 1967 line reaffirm this conviction. Israel's demand for Hamas's ideological concession prior to any form of diplomatic engagement is likely to remain futile. The PLO's experience shows that Israel has hardly acted as a benevolent occupier. If Hamas were to shift its own policies and accept the Quartet's conditions, it would lose valuable political capital and negotiating clout. Hamas has long called on Palestinian diplomats to hold on to their trump cards rather than negotiate in good faith. Should Israel ever choose to pursue a peace option or itself accept the legitimacy of the 1967 borders, admittedly an unlikely development given the current political climate in Israel, Hamas would present a powerful and effective counterpart. Yet rather than empowering its negotiating partners, Israel has historically pursued a self-fulfilling prophecy that ensures there is "no partner" by weakening its counterparts and undermining their legitimacy.

Israel's refusal to deal with Hamas's diplomatic signals is not solely the result of the movement's use of armed struggle. Hamas's political emergence within the Gaza Strip heightened Israeli worries by rupturing the continued subservience of the Palestinian institutions to the occupation. This compliance had become concretized in the body of the Palestinian Authority following the Oslo Accords. By resuscitating key Palestinian demands that the PLO had conceded, including the goal of liberating historic Palestine, Hamas has attempted to take Palestinian nationalism back to a pre-Oslo period. The Oslo Accords have facilitated the continuation of Israel's occupation and have been followed by a failed peace process that has resumed for two decades at significant cost to Palestinians, while Israel expanded its settlement enterprise. Hamas's efforts to undo the political structures that Oslo created challenged a status quo that has been sustainable, if not beneficial, for Israel and its colonization of Palestinian territories. In essence, Hamas's

takeover of Gaza marked the failure of Israel's efforts to centralize Palestinian decision-making with compliant figures like Mahmoud Abbas, who in effect allow Israel to maintain its occupation cost-free.

Hamas's fate is emblematic of Israel's "decision not to decide" on the future of the Palestinian territories and its reliance on military superiority to dismiss the political demands animating the Palestinian national movement.<sup>102</sup> Since the blockade was instituted, Israel's strategy toward the movement has evolved. As a key member of Israel's security establishment noted, "Israel needs Hamas to be weak enough not to attack, but stable enough to deal with the radical terrorist groups in Gaza. This line may be blurry but the logic is clear. The challenge lies with walking this blurry line."<sup>103</sup> Managing Hamas in this manner allows Israel to avoid risking another transmutation of Palestinian nationalism. Defeating Hamas militarily would, obviously, be one way of ridding Israel of its "Hamas problem." But that would simply transport Hamas's ideological drivers to another vehicle that would remain rooted in the key tenants of the Palestinian struggle. Instead, as this book has demonstrated, Israel has worked over the past decade to contain Hamas in the Gaza Strip and to turn it into an administrative authority akin to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. This strategy has taken several forms. In the West Bank, extensive security coordination with the Palestinian Authority has effectively, but temporarily, dismantled Hamas's infrastructure.<sup>104</sup> In the Gaza Strip, Hamas is imprisoned through a blockade that structurally severs the movement from the rest of the territories.

Leveraging Hamas's containment over the course of a decade gradually institutionalized a process of pacification that is ongoing but inconclusive. Israel's efforts to definitively achieve "calm for calm" have failed. Palestinians in Gaza view the lifting of the blockade, itself a violent act of war, as a necessary prerequisite for calm. Instead of deterrence, since 2007 Israel's policy toward Hamas has taken the form of what Israel's security establishment refers to as "mowing the lawn."<sup>105</sup> This entails the intermittent use of military power to undercut any

growth by the resistance factions in Gaza. Through three major wars and countless incursions that employed its lethal “Dahyieh Doctrine,” Israel has used military might to break the spirit of resistance in Gaza, pacify Hamas, and work toward deterrence.<sup>106</sup> The result is that Israel and Hamas are now engaged in the process of maintaining an equilibrium of belligerency. Hamas relies on rocket fire to unsettle the status quo and negotiate enhanced access under the persistent blockade. Israel employs military might to debilitate Hamas.

This *modus operandi* has enabled both Israel and Hamas to pursue short-term victories at the expense of a sustainable resolution, while they both bide their time. From Israel’s perspective, resistance has been sufficiently managed so that Hamas’s rule over the Gaza Strip can now be tolerated, even abetted. Throughout 2015 and 2016, Israeli politicians and the security establishment spoke about the need to “stabilize” Gaza under Hamas’s rule and as a separate territory from the West Bank.<sup>107</sup> The blockade persists and reconstruction has been left to a minimum.<sup>108</sup> After the end of Protective Edge through 2016, the Rafah border remained largely shut even to humanitarian assistance, apart from seventy-two days of partial opening.<sup>109</sup> Meanwhile, Israel has allowed more supplies to enter through the overland crossings at Erez and Kerem Shalom.<sup>110</sup> These are still controlled to manage quality of life just above the brink of turning Gaza into a humanitarian catastrophe. Loosening access is managed to safeguard the present dynamic, which positions Hamas as Israel’s counterpart and as the entity responsible for securing calm on its southern border.<sup>111</sup>

Having failed to off-load its governmental responsibilities, Hamas took its own measures in these two years to enhance its revenues via domestic tax raises and revived diplomatic efforts to salvage regional relations.<sup>112</sup> This included diplomatic engagement with officials such as Tony Blair, the former head of the Quartet, and others, under Qatari mediation.<sup>113</sup> Hamas interpreted this mediation as a sign that the international community has openly conceded the need to engage with the movement.<sup>114</sup> Such diplomacy focused on the need to maintain the

ceasefire in Gaza. From Hamas's perspective, a failure to maintain calm and stability threatens to precipitate further Israeli operations at significant cost to both its government and the inhabitants of the strip. The liberation project adopted by the wider movement has inadvertently become weighed down by a calculus that had been less burdensome when Hamas acted solely as a spoiler external to the political establishment rather than as a governing authority. Hamas's popular support is now shaped by the quality of its administration within the Gaza Strip and not by its commitment to resistance.

Often these two areas are in direct conflict with one another, a shift that has not been lost on the Palestinian Authority. Responding to Hamas's consistent condemnation of the Palestinian Authority's security coordination with Israel, Fatah accused Hamas of succumbing, behind closed doors, to calling resistance "acts of aggression"; abiding by ceasefires with Israel; calling rocket fire "treasonous"; and obtaining rewards for good behavior from Israeli generals in an effort to build a so-called Sinai state (or an Islamic emirate) in Gaza.<sup>115</sup> While some of these accusations are self-serving exaggerations, there is also an element of truth behind them. In each of the ceasefire discussions signed with Israel in 2009 and 2012, Hamas had indeed agreed to short-term efforts to restrain the resistance in exchange for stability and the promise of a future easing of the blockade. Hamas views these ceasefires as necessary concessions to sustain its government, give Gazans a break, and avoid further conflagrations with Israel. In the absence of any progress on the political level, these ceasefires are seen as practical short-term compromises that do not undermine Hamas's longer-term liberation project.<sup>116</sup>

Israel's policies toward Hamas have produced a situation whereby Israel is able to exercise effective control over the Palestinian territories without taking responsibility as an occupying force. Whether there is a systematic and explicit Israeli separation policy for the West Bank and Gaza remains unclear, but Israel has nonetheless benefited from and reinforced this division.<sup>117</sup> Within the West Bank, the occupation has been



outsourced to a compliant Palestinian Authority. Even as Israel maintains its settlement expansion throughout the territories, the Palestinian Authority is still held accountable for administering and governing the lives of Palestinians under Israel's occupation and for safeguarding Israel's security through extensive security coordination. Within the Gaza Strip, Hamas has become the entity that is in practice held accountable for the well-being of the Palestinians who reside there. Israel continues to act as an "effective and disengaged occupier," ensuring the containment and isolation of the Palestinians in Gaza without having to incur any additional cost for administration.<sup>118</sup>

Instead of Palestinian reconciliation, the outcome is two administrative authorities operating under an unyielding occupation. The crucial difference between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, however, is that Hamas performs its role of managing resistance in language that remains ideologically pure, leaving room for future escalations. While in the West Bank the Palestinian Authority's interim nature has effectively been made permanent, the situation is likely to be temporary within the Gaza Strip.<sup>119</sup> The Palestinian Authority's permanence has been driven by the illusion of sovereignty and economic development that leaders such as former prime minister Salaam Fayyad have cultivated. There is no such illusion in the Gaza Strip, where there will more likely be an expiration date for Israel's ability to manage what has become one of globe's bleakest humanitarian catastrophes.

Under international law, the blockade amounts to collective punishment and comes at a horrific cost to Gaza's population.<sup>120</sup> Seeing Gaza as an open-air prison does not account for the intermittent bombing campaigns that terrorize and kill its inhabitants, or for the carefully engineered access policy that monitors the quality of life of those incarcerated by the blockade.<sup>121</sup> Rather than the subservience that is inherent in the Palestinian Authority's modus operandi with Israel, Hamas has ensured that the political system it has created in Gaza is rooted in resistance. Hamas believes that the only language of dialogue with Israel is one of violence between occupier and occupied. Therefore, while

Hamas might be contained in the Gaza Strip against its will, and its military struggle may at times remain dormant, it shows no sign of ideological softening beyond what it has already offered. As it endures what it typically refers to as the ebb of armed struggle, the movement continues to build and strengthen its military arsenal while it awaits an opportune moment to relaunch its resistance. This is likely to remain the case until a just political settlement is offered to the Palestinians, even as the process of pacification by force is interspersed with fleeting moments of calm.

### ISLAMISM AND THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE

Hamas's Islamism facilitated the opportunistic dismissal of its political motivations by Israel as well as by regional actors. Throughout 2015 and 2016, Hamas's relationship to the Muslim Brotherhood led countries such as Egypt or factions such as Fatah to call into question its nationalist aims. This was exacerbated by Hamas celebrating the rise of Islamic parties to power throughout the Middle East after the Arab uprisings in 2011. In reality and practice, however, Hamas has limited itself to the political landscape that exists in Israel and the occupied territories. While Hamas often rhetorically falls back on its regional Islamism, it has largely operated within the structures of the nation-state model.<sup>122</sup> That makes Hamas similar to other regional Islamist movements that are shaped by their particular context even while utilizing Islamic political discourse that transcends boundaries.<sup>123</sup>

Nonetheless, like other Islamic parties in the region, Hamas's political aspirations, as they began to manifest themselves in 2005, faced intense local, regional, and international opposition. The political participation of Islamic parties in the Middle East has long been a source of tension. Backed by Western allies, secular and Islamic Arab dictatorships have worked to suppress or co-opt Islamic parties in order to safeguard their authoritarian regimes and limit democratization.<sup>124</sup> Such actions have historically found sympathetic Western backers who

worry about the “fundamentalist threat” of an Islamic resurgence.<sup>125</sup> This threat is often portrayed as a monolithic anti-Western and anti-democratic force that has to be suppressed to protect Western democratic and liberal principles as well as regional stability.<sup>126</sup>

Islamic political participation has long raised questions regarding the compatibility of Islam and democracy and the classification of Islamic movements as radical or moderate depending on their use of violence.<sup>127</sup> Hamas’s dedication to jihad puts it within the category of radical Islamists that legitimize the use of arms in their revolutionary stance toward the incumbent political order.<sup>128</sup> This distinction between radical and moderate movements, however, is oftentimes arbitrary. Separating radical and moderate Islamists on the basis of whether they have revolutionary (sometimes violent) political goals or gradually transformative social agendas brushes over the fact that a movement, Hamas for instance, may have a wide-reaching social and charitable infrastructure that in many ways underpins its legitimacy as a revolutionary political movement.<sup>129</sup>

Islamist groups fall along a spectrum of moderation to radicalism. This complicates the popular debate regarding Islamism and democracy. While cases can be made for the engagement of moderate Islamist movements in politics, both opponents and supporters of Islamist participation typically view radical parties as being intrinsically at odds with democratic ideals.<sup>130</sup> Proponents of participation uphold the distinction between moderate and radical Islamists by supporting the former (often cited are Jamaat-i-Islami of Pakistan, Ennahda of Tunisia, and the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt) to become active political parties, and in the process potentially undermine the hold of radical Islamists.<sup>131</sup> This position argues that moderate Islamist parties should be encouraged to compete in democratic elections as a means of forcing compromises and diluting ideology through political alliances and coalitions.<sup>132</sup> This would test whether democratic gain would translate into democratic governance.<sup>133</sup> Such voices cite the need for strong institutional systems that are committed to democratic principles and

that can maintain checks and balances to limit the power of any one political party, Islamist or otherwise.<sup>134</sup>

The ostensible moderation of Islamist parties in power is opposed by those who argue that Islamists cannot be allowed to participate in democratic processes in the hope that they will eventually moderate.<sup>135</sup> Opponents of participation have stressed that Islamism is intrinsically incompatible with democratic values. These scholars argue that for nationalist movements to successfully achieve their goals, they cannot be aligned to a particular faith or ethnicity but must rather be secular and equally open to all faiths as a precursor to forming a state for all citizens.<sup>136</sup> Critics state that Islamists believe in the sovereignty of God rather than people; as such, protecting the rights of minorities against discrimination would become redundant when divine legal teachings sanction such discrimination.<sup>137</sup> Further, the implementation of a religious-based political order, even if modernist in outlook, is seen as inherently contradictory to secular democracy.<sup>138</sup> These arguments led to the suppression of Islamist movements to varying degrees within the Arab world in the twentieth century. In instances where political participation was allowed, this was more often than not done in the hope of limiting the influence of Islamic parties. When the Islamic Salvation Front, a Sunni Islamic party in Algeria, actually won the democratic elections in 1991, it was immediately suppressed by the ruling regime, sparking a civil war that lasted close to a decade and resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Algerians.<sup>139</sup>

Hamas's engagement in politics offers an interesting and unique contribution to this debate, given its dual nature as a radical Islamist movement that is also engaged in a liberation struggle.<sup>140</sup> As various chapters in this book have shown, Hamas's use of violence dropped significantly while it contemplated engaging with the political system. In the months leading to its participation in the 2006 elections, Hamas appeared committed to the democratic ideals that underpinned its political agenda. The movement's engagement with the political system did not constitute "moderation" in the manner typically understood when

speaking of parties transitioning from the battlefield into the political arena. Hamas maintained both its ideological conviction and a readiness to use force to push forward its vision for the Palestinian struggle. However, it did so while engaging fully in the democratic political system that was being constructed in the post-intifada reality.

Although local and international intervention undermined Hamas's democratic experiment, it could still be seen that Hamas was in essence taking part in the politics of resistance, whereby governance, local administration, and political participation did not come at the expense of the struggle for liberation but, rather, complemented it. The goals that had informed the movement's military struggle came to be articulated within the political arena. This further underscores the complexity of Islamist movements by demonstrating how Hamas can exhibit a seemingly moderate stance toward the democratic process domestically while advocating armed struggle against the occupation. Hamas's experience after its takeover of the Gaza Strip provides further insight into its approach to governance. As Hamas centralized its grip on power, concerns were raised regarding its authoritarianism and desire to impose a conservative social order. Such worries are often dismissed by those who state that Islamists are unfairly confronted with a catch-22 scenario when seeking power.<sup>141</sup> In other words, Islamists will be criticized for whatever policies they adopt once in government as a result of a "fundamental fear"—largely on the part of the West—that they are incompatible with democracy.<sup>142</sup> This fear seeks to make Islamism exceptional, as being inherently violent and uniquely incompatible with politics.

Hamas's approach to governance of the Gaza Strip, which is taking place under an exceptional situation given the persistence of Israel's blockade, suggests that the movement is active in the creation of an illiberal democracy, or perhaps a system based on "soft authoritarianism."<sup>143</sup> The movement has repressed political plurality and has maintained a conservative social order while demonstrating an ability to adopt a modernist and pragmatic approach to governance, for instance by

maintaining open channels of communication with human rights organizations.<sup>144</sup> To the ire of Salafi movements, Hamas has avoided implementing *shari'a* law. It has, however, worked to create a virtuous society that is governed by righteous laws (e.g., sex segregation). This is arguably with the aim of eventually creating a system from which *shari'a* law could organically develop.<sup>145</sup> Also central to the movement's governance is the construction of an identity around resistance. The combination of populist politics and authoritarianism actually mirrors the manner in which the PLO approached its own institutional building during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>146</sup>

Understanding Hamas's Islamism and its interplay with the movement's nationalism is imperative for assessing the movement's political track record. Hamas carries a significant degree of responsibility for the state of fragmentation within the Palestinian territories today. The movement's entrenchment in the Gaza Strip and its increasingly authoritarian hold on government are the most obvious sources of concern, particularly for the people under its rule. More broadly, however, Hamas has made damaging decisions in two intertwined fields that should be explored separately: the political and the military.

The political damage began with the movement's 2005 decision to run in the Palestinian legislative elections. The movement's entry into the political system represented both an embrace of the democratic mechanisms underpinning modern-day nation-states and a revolution against the incumbent order within the Palestinian territories. Hamas was willing to embody the institutions of the state, to lead the civil service, and to use the legislature to govern effectively. It understood the limits and values of power-sharing and even attempted to form a coalition as its first government. In that sense Hamas accepted, at least in principle, the democratic process inherent in the political transition between parties. Concurrently, however, the movement viewed its election victory as a mandate to reconstitute the tenets of the very structure it was elected into. Although Hamas had been elected into the Palestinian Authority, the body that sits at the very core of the Oslo Accords,

the movement's entire political agenda was based on reformulating the national struggle away from the international agreements that had underpinned the creation of the Palestinian Authority. In other words, Hamas sought to accede to the very institutions it repudiated. In effect, the movement viewed its democratic victory as *carte blanche* to undo and reassemble the entire systems of "state" and in this manner failed to understand the principles of democratic rule.

Acknowledging this dynamic does not then support the view that Islamic parties are unable to respect the checks and balances inherent in democratic systems that limit the power of any one political party. It is arguably the case that it was Fatah that entrenched its rule and with direct American and Israeli intervention acted as a bulwark against a political transition in its bid to maintain single-party hegemony. The debate around engagement with Hamas as a democratically elected Islamist party in 2006 predates discussions around the success of Islamist parties throughout the region following the Arab uprisings.<sup>147</sup> Many have attempted to understand and influence how these victories can be dealt with. Some scholars have interpreted the early events of the Arab uprisings as emblematic of moderate or reformist streaks of Islam that are open to pluralistic governance and empowerment through democratic processes (e.g., Ennahda in Tunisia).<sup>148</sup> Others have put forward the notion of a "modern Islamism."<sup>149</sup> This view argues that rather than focusing on whether Islamism is compatible with democracy, the focus should be on the aspirations of the people in the Muslim world to allow for the emergence of an indigenous form of democracy rather than imposing liberal Western values.

Hamas's rhetoric before and after its election victory certainly suggested a desire for a local form of democratic rule to emerge within the Palestinian struggle. The movement's failure to impose that vision, however, has less to do with the incompatibility of Islam and democracy and more to do with the limits of sovereignty and the relations between state-building and revolutions. For Hamas, respect of past international agreements and the performance of sovereignty that had underpinned

Fatah's rule in the Palestinian Authority were premature developments given the absence of liberation. While Hamas had embraced the democratic process, it had done so less in the spirit of government and more with the desire to lead the Palestinian struggle. In many respects, this development is the belated outcome of the Oslo Accords. Sidelining the Palestinians in a permanent state of restricted autonomy and curtailing their sovereignty did not in fact lead to their pacification, but rather it sparked a search for alternatives that might sustain the national revolution.

This is precisely why Hamas's entry into the political system was threatening to actors invested in maintaining the status quo. Nonetheless, Hamas failed to understand the balance that had to be struck between government and revolution. It had mistakenly assumed that revolution could be launched from within the very systems that had been created to domesticate the national struggle. Transitioning into the political system in many ways mired the movement and compromised its liberation agenda in its efforts to reconstitute the incumbent order. More than half a decade before dictatorships supported by proxy wars would break the Arab uprisings, Hamas's own revolution was crushed. Whether Fatah's belligerency or the international blockade waged against Hamas warranted the movement's reactions and the brutality it showed in its takeover of Gaza in 2007 remains debatable. In facing such opposition, Hamas crossed several red lines and betrayed key tenets it had long upheld regarding the sanctity of Palestinian blood. The violence Hamas unleashed on other Palestinians severely compromised the Palestinian struggle. In effect, Hamas made the choice that forcefully safeguarding its democratic right to govern was a lesser violation than conceding to Fatah's authoritarianism. Palestinians continue to suffer the implications of that decision to this day.

With its takeover of Gaza, Hamas effectively merged revolution and state-building. The movement's approach to governance has been based on an effort to situate the notion of resistance at the heart of the polity within the Gaza Strip. Economically, socially, and militar-



ily, resistance to Israel's continued occupation of Gaza has become central to Hamas's governance of the enclave. Looking at the period between 2007 and 2011, Hamas did indeed settle into a ruling mode. Over the course of these five years, territorial governance overtook reconciliation as the movement's priority. Dismissing concessions that Hamas had previously accepted in the pursuit of unity, the movement chose to maintain its governance over the Gaza Strip rather than prioritize Palestinian unity. Hamas rationalized this move by maintaining that its rule over a "liberated" strip of land was in effect protecting the Palestinians against further concessions by the PLO. This allowed the movement to safeguard its own liberation project, one that remains fundamentally at odds with Fatah's. While that argument may be true, its impact was that territorial governance continued to take precedence over unity.

The second problematic choice Hamas made was in the military arena. Hamas's use of violence, like the PLO before it, has been rooted in arguments of legitimacy, justice, and self-defense. Given Israel's violent occupation of Palestinian land, arms were seen as the only recourse for resistance. Decades of failed diplomacy have done little to undermine this argument. Yet there is no question that Hamas's reliance on jihad has had devastating implications for the Palestinian people. Aside from the moral bankruptcy and the corrosive effect of targeting and killing civilians, dedication to armed resistance against a superb foe like Israel has led to the disintegration of the Palestinian struggle. Strategically, this approach has not only failed; it has also threatened to erode the very social fabric of the Palestinian community under occupation. It has normalized and excused the use of violence as a tactic to achieve political ends and facilitated the dehumanization of opponents. The ease with which Fatah was "othered" as a Zionist outpost and the brutal and fratricidal manner in which the Palestinian factions turned on each other in 2007 is the clearest manifestation of this phenomenon. While social erosion is perhaps a natural outcome of fragmentation under an interminable and relentlessly lethal occupa-

tion, the proliferation of violence as a strategy for liberation has also played its part. Hamas, and certainly Fatah, have actively contributed to dividing the national liberation struggle into two competing trajectories and to turning domestic relations into lethal acrimonious battles without foreseeable end.

With the beginning of the Arab uprisings, Hamas's decision to maintain its rule within the Gaza Strip at the cost of reconciliation took an unexpected turn. The closure of the tunnels and the rise of regimes that were hostile to Hamas effectively led to its entrenchment within the Gaza Strip. Efforts to shed its governing responsibilities and transition back into a liberation movement have of course been blocked by both the Palestinian Authority and Israel. For both parties, Hamas's containment in Gaza is a way to isolate and pacify Palestinian resistance. For other Arab regimes, undermining Hamas is important to demonstrate the limits of democratization in the Arab world. The manner in which Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood have been vilified in Egypt demonstrates the extent of overlap between the interests of Israel and authoritarian rulers in the region. This has historically come at the expense of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. But it has also allowed the perseverance and stability of oppressive regimes that have long acted against the interests of their people.

In many ways, Hamas's democratic experiment offered a microcosm of the forces that would be unleashed throughout the region half a decade later. Like other Arab uprisings, Hamas's election was a call for change, for a move away from corrupt authoritarian rule that often placed the interests of Western policies in the region above the rights of its people. In Hamas's election, Palestinians sought an alternative. The manner in which that alternative has been demolished and the ensuing fragmentation of the Palestinian polity and territories foreshadowed the darker trends yet to come.<sup>150</sup> Having for the most part averted democratization, Arab states now appear to be offering further avenues for diplomatic openness with Israel despite the absence of any prospects for a just peace on the Palestinian front. While this cooperation is being pursued to main-

tain the present regional order, Hamas's election and the Arab uprisings that followed should make clear that popular sentiment and outrage is always bubbling beneath the surface.<sup>151</sup> Protests and revolutions have demonstrated their power in making whole regimes collapse. Their temporary pacification should not be taken as a sign of stability or acquiescence.

### NEW HAMAS, OLD DYNAMICS

In early 2017, Hamas issued a new "Political Document" after months of speculation that it was looking to revise its problematic charter. The document emerged as the culmination of all the developments that the movement had undergone for the decade of its rule over Gaza. It demonstrated that on the most official level, Hamas accepted the creation of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, UN Resolution 194 for the right of return, and the notion of restricting armed struggle to operate within the limits of international law. Although not breaking any new ground in terms of political concessions, the document was a powerful intervention that restated more forcefully than before the position Hamas has adopted since at least 2007, if not since the 1990s. It appeared to define the outer reaches of what the movement might be willing to offer without defaulting on its ideology. In a nod to the Sisi regime in Egypt, the new document officially severed Hamas from its parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, making explicit its commitment to Palestinian nationalism, as argued in this book.<sup>152</sup>

Hamas's document was released without a formal renunciation of the movement's charter, alluding to internal power struggles. Elections had been ongoing within the movement for the preceding months. Khaled Meshal had completed his final term as head of Hamas's political bureau and was replaced by Ismail Haniyeh. Yehya Sinwar, a powerful figure within Hamas's military, was elected as the head of Hamas's operations in the Gaza Strip. Sinwar's election indicated both the growing strength of Hamas's military wing and the expanding importance of the "internal leadership" and the Gaza Strip to the movement's decision-

making. This publication was in many ways seen as Meshal's last effort to officially document Hamas's political position and to communicate to the international community a starting point for diplomatic engagement before Hamas moves in an unknown direction under new leadership.

Hamas's initiative went largely unnoticed. Netanyahu's spokesman stated in response that "Hamas is attempting to fool the world but it will not succeed."<sup>153</sup> With the inauguration of US president Donald J. Trump into office, tensions that had long been simmering within the region erupted. Empowered by Trump's condemnation of "Islamic extremism," countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates mobilized to isolate and blockade Qatar, a country they accused of funding terrorism.<sup>154</sup> Similar dynamics had been taking place within the Palestinian territories, where President Abbas had decided to increase pressure on Hamas. In the early months of 2017, Abbas reduced medical shipments into Gaza; cut the salaries paid to Fatah employees based there, severely crippling the local economy; and stopped making payments to Israel for electricity supply into Gaza. This precipitated a major crisis within Gaza as international organizations declared the threat of a "total collapse." Such a catastrophe was avoided by emergency fuel shipments from Egypt, which indicated its willingness to forge a more pragmatic relationship toward Hamas. Having severed its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas was more palatable an interlocutor to Sisi, who asked Hamas to strengthen its policing against Sinai militants seeking refuge in Gaza.<sup>155</sup>

These latest developments demonstrate in the clearest manner the success of Israel's divisive tactics toward the Palestinian territories. Abbas's willingness to strengthen the stranglehold on Palestinians in Gaza, effectively accepting the collective punishment of two million Palestinians for his own political interest, has shown the degree to which the Palestinian Authority has become complicit within Israel's regime of occupation. More importantly, subsequent developments after Abbas's decision show that years after the commencement of the blockade in 2007, Hamas, rather than collapsing, appears still able to survive the

strongest of chokeholds and to continue consolidating its own power in Gaza. Israel's strategy of conflict management has also proven surprisingly sustainable as the occupation enters its fifth decade and as regional relations shift in Israel's favor. Through the current dynamic, Israel maintains control over the maximum amount of Palestinian land with minimal responsibility for the indigenous population. Despite this violation, the proxy wars that currently dominate the Middle East have meant a greater level of cooperation, intelligence sharing, and general normalization between Sunni Gulf States and Israel as they both contend with the perceived threat from Iran.<sup>156</sup> Years after the *Mavi Marmara* incident, Turkey has also moved to revive diplomatic ties with Israel.<sup>157</sup>

Prospects for Israel's broader integration expanded even further in the fall of 2017 as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates became more vocal in their desire to formalize relations with Israel. The regional alignment of interests increased the urgency of tackling the question of Palestine to pave the way for these nascent relations to bloom with minimal popular backlash.<sup>158</sup> In October, another unity deal was brokered between Hamas and Fatah, under Egyptian mediation. Although many of the challenges that felled the 2014 Shati deal persisted, including issues related to institutional integration and Hamas's arms, prospects for unity were seen to be more favorable. This was particularly true in light of the rapprochement between the Sisi regime and Hamas. Cautious optimism was primarily due to the determination of regional actors to push through a final settlement for Israel-Palestine, to facilitate their own normalization of ties with Israel. Unity between Hamas and Fatah was seen as a precursor to an agreement signed between Israel and Palestinians, one that many hoped would be proposed by the Trump administration.

As this book went to print, pressure was building on the Palestinian leadership from Saudi Arabia and the United States to accept a rumored deal. Such a deal is anticipated to fall far short of minimum Palestinian demands. Hamas is likely to face similar pressures, namely from Egypt, which controls the Rafah crossing into the Gaza Strip. Such pressure could indeed force the conclusive pacification of Hamas

and ensure its acquiescence to the creation of a Palestinian state by name, one that would most likely remain subservient to Israeli hegemony over the entire land of historic Palestine. Yet the lasting success of any Palestinian unity government or even Israeli-Palestinian agreement will ultimately depend on the manner in which core Palestinian grievances are addressed. In that sense, understanding the widespread legitimacy of movements such as Hamas is a necessity, as many of the political motivations that underpin its ideology form core tenets of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination.<sup>159</sup>

Until these fundamental drivers of Palestinian nationalism are addressed, Israel will be forced to continuously manage and advance the structures of control it has developed over both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to pacify Palestinian resistance. Whether through a formal peace deal or otherwise, the absence of any unrest in the territories should not reflect stability, given that popular grievances will continue to simmer in the absence of a just peace.<sup>160</sup> The “lone knife” attacks that have proliferated since 2015 are one indication of underlying tensions, as are the protests that erupted around Jerusalem’s al-Aqsa Mosque in the summer of 2017.<sup>161</sup> The brutality of the 2014 assault on Gaza perhaps ensured a longer period of pacification than previous escalations. But there is little doubt that another conflagration is forthcoming. This will mark the continuation of Israel’s strategy of “mowing the lawn” as well as the perseverance of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. The manner in which the next war unfolds will be event-specific, but the underlying drivers remain unchanged.<sup>162</sup>

As for Hamas, until—and indeed if—it is conclusively pacified through an enforced peace deal, the equilibrium of belligerency between the movement and Israel will continue to mark relations between the two parties. Through Hamas’s effective containment in Gaza, Israel can forfeit the viability of any final resolution that would address Palestinian demands while blaming Hamas’s terrorism as the underlying cause of unrest. Hamas, for its part, can avoid making additional ideological concessions by arguing, rightfully, that Israel itself has failed

to accept either the need to fulfill Palestinian rights or the legitimacy of the 1967 borders. Both Hamas and Israel will continue to focus on short-term survival in a longer-term battle, where political gains can be reaped from intermittent confrontations on the battlefield. This status quo allows Hamas to sustain its power and Israel to maintain its colonization of the West Bank and its stranglehold on the Gaza Strip, where the besieged Palestinians continue to pay the highest price of all.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is an accidental book. I began this work a decade ago as a part-time project that would allow me to learn more about Israel-Palestine and, through that, my own history. The research was carried out and written over long morning and evening commutes to my day job, on weekends and evenings, in airport lounges, and during business trips and family holidays. Naming all the people who supported this unusual but most rewarding intellectual journey, and who suffered its consequences, would be impossible. To all of them I remain indebted.

In the summer of 2014, as Israel's Operation Protective Edge was starting in Gaza, this undertaking transitioned into a book project. All I remember of that summer is a feeling of absolute helplessness and horror; an inability to make sense of all that death and destruction, or to put an end to it. A coincidental introduction to Kate Wahl at Stanford University Press came at the right time. I decided to leave my job and expand my research into a book manuscript that could help me, and hopefully my readers, get some answers. Three years later, I submitted this manuscript. It is a most unexpected end to a journey that began in what now feels like another lifetime.

The people who guided me along this path are numerous. It all started with George Joffé, at the University of Cambridge, who encouraged my wide-eyed curiosities and patiently shared with me his vast knowledge of Israel-Palestine over many hours in his book-lined living room. In him, I met a mentor, friend, and fellow conversationalist on all things related to the Middle East.

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