Rebel-to-political and back? Hamas as a security provider in Gaza between rebellion, politics and governance

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ABSTRACT
After winning the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections and subsequently taking control of the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2007, the Palestinian Hamas – a hybrid political, social and military actor – undertook a complex process to ascertain authority and control over Gaza. The article focuses on understanding Hamas’s performance as a political party and a “rebel government” as well as the impact of this newly acquired role on the group’s strategy. Relying on primary sources, field-work and interviews with members of the Hamas government and its security sector, the study looks at Hamas’s role as a security provider and analyses the complex relationship between the institutionalized security sector and the group’s insurgent armed wing. Examining Hamas’s logic as a security provider and exploring the inherent tensions between political and insurgent logics allows for a better understanding of both the rebel group’s role as a political actor and the broader challenges behind the successful rebel-to-political transformations of non-state armed organizations. In doing so it contributes to the emerging literature on non-state actors’ shifts between ballots and bullets and on their potential role as alternative governance providers.

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Squaring the circle? Rebel groups as political parties and governance-security providers

An especially interesting, yet under-researched question in the emerging literature examining rebel-to-political transformations of non-state armed groups (NSAGs)1 pertains to these actors’ ability to operate as political and governance actors whilst retaining a military apparatus.2 How does preserving an armed wing affect armed groups’ operations as political parties and their broader relationship with institutional politics and the existing political order? Even though disarmament and demobilization are often seen as preconditions to rebel party-building,3 rebel groups can develop political and governance functions while maintaining formal or informal involvement in insurgency and rebellion. Better understanding this dynamic and the inherent tensions it produces can help shed light on the broader challenges of transitioning from bullets to ballots and
from war-making to state- and peace-making. Similarly, it can contribute to the weighty
debate examining under what circumstances rebel-turned-political groups can become
agents of stability or democracy.4

The present study examines how a complex NSAG, Hamas, balances “ballots and
bullets” by assessing the group’s political and governance record through its perform-
ance as a security provider. The research is based on field-work in the Gaza Strip
(mostly Gaza City) in January 2014. The data were collected through semi-structured
interviews with relevant stakeholders from the Hamas government and security
sector. Interviewees are fully identified except when they explicitly requested to have
their name withheld.

Hamas is especially interesting because it is a sui generis, hybrid organization that
blurs the lines between insurgent and conventional tactics in its military strategy. It
also merges extra-institutional and institutional politics through its activism as a grass-
roots socio-political movement and a political party. Finally, Hamas in Gaza de facto
challenges the boundaries between state and non-state actor. Indeed, Hamas’s political
role in the Strip can be seen through the lens of “rebel governance” – “the development
of institutions and practice of rule to regulate the social and political life of civilians by
an armed group”5. This concept is especially useful to look at how, when centralized and
formal state authority is missing or insufficiently strong, alternative providers of gov-
ernance emerge to either supplement or replace the state altogether.6

Rebel groups’ strength as political actors and governance providers can be
assessed as a function of their ability to make “collectively binding rules to hierarchi-
cally coordinate the provision of common goods”7 (legal or prescriptive sovereignty)8
and by their capacity to hold a monopoly on the use of force (effective or material
sovereignty). In examining Hamas’s record in balancing political and governance
imperatives and armed struggle, the research looks especially at Hamas’s ability to
effectively exercise as well as legitimize a monopoly on force in the Gaza Strip
after the group assumed its control in 2007.

This is because the monopoly on the “legitimate use of physical force” resulting in
the “capacity to unilaterally impose and enforce collectively binding decisions against
the resistance of those who oppose them”9 is a core attribute of statehood and effective
sovereignty. What is more, the exclusive use of collective force is not just necessary to
project authority and ensure control over the civilian population, but it should also be
seen as a key political tool to build legitimacy. The ability to enforce law and order can
be rightfully assumed as the acid test of governance, according to the principle of salus
populi suprema lex10 and to the notion of security as a primary public good that “helps
to constitute the very idea of ‘publicness’”.11

Effective law-enforcement and provision of security can increase the civilian popu-
lation’s acceptance of the rebel government, thus maximizing trust and quasi-voluntary
compliance and allowing NSAGs to rely on more than just coercion – itself organiza-
tionally and politically costly – to rule.12 Kilcullen’s theory of competitive control stres-
ses the importance of security as a key step in “creating a normative system that makes
people feel safe through the predictability and order that it generates”.13

In other words, a non-state actor’s ability to provide security for the population and
territory it seeks to control should not just be seen as a measure of its coercive power.
Even though security is indeed related to what Mann calls “despotic power” – the state’s
control over its citizens – it also reflects the NSAG’s “infrastructural power” – the
capacity to “penetrate and centrally coordinate the activities of civil society through
infrastructure”, and it can assist to boost the group’s discursive power. A functioning security sector serves indeed a key role in the symbolic politics domain, by allowing a non-state actor to closely mimic and reproduce the language, symbols and structure of a state – as an additional way to gain legitimacy.

Of particular significance, yet under-explored in the literature, is the relationship between a rebel group’s efforts to operate in the institutional political domain by becoming in charge of statutory security provision and its competing activities as an insurgent actor.

Accordingly, Hamas – the “Islamic Resistance Movement” (Harakat al Muqawama al-Islamiyya) – offers an especially interesting case to examine both the effectiveness and legitimacy of NSAGs as security providers and how the challenges of controlling a dual institutional-insurgent armed apparatus affect the group’s ability to balance between “ballots and bullets”. Since 2007, Hamas has heavily invested in building a shadow security sector – defined as “all state organizations which are legitimized to use or threaten the use of force in order to protect society and the liberty of its citizens.” But has the group’s parallel existence as a rebel group compromised its ability to provide security, stability and good governance?

To answer this question, the study first examines Hamas’s organizational evolution and transformation into a political party and a sui generis rebel government. It then zooms in on understanding what organizational shifts and external policies the group adopted to balance domestic provision of security and external armed struggle. Based on this analysis, the article assesses the success of Hamas’s transformation as a dual political-insurgent actor through the lens of its ability to provide security. Finally, in the concluding section, the article relies on Hamas’s case to reflect on the broader role of disarmament in rebel-to-political transformations of NSAG as well as on their potential to be agents of stability and democratization. In doing so it contributes to the emerging literature on non-state actors’ shifts between ballots and bullets and on their potential role as alternative governance providers.

Hamas: from anti-systemic actor to “hybrid” political party and institutional player in Gaza (2007–2014)

Since its initial creation as the armed wing of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1987, the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement has been characterized by high internal dynamism and fast-paced change.

At the military level, the group evolved from being a relatively unsophisticated violent faction that relied on individual stabbings against Israelis to becoming a well-trained and organized armed group capable of deadly suicide bombings and of launching rockets deep into Israel. What is more, both during Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009) and even more recently in the course of Operation Protective Edge (2014), Hamas demonstrated its transformation into a “hybrid” actor with high combat skills and focused on engaging its enemy through both classic guerrilla and terrorist tactics such as ambushes, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide missions as well as by employing more conventional stand-off tactics.

Hamas’s military evolution has been mirrored by an even more profound social and political transformation, with the group shifting from the margins to the centre of the Palestinian political stage. This process was accelerated following the group’s creation of a political party in 2004 and its victory in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC)
elections. After failing to create a unity government with its historical political foe Fatah, simmering tensions between the parties turned into open armed confrontation, culminating with Hamas assuming control of the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2007 and becoming its sole and uncontested ruler.

After 2007 Hamas claimed to have the *de jure* legitimacy on the basis of its 2006 electoral victory and asserted the takeover was due to Fatah being “unwilling to accept the results of Palestinian democracy and the ballot box.” Palestinian President and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas rejected this interpretation and reacted by dismissing the Hamas-led government and creating a parallel one in the West Bank, producing a schism within the Palestinian political system. The international community supported Abbas by dealing with the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA) as the legitimate government, and rejecting Hamas’s claims.

Despite the lack of international recognition Hamas moved ahead with its state-building project and invested in ensuring total control over the Strip while attempting to keep the political system and the economy afloat. It did so facing complex challenges, including the deep enmity of the Fatah-led government in Ramallah as well as an internationally supported Israeli policy of isolation of the Strip – resulting in sharp restrictions in access and exit of goods and people and withholding of international aid as well as tax and custom revenues.

By ruling Gaza, Hamas further transitioned from being a rebel, anti-systemic group into a hybrid armed-political organization involved simultaneously in institutional politics and governance as well as in extra-institutional armed struggle. This process was accompanied by increased tensions between the needs of Hamas as the “resistance” (*Muqawama*) and its broader ethos – calling for sustained confrontation against Israel – and the priorities of Hamas as a political party and a “ruler” – urging the group to take a more risk-averse position and to focus on internal power consolidation. Within Hamas, the at times diverging strategies of governance and armed struggle also led to increased organizational tensions between the group’s political, military and external leadership clusters.

To better grasp the inherent tensions between the governance and resistance imperatives as well as the role of security provision as a state-building tool, it is especially interesting to understand both how Hamas reformed the security apparatus in Gaza after 2007 and how it managed the dual insurgent-institutional force structure.

**Insurgent and institutional forces in Gaza: an overview of the post-2007 reforms**

Following its takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, Hamas found itself operating as the sole political authority in Gaza and managing both “resistance” and security through its armed wing – the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades (Qassam Brigades or IDQB) – and a newly established security sector.

One of the immediate effects of the Hamas takeover was the separation of Palestine into two distinct centres of power, respectively the PA in the West Bank – led by Mahmud Abbas and Fatah – and the Hamas-led government in Gaza. In the Strip, this meant the almost immediate collapse of the security sector, as the security forces on the PA’s payroll were ordered not to report for work. In an interview with the authors, Dr. Islam Shahwan, spokesperson of the Hamas Ministry of Interior, described
this as a significant challenge due to the sudden quantitative decrease of the security sector from over 50,000 to just 7000 employees. To cope with this challenge, Hamas relied on its own “Executive Force” (EF) to provide security in Gaza. The EF or Tanfithya had been created by Hamas in April 2006, following failed attempts by the Hamas government and Minister of Interior Said Siam to wrestle control of the PA security forces away from the Presidency and Mahmoud Abbas. Even though Abbas had initially banned the EF, Hamas continued to build it up, going from 3000 to 6000–7000 members between its creation and June 2007. The group heavily recruited EF members from both the Qassam Brigades and Hamas’s neighbourhood vigilante groups while placing the new force under the control of former Hamas military commander Abu Ubayda al-Jarrah. Before the takeover Hamas attempted to provide the EF with an aura of legitimacy by relying on uniforms and insignia to brand it as an official statutory branch of the PA aimed at curbing crime and disorderly conduct in the Strip. These efforts suggest that even before 2007 Hamas focused on the provision of security as a tool to gain domestic legitimacy and to brand itself as a capable governance actor. In other words, the creation and development of the EF was not just about exercising coercive power, but it rather represented an attempt to further transition from insurgent to institutional stakeholder.

To assist the EF in the immediate aftermath of the takeover Hamas also relied on the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, directly blurring the lines between internal and external security tasks and between governance and “resistance”. Yet, at least formally, this situation was short-lived as by October 2007 the Hamas government in Gaza restructured the security apparatus, dissolved and integrated the EF and created a formal separation between institutional and insurgent forces.

In re-structuring the security forces, Hamas implemented far-reaching changes, placing all the departments previously under presidential control under the Ministry of Interior and downsizing the entire security sector to roughly 15,000 employees. These initial reforms were carried out with the cooperation of veteran and well-respected Fatah police officer Tawfiq Jabr, who had accepted the role of police commander. The reformed security forces were restructured as the Civil Police; the Palestinian National Security Forces (PNSF), in charge of border security; the Security and Protection Apparatus, focusing on protecting key personnel and infrastructure; the Internal Security, tasked with counter-intelligence and preventing Israeli operations inside Gaza; and the Civil Defence Department, dealing with disaster management and response.

The Civil Police – in charge of ensuring law and order in Gaza – lays at the core of Gaza’s reformed security sector. Its tasks included road traffic control, crime prevention and prosecution, drugs control, patrolling and crowd control, among others. The police was first developed after the 2007 takeover and subsequently rebuilt after the 2009 Israeli Operation Cast Lead, which heavily targeted the civil police and its infrastructure. During Cast Lead, both the Minister of Interior, Said Siam, and the police commissioner, Tawfiq Jabr, were killed, the latter in an attack on the police academy’s graduation ceremony.

Newly appointed Interior Minister Fathi Hammad picked up the pieces in the spring of 2009. In the same period, the Hamas government also invested in establishing a Police College to address the shortage in human resources and to offer specialized training. In parallel with the college, the Ministry of Interior established a Training and Administrative Development department, tasked with organizing courses for its
employees as well as with partnering with other ministries and local (and, when possible international) NGOs, and investing in research and development. This is in addition to the Arafat Police Academy, which existed before the 2007 takeover.

Beside the civil police, the other main branch of the security sector, the PNSF, was tasked with protecting the border, preventing smuggling and trafficking, and regulating “suspicious behaviour” along the border area. In an interview with the authors, Eng. Jobeer Dahman, a Captain in the PNSF, emphasized the civilian nature of the PNSF and its mandate. In a separate interview, Sayed Abu Sham’allah, Public Relations and Media Officer of the PNSF, further explained that the PNSF was additionally tasked with implementing orders from the Ministry of Interior aimed at preventing specific groups or individuals from reaching the border areas (for example in the context of the implementation of a ceasefire agreement with Israel, to prevent rogue individuals from launching rockets).

In parallel with these statutory forces, Hamas after 2007 continued to operate through its military wing – the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades. The IDQB were set up in the early 1990s as a functionally separated and highly secretive wing, in order both to protect it from Israeli security forces attempts to target or infiltrate it and to maximize its freedom of action and flexibility. The group sees itself as part of a “movement of national liberation” and states that its main objective is the liberation of “all Palestine.”

While technically subordinated to the Diaspora-based Political Bureau and bound to comply with the directives issued by the group’s directive organ, the Shura Council, the IDQB enjoy great tactical freedom and independence.

Operationally, the history of the Qassam Brigades shows remarkable adaptation to its complex combat environment, evolving from conducting relatively unsophisticated acts of political violence in the early 1990s to engaging in large-scale suicide terrorist attacks and, especially since 2005, rocket attacks. After the Israeli unilateral disengagement from Gaza the group focused on qualitative and quantitative growth as well as on boosting its grassroots presence through neighbourhood-based militias aimed at “local community protection.” After 2007, the IDQB gained freedom of movement inside the Strip and further evolved towards becoming a quasi-army. They invested in weapon production as well as acquisition, focusing on increasing their artillery capabilities – through rockets and mortars – as well as on anti-tank weapons, IEDs and target-designed explosives, seen as part of the group’s effort to prepare for direct engagement with the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). At the same time, the IDQB’s coffers swell through their involvement in Gaza’s tunnel economy. Indeed, after 2007 and in order to cope with its isolation, Hamas invested in a sophisticated network of tunnels across the Egyptian border. A vital source of income for Hamas – through taxation – as well as an important means for basic goods to enter Gaza, the tunnels became just as crucial for the IDQB, with the Brigades profiting from their direct involvement in the smuggling business. Hamas’s military wing also relied on the underground tunnels to bolster its military apparatus as well as for defensive and, more recently, offensive operations.

With the newly acquired capabilities, the Qassam Brigades began to operate as a de facto army, under the influence of Hezbollah’s model of “hybrid warfare” employed during the Second Lebanon War in July 2006. They accordingly organized in divisions, brigades, battalions, platoons and units and partitioned the Gaza Strip territory into military districts, including northern, central and southern sectors as well as a Gaza
City sector, resembling a regular military. Similarly, again in line with the “Hezbollah model”, the Qassam Brigades developed both offensive and defensive tasks, with Hamas ground forces targeting the Israeli army within the Strip through hit-and-run operations, ambushes, IEDs and standoff tactics and with the group investing in developing a multi-layered defensive system involving both irregular tactics and semi-conventional combat in urban terrain, including by holding ground.

In terms of tasks, the Qassam Brigades began to represent their mission in line with a regular army’s primary function of territorial defence against external threats, also relying on the absence of the Ministry of Defence – itself part of the Oslo framework setting up Palestine as a demilitarized state – to emphasize the separation between the Gaza institutional security sector developed under the Ministry of Interior and the Qassam Brigades. While emerging as an autonomous de facto army, the Qassam Brigades still operate on the basis of the broader ideological concept of “resistance” (Muqawama) – a comprehensive framework based on an ethos that emphasizes capacity for sacrifice, ideological purity and a deep sense of individual religious duty. Its translation in military terms generates an operational concept characterized by a willingness to engage in a protracted war to exhaust the enemy as well as in efforts to cause as many casualties as possible and to redirect the struggle to the civilian environment to create moral dilemmas within the enemy. The merging of these operational concepts is clearly reflected the IDQB’s statement on the occasion of the 27th anniversary of Hamas’s foundation in December 2014, declaring itself to be

working as the al-Qassam army (…) with its units of mujahideen, which today involve (…) a unit of artillery, an elite unite, a tunnels unit, a snipers unit, an armour unit, an infantry unit and a defence unit to repel further attacks from the Zionist enemy.

Since 2007 the Qassam Brigades’ status in Gaza has been highly ambiguous, with the group operating as Gaza’s de facto, hybrid, non-institutionalized yet recognized armed forces. Indeed, on the one hand the IDQB focused on external tasks normally associated with a regular army. Unlike a regular army, however, the IDQB were not – formally or informally – taking orders from the Hamas government and did not recognize the group’s political leadership as their own superiors. On the other hand, the group was officially recognized – albeit not controlled – by the government and at times it assisted in internal law-enforcement operations. Finally, to make matters even more complicated, double membership between the IDQB and the regular security sector contributed to further blurring the lines between insurgency and governance.

Reconciling bullets and ballots? Hamas’s provision of security

There is no question that, after the 2007 takeover of Gaza, Hamas heavily invested in developing both its “rebel forces” – through the IDQB – and the institutional security sector in Gaza. A telling sign of how much the Hamas government cared about its record as security provider is certainly the fact that of the roughly 40,000 employees on Hamas’s payroll in 2014 more than 15,000 were part of the security sector.

But how did Hamas fare in terms of effectively providing security? The group’s performance in the security realm can be examined by relying on the following parameters, commonly used in the security sector reform and good governance literature:

- monopoly on the use of collective force;
effectiveness of the security sector in providing security;
level of professionalism and de-politicization and existence of clearly defined roles,
rules, procedures and mandates;
adherence to the rule of law, predictability in administering law-enforcement and justice (fairness) as well as transparency, accountability and clear oversight.

Firstly, monopoly on the use of collective force is a crucial indicator of effectiveness in the provision of security as well as a key measure of effective sovereignty. It is therefore not surprising to note that immediately following the June 2007 takeover Hamas invested greatly in reigning in the public display and use of weapons in Gaza, a move that led the group to directly tackle the previous freedom of action of powerful local clans and families. While this campaign, in addition to a more comprehensive investment in lowering street crime, did significantly increase the Hamas government’s level of control over the use of force in the Strip, it still did not resolve the broader issue of how to interact with armed factions operating in Gaza.

Regulation of competing and allied non-statutory “resistance” groups in Gaza created inherent tensions between governance and armed struggle. To dodge this challenge, Hamas adopted a complex approach to “resistance” groups, with the government insisting on the necessity to coordinate armed campaigns against Israel and alternating between openly curbing other armed factions’ activities and turning a blind eye and allowing them to operate. At the same time, the Hamas government also clearly stressed that any direct challenge to Hamas’s sovereignty over Gaza would be met with armed force to neutralize the perceived threat. A case in point was Hamas’s reaction to Jund Ansar Allah—a Salafi-jihadist group—proclamation of the “Islamic Emirate” of Rafah in August 2009, which led to a swift and brutal crackdown against the group as well as its supporters and leaders.

Hamas’s inability to ensure complete monopoly on the use on force transcends the operational level and is intrinsically connected to the group’s attempts to balance “resistance” and governance. Indeed, Hamas’s need to preserve its parallel armed apparatus as well as its ethos and reputation of “resistance” results in a powerful deterrent against enforcing a zero-tolerance policy with respect to the existence and operation of other armed groups. In turn, this de facto places a constitutive limitation on the rebel government’s monopoly on the use of force as well as on its capacity to act as a regular institutional political actor. Of course, the proliferation of armed factions is by no means exclusive to Gaza: competing armed groups also exist in the West Bank, where — unlike the case of Hamas in the Strip — the PA cannot rely on continuous and uncontested territorial control to ensure its sovereignty.

This predicament is also reinforced by the existence of the Qassam Brigades as a highly autonomous and formally separate “non-statutory” group operating in Gaza. This creates a sui generis situation where Hamas, the rebel government, shares its monopoly on the use of collective force with the group’s military wing. Although the IDQB are part of Hamas and self-identify as an integral part of the organization, their de facto autonomy and independence from the political leadership and the government challenge the latter’s exclusive claim to force.

Secondly, Hamas’s record as an institutional security provider can be seen as a function of the security sector’s ability to preserve law and order in Gaza. One of Hamas’s main achievements in the aftermath of the takeover was to quickly reign in crime, unlawfulness and “anti-social behaviour.” Beyond the group’s obvious interests in
exaggerating its own achievements, still – based on both public opinion polls and direct observation – it is possible to affirm that after 2007 the general feeling was that Gaza’s streets were generally more secure and that petty crime was more forcefully dealt with (see Figure 1). Interestingly, the general public rate of approval for the Hamas government seems to be influence by the overall perception of security (see Figure 2).

The rise in the public perception of safety is especially important to note because Gaza before 2007 was indeed characterized by a weak and generally ineffective security sector. After 2007, the situation improved, with reported drops in the number of assaults and murders and with a general rise in the number of registered and attended complaints (although the absence of independently verified data on crime rates prevents reporting of more precise numbers). At the same time, the positive impact of the crackdown on crime and lawlessness should also be balanced with the problematic repression of political and civil opposition and growing restrictions in the public sphere.

A third key indicator of an effective security sector is the existence of clearly defined roles, rules, procedures and mandates, along with professionalism and de-politicization. Here, the record is decidedly mixed. On the one hand, one of Hamas’s important achievements in reforming the security sector post-2007 was indeed to create an overall more functional and effective structure characterized by clear command and control as well as a formalized division of roles and tasks.

At the same time, the complex and at times blurry relations between the Qassam brigades and the security sector represents the system’s Achilles heel. Technically, the IDQB are intended to be completely separate from the institutional security sector. In an interview with the authors, Dr. Islam Shahwan, spokesperson of the Ministry of Interior, asserted that the relationship with the “resistance” is better regulated under the Hamas government than it was before 2007:

![Figure 1. Public perception of security and safety (Numbers given in percentages, dismissing DK/NA values).](image-url)
Regarding the relations with the resistance movement, previously they had bad relations with the government (…) but nowadays they have very good relationships (…) and they have signed an agreement to define the duties and the tasks and to clarify the roles of both sides (…). The resistance movement is mainly along the borders, to defend the borders and deter the Israelis from an attack; whereas the Ministry of Interior and all its divisions are focused only on internal affairs and on protecting civilians (…).62

Yet, reality is more complex. At times the IDQB have carried out domestic law-enforcement, police work or crowd control. Najib and Friedrich explain that the Qassam Brigades after 2007 “have increasingly come to combine paramilitary action with interference in societal affairs”,63 de facto blurring the line between institutional and “resistance” tasks.64

Another grey area in terms of blurring the lines between insurgent and institutional forces is the role of the security sector during armed confrontations with Israel as well as its role in enforcing ceasefires. The security sector formally maintains that it does not participate “as per agreement with the resistance” in armed confrontations with Israel.65 Likewise, the security sector affirms it is not actively involved in issues pertaining to ceasefires with Israel, managed instead by “the different movements involved in the resistance”.66 Reality is more blurry, however, with plenty of room for overlap; for example, security forces arrest individuals who break an agreed lull in hostilities.67

In addition, another key shortcoming of the post-2007 security sector is its inability to be de-politicized and bi-partisan. According to the interviews, the legal framework for recruitment should prevent any kind of permeability between members of the “resistance” and the new cadres recruited for the police and security forces. For example, Dr. Ibrahim Habib stated that no former members of the muqawama (resistance) groups are allowed to go through the police admission process.68
Yet, in practice, dual membership between members of the security sector and both the IDQB and the Palestinian Revolutionary Committees is far from uncommon. What is more, the overall strategy of the Hamas government post-2007 has been in line with appointing supporters and members of the movement to all the main leadership positions in the legislative, judicial and executive branches of government.

Fourthly, an effective security sector can be evaluated on the basis of its adherence to the rule of law as well as on its level of transparency and accountability. The Ministry of Interior as well as the Hamas government in general repeatedly stress the strong focus on meeting international standards in police practices and complying with international law. From within the Hamas ranks, Ghazi Hamad explained: “Transparency in governance is a necessary precondition for accountability.”

Still, the security sector’s record is far from pristine, as shown by the lack of official data accessible to the public. More substantially, one of the main problems of the post-2007 anti-crime campaign carried out by the security sector is that it was also matched by a crackdown on internal opposition to the Hamas government. Similarly policing has also focused on “social control” and “moral policing”, for example by monitoring women’s attire or by regulating behaviour deemed as inappropriate.

In parallel, there have also been reports with respect to members of the security sector relying on extra-legal tools and engaging in human rights violations, ranging from abductions, to arbitrary detentions, to unlawful killings, with frequent abuses concerning suspected “collaborators” even as recently as the 2014 war with Israel. In this context, accountability remains an especially opaque issue. This is the case although the Hamas Ministry of Interior has invested in expediting systems to submit citizens’ complaints, while also creating human rights units, especially integrated in the Civil Police apparatus (see Supplemental data), and publicizing its desire to cooperate with human rights organizations in Gaza. Still, the inability to obtain independently verified data regarding individual accountability for human rights violations raises serious doubts regarding the actual record when it comes to investigating and punishing those responsible for human rights violations within the security sector (a shortcoming that the Gaza security sector shares with the PA security forces).

**Conclusion: rebel-to-political and back?**

Hamas, a complex political, social and armed organization involved simultaneously in rebellion, politics and governance, is an interesting case to examine how non-state actors’ parallel existence as rebel groups and political parties can affect the transition “from bullets to ballots” and the investments in institutional politics.

A quick overview of Hamas’s strategy post-2007 stresses how, without relinquishing its armed wing, Hamas still came to see governance as a core strategic priority. Here, the group used the provision of security as a key tool to boost both its power and its political legitimacy. At the most basic level, investing in security allowed the group to increase its effective control of Gaza and its citizens as well as to rein in competing armed factions and political opponents alike. The provision of security was also a key instrument to strengthen Hamas’s claims to legitimacy and “statehood”. Indeed, the Hamas government invested heavily in streamlining and reforming Gaza’s security sector to increase the level of control and coordination of Gaza’s political institutions. In addition, Hamas relied on the performance of the security sector to build legitimacy and project itself as a fully fledged competent, functional and legitimate state. The physical presence and
performance of the Hamas-controlled security sector in Gaza represented a powerful visual and symbolic representation of Hamas’s state-building. As such, it became key to Hamas’s discourse of effective and legitimate sovereignty in Gaza.

At the same time, Hamas’s deep investment in the provision of security did not produce a security sector that closely mimics that of a traditional state, but rather a hybrid, *sui generis* force structure along with an ambiguous dual insurgent-institutional apparatus.

On the one hand, some of the main shortcomings of the Hamas security sector – from the failure to tackle the proliferation of armed groups, to the partisan nature of the security sector, to the mixed record in ensuring fairness, transparency and accountability, to the impact of the generally centralizing and authoritarian tendencies of the government – are all shared by the PA security sector in the West Bank and the one in Gaza.

On the other hand, other flaws of the security sector in Gaza, and by extension of Hamas as a security provider, are very much distinctive and embedded in the dual, *sui generis* hybrid existence of Hamas as a political party and a government and as a rebel faction.

Firstly, Hamas’s limits in ensuring its monopoly on the use of force are intrinsically connected to the group’s attempts to balance “resistance” and governance, a predicament reinforced by the existence of the Qassam Brigades as an autonomous and formally separate “non-statutory” group operating in Gaza, resulting in a hybrid situation where Hamas as a rebel government shares its monopoly on the use of force with the group’s military wing.

Secondly, the blurred membership lines between the IDQB and the security sector, and – at times – between the mandate and tasks of institutional and insurgent forces, do affect the security sector’s capability to both be de-politicized and to preserve clear and distinct roles and functions amongst its different branches. Finally, this very same blurry situation negatively affects key issues such as transparency or accountability for human rights violations.

These observations are highly pertinent to the broader discussion on the modalities of rebel-to-political transitions in NSAG: they stress how a NSAG’s involvement in institutional politics and investment in governance need not necessarily be preceded by disarmament and demobilization of its armed wing. At the same time, the long-term process of socialization and integration into the political system and the future potential for domestic democratization are both significantly complicated by the efforts to reconcile rebellion and institutional politics. In this sense, the tensions inherent within Hamas’s quest to be an effective security provider and a “resistance movement” reflect the broader struggle between governance and rebellion and between the competing needs of political accommodation and military struggle faced by non-state armed providers of governance. This reflects the inherent and embedded obstacles of fully transitioning from bullets to ballots, from rebel to institutional political organizations, and from insurgency and war-making to governance and state-making.

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Notes

1. Non-state armed groups can be defined as organizations that are armed, willing and capable to use force to attain their political, economic or ideological goals and not under the formal or de facto control of a state. International Council on Human Rights Policy, *Ends and Means*; Schneckener, *Spoilers or Governance Actors?* 8–9; McHugh and Bessler, *Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups*, 14–16.

2. Some notable exceptions include Van Engeland and Rudolph, *From Terrorism to Politics*; Weinberg et al., *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups*; Martin, “Dilemmas of ‘Going Legit’”; *Armed-Political Organizations*.

3. Manning, “Party-Building on the Heels of War”; de Zeeuw, *From Soldiers to Politicians*.

4. Boudreau, “Security and Democracy”.

5. See Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers*; and Mampilly, *Rebel Governance*, 44.

6. Risse, *Governance Configurations*, 3.

7. Börzel *Governance with/out Government*, 8.

8. Asbach, *Sovereignty between Effectiveness*, 2.

9. Börzel *Governance with/out Government*, 13.

10. Literally, “The Well-being of the People is the Supreme Law.”

11. Loader and Walker, *Civilizing Security*, 8.

12. Willms, *Justice through Armed Groups*, 24.

13. Kilkullen, *Out of the Mountains*, 114.

14. Mann, *The Autonomous Power*, 188. Quoted in Agnew, *Sovereignty Regimes*, 443.

15. Born and Fluri, *Conclusions*, 104.

16. Turner, “Building Democracy”; Longo and Lust, “The Power of Arms”.

17. Al-Arabiya, *فتح و حماس توافقان*.

18. See Berti, *Non-State Actors*.

19. Rabbani, “The Making of a Palestinian Islamist Leader”, 70.

20. Sadiki, *Reframing Resistance*, 358–361.

21. Aviad, *Hamas’s Military Wing*, 6–7.

22. Interview by the authors with Dr. Islam Shahwan, spokesperson of the Ministry of Interior, Gaza Strip, January 16th, 2014.

23. Cavatorta and Elgie, *The Impact of Semi-Presidentialism*, 35.

24. Sayigh, *Inducing a Failed State*, 20; Cavatorta and Elgie, *The Impact of Semi-Presidentialism*, 50–51.

25. Milton-Edwards, *Order Without Law?*, 665, 671.

26. Sayigh, *Policing the People*, 6; 16–17.

27. Pelham, *How Islamists Govern*, 7.

28. Sayigh, *Policing the People*, 15.

29. Interview, Dr. Islam Shahwan.

30. Interview by the authors with Lieutenant Colonel Mr. Ayoub Abu Sha’ar, Police Spokesperson, Gaza City, Gaza Strip, 21 January 2014.

31. Human Rights Watch, *Precisely Wrong*, 6–7.

32. Interview by the authors with Dr. Ibrahim Habib, Vice-Dean for Academic Affairs, Civil Police Academy, Gaza City, Gaza Strip, 18 January 2014.

33. Interview, Dr. Islam Sahwan; Sayigh, *We Serve the People*, 63–64.

34. Interview by the authors with Eng. Jobeer Dahman, Captain in the Palestinian National Security Forces, Gaza City, Gaza Strip, 20 January 2014.

35. Interview by the authors with Col. Mr. Sayed Abu Sham’malah, Public Relations and Media Officer, Palestinian National Security Forces, Gaza City, Gaza Strip, 20 January 2014.

36. Interview, Eng. Jobeer Dahman.

37. Interview, Col. Mr. Sayed Abu Sham’malah.

38. Kurz and Nahman, *Hamas: Radical Islam*, 16–18; Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*, 173; Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*, 115.
Brigades of Martyr Izz ad-Din al-Qassam-website.http://www.alqassam.ps/arabic/#!/

Mishal, The Pragmatic Dimension, 582; Gunning, Hamas in Politics, 98–99.

See Berti, Armed-Political Organizations, 82–83.

Sayigh, Policing the People, 46.

Interview by the authors with retired high officer Israeli Defence Forces, Herzliya, 10 February 2014.

“Hamas’s Military Buildup in the Gaza Strip.”

Pelham, Diary.

Pelham, Gaza’s Tunnel Phenomenon, 10.

Pelham, Diary; and ibid.; Aviad, Hamas’s Military Wing, 8.

Interview by the authors with reservist in the Nahal Brigade, Israel Defence Forces. Tel Aviv, 3 February 2014.

Johnson, Hard Fighting, 116–119, 140–141; Cohen, Hamas in Combat, 7–11

Interview J.D., officer in the National Security Forces in Gaza Strip, 17 February 2014.

“مﺎﺴﻘﻟﺍﺐﺋﺎﺘﻛ،ﺔﻳﺮﻜﺴﻌﻟﺍﺕﺎﻧﺎﻴﺒﻟﺍ،ﻯﺮﻛﺬﻟﺍﻲﻓﻡﺎﺴﻔﻟﺍﺏﺎﻄﺧ 27 ﺳﺎﻤﺣﺔﻗﻼﻄﻧﻻ” [Brigades al-Qassam, Military statements, “Al-Qassam conmemorate 27 anniversary of Hamas institution”]. See http://www.alqassam.ps/arabic/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85/5221/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%9A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%89-27-%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3.

Sayigh, We Serve the People, 8; al-Sharq al-Awsat, Funding Government.

Ignacio Cano, Policía y su Evaluación; Caparini and Furi, Relevance of Democratic Control, 8; Karkoszka, The Concept of Security.

International Crisis Group, Ruling Palestine I, 8.

Al-Jazeera, مظل زعم جد انصار.

Sayigh, Policing the People, 25.

Nissenbaum, Hamas Promotes ‘Gaza Riviera’.

Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights, Jungle of Guns & the Law of the Jungle, 6–22.

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Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israeli Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center (IICC), Members of Hamas, 1.

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