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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Syria on Gaza: Incongruity in the Regime's Resistance Discourse

Policy Analysis Unit – ACRPS | Sep 2014

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**Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies**

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

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## Introduction

Operation “Protective Edge”, Israel’s offensive against Gaza that was launched on July 8, 2014 differed from “Pillar of Defense” launched at the end of 2012, in that it took place in the midst of a regional counter-revolution. The new environment was typified by the presidency of Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt. Official reactions from Arab states and regional players to this most recent Israeli aggression were also more varied compared to previous aggressions. Qatar and Turkey provided political, media, and possibly also financial support to the Palestinian resistance factions. Meanwhile, the so-called “moderate” Arab states either equivocated between the Israelis and Palestinians or even condemned the Palestinian resistance movements and their rejection of an Egyptian peace initiative, going so far as to blame them for the innocent lives lost as a result of the Israeli attacks.

Another difference is that the “Resistance Axis” comprising Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, was not to be found at the table during this latest conflagration. Within this group, the Syrian regime’s position merits particular attention for the way in which it has shifted along with the region’s changing political landscape. This demonstrates the reliance of any regime support for Palestinian resistance on the regime’s interests, in particular after the birth of the Syrian revolution.

## Hamas as Part of the Axis of Resistance

Ceasing support for Palestinian resistance movements – and specifically Hamas and Islamic Jihad– and their expulsion from Syrian territory, was an explicit condition laid down by then-Secretary of State of the United States Colin Powell during a visit to Damascus in May, 2003. Despite American pressure however, the Syrian authorities refused to expel the leaderships of these Palestinian movements, which the US State Department had designated as terrorist organizations, from Damascus. Later, the failure of the US mission in Iraq, and the ability of resistance movements based within both Lebanon and Palestine to withstand Israeli efforts to crush them, helped to crystalize the Resistance Axis, which at the time included both Hamas and Islamic Jihad as well.

In December 2008, when Israel launched Operation Cast Lead on the Gaza Strip, Syria, together with Qatar, spearheaded an effort to convene an emergency Arab summit aimed at bringing the aggression to an end. At the time, “moderate” Arab states prevented a quorum required for the convening of such a summit. Syria and Qatar

resorted to holding the “Gaza Summit” in Doha on January 16, 2009, bringing together regional powers who concurred on the need to confront Israeli aggression and support Palestinian steadfastness. On the ground, Syria backed the military efforts of Hamas during Cast Lead by relaying information on Israeli air sorties that were detected by Syrian radar installations<sup>1</sup>. Domestically, the Syrian government also facilitated a grassroots donation campaign, with the Syrian public making donations for the benefit of Palestinians in Gaza.

## The Syrian Revolution : Hamas Cast Outside the Axis of Resistance

With the birth of the Syrian revolution on March 15, 2011, the Hamas leadership used its influence in the country to attempt to contain the crisis and mediate between the regime, the protesters , and the organized political opposition. Hamas’ mediation efforts were aimed, essentially, at persuading the Syrian government to cease using violence and embark on genuine reforms that would assuage the protestors. Once the peaceful protests became armed – a result of the use of brutal force– the regime requested Hamas’ unconditional support against the revolutionary movement. That demand was echoed by Iranian envoy Qasem Soleimani. Following their refusal to abide by these demands, Hamas leaders began to leave Syria in December 2011. By November 2012, the Syrian authorities had ordered Hamas offices in Damascus to close permanently. Islamic Jihad maintained relations with the Syrian regime but adopted an ambiguous stance towards the revolution, save for one attempt to call for dialogue between the various Syrian parties and demanding that “painful concessions be offered to end bloodshed and preserve the integrity of Syria.”<sup>2</sup> The worsening security conditions in Syria however prompted Islamic Jihad’s Secretary General, Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, to leave for Cairo in August of 2012. During the recent war on Gaza, sources indicated he was living in Beirut.

Its standoff with Hamas affected the Syrian regime’s overall approach towards resistance movements. When Israel launched Pillar of Defense on the Gaza Strip on November 14, 2012, the Syrian government issued a single terse statement on the first day of the assault, in which it denounced the aggression and condemned the

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<sup>1</sup> Interview by ACRPS with a member of the Hamas political bureau in Doha on July 23, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with general secretary of Islamic Jihad Ramadan Abdullah Shalh on the Liqah al-Youm program on *Al-Jazeera*, March 15, 2014, <http://goo.gl/2CNedb>.

assassination of leading Hamas figure Ahmad al-Jaabari, whom it referred to as a martyr.<sup>3</sup> Syria's national press and the official media covered the events closely, but , regime supporters were critical of Hamas' position on the Syrian crisis, and skeptical of its ability to stand up to Israeli aggression in unofficial channels and in social media.

Reactions to Protective Edge were no different: Syria's ruling Baath Arab Socialist Party and the People's Assembly, the country's legislature, issued declarations decrying the aggression as a "genocidal act" meriting an international tribunal to investigate its crimes on July 12. They were joined by the country's government on July 16. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Syrian regime exploited Gaza's recent crisis by releasing a statement claiming that the goals of the Israeli aggression on Gaza complemented the aims of the "terrorist war on Syria" to target the axis of resistance and force it to surrender.<sup>4</sup>

In his inauguration speech on July 17, 2014, Bashar al- Assad stated that his government would remain committed to the Palestinian cause. He did make a distinction, however, between the Palestinian resistance and Hamas, which he deemed to be a "fraudulent" resistance movement. In his words,

*"...requires us to distinguish carefully between the Palestinian people who resist, whom we must support, and some ingrates among them [...] between real resistance fighters, whom we must back, and those amateurs who wear the garb of resistance according to their interests and to improve their image and bolster their power. If we do not do this, then, consciously or unwittingly, we will be serving Israeli goals."<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> "Death of nine Palestinians and dozens of injured in open-ended Israeli attack on Gaza; the resistance responds by targeting settlements and Tel Aviv; Syria condemns and America justifies", *Al-Thawra*, November 15, 2012, <http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/archive.asp?FileName=35192286420121115013754>

<sup>4</sup> "People's Assembly and regional leaders of the Baath Party and the Union of Ulema in Syria: the Israeli attack on Gaza is a genocidal war that demands an international tribunal for the occupation and its supporters," *Sana*, July 12, 2014, <http://goo.gl/we8o6L>; and "Draft bill to enable waiving membership in housing associations without resort to the courts," *Tishreen*, July 16, 2014, <http://tishreen.news.sy/tishreen/public/read/320343>.

<sup>5</sup> "President Assad swears the constitutional oath: The Syrians foiled the terrorists and their masters [...] We will reconstruct Syria and continue to strike and terrorism and carry out reconciliations," *Sana*, July 17, 2014, <http://goo.gl/jMUHWW>.

In line with the above, state controlled media continued to refer to the Palestinian factions fighting in Gaza as “the resistance”, but avoided direct references to Hamas. Instead, these media deemed as “genuine” resistance movements those factions aligned with the Syrian regime, such as the Jihad Jibreel Brigades of the PFLP-General Command, which, according to official Syrian media, bore the brunt of resistance during the Israeli onslaught on Gaza and caused the greatest damage to the Israeli army. Notably, that particular formation is completely aligned with the Syrian regime and is fighting alongside it on many fronts in the environs of Damascus, while its presence in Gaza is negligible.

## Defining Resistance

The Syrian regime’s relationship with resistance movements has always been contingent on the regime’s survival strategies and the extent to which those resistance movements serve its foreign and domestic policies. The Syrian regime supported Hamas when doing so served to bolster Damascus’ regional standing, and negotiating power and leverage with Washington. As soon as Hamas refused to stand with the regime in the oppression of the Syrian people, the group was quickly discarded as an “ingrate,” which played at resistance: this was a jibe that at one time had been used to tar all Palestinian resistance movements, particularly Fatah.

In reality, the makeup of the Syrian regime and the lifestyle of its members, especially under President Bashar al-Assad, could not be further removed from the idea and principles of resistance. Yet the deterioration of Syria’s relations with the West, particularly after the occupation of Iraq and the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, has forced Damascus to strengthen its ties with political Islamist movements that espouse a discourse of resistance. This argument is corroborated by the behavior of the regime once its objectives no longer aligned with those of movements opposed to US policy in Iraq and Palestine. The minute that Hamas declined, as a matter of humanitarian concern and principle, to support the regime’s approach to the revolution, it was deemed to be a fraudulent resistance movement: this, despite the fact that it is Hamas which is combatting the Israelis on the ground alongside other Palestinian factions. The regime’s malleability and vacillation is also evidenced in its firm alliance with the government of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, formed after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, despite the fact that Maliki’s regime owes its existence and survival to the American occupation.



In the eyes of the Syrian regime, "Resistance" is a title for which only its supporters are worthy, even if these latter are supporters of Israel. Its opponents, even if they are locked in battle against Israel, are deemed traitors and frauds. The Iranian press, another pillar of the "Resistance Axis", have even taken to calling the Houthi Movement the "Yemeni Resistance": an explicit case of the title being conferred on a state's political allies and those with which it identifies on a sectarian basis, this provides us with another example of how efforts to redefine the word has become absurd.

Ultimately, the Syrian regime's position on Operation Protective Edge differs little from that of Egypt. In both cases, the regime's foreign policies and its relations with regional non-state actors are determined by its struggle for legitimacy with domestic protest movements. One small difference in the Syrian case is the regime's reliance on the mantra of "Resistance" as a way of deriving legitimacy from popular and principled causes of national concern.