

Will Hamas change course - CSMonitor

ARCHIVE 2006 0201

Will Hamas change course?

As global pressure mounts, the radical Islamist group says it won't alter its charter calling for jihad against Israel.

By Ilene R. Prusher, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor **February 1, 2006**

Hamas was founded in 1987, it put the goals of the Islamic Resistance Movement into writing: "Allah is its goal, the Prophet its model, the Koran its Constitution, jihad its path, and death for the case of Allah its most sublime belief."

Now Hamas finds itself caught between an overwhelming mandate to run the Palestinian Authority (PA) after last week's election and an international demand to change its stance on Israel. And the movement's lengthy charter stands as a roadblock between the two.

Changing it, say Hamas leaders, is not on the table. Don't change it - says Israel, the US, the European Union, and the United Nations - and Hamas will not be invited to the table, neither for negotiations nor for foreign aid.

In translation, the document is close to 9,000 words and is replete with Koranic references instructing Muslims to wage jihad (meaning holy war or struggle) against the Jews on every last hilltop of historical Palestine - not just the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but also Israel proper, as established in 1948.

A decade ago, a different Palestinian charter was at the center of controversy. The founding covenant of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), like the one written by Hamas, called for Israel's destruction, though the PLO said that it had embraced the concept of a two-state solution since 1988. Ten years later, during President Clinton's visit to Gaza, a PLO body announced it had annulled the paragraphs calling for Israel's demise.

But Hamas leaders have made it clear that the world should not expect it to follow suit. Nor would changing the Hamas charter be as easy as deleting or amending a few sections. Each of its 36 sections breathes an Islamist ideology that seems incompatible with the concept of Arab-Jewish reconciliation.

The time for establishing a Palestinian Islamic state, the charter states, "will not come until Muslims will fight the Jews [and kill them]; until the Jews hide behind rocks and trees, which will cry: O Muslim! there is a Jew hiding behind me, come on and kill him!"

Ahmad Abdel-Aziz Mubarek, a top Hamas official elected last week, says in an interview in the party's headquarters in Ramallah that he thinks it will take 15 years to see the realization of Hamas's vision for an Islamic state here.

"We're working to see change in our country and in all the Islamic countries not just for this year, but for the coming decades," says Mr. Mubarek.

A Hamas campaign poster hangs on the wall behind him. It's an illustration of horsemen with blood dripping across their conquered territory, and the faces of two slain Hamas leaders, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdul-Aziz Rantissi, both assassinated by Israel in 2004. Mr. Yassin, taking ideas from the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt, and fusing them with a Palestinian nationalist ideology, was the main author of the charter, analysts say, and no one in Hamas seems willing to even entertain the idea of altering it.

"The charter represents the main aim and opinions of the movement, so nobody can change it," Mubarek said in a subsequent phone interview Tuesday. "Hamas cannot now say, 'No, just half, or just 30 percent of Palestine is for Palestinians, and the rest is for the Israelis.' It's not just Hamas; no one among the Palestinian people can say that."

Mubarek, an expert in the Islamic court system, argues that even Fatah, the PLO faction that reached a peace deal with Israel in 1993, is in line with Hamas's viewpoint. Truly accepting Israel as long-term neighbor, he says, was never on the agenda.

"If they say this with their tongues, they hide something else in their hearts, and the whole world should know this," says Mubarek. "So Israel must accept a truce, because Israel will not find any Arab or any Muslim who is willing to accept Israel."

The concept of a truce, or *hudna* in Arabic, is one Hamas has floated often. Hamas has worked under a self-imposed, unilateral cease-fire for the better part of a year, in part because leaders decided that additional attacks were not in the group's current interest. But Israeli officials are loathe to accept any offer of a truce as a serious gesture, because Hamas's literature indicates that this would be a temporary strategic move, allowing the group to gather strength and resources.

In interviews with top Hamas officials, some of the organization's leaders have expressed a belief - controversial even among Muslims - that Islam forbids Muslims to make peace agreements and pacts with non-Muslims.

The group's charter says that peace initiatives and international conferences to resolve the Palestinian problem "are all contrary to the beliefs of the Islamic Resistance Movement," calling into question whether Hamas will welcome US and European intermediaries in the conflict. The charter also paints the PLO as a wayward organization that is too heavily influenced by Western and Christian ideas.

Hisham Ahmed, a professor of political science at Bir Zeit University near Ramallah and an expert on Palestinian Islamists, says that the outside world is unlikely to gain ground with Hamas by immediately pushing it to change. But that doesn't mean that it might not be altered in the longer term.

"The annulment of the PLO covenant was not a very popular endeavor even among secular forces. Not because there's a drive to throw the Jews into the sea, but rather, there was a feeling that it was too early to give such a thing and that the price paid was not really worth it," says Dr. Ahmed.

"If you look at the offer of the truce, I see this as a de facto type of recognition of the status quo," he adds. " Hamas would not be willing to amend the charter now, but if there is a move forward on Israel's part to end the occupation, I think there is ample room for all sorts of considerations."

But with Hamas viewing Israel as occupied Palestinian land, such an offer will likely be viewed as a nonstarter.

Some Palestinian observers say that the Hamas charter follows the same line of thinking of nearly any Islamic political movement. "The Hamas narrative is practically the same as any Islamic narrative," says Mustafa Abu Sway, a professor of Islamic Studies at Al Quds University in East Jerusalem.

In a region full of nascent democracies and autocracies, no group with such a charter has ever been elected in a poll declared free and fair by international observers. And that has left nearly all the players unsure exactly what role the charter plays.

But the covenant should not be confused, says Dr. Abu Sway, with texts that are sacred and untouchable. "It's a political charter, after all," he says. "It's not a revealed book."

Controversial covenant

- The following quotes are taken from Hamas's charter, written in 1988.
- "Israel will rise and will remain erect until Islam eliminates it as it had eliminated its predecessors."
- "The Islamic Resistance Movement believes that the land of Palestine has been an Islamic Waqf throughout the generations and until the Day of Resurrection, no one can renounce it or part of it, or abandon it or part of it." [Note: Waqf is a religious property giving revenues, as regulated by Islamic law.]
- "There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by Jihad. The initiatives, proposals, and International Conferences are but a waste of time, an exercise in futility."
- "For Zionist scheming has no end, and after Palestine they will covet expansion from the Nile to the Euphrates. Only when they have completed digesting the area on which they will have laid their hand, they will look forward to more expansion...."

Source: The Palestine Center, Washington