

– Hisham H. Ahmed

Chehab, Zaki

Inside Hamas:

The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement

Emeryville: Nation Books, (hardcover 2007, \$25.95)

(paperback 2008) 256 pages.

Hroub, Khaled

Hamas: A Beginner's Guide

London: Pluto Press, (paperback 2006, \$18.95)

192 pages.

Levitt, Matthew

Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad

New Haven: Yale University Press, (paperback 2007, \$17)

336 pages.

Tamimi, Azzam

Hamas: A History from Within

Northampton: Olive Branch Press, (paperback 2007, \$20) 372 pages.

IN A SEEMINGLY dramatic move in mid-2004, Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement which hitherto refused to participate in the Palestinian political system, expressed its willingness to be a part of that system.

Today, as the Bush administration claims to be re-starting a “peace process,” but with Hamas demonized and excluded from any role – and with Hamas-governed Gaza under a murderous Israeli siege driving its population toward semi-starvation – it's all the more important to look at the Palestinian Islamist movement as it really is. The books discussed here provide insights into the evolution of Hamas as well as the ideologically charged debate about its so-called “terrorist” character.

In 2004, combining both pragmatic and realist postures, Hamas declared its readiness to conditionally join the secular Palestine Liberation Organization. Such expressions by the movement certainly served as the prelude for its eventual agreement to participate in the second Palestinian legislative elections in 2006, and finally for forming the Palestinian government shortly thereafter.

Hamas reasoned that such changes served the interests of the Palestinian people. As “normal” as such steps may be, they signaled an important transformation within Hamas both ideologically and politically. Up until this evolution in the movement's political thinking, Hamas had historically refused to join the Palestinian political system and recognize its legitimacy: as a matter of fact, it was in the forefront of the opposition to this system since Hamas was established in 1987.

When Hamas was first formed, it considered the PLO a non-representative body of the Palestinian people. It thus refused to be a part of the Unified National Leadership of the first Intifada, because this leadership was associated with the PLO. Hamas organized its own separate Intifada activities, held its own strike days, and published its own leaflets. The idea of the democratic secular state espoused by the PLO was unacceptable to Hamas on ideological grounds.

Hamas refused to participate in the first legislative and presidential Palestinian elections in 1996 and called upon Palestinians to boycott. Furthermore, Hamas did not recognize the Palestinian

government that was formed, as it considered the Palestinian Authority (PA) to be an offshoot of the Oslo Accords, which Hamas vehemently opposed.

It is important to stress here that in practicing its ideological and political beliefs at such an early stage, Hamas had followed in the footsteps of its parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood, which was formed in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan Al-Banna, had all along opted to be in opposition to the political system in existence whether in Egypt, in Palestine since the establishment of the PLO in 1964, and to a lesser extent in Jordan.

The Brotherhood and its composite Islamic movements emphasized distinctiveness from the political norm: to them, political and ideological uniqueness has been an important, effective tool of indoctrination and mobilization. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood strongly opposed Nasser of Egypt at a time when his popularity reached levels high in the Arab World at large.

Similarly, when Palestinian nationalism as concretized through resistance to the Israeli occupation in the 1970s and 1980s was at its zenith, the Islamic movement in Palestine, i.e. the Palestinian wing of the Brotherhood and the precursor to Hamas, advocated non-involvement in direct political activities and preached confinement to religious educational duties. The national movement emphasized armed struggle to bring about liberation while the Islamists stressed subtle social transformation.

Hamas's fundamental change in political attitude toward the Palestinian political system in mid-2004 should not be underestimated, even if tactical rather than strategic in nature. In fact, this change in Hamas's attitude is in some sense reminiscent of an earlier equally important change in the attitude of the Islamic movement in Palestine in 1987.

Prior to the Intifada, the Islamists opted to stay outside the realm of combating the occupation under the rubric of being preoccupied with "educating" their constituency. However, when the Intifada broke out, the Islamists, particularly the young, realized that non-involvement amounted to political extinction. Hence, Hamas was formed as a way to underscore the change of attitude from the earlier one adopted by the Brotherhood.

In other words, both kinds of change, as evidenced in 1987 and in 2004, indicate among other things that the Islamists in Palestine, in spite of seeming rigid ideological principles, are willing to adapt in response to internal societal demands at very critical moments, although perhaps slowly and belatedly. There are other instances of adaptability by Hamas meant to satisfy internal demands as well as external expectations.

By emphasizing its distinct role in the Palestinian arena, Hamas altered the internal balance of powers in Palestinian society. The sole representative character enjoyed by the PLO since 1964 was seriously challenged by Hamas in 1987. In its attempt to contain Hamas, the PLO tried at the outset to incorporate Hamas in the Palestinian National Council, PNC, the Palestinian parliament in exile until the formation of the Palestinian National Authority. Hamas, which originally considered the PLO to be an outcast of sorts, quibbled with the PLO leadership over the size of its representation in the PNC. Thus the previously-held ideological rejection of the PLO was compromised in the interest of acquiring more seats in the Council.

The point here is that political considerations matter for Hamas no less than ideological positions. In almost every step taken or measure adopted since its establishment, political considerations have been at the forefront of Hamas's decisions. Take for example the fact that Hamas benefited from the deteriorating relationship between the PLO and countries in the Gulf during the Gulf

Crisis of 1990-1991 over perceived PLO siding with Iraq against Kuwait: most of the aid from the Gulf which previously used to be channeled through the PLO was directed toward Hamas.

Interestingly enough, while Hamas's opposition to the PLO mounted due to the latter's signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, Hamas as noted above refused to participate in the ensuing elections in 1996 in spite of its earlier repeated calls upon the Palestinian people to elect a new political leadership. Again, the point here is that Hamas is adaptive to circumstances and conditions in as much as they serve the movement's interests as defined by the leadership. The foremost concern for the leadership has been the desire to increase the size of the movement's membership in order to widen the power base of Hamas.

Thus while the Palestinian Islamic movement stood in opposition to the nationalists' embracing of armed resistance in the 1970s and 1980s, Hamas too stood in opposition to official Palestinian engagement in the Oslo political process: in 1993-1994, Hamas was involved in a number of military attacks against Israeli targets, in part to derail the peace process. It almost became routine to expect Hamas to launch a military attack on Israelis on the eve of a Palestinian-Israeli and/or Palestinian American negotiating session. All along, the objective was to enhance the popularity of the movement, especially given the static nature of the Oslo process and also given the increasing dissatisfaction by the Palestinian people with the performance of their negotiators.

In the midst of such competing tendencies in Palestinian society, the Islamist Hamas found it appropriate to ally itself with Marxist-Leninist leftist opposition to the leadership of the PLO. Such an amazing marriage of convenience can only be explained in pure political, certainly not ideological, terms.

Perhaps it is safe to assume that the increasing popularity achieved by Hamas when leading the opposition has surpassed its political development and maturation. The continued changing position by Hamas on some ideological and political issues, while reflecting pragmatism and adaptability, nonetheless signals confusion. It might be equally safe to suggest that Hamas's political evolution has been slower than its popular development: hence the shifts of attitudes by the movement toward the PLO and the centrality of elections in Palestinian politics.

Yet an even more illuminating development in Hamas's political thought has related to its position with regard to the nature and geographic scope of the Palestinian state. While principally stressing in its Charter of 1988 that the state will be built on all the land of historic Palestine, Hamas later on accepted the idea of a transitional settlement whereby the state will be established on the land occupied in 1967. Hamas's leaders went even as far as to offer a long truce, Hudna, for up to fifty years with Israel in exchange for fulfilling conditions previously enumerated by the PLO.

Palestinian Politics Transformed

Ironically, the Oslo agreement can be viewed as the event which served as the main turning point in the makeup and direction of the Palestinian political system, seriously altering the basis upon which that system was built since Fatah took over the PLO in 1969.

The contemporary Palestinian body politic was initially formed with the establishment of the PLO in 1964 principally to serve the interests of the Arab political system. Also ironically, both Nasser of Egypt and King Hussein of Jordan, who were in outright competition with each other over regional leadership, both supported the establishment of the PLO. Each attempted to veer the

PLO in his direction. This state of affairs continued until Yassir Arafat assumed leadership of the PLO on behalf of the militant Fatah in 1968-'69.

It can therefore be said that from 1969 to 1996, Fatah was the backbone of the PLO and the faction most capable of catering to Palestinian needs and demands. The primary tool for gathering support and increasing popularity was national in nature: the more resistance to the occupation the higher the level of popularity. This is, in part, why Fatah galvanized incredible popular support after it appeared triumphant on the Israeli army in the battle of Al-Karameh on the Jordanian border, on March 21, 1968.

Understandably, such Palestinian victory by a handful of commandos against the heavily-armed and well-trained Israeli army was compared by Palestinians and many other Arabs with the shameful defeat of all Arab armies in the six-day war of 1967. Following Al-Karameh, the PLO succeeded in establishing consensus in Palestinian society recognizing its unchallengeable representation of the Palestinian people.

This domestic/national recognition was followed by the regional Arab and international recognition of the sole legitimate representation of the PLO in 1974. Between 1969-1996, emphasis in Palestinian society was on Palestinian nationalism rather than on Islamism. The Declaration of Palestinian statehood in Algiers in November 1988 was a nationalist measure rather than an Islamist Endeavour.

The Oslo Accords created shock waves in Palestinian society, eventually leading to the reconfiguration of political cleavages. The consensus established earlier by the PLO was challenged and actually questioned by Hamas, especially as the PLO recognized Israel even while the latter remained an occupying power. To make matters worse, the unifying PLO was practically replaced by the complacent Palestinian National Authority (PNA, or PA).

At the same time, it was natural as a function of Oslo that the nationalist fervor which used to help Fatah acquire its domestic strength and popularity had to be held in check. There was no substituting rallying force around which Fatah members could gather and operate dynamically, except perhaps the symbolism of Yasser Arafat. Rampant economic and moral corruption in the PNA, a non-promising political process and continued Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people during the peace era, all were factors which provided opportunities for Hamas.

The establishment of the PNA necessitated significant changes in intra-Palestinian relations, particularly with Hamas. To some limited degree the PNA performed direct authoritative functions on the ground on a daily basis, a development which compelled both Hamas and the PNA to devise a whole new set of techniques for conducting relations between them.

Such a necessity became absolutely unavoidable as a result of the 1996 elections, when Fatah won the presidency and the majority in the Legislative Council. Hamas's refusal to participate or recognize these elections, however, complicated matters immensely. Fatah and its leadership were viewed as playing an authoritarian role and all the consequent corruption and decadence in the system was basically blamed on Fatah.

Another important turning point in the conduct of intra-Palestinian relations took place following the failure of the Camp David talks in 2000. As the second Intifada broke out on September 28, 2000 following Ariel Sharon's violation of the Aqsa Mosque, both Hamas and Fatah found themselves embarking on an entirely different relationship. While the pre-Intifada period was

characterized by competition and animosity, the Intifada era was marked with a greater degree of coordination and cooperation, in spite of some breakdowns every now and then.

The most important development at that time was that all Palestinian factions espoused direct resistance to the occupation. This in effect legitimated Hamas's advocacies during the Oslo era: In other words, due to the intensity of repression by the Israeli army, Palestinian factions found themselves driven to follow in the footsteps of Hamas, in many respects.

Certainly Sharon's measures and policies, especially after he became prime minister, resulted into two important developments on the internal Palestinian scene. For one thing, his continued policy of killing, incursion, settlement building, imprisonment and destruction unified Palestinians more than ever before. Regardless of political affiliation, Palestinians once more experienced the direct military rule of the Israeli occupation: unity of experience and of cause was the answer.

Secondly, Sharon diligently embarked on destroying the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority, rendering its security apparatus and ability to provide services almost null and void. In simple terms, he systematically and strategically weakened the PNA – in essence achieving one of the most important strategic objectives of Hamas. Of course, Hamas was the beneficiary. Its program calling for resistance acquired more popularity while that of the PNA, which continued to be based on negotiations and political settlements, lost momentum and came to be regarded as the cause of all ills.

Perhaps it was exactly at that stage where Hamas started to consider penetrating the Palestinian political system, understanding well that that system's old structure and operation was inevitably crumbling. Thus, the third determinant in the configuration of the internal Palestinian balance of power was the absence of Yasser Arafat from the scene in the midst of questionable circumstances. [Within both Palestinian and Israeli circles, it is widely considered that Chairman Arafat was poisoned – ed.]

By Arafat's death, Hamas calculated that there was hardly any obstacle in its way to extend its grip on the Palestinian political system in a phased manner. Therefore, winning the majority of seats in the Legislative Council in 2006 was only the first step, as Khaled Misha'al, the head of Hamas's political bureau, announced in celebrating the results of the elections. From Hamas's point of view, the second phase was the Palestinian presidency and the third was control of the PLO.

In effect, the Palestinian elections of 2006 led to redefining intra Palestinian relations all over again. Unity and co-operation were quickly replaced by disharmony and confrontation. Hamas, which previously led the opposition, now became the leader of the PNA, at least in its legislative branch. Neither Fatah nor Hamas could stomach the new situation. Neither of them was used to play the new role assigned to it. Fatah knew well how to be in the leadership of the PNA and Hamas, for its part, was accustomed to project opposition to the status quo: indeed, quite a dangerous recipe in a society torn by instability, tribalism and factionalism.

The most formidable challenge for the old PNA and for Israel and the United States then became how to deal with Hamas and what kinds of policies should be adopted to interact with a Hamas-led government. Should Hamas be placed under siege, or considered as the legitimate elected Palestinian government? Should the international community consider Hamas as a terrorist organization? Should Hamas be viewed as a "moderate" Islamic organization with whom one can do business if compared with Al-Qaida?

What are the ramifications of weakening Hamas at this stage, especially if no political settlement for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict seems to be in the making? Would Hamas be able to handle the new situation it inherited after it won the elections? Each of the books under review here sheds some light on some of these questions. By highlighting some of the essential points presented in these books, my objective here is to conclude with a critique of the current strategy utilized to deal with Hamas.

A Look Inside Hamas

In his *Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement*, Zaki Chehab, a Palestinian journalist living in Britain, reflects on how the world was shocked as Hamas won a landslide victory in the legislative elections in the West Bank and Gaza in January 2006. Chehab, who had access to many officials from the PNA and from within Hamas, notes that inside Palestine the results of such elections were expected.

Chehab reasons that the lack of success in the Oslo process left Palestinian society few options but to rally around Hamas's championing of armed resistance to the occupation. To further widen its base of popularity, as Chehab discusses, Hamas established a large network of social welfare, medical and educational programs to fill the gaps caused by the PNA.

Having followed Palestinian political groups for decades, Chehab was able to explain why Hamas managed to achieve such an astounding victory in the elections against the backdrop of many expectations and pollings to the contrary. Reviewing the history of the movement since its establishment around the outbreak of the first Intifada in 1987, Chehab suggests that it should have come as no surprise that Hamas would win the sympathy of most Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, notwithstanding the many political and economic difficulties the movement faces.

Chehab is able to present his information in an engaging manner, with a journalistic style that makes his work easily accessible to the general public. He tells us how the Israelis may have aided Hamas in its establishment during then 1980s, when they were encouraging an Islamist alternative to compete with the nationalist PLO. Showing how paradoxical things could become, he documents the stories of some controversial figures in Hamas, especially those who rallied behind suicide bombing. The originality of the interviews Chehab conducted with Hamas leaders will contribute to a better understanding of this quite controversial movement.

In *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*, another renowned Palestinian journalist and scholar Khaled Hroub meticulously provides Western readers with answers to many questions they raise about Hamas. Employing his expertise as a secular scholar who has written extensively about Hamas, Hroub presents invaluable information about Hamas's ideology, popularity and organization. Hroub explains why Hamas has achieved noticeable success in Palestinian politics, highlighting those factors that are usually ignored by the Western media.

Hroub also provides an overview of the history of the movement, informing his readers of the main principles upon which Hamas is based. Analyzing Hamas's political agenda, Hroub clarifies how and why Hamas managed to achieve victory over its local competitors in Palestinian society.

Although meant to challenge conventional wisdom on Hamas in the West, Hroub's work critically assesses Hamas's relations with the PLO, as well as its position toward Israel and suicide bombing attacks. The author points out that while Hamas's Charter of 1988 contained anti-Jewish

statements, with time Hamas has veered away from the original text, rendering that Charter practically obsolete.

Hroub argues that Hamas has come to differentiate between Zionism and Judaism. While many Islamic movements may have been affected by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, including Hamas, Hroub cautions his readers against generalizations: Hamas, Taliban and Al-Qaida are not the same, he stresses.

In attempting to analyze the interplay between Hamas's Nationalism and its Islamism, Hroub emphasizes that Hamas's foremost objective is to get rid of the Israeli occupation. While this might be largely true, Hamas has also tried to undo the status quo in Palestinian society by contributing to the weakening of the PNA. In addition, Hroub elucidates Hamas's heavy involvement in providing social, medical and educational services to Palestinian society at a time when such services are most badly needed.

Hroub's highly informative, well-researched book provides a refreshing wealth of information about a movement that has become the object of stereotyping and misunderstanding in the West. The author traces the evolution of Hamas as it grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood. Similar to that of Chehab, this book contributes to a better understanding of Hamas, its present policies as well as its future challenges and surprises.

Indicting "Alms and Arms"

In contrast to Chehab and Hroub, Matthew Levitt, formerly a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a deputy assistant secretary in the Treasury Department, employs his background as an analyst in the FBI to present a critical picture of Hamas in his *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*.

Levitt provides what might be considered as the indictment of Hamas in the court of Western opinion. For Levitt, Hamas should be viewed as one of the world's most dangerous terrorist organizations; as such Hamas poses one of the main obstacles to peace in the region. Levitt details what he considers to be the tactics employed by Hamas to finance itself and to keep its structure intact: Hamas, from Levitt's point of view, is involved in money-laundering and militant attacks, primarily to boost its program of indoctrination. Reviewing Levitt's book, the Israeli writer and author Benny Morris commented that Hamas combines "alms and arms" to advance its agenda.

Heavily documenting his information, the author insists that there is no separation between Hamas's social, political and military structure. The movement is one which works to bring about terrorism. Everything that Hamas does, as far as Levitt is concerned – its religious, medical, social welfare and political activities – all are meant to aid in the strengthening of Hamas's violent orientation.

Levitt's book is perhaps one of the most widely read and praised work on Hamas in the West. Forwarded by none other than Dennis Ross, the Clinton Administration's envoy for peace in the Middle East, Levitt's has been well received and positively evaluated in many circles in the West. His book has been described as "compelling," "enlightening," "authoritative" and masterful.

To be sure, the author goes out of his way to back up his analysis with a lot of information from declassified intelligence documents and Israeli court records. He further substantiates his views with commentaries from media reports and scholarly analyses. However, most of his interviewees are unnamed, raising some questions about the authenticity of some of the information presented.

Levitt's book concludes with a set of recommendations which if followed, he suggests, will neutralize Hamas and render its existence meaningless. For one thing, Levitt recommends placing Hamas under siege and cutting off all of its funding resources – the policy being followed today by the United States and Israel. He further encourages all concerned parties, including the United States, to crack down on any organization which might lend any kind of support for Hamas, which in fact has been implemented in a major legal assault on Muslim charities in America.

Levitt does not realize that tightening the noose around Hamas could lead to further radicalization in Palestinian society. The international economic boycott imposed on Hamas since the legislative elections seems to have deepened frustration in Palestinian society. Levitt does not seem to benefit from the lesson of the 2006 elections: contrary to his strategy's desired outcomes, Hamas came out stronger and the secularists had the most to suffer. His formula does not offer practical solutions, as it actually further complicates the situation for the secular forces in Palestinian society.

Challenging the “Terrorist” Label

In an attempt to dispel many misgivings toward Hamas, Azzam Tamimi in *Hamas: A History From Within* presents a completely different picture from that widely held in the West. He challenges the prevalent notion that Hamas is simply a militant suicidal terrorist organization. Unique among the authors of titles reviewed here, Tamimi writes from a standpoint within the Islamic movement, as the founder of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought in London.

The history that Tamimi presents is of “an organization of Arabs and Muslims who happen to be Palestinian,” which is deeply rooted in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and must be studied “in a global context rather than placing it exclusively within the context of Israel.” (3) Hamas's ideas, thought processes, policies and practice which Tamimi discusses in his book are not those usually focused upon in Western circles. Tamimi tries to show us that Hamas had to cross many risky paths in its development to ensure its survival against great odds, particularly at the hands of the Israelis.

Contrary to some analyses – including that of the author of this review article – Tamimi does not accept the idea that Hamas was assisted at least indirectly in its establishment by the Israelis in order to counteract the PLO. Tamimi is only content with suggesting that Hamas managed to outsmart the Israelis who were ignorant of Hamas's ideas and intentions. For him, Israel failed to understand what Hamas meant for the poor and the refugees in Palestinian society.

Tamimi recognizes that the Muslim Brotherhood refrained from involvement in direct resistance against the Israeli occupation during the 1970s and 1980s, justifying that course by the movement's focus on instilling Islamic values in the hearts and minds of young Palestinians. The preoccupation of the Brotherhood was the education of their members and supporters against intruding ideologies, such as liberalism, Marxism and secularism, convincing its supporters that such ideas will harm the individual, the family and the community in its entirety.

Therefore, the Brotherhood advocated against militancy during that stage and instead stressed Islamic civility. As such, Tamimi further recognizes that the Occupation did not mind such religious activities. The Israeli authorities saw that the Brotherhood's focus on young people's social, educational and recreational activities could sway this important segment in society away from involvement in the work of the resistance groups.

Hence the Israelis granted the Brotherhood permits to operate freely, especially in Gaza.

This “facilitation” by the Israelis helped the Brotherhood (Ikhwan) establish its own day-care, kindergartens, schools, even universities, health clinics and hospitals, in addition to a number of social organizations. Tamimi does not believe, however, that such institutions that were somewhat facilitated by the Israelis eventually led to the establishment of Hamas. Rather, he sees its formation as the result of pressure from the movement’s young members who were influenced by the newly organized Islamic Jihad and by Islamic-oriented members of Fatah who were initiating their own armed resistance campaign in the early 1980s. (43-45)

In his narrative, Tamimi sheds a lot of light on the life and experiences of many important personalities within Hamas, most notably Sheikh Ahmad Yassin – ultimately assassinated by an Israeli bomb – with whom the author seems to be quite fascinated. Sheikh Yassin, the spiritual founder/leader of Hamas had played quite a pivotal role in putting the movement together, even when he was in prison on a number of occasions, as Tamimi details.

Through Tamimi’s writings and highly informative original interviews, we have ample opportunity to learn about influential politicians within Hamas – their thought processes and many encounters over the years. We learnt about Khalid Mish’al, who was targeted for assassination by the Israeli Mossad while in Jordan and who later became the head of Hamas’s political office now based in Damascus. We also learn about periodic tensions between Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood branch in Jordan.

Tamimi takes pride in Hamas’s ability to remain steadfast against so many odds: Hamas did not budge even when hundreds of its leaders and supporters were deported by Israel to Marj Al-Zuhur in South Lebanon in the early 1990s, for example. In spite of numerous attempts to break Hamas, Tamimi stresses, the movement remained principled and noncompliant: it has not modified any of its essential principles. Tamimi considers this to be one of Hamas’s main strengths and one of its primary sources of popularity with the Palestinian public. The “honesty” and “dedication” of Hamas’s leaders, in addition to their living among rather than above the people, as well as transparency within the movement, all have encouraged Palestinians to rally around Hamas.

The merits of Tamimi’s work notwithstanding, in discussing Hamas’s relations with Fatah and with the Palestinian political system he clearly shows bias and partisanship toward Hamas. Tamimi is correct in pointing out that rampant corruption has cost Fatah and the Palestinian National Authority dearly as far as Palestinian public opinion is concerned. Over the years there has grown a group of self-serving individuals within the Palestinian political system who have misused and abused their positions.

It is also true that the politics of such individuals has lost its taste with people who are systematically suffering under occupation. It is equally true that Hamas has better understood the needs of Palestinians in the last couple of decades, and worked diligently to meet some of these needs so as to win people’s sympathy and support.

Yet Tamimi’s constant generalizations about Fatah and its historic role in Palestinian politics are misleading. His systematic justification of Hamas’s changing positions, whether regarding participating in elections or toward the nature of the political settlement for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict weakens a book that is otherwise informative and reflective. It is conceivable that Tamimi redraws the picture of Hamas as perceived in the West, but it is not sound that he engages in tainting or dismissing other Palestinians’ efforts and roles.

Perhaps this kind of view toward the “other” Palestinian has immensely contributed to today’s problems among the different Palestinian political currents. Tamimi needs to recognize that there is a whole school of thought within Fatah which believes that the movement has been hijacked by

the inept, the bankrupt and the corrupt. He also needs to realize that a great deal of Hamas's political program today is practically refurbished from Fatah's original program.

Furthermore, Tamimi needs to see Hamas as is, rather than how its proponents want it to be viewed. After all, Hamas is a political group with a clear political agenda, a group – like many others – which has invariably been opportunistic and self-serving. One only needs to look at so many human rights abuses committed by Hamas in Gaza today to realize the movement's fascination with power.

Tamimi himself points out that one of the main dynamics behind Hamas's change of heart in 2004 with regard to participating in the elections was the absence of Yasser Arafat from the scene as a result of his poisoning. In other words, Hamas decided to participate only when it felt that it stands a good chance of winning without the counterbalancing weight of Arafat. In this there is opportunism, as nothing has fundamentally changed on the world stage to merit a change of position on the part of Hamas from the 1996 refusal to participate in the elections at that time.

Tamimi should dispel the impression the reader is bound to get that anything that Hamas does is acceptable and justifiable. The reader cannot help but perceive a great deal of rationalizing and justifying, where a more critical analysis was expected. One would wonder as to how the author will approach the deteriorating and worsening intra-Palestinian situation in Gaza today after Hamas took control of the entire Strip: Hamas has not had clashes only with its main rival, Fatah, but also with Islamic Jihad and with most other political groups. The dysfunctional nature of the previous security regime in Gaza is not to be under-estimated; the ferocious assault by Hamas on Fatah supporters, however, is a grave slip which history might not forgive.

On the whole, this is quite an important volume which enriches the discourse on Hamas in particular, and Islamic movements in general. This book fills in many gaps in other works on this controversial subject. Experts and observers will undoubtedly find the information of utmost value.

Conclusions: Excluding or Including Hamas?

From the foregoing analysis might stem a still more heated debate as to where to go with Hamas from here. Should the political and economic siege continue? Should Israel attack or negotiate with Hamas?

The exclusionists stress that Hamas should be kept outside the Palestinian system. According to their line of thinking, Hamas should not be allowed to enjoy the luxury of its victory in the January 2006 elections: rather, its mission should be complicated so as to destroy public confidence in its ability to govern. Further, this school of thought warns of the dire consequences of conducting politics with Hamas, in that it will help legitimize its militant agenda. This camp is primarily composed of leading officials in the United States, Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

On the other hand, the inclusionists suggest that further isolation of Hamas could lead to more radicalization in Palestinian society. Proponents of inclusion are of the view that pushing Hamas to the corner sends a very bad message to believers in democracy in the region. Furthermore, rather than helping the secular forces, complicating Hamas's role in the manner it is being done strengthens Hamas and absolves it of many of its strategic mistakes. Numerous experiences have shown that the more pressure on Hamas, the more success the movement generates. Therefore, Hamas's role and presence should be recognized and dealt with in a much more creative way: belligerency has only brought Hamas more popularity and sympathy.

This school of thought is not necessarily espoused only by Hamas's supporters. Many secularists believe that the flow of events over the past couple of years has been clearly in Hamas's favor, and that the hard-line architects of excluding Hamas are to blame. This is, in part, what led a group of leading Israeli writers and scholars, with names no less significant than Amos Oz, David Grossman and A.B. Yehoshua, to call upon their government to negotiate with Hamas, because they think it is in Israel's best interest to do so.

Therefore a more visionary, proactive rather than reactive strategy is required. The cost is too heavy to ignore if the current fruitless exclusionist approach is to be pursued. Extremism can thrive mainly in an environment that lacks hope for a better political and economic future.

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