

Non-State Power: The Case of Hamas

Written by Glen Segell

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GLEN SEGELL, FEB 18 2019

This article argues that the concepts and descriptors of hard and sharp power are relevant to non-state actors, the case of Hamas in Gaza since 2017, even if they were conceived as concepts and descriptors for state actors. The article commences by a review of the definitions of different types of power and then proceeds to show how Hamas as a non-state actor uses hard and sharp power in its struggle against a state actor, Israel. Israel uses hard and soft power, that are combined into smart power.

Such a review of the definitions of power and the explanation of the use of them by Hamas as a non-state actor is a significant case for understanding the application of concepts and descriptors in International Relations. The field of International Relations and with it the concept of hard power were born with the state, in mind, as the main if not the sole actor. The emergence of sharp power was to explain how authoritarian states, not capable of using soft power resorted to other means. This article is significant because it shows that non-state actors are also significant actors in International Relations, and that they use hard power and sharp power. The article proceeds with a review of the definitions of power and then determines the case of Hamas as relating to them.

Types of Power

Power has many definitions. One of which is the ability or capacity to do something or act in a certain way. Another is the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events. Both mean getting what you want when you want it. There are means, methods and techniques beyond that of the use of physical force, such as the threat thereof. You don't necessarily need to have the capability. All that's required is the perception that you have the capability. The essential difference then is not just the means, but rather the method or technique.

This is significant in today's world typified by social media and sometimes post-truth that relates or denotes circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. A population could be influenced by that which is not factual or fabrications of varying degrees aka the buzzword fake-news.

While there are many good reasons to have a critical view of generalizations the idea of post-truth captures important challenges to how power is exercised and invites reflection on the study of International Relations (IR). IR was born looking at the state as main or even only significant actor throughout history. This article argues that non-state actors are as relevant as state actors and wield power. The more we research the more we can distinguish between different types of power and how they are used by whom and in doing so find that the same concepts and descriptors of power are applicable to both state and non-state actors.

In order to show this, this article will continue detailing the main characteristics of each concept of power to show the main differences between hard, soft, smart and sharp power. It will then discuss the case of a non-state actor, Hamas, showing that descriptors of power often used for states in international relations can also be applied to non-state actors.

Hard Power and Soft Power

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The field of international relations developing in the 20th Century Cold War brought Harvard Professor of Government Joseph Nye, Jr. to conceive the term hard power to describe the power interactions in the international arena. Hard power according to him and those subsequently using the term was based on coercion, and largely a function of a country's military or economic might through threat or payment. In other words, hard power meant a state getting what it wants by using or threatening to use force or sanctions or inducing compliance with rewards.

Technological evolution, the opening of borders, and increased travel and migration enabled people to communicate more than ever before. The communication was not just one to one such as over a phone or one to many such as a radio or television broadcast. Communication was enabling a conversation. It also enabled the mass population to express its opinions. The new medium of communication brought Joseph Nye to coin the term soft power defined as a state getting what it wanted by attracting and persuading people through values, policies, institutions, and culture. The inference was that the new medium of communication could be used akin to a commercial advertisement or product branding to influence people.

Nye contrasted hard power and soft power when analyzing state activities. The latter he said is based on attraction as opposed to the former which is coercion and arises from the positive appeal of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies – as well as from a vibrant, independent civil society. It includes diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, economic reconstruction and development, as well as cultural influence like art, literature, music, cinema, design, fashion, and even food.

Around the time the US government started acknowledging the importance of soft power in the mid-2000s almost a decade after it was voiced by Nye, Nye also realized that soft power is rarely enough on its own. When it is used by states it is often to support or reinforce hard power. So, he introduced smart power as an extension, as a combination of hard and soft power where one reinforces the other. In other words, soft power when coupled with hard power, would be a force multiplier.

Smart power is the careful calibration of hard power and soft power to achieve political objectives. It refers to an approach that underscores the necessity of a strong military, but also invests heavily in alliances, partnerships, and institutions of all levels to expand one's influence and establish legitimacy of one's action. Smart power is a useful term that provides a framework for helping the analysis. It assists in showing when the framing of the information shades into deception, it limits the subject's voluntary choices. So this moves from persuasion to coercion.

This is significant because smart power as an approach underscored the necessity of a state to expand its influence and establish legitimacy of its actions. This highlighted political objectives and military objectives against not only the state leadership but also the civilian population. This opened the door for considering how non-state actors also wield power to influence both state leadership and the mass population through social media, for example.

Sharp Power

Sharp power was articulated by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig in 2017. The intention was to provide a concept, a descriptor, that would explain the rising influence of authoritarian states in the democratic world as being something different to soft power because the soft power characteristics of persuasion were not prevalent. They described it as the deceptive use of information by authoritarian governments for hostile purposes employing subversion, manipulation, distraction, and lies. They provided the cases studies of China and Russia, as examples of authoritarian states, who use information in a piercing, penetrating, or perforating manner into the political and information environments in the targeted countries, for example a democracy, the United States. They demonstrated that this means, and method of influence is not soft (persuasion) or hard (coercion) but, in their view sharp (subversive).

They provided cases to show how authoritarian states exploit freedoms in the Western world to covertly propagate their partisan and illiberal views and not engage in a legitimate effort to share alternative ideas or broaden the debate. Authoritarian states could do so because they have not and are not playing by the rules of governing democracies. They exploit the asymmetry of openness between their restrictive systems and democratic societies.

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Sharp power is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on distraction and manipulation. The means used to gain favorable public opinion are via sophisticated information technologies and social media with a reliance on subversion, bullying and pressure.

Sharp power is an excellent addition to the terminology. It doesn't make redundant the terminologies of hard, soft and smart power that are still very relevant to explaining contemporary international relations. Sharp power adds a term to help understand events that cannot be explained solely in terms of hard and soft power or their combined smart power. In one-word sharp power is when the target audience no longer has an ability to be discerning, it is determinism, where the target audience may not even be aware of it and so lacks the ability to be discerning

New Terms but Same Threats

The proliferation of terms, concepts and descriptors was very useful to understand the wielding of power in the international arena so that means could be contemplated to counter the threats posed. In doing the means used by actors, both states and non-states, formed the basis for deciding if it was wielding hard, soft, smart and sharp power. While some means such as military or economic are clear to observe as are their impacts and effects, it is not always easy to determine when or how an actor is using information and its impact and effects. For example hard power uses information to coerce while soft power uses information to persuade. But both are using information.

So an additional way to differentiate is to look at the responses of the target state or its population or the measures of effect and not just at the means used. For example in using hard power that is coercion or threat there is no interest in what the target wants or thinks because the objective is to make the target afraid and thus if it is afraid then hard power has been applied and has succeeded. Reassurance and mitigating the fear reduces the effectiveness of hard power. In soft power the adversary is trying to persuade the target to freely change. So, everything depends on what the target wants or thinks or voluntarism and there is a range of responses none of which involve fear. If the target's opinions or actions change then it has been effective.

In the same manner of evaluating the means used, and the responses and the measures of effect it is also possible to determine if soft or sharp power is being used. Public diplomacy for example is soft power because it aims to persuade but when the principle of voluntarism has been breached if the audience is injected by fake news; that is sharp power because the audience lacks the ability to be discerning. Sharp power is offensive by piercing, penetrating, or perforating the political and information environments in the targeted countries. The techniques of sharp power involve, psychological warfare and propaganda that are all very similar and not too different from commercial marketing strategy. Product branding, advertising and market research clearly shows how vulnerable and influenced any person is. It differs from soft power that harnesses the allure of culture and values to enhance a country's strength. When actors use sharp power it is accompanied by a determination to monopolize ideas, suppress alternative narratives, and exploit partner institutions. Sharp power and soft power are not mutually complementary. No actor can simultaneously use soft power attraction and coercive sharp power disruption and censorship against an open democratic society.

It is hard to counter both soft and sharp power in a democracy because the objective of the state is to permit and even promote openness for example the freedom of the press. But there are still watchdog authorities and censors that could limit deliberate deception. A way to counter both sharp power and soft power is to tarnish the wielder and to take an assertive posture on behalf of principles.

The Case of a Non-State Actor Hamas

As has been noted the descriptors and concepts of hard, soft, smart and sharp power were first coined in literature that used states as the case example to show their use by states. However in International Relations there are also non-state actors that have progressively become significant in the wielding of power. This article argues that these descriptors and concepts of power are also applicable and very useful to the analysis and understanding of the interactions between state and non-state actors, both in their actions, the means and the outcomes.

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This article proceeds to show this applicability of the various concepts of power to non-state actors by taking Hamas, a non-state actor, and Israel, a state actor looking at the types of power used in their interactions relating to Gaza 2017-2019. In doing so this article will show the value of the descriptors and concepts of hard, soft, smart and sharp power for the analysis of non-state actors.

Hard Power, Soft Power and Sharp Power in Gaza

There is no doubt that hard power was used constantly by both sides. There was a protracted and ongoing exchange of fire that included the launch of rockets and burning kites and balloons across the border by Hamas into Israel and the bombing by the Israel Air Force of targets in Gaza, and the economic blockade of Gaza by Israel.

But there was also another battlefield in addition to the geographical face-off between armed forces. It was the narrative of events targeted initially at each other's population through the global mass media and social media. When this failed to achieve its objectives there was then a counter-narrative also targeted at each other's populations as well as at the international media and the global opinion both of leaders and the public. This was also through the global mass media and social media. The objective of both sides was to influence each other's sides, attain legitimacy for their own policies, politics and actions and to delegitimize the other side's policies, politics and actions. There was indication that their own population was being target in this information campaign.

Looking at how both sides battled in and for the international media, world public opinion and the support of world leaders shows how soft and sharp power were wielded and how sharp power is an excellent descriptor for the means used by non-state actors, in addition to that used by authoritarian states.

The Narratives

The methodology to consider the case of Hamas, a non-state actor wielding sharp power for example in addition to hard power and Israel a state actor using soft power in addition to hard power is to look at the narratives provided by both sides in the global media and social media about events that took place. The narratives show an information warfare campaign. With such a methodology it is possible to ascertain both the means and the objective of the provision of detail and information and hence which definition of power is applicable. The styles can be differentiated by analyzing, for example, the use of adjectives, adverbs, hyperbole, rhetoric, in addition to the content. The events described by both in the narrative relate to the use of hard power by the other side.

In the case of the protests and demonstrations by Palestinians on the border fence between Gaza and Israel since 2017, usually on Fridays, the underlying message in Israel's narrative, written in statements issued by the Israel Defense Forces and other Israeli government offices is that Hamas is a ruthless and violent Islamic theocracy supported by a bellicose state Iran that constantly threatens and attacks civilians in Israel. The apparent goal in Israel's narrative is to persuade readers, in the Arabic and English languages, that Hamas is a terrorist organization that initiated and organized the protests and demonstrations, not oppressed citizens and that it is forcing suicide bombers to break through the border fence and perpetrate violence against Israeli civilians. In the case of Israel the style of the narrative was written as public diplomacy to attract namely soft power.

The underlying message in Hamas' narrative voiced by their leadership before the TV cameras and in social media video clips, in the Arabic, Hebrew and English languages and analyzed by others, is that it is the elected governance of a desert enclave facing a humanitarian crisis because of a prolonged blockade by Israel that is occupying other Palestinian territory and refusing to grant statehood to a nation. The narrative of Hamas presents the protests and demonstrations as innocent and peaceful initiated by suffering citizens to protest their awful economic and social conditions. They wish to show that the Israeli response is not proportional and that civilians including women and children are wounded and killed. The apparent goal in Hamas' narrative is to provide selective information to obtain condemnation of Israel in international bodies such as the UN Council on Human Rights. In the case of Hamas the style of the narrative is written, to persuade, to provide misleading information or deception by only showing and providing selective out of context information, namely it is using sharp power.

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Progressively on the Fridays that the Gaza demonstrations took place frictions escalated. Hamas threw firebombs, shot at Israeli soldiers, put explosives on the fence, and crossed into Israel's territory. Israel used riot control methods including teargas and live fire. There were casualties on both sides. However, there was no hard evidence to sustain the narratives of either side thus it was difficult for both sides to shape public opinion. The first stage of the information warfare campaign be it by soft power, Israel, or by sharp power, Hamas, didn't succeed for either side. Nor did hard power succeed for either side and the armed conflict continues.

The Counter-Narrative

Given that the initial information campaign didn't succeed both sides had a counter-narrative to the other side's narrative. In the counter narrative both sides appealed to each other's population's emotion and personal belief but also escalated to world forum attempting to apply third party pressure on the other side or at least to tarnish its image and validity and maybe delegitimize it. Analysis of the techniques, means, objectives and outcomes show that Israel continued to wield soft power and that Hamas continued to wield sharp power. Once again, the target-audience of both was not their own population.

Israel's counter narrative appearing in official government statements quoted in the Israeli mass media and social media, and the same worldwide, stated that Hamas wanted as many Palestinians as possible to be killed, including women and children, in order to obtain favorable media coverage, sympathy in global public opinion, denunciation from world leaders, and condemnatory resolutions from UN bodies. Israel stated that Hamas was using disproportionate means, namely violence, whereas peaceful diplomacy would result in a lifting of the blockade. Israel employed public diplomacy techniques and associated means to attempt to attract and persuade the residents of Gaza not to engage in activities that Hamas promotes and its preferred means. The video clips aimed at showing a better life than violence. In view of these it is possible to define Israel as using soft power. There is no evidence to suggest that Israel succeeded in this.

Hamas' counter narrative quoted in speeches in the United Nation and on social media, also quoted in the global mass media, accused Israel of committing war crimes by intentionally shooting and killing demonstrators. The video clips were selective of violence with no background information. There is no evidence to suggest that Hamas succeeding in attracting or persuading Israel's citizens through values, policies, institutions, and culture, or aiming to win through the positive appeal of its cultural and political ideals or from suggestions that these provide a vibrant, independent civil society. Hamas didn't engage in foreign assistance, civic action, economic reconstruction and development, or cultural influence like art, literature, music, cinema, design, fashion, or even food. So, Hamas by the given accepted definition was employing the techniques and means of sharp power in its provision of information namely the objective of deception.

However Hamas did succeed in gaining support from third parties. Perhaps its objective was easier to attain, namely a statement of condemnation from world leaders and it managed to achieve this. For example UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini called for an independent investigation of Israel's conduct and at the Vatican, Pope Francis lamented the killing of defenseless Palestinians. Hamas's narrative didn't offer a choice but called on the world to condemn Israel. Perhaps Israel's objective was harder to attain, that of reducing mass Palestinian support for Hamas and it didn't manage to achieve this. Israel's narrative left the door open for the target audience to decide, whether to support Hamas or not. The conflict with Hamas in Gaza persists.

Conclusions

This article argued that the concepts and descriptors of power even though conceived for describing state actors are relevant to describe non-state actors. The article commenced by a review of the definitions of different types of power and then proceeded to show how Hamas as a non-state actor used hard and sharp power in its struggle against a state actor, Israel. Israel used hard and soft power, that were combined into smart power.

This article used the methodology of the narrative of both sides, Israel and Hamas, to determine in their information warfare campaign whether soft or sharp power was being used in addition to hard power by military and economic

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means. The case of Hamas argued in this article shows that non-state actors are significant actors in International Relations and that they can and do wield power for example hard power and sharp power.

By looking at the difference in style and content of each narrative and counter-narrative and the apparent objectives therein it was possible to see the differences between soft and sharp power. Both sides had narratives that didn't rely solely on providing objective facts but aimed to influence or shape opinion. The analysis of Hamas' narrative provided evidence that it was wielding sharp power, in accordance with the definition of sharp power.

Even though Hamas, a non-state actor succeeded in gaining sympathy it wasn't unable to utilize this to further any other objectives. Winning an information battle, be it by soft or by sharp power, doesn't necessarily mean that the conflict is over.

The analysis of the narrative provided evidence to sustain the theoretical framework and premise that the essential difference in types of power is not just the ability, capability and intent but also the means, method or technique of both states and non-state actors. The analysis of the narrative provided evidence to sustain the theoretical framework and premise of the definition of sharp power that it is different from soft and hard power or their combined smart power in both actions and outcomes.

It is clear in the study of power learned from this case that it is not possible for actors, be they states or non-states, to determine whether sharp, soft or smart power would be able to achieve the ends or be more effective than hard power even if they had the capability for all types of power, and few do. There are no good sources about future outcomes only speculation.

Nevertheless the study of power from this case provides certain conclusions. It suggests that non-state actors that prioritize control and censorship over openness, would be deficient in soft power projection and success. So they would fall to using sharp power. When wielding sharp power non-state actors can cause distraction with key attributes of expression and manipulation of the mass media and public sensitivities rather than attraction and persuasion (soft power) or coercion (hard power). All that's required is to instill perception even without facts in the minds of the audience, that includes global leaders.

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