

Islamic Resistance Movement

Hammas

Studies of
Thought & Experience

Editor

Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

Contributors

Dr. 'Adnan Abu 'Amer	Prof. Ahmad Sa'id Nofal	Mr. Belal M. Shobaki
Dr. Hafez al-Karmi	Prof. Dr. Ishtiaq Hossain	Mr. Isma'il Haniyyah
Mr. Khalid Mish'al	Dr. Mohsen Moh'd Saleh	Dr. Musa Abu Marzuq
Prof. Mustafa Abu Sway	Dr. Raid M. H. Nairat	Mr. Sameeh Hammoudeh
Mr. Sami N. Khater	Prof. Dr. Talal 'Atrissi	Mr. Usamah Hamdan
Mr. Yousef Abu Alsuood	Prof. Yusuf Rizqa	



Chapter Eleven

Hamas in Western Academic Literature

Mr. Yousef Abu Alsuood

Hamas in Western Academic Literature

Introduction

In April 1993, the US labeled the Palestinian Islamic Movement, Hamas, a “terrorist organization,” and in 2003 European countries followed suit by applying the same label too.

In January 2006, the Palestinian people in WB and GS exercised their democratic right in the elections to the PLC. Western policy makers held their breath at the unexpected triumph of Hamas, which was considered a victory to the resistance choice over the choice of the peace process and its consequences.¹ This huge change propelled Hamas in to the middle of the political game.

Between Western academics and scholars, the event signaled an important shift in academic approaches to the organization, in terms of number of studies and variety of views. Entering the elections was considered a shift in the political and strategic structure of the movement, towards more openness. Some argued that it was time to approach the movement using unconventional new techniques.

This study aims to answer the two following questions:

1. To what extent do these academic studies succeed in understanding the reality of Hamas?
2. What are the contextual factors that may affect some of the views expressed?

By studying the body of literature on Hamas, it is clear that there exist two schools of thought among academic scholars. The first considers Hamas as a violent militia group that must be cracked down on; while the other labels the movement a pragmatic, political and social movement that could be engaged by the international community. However, it is important to make clear from the outset that external factors play the dominant role in assessing the political behavior of the movement.

¹ “Ruling Palestine 1: Gaza Under Hamas,” Middle East Report no. 73, 19/3/2008, International Crisis Group, p. 21.

In this concise overview, we will not review the whole scientific body published on Hamas. Rather, we will use the most recent significant articles and studies prepared by the most prominent western scholars in the field.

Khaled Hroub,² and Azzam Tamimi,³ are the most prominent researchers to have published in-depth investigations on Hamas using the insider's approach. However, due to their Arab-Palestinian origins and to maximize the space afforded to other new western studies, their works will not be included in the scope of this overview.

First: Hamas as a Conservative Military Militia

Mathew Levitt, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy is the most prominent scholar to have listed Hamas as a violent radical group. He labels Hamas as a “terrorist” organization that it is necessary to be marginalized by the international community. He claims that Hamas uses its social welfare and religious effect to protect and market its violent actions. Levitt argues that “the battery of mosques, schools, orphanages, summer camps and sport leagues sponsored by Hamas are integral parts of an overarching apparatus of terror.”⁴

In his study, Levitt tries to convince his readers with a conclusion that Hamas employs all its political tactics in order to maintain its violent power. Furthermore, Levitt states:

Although Hamas engages in political and social activities, the main purpose of each of these tactics is the Jihadist principle of destroying Israel. Thus, relatively moderate statements by Hamas leaders, for instance by Gaza-based leaders like the late Shaykh Yasin, should not be interpreted as a disavowal of violence, but as a tactical planning based on a strategic commitment to violence.⁵

² See Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000); and Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*.

³ See Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*; and Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: A History from Within* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2007).

⁴ Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

In another study, Levitt says, “there is ample evidence for the role of Hamas social institutions in the terror activities directed and authorized by Hamas leaders and commanders.” He adds that the US government has also come to share this view, when the Treasury Department issued, in August 2003, an announcement “designating six senior Hamas political leaders and five charities as terrorist entities.”⁶

Eli Berman, an economist at the University of California (UC) in San Diego and Research Director for International Security Studies at UC’s Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, prepared a study entitled: *Radical, Religious and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*. Berman uses an economic approach to describe Hamas’s behavior, arguing that all such radical groups use all the support they receive to develop their violent militias. He adds:

Beginning with the first Intifada, they forced a poor population to adhere to general strikes of commercial activity which prevented Palestinians from shopping, doing business and sometimes even from working. They even attempted a boycott on all work for Israelis, which would have resulted in sacrificing perhaps a quarter of Palestinian GNP [Gross National Product]. They worked to cripple a peace process that was returning occupied territory to Palestinian control because the process represented, in their view collaboration with the conquerors of Palestine in 1948, precisely the opposite of the patient ideology of the pre-1988 Muslim Brotherhood.⁷

The most striking remarks made by Berman are his bracketing of Hamas with the Taliban and other radical Islamic groups. Berman goes further in his analysis. He claims that global radical religious organizations are linked together. He denies the national behavior of Hamas. Berman argues that “in this front sense, Hamas as a terrorist organization uses social activities to disguise its other activities. It is better to understand that social services are used to support terrorism in order to achieve political goals.”⁸

⁶ Matthew Levitt, “Hamas from Cradle to Grave,” *The Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 11, issue 1, Winter 2004, pp. 3–15.

⁷ Eli Berman, *Hamas, Taliban, and the Jewish Underground: An Economist’s View of Radical Religious Militias* (Cambridge, Mass: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2003), p. 9.

⁸ Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (Milken Institute, 2010), p. 79.

Gawdat Bahgat, the professor of national security affairs at the National Defense University's Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, illustrates that Iran uses Hamas's violent actions to support its political struggle with the United States.⁹ He adds that Iran supports Hamas financially in order that it can carry out violent attacks against Israel. Bahgat claims that "Iran uses Hamas's violence to keep Israel away from it."¹⁰

With a less decisive approach in targeting Hamas as a militia group Haim Malka, deputy director and senior fellow of the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), refers to the use of welfare charitable institutions to spread the movement ideology among Palestinians. Malka shows that Hamas's use of charitable institutions to support its military apparatus is a charge that has been well established. He reaches these conclusions through an Israeli study and goes further: "As early as 1994 in one of the first major works on Hamas, the movement was accused of diverting charity funds to what was at the time referred to as 'secret activities' or the military apparatus. Others have argued that the Hamas *da'wa* [religious speech] is the bedrock of Hamas's terrorist activities." Malka tries to send a direct message that Hamas uses its social welfare network to develop its position in the struggle not only with Israel but with the PLO and more recently the PA.¹¹

Malka uses the religious approach to explain Hamas's concentration on and employment of this welfare organization. He claims that

at the center of Hamas's charitable activity and the foundation of its community activism is the mosque. Larger mosques often have a number of associated institutions built into or around the mosque complex, including schools, health clinics, and *zakat* committees. The mosque complex is intended to provide a wide range of both physical and spiritual needs of the local population and function as a community center. Whether Hamas's services are provided in exchange for political support or simply based on

⁹ Jawdat Bahgat, "Terrorism in the Middle East," *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, Summer 2007, pp. 174–175.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹¹ Haim Malka, "Hamas: Resistance and The Transformation of Palestinian Society," in Jon B. Alterman and Karin Von Hippel (editors), *Understanding Islamic Charities* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), pp. 98–126 and p. 124, <http://csis.org/publication/understanding-islamic-charities>

need is questionable. Regardless, by providing social services and caring for marginalized sectors of society, Hamas attempts to demonstrate that it cares about people's individual daily struggle as well as the national struggle. Its activities seek to make Islam relevant in every aspect of Palestinian life.¹²

Malka goes further to look at the debate between scholars about the transformation of Hamas. However, Malka points out that the movement is still committed to its Islamic Ideology while it uses all available political tactics to maintain power. He ends his study with a judgment, saying: "such political shifts, whether tactical or strategic, will not alter Hamas' ultimate goal of creating a Palestinian state based on Islamic principles."¹³

A Critique of This School of Thought

1. Academics like Bahgat, who claim that Hamas is controlled by the Iranian regime and argue that Iran uses the organization as a bulwark against Israel, fail to illustrate why the international community, and the US in particular, have opened direct and indirect contact with Iran but still keep the door closed to Hamas. Since its inception in 1987, Hamas has maintained its independence and followed an independent policy, with neighboring countries and in its international relations, sometimes in a manner that has opposed Iranian policy. In addition, Hamas participated in the PLC elections despite Iranian advice to the contrary. Prior to 2006, Iranian support concentrated on PIJ, but after Hamas won the elections the Iranian stance shifted to be more open and supportive to Hamas, without affecting the latter's independence. Furthermore, since March 2011, events in Syria (with Hamas leaving the country) show the great distance between Iran and Hamas and the independence of Hamas's political decisions. Hamas chose the people's side and refused to support the suppression of the Assad regime, a stance that totally at odds with Iran, with its strong alliance with the Assad regime.
2. Academics who assess Hamas as only a violent group tend to ignore the political activities of the organization. They have ignored the fact that Hamas has accepted the conditions of certain political games and participated in the elections that were considered a product of the Oslo Accords. This school of

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹³ *Ibid.*

thought claims that Hamas makes violent attacks against Israel; however, they fail to explain why Hamas uses violence; not even explaining that this violence has often been a reaction to Israeli attacks.

Scholars like Levitt and Berman have neglected to mention that Hamas's decision-making is pragmatic, and does not necessarily lead to military action, except when it constitutes resisting the occupier—which is acknowledged by international law—or a reaction to Israeli aggression, or for the protection of the Palestinian people from Israeli assaults.

3. Researchers of this line ignore the deep roots of the history of the Palestinian people in their struggle for independence and freedom, which is the basis for Hamas's inception. Palestinian people are aware of the importance of retrieving their occupied lands. Since the British mandate, the Palestinians have been fighting to regain their freedom, and that is why they are often zealous in their struggle against Israel, and that is also why Hamas is popular; it has not conceded the Palestinian fundamentals. Palestinians are not satisfied with the absence of any outcome from the peace agreements. Consequently, a logical choice for them is supporting resistance forces, like Hamas.
4. Such a school of thought must not call for the isolation of Hamas, and must instead call on the international community to take real steps towards having an understanding with Hamas. Past experiences have shown that the strategy of isolation and neutralization will not weaken Hamas, rather it made it more powerful, present and entrenched.
5. Studies of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has to be extremely attentive to material biases. The setting is a minefield in terms of how preconceptions and background circumstances tend to influence writer's positions. This is shown in Levitt's, Berman's and Bahgat's work, they all use Israeli documents to assess the movement. It would be better to listen to the targeted segment, i.e., Hamas and the Palestinians.
6. Concentration on the dominance of the MB movement on Hamas without noticing the latter's local efforts as a national liberation movement. Hamas has never denied its MB roots, but this has never had an impact on being a movement with national interests, working to resist the occupier and struggling to regain the rights of the Palestinian people.
7. Many works of this school of thought aim to serve political objectives, instead of serving just academic research objectives. We noticed that the American

Envoy to Middle East between 1988 and 2000, Ambassador Dennis Ross, wrote a forward for one of Levitt's studies. He summarizes the whole study thus: "Hamis must be in a position of having to choose: govern successfully by transforming itself or fail and be discredited."¹⁴ Anders Strindberg, historian and intelligence expert, claims that much scholarly research on Hamas (as well as on other Islamist organizations) is closer to "political propaganda than social science."¹⁵

Second: Hamas as a Political Pragmatic Organization

The second school of thoughts between western academic scholars claims that Hamas is a political party capable of adjusting and transforming away from violence if it finds a secure environment that enables its continued existence. Some argue that it is true that Hamas is an ideological movement rooted in the MB movement, but Hamas has shown in practical ways that it attaches a high degree of importance to Palestinian nationalism.

Andrea Nüsse, a German journalist studying Middle Eastern issues describes Hamas as "a national organization that is surprisingly pragmatic and clear-sighted in its analysis of international politics... It demonstrates an impressive ideological flexibility."¹⁶ Nüsse claims that it is true that the 1988 Charter contains violent and anti-Zionist rhetoric but the movement has since elaborated its specific ideology and has become a mass movement. She attempts to convince her reader that there is a good margin between Hamas's oral denunciation and its real politics,¹⁷ which is considered as a sign for future optimism in the organization's political response.

Studies that followed the dramatic triumph of Hamas in the 2006 election, show the movements' willingness to change is accompanied with a focus on the political rather than violent struggle with Israel. Jeroen Gunning, a Reader in

¹⁴ See Matthew Levitt, *Hamis: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, p. ix.

¹⁵ Elin Hellquist, "Outlawing Hamas," Lund University, Department of Political Science, <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOid=1326018&fileOid=1326019>

¹⁶ Andrea Nüsse, *Muslim Palestine: The Ideology of Hamas* (Harwood: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

Middle East Politics and Conflict Studies at Durham University, has published a number of studies on Hamas. In one of his studies entitled “Peace with Hamas? The Transforming Potential of Political Participation,” Gunning argues that one of the unresolved dilemmas in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is whether peace is possible without, or feasible with, Hamas. He seeks to explain why Israeli policies have thus far failed and why inclusion of Hamas in the peace process is more likely to produce a lasting peace. Gunning succeeded in applying data drawn from interviews, fieldwork and surveys, and theoretical perspectives from peace, terrorism and social movement studies. Consequently, he analyzes the evolution that Hamas has undergone since its inception and how changes in its leadership, constituency and political culture, have affected the movement’s attitudes towards peace and compromise. Gunning described Hamas as a “limited spoiler” that will offer more resistance if kept outside of the political process.¹⁸

Gunning’s studies illustrate that Hamas certainly has the potential to transform itself whenever the circumstances dictate. According to Gunning, “since Hamas has already dropped one of its two ultimate proclaimed goals—the establishment of an Islamic state in Palestine—over time Hamas might change its attitudes towards Israel.” Gunning also argues, “Hamas’ history has shown that it is much more concerned with maintaining popular support than ‘safeguarding its ideological purity’ and that it has a ‘diminishing commitment to its core goals.’”¹⁹ However, Hamas actually did not drop its ultimate goal of liberating Historic Palestine completely, despite the fact that it has accepted the establishment of a Palestinian state in the GS and WB along with a long-term truce, albeit without recognizing Israel.

¹⁸ Marie-France Guimond, Overview: Literature on Hamas, 2000–2005, site of International Development Research Centre (IDRC), <http://web.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/11618875251Hamas-rev.doc>

¹⁹ Floor Janssen, *Hamas and its Positions Towards Israel: Understanding the Islamic Resistance Organization through the concept of framing* (The Hague, The Netherlands: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2009), p. 33, http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20090200_cscsp_security_paper_jansen.pdf
Citing Jeroen Gunning, “Peace with Hamas? The Transforming Potential of Political Participation,” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 80, issue 2, March 2004, pp. 251–252, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/International%20Affairs/Blanket%20File%20Import/inta_381.pdf

Gunning uses an offensive approach and criticizes the international community as well as Israel in their failure of dealing with Hamas. He concludes that their

conditions can [not] be met unless the Israeli government, and external “custodians” of the peace process, accept that some of the demands made by groups like Hamas arise from genuine concerns, and necessitate concrete reform to both the content of the peace that is on offer and the process by which it is negotiated... If Israel is unwilling to pay this price, the external “custodians” may need to force it to yield as they are trying to force Hamas to yield at present - or, in the absence of any other leverage or incentives, political violence will continue to be Hamas’s method of choice.²⁰

Beverly Milton-Edwards, a professor of Middle East Politics at Queen’s University Belfast in Northern Ireland, wrote many articles about the Islamic phenomena in the Arab world. One of her studies, written with the assistance of Stephen Farrell, was entitled *Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement*.²¹ Based on hundreds of field interviews, the book addresses critical questions and employs both a chronological and a thematic approach. Milton-Edwards and Farrell’s approach presents “first-hand accounts of Hamas’ fighters, social activists, victims, political supporters and opponents, and by so doing to give a glimpse into how Hamas was born, grew and thrived in the mosques, and refugee camps.”²² And “the authors give voice to the interviewees whose words constitute an important part of the study and whose sharp analysis and criticism help on many occasions to emphasize, counterbalance or nuance the authors’ intended neutral and analytical description of Hamas’ frequently violent actions.”²³

All these elements help to explain the considerable Palestinian support for the movement. The study takes a chronological approach, which is necessary to understand key thematic issues like the Al-Qassam Brigades, which are the “military wing” of the movement; martyrdom; the process of Palestinian division; and the relationship between violence and politics in Hamas’s history.²⁴

²⁰ Jeroen Gunning, “Peace with Hamas?,” p. 255.

²¹ Beverly Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement*, reviewed by Carmen López Alonso (UK, US: Polity Press, 2010).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Shaul Mishal, a researcher of Arab and Palestinian politics at the Department of Political Science at Tel Aviv University, uses the network approach in studying Hamas. He argues that “Hamas, like other Islamic movements, tends to be reformist rather than revolutionary, generally preferring to operate overtly and legally unless forced to go underground and use subversive or violent methods in response to severe repression.”²⁵

In his study for the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF), Henry Siegman criticizes and highlights the contradiction in contemporary US policy towards Hamas. He claims that “it is not only Israel that has ignored significant changes in Hamas. The United States and Europe have done so as well, insisting that Hamas must first accept conditions for engagement designed by Israel expressly to preclude the possibility of their acceptance.”²⁶

Siegman goes deeper and identifies the contradictions in American policy towards Hamas in comparison to its relation with the Afghani Taliban. He argues that

there is no reason for the US to continue to support these conditions. Obama has not imposed similar conditions for talks with the Taliban. To the contrary: he is encouraging the return of the Taliban to a coalition government with President Hamid Karzai even as they are killing American forces and Afghan civilians. Is the Taliban’s ideology more congenial to Obama than that of Hamas, many of whose leaders and adherents are university graduates, and who encourage rather than forbid and punish the education of their daughters?²⁷

Sara Roy is a senior research scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. She added valuable studies to the research body on Hamas. One of her latest publication is *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector*. Based on many field interviews with charitable institutions,

²⁵ Shaul Mishal, “The Pragmatic Dimension of the Palestinian Hamas: A Network Perspective,” *Armed Forces & Society* journal, vol. 29, no. 4, Summer 2003, p. 585.

²⁶ Henry Siegman, US Hamas Policy Blocks Middle East Peace, Noref Report no. 8, NOREF, September 2010, p. 5, http://peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/c4154e8f5a6c4e0dbc761f9ce335bf60.pdf; and see Henry Siegman, “An immodest—and dangerous—proposal,” *The Middle East Channel*, site of Foreign Policy, 9/8/2010.

²⁷ Henry Siegman, US Hamas Policy Blocks Middle East Peace, p. 5.

banks, companies and ordinary people in GS and WB, Roy claimed that fighting against Hamas charitable organization would only increase its popularity. She goes further to add: “Indeed, given the steady socioeconomic deterioration that followed the implementation of the peace process, the balance of power between social and political Islam shifted even further in favor of the former, particularly at the grassroots level, where the majority of people interacted with the movement.”²⁸ Roy’s fieldwork and her approach in listening to people’s feelings and concerns about their experience helps to explain why Hamas has gained such popularity among Palestinians.²⁹

A Critique of This School of Thought

1. This approach has succeeded in giving an “insider” point of view on the organization. Researchers assume here that

Hamas cannot be understood in isolation. It is connected with those Islamist actors who preceded the movement after the First World War who opposed both British political rule and the Zionist aim to build a Jewish homeland in Palestine. It is also connected to the ulterior processes in Palestinian history, both before and after the two crucial Arab-Israeli wars: the 1948–49 war (with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948) and the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the occupation of the Palestinian territories that followed.³⁰

2. This school approaches Hamas in a broader manner, it considers Hamas a complex social and political organization, and a national resistance movement with moderate views. It cannot be approached as only a “violent organization.” Many studies confirm the fact that Hamas cannot be studied in “a unilateral way,” outside the context of the Palestinian historical developments.³¹
3. In discussing the triumph of Hamas in 2006’s election, they argue that the organization’s “electoral victory derives from many sources. The campaign of violent resistance against Israeli military occupation and the actions of its powerful military wing are important factors, but not the only ones.” They

²⁸ Sara Roy, *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza*.

²⁹ Sara Roy, *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

³⁰ Beverly Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*

tend to say that Hamas won “Palestinian hearts and minds” as a result of its organization, close relationship with the public of its members and its efforts to defend Palestinian rights.³²

4. Depending on basic information, provided through interviews and field visits, academics from this line of thought have been able to discuss Hamas thoroughly from the inside. They even studied the movement’s surrounding environment instigating “violence.” Thus, reaching the following conclusions:
 - a. Hamas will not abandon armed resistance because a large segment of the public still deeply believe that resistance and military action are their only option in confronting Israeli occupation and aggression.
 - b. It is easy to analyze Hamas’s documents, including the 1988 Charter, and reach different conclusions. However, they could be misleading unless the development of Hamas political thought and conduct is studied thoroughly and interviews are conducted with Palestinians who are pro-Hamas.

Third: Debatable Historical Charter

The Charter of Hamas “has sparked a lot of controversy, both inside and outside the organization.” The document, which was first issued in 1988, “attempted to offer an ideology to counter Zionism.”³³ Some critics take advantage of the charter to attack Hamas, especially when they use it as the sole source by which to understand Hamas’s political thought. Some of its articles clearly show the influence of “political Islam,” especially the MB movement’s thought, on Hamas’s framework of thought. Some articles, which urge the liberation of Palestine and destruction of the Zionist Israel, have been discussed thoroughly by western academics.

In the two decades following the issuance of the Charter, Hamas dealt with various developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It dealt with the outcomes of the peace process, even when it did not officially recognize the process, and it accepted an unannounced long-term truce with Israel if the latter withdrew from

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Mohamed Nimer, Charting the Hamas Charter Changes, *Insight Turkey* journal, vol. 11, no. 4, October–December 2009, p. 115.

the 1967 territories. “Tracing the political development of Hamas since 1992,” evidence could be shown that “current political leaders of Hamas are moving the organization beyond the ideological rhetoric of the early years of the movement.”³⁴ However, some scholars still judge Hamas only by its Charter, neglecting the progress of its political approach.

Still, some scholars use the Charter as evidence to show that “violence” is the basis of Hamas’s conduct towards Israel. It is seen in the works of authors who consider Hamas a violent militant organization and in the studies of some Israeli researchers. One of these is Wim Kortenoeven a researcher at the Centre for Information and Documentation of Israel (CIDI) in The Hague. Kortenoeven argues that this Charter is considered as “an outline of the movement’s goals, tactics and strategies.” “According to Kortenoeven, it still retains its relevance, while its principles have been confirmed countless times by different Hamas officials throughout time.” According to Kortenoeven:

Hamas’s *raison d’être* continues to be the destruction of Israel based on religious precepts captured in its 1988 Charter, making a durable moderation of its ideology impossible: “there is no such thing as a moderated form of mass murder or destruction of a state.” Further, Kortenoeven argues that the Charter is so pivotal for the movement, that its abolition, or even any alterations in the Charter’s text, would mean the end for Hamas as an organization.³⁵

On the other hand, other academics are perplexed by the dichotomy between Hamas’s Charter and its political discourse. However, the document remains no more than a historical document published during the first *Intifadah* that must be treated as a document that belongs to that period of time. In 2010, Jim Zanotti, a political analyst in the Middle Eastern affairs, presented his study to the US Congress. He illustrated that

Hamas’s primary goal is to achieve the “liberation” of all of historic Palestine (comprising present-day Israel, West Bank, and Gaza Strip) for Palestinian Arabs in the name of Islam. There is vigorous debate among analysts and perhaps within Hamas regarding the essential aspects of this goal. Hamas’s Charter is explicit about the struggle for Palestine being a

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Floor Janssen, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

religious obligation. It describes the land as a *waqf*, or religious endowment, saying that no one can “abandon it or part of it.”³⁶

Zanotti claims that

those who believe that Hamas is pragmatic are less likely to believe that it considers itself bound by its Charter or by rhetoric intended to rally domestic support. Those, on the other hand, who contend that consensus exists within Hamas not to compromise on core principles believe that Hamas sees events from a different perspective than the US and other international analysts. They assert that Hamas has a vastly different concept of time, borne out by a gradual but consistent rise in the movement’s fortunes over the course of generations (within its greater Muslim Brotherhood context) in the face of significant internal challenges and external opposition.³⁷

Fourth: Hamas and International Terrorism

Hamis is often considered distant from “violent” groups that use military means to achieve their objectives. However, Israeli officials often compare Hamas to al-Qaeda, despite the fact that it limits its military action to within Palestinian territories, a fact that distinguishes Hamas from other groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Even those who consider Hamas a “violent” group, have not presented any evidence to prove that it has connections with international terrorism, and do not deny the fact that all of the movement’s operations are against Israel and within the Palestinian territories.

Despite labeling Hamas as a militia, Matthew Levitt admits that although the movement has an international presence, it “has never actually carried out a terrorist attack beyond its traditional area of operations in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip.” For example, Hamas’ decision to run in the Palestinian elections, its participation in the Palestinian National Unity Government, and its control of Gaza even after the collapse of that unity government mitigate against a Hamas decision to target Western interests. Moreover:

³⁶ Jim Zanotti, Hamas: Background and Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service (CRS), 2/12/2010, p. 13, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R41514.pdf>

³⁷ Ibid.

Hamas believes itself to be engaged in resistance, not terrorism. Many supporters of Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups condemned the September 11 attacks in the United States (2001), the March 11 attacks in Spain (2004), and the July 7 attacks in Britain (2005). Clearly, maintaining this distinction is paramount for Hamas and its supporters. In assessing the potential threat from Palestinian groups that rely on American dollars, FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigations] officials concluded that their extensive fund raising activity itself acts as a disincentive for operational terrorist activity in the United States. Hamas leaders have verbalized this sentiment. According to an FBI summary transcript of a 1993 Hamas meeting in Philadelphia, the participants mentioned “all the [support] activities they are talking about pertain to the activities within the United States. They also mentioned it is not to this best interest [sic] to cause troubles in the American theater.”³⁸

In her study, Sherifa Zuhur, a research professor of Islamic and regional studies from 2006 to 2009 at the US Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute, argues

that Hamas shares an acceptance of the scientific rational traditions of the West along with moderate Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. (The fact that both groups are castigated as highly ‘fundamentalist’ and Taliban-like is a great irritant to Hamas.) Hamas accepts the legitimacy of the nation-state, as opposed to bin Laden and Zawahiri’s emphasis on the Islamic nation. The Western training or Western-style education of most Hamas leaders has much to do with the organization’s stances. The United States had not initially labeled Hamas a terrorist organization. The State Department acknowledged meetings with Hamas representatives until March 1993, when the Israelis protested. It was aware of Palestinians worldwide, who were either associated with the Ikwan [MB], or later, Hamas. Palestinian organizations that were part of the PLO, like the PFLP, remained on the terrorist list, but practically speaking, secular nationalist Palestinian groups were legitimated after Oslo despite certain factions’ rejection of Oslo. Hamas, which rejected Oslo but took a neutral stance toward the PA at the time, was increasingly treated as a dangerous terrorist threat in U.S. media

³⁸ Matthew Levitt, “Could Hamas Target the West?,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* journal, vol. 30, issue 11, November 2007, p. 931.

from that point up to its victories in the 2006 and 2007 elections. As a result of U.S. hostility to Hamas, the organization increasingly regards the U.S. administration, although not the American people, as an enemy.³⁹

Zuhur who researches middle east and international security at several universities adds that

Hamas is not interested in a global jihad like al-Qaeda, and maintains that its only foe is Israel, hoping that better communications with the United States will emerge, and recognizing that its officials' inability to travel and speak with Americans have damaged its image. The United States and Israel lobbied the EU to reject Hamas. Under this pressure, the EU decided to reject the military wing of Hamas, but not the organization as a whole; until 2003 and even later, certain European countries maintained ties with Hamas. Overall, the government-oriented or North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-oriented security analysts have taken a hard line toward Hamas and seem slow to realize that backing President Abbas is a losing course.⁴⁰

Fifth: Dynamics Around & Within Hamas.

Since its victory in the PLC election in 2006, Hamas's political behavior has been under the scope of many experts. Some expected the movement to be divided into wings, based on internal reactions to issues such as the reconciliation with Fatah or the conflict with Israel. But despite the changes, the movement maintained an intact structure.

During this period, Hamas took over GS after the failure of the Mecca Agreement in 2007. The movement faced massive challenges including meeting the people's daily needs and facing Israeli aggression at the end of 2008 after a long siege on GS. However, the movement proved its strength and steadfastness during these changes, as a matter of fact its strength and presence have increased locally and regionally, especially after Israeli attacks.

³⁹ Sherifa Zuhur, *Hamis and Israel: Conflicting Strategies of Group-Based Politics* (Strategic Studies Institute (SSI)–United States Army War College, December 2008), pp. 60–61, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/pub894.pdf>

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 61.

Regional changes including the uprising in Egypt created new challenges as well as opportunities for Hamas. In his study, Evangelos Diamantopolus, a researcher at the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of Peloponnese in Greece, claims that

the Arab Spring has significantly influenced the [Middle East and North Africa] MENA region and Hamas could not be an exception. The organization faces pressing internal and external calls to take decisions on important issues that might change its character. The rise of a moderate Muslim Brotherhood, from which Hamas originates, appearing increasingly ready to comply with democratic rules in Egypt, pushes the Islamic Resistance Movement to put down its arms and denounce terrorism. In addition, the Palestinian public opinion seems to support reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah but that requires the group to show further moderation and pragmatism as well. Finally, the option of not siding by Assad in Syria's civil war might cost Hamas' place in the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis in the future. However, that scenario appears to be less costly after the Arab revolutions since other governments seem ready to let Hamas build not only its headquarters in their soil but close ties with their states as well.⁴¹

In the light of these deep changes in the political landscape within and beyond Hamas, Nathan J. Brown, a professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, wrote his long article "Is Hamas Mellowing?" for the think tank Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He argues that the international community should interact with the gradual shifts occurring within Hamas.⁴²

He illustrates that

while Hamas's destination is still very much uncertain, the motivation of its leaders for embarking on this path is much clearer. They seek to position the movement regionally to be able to take full advantage of the changes in Egypt and the rise of Islamists more generally—as well as to cope with the disintegration of the Syrian regime that has hosted them for so long.

⁴¹ Evangelos Diamantopoulos, "Hamas After the Arab Spring," Middle East Flashpoint, no. 27, site of Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies, University of Peloponnese, p. 3, http://www.cemmis.edu.gr/files/hamas_after_the_arab_spring.pdf

⁴² Nathan J. Brown, Is Hamas Mellowing?, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17/1/2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/01/17/is-hamas-mellowing/921a>

Reconciliation also offers the possibility of reemerging in the West Bank where much of the movement has been forced—sometimes quite harshly—into hibernation since 2007.⁴³

Brown adds:

The movement's government in Gaza—which exercises authority quite effectively on the ground but remains internationally isolated—might be able to continue the process of prying open the diplomatic and economic window that has fallen ajar over the past year. And Hamas would also gain a voice in Palestinian decision making and what might amount to a veto over international diplomacy coupled with deniability.⁴⁴

Brown wonders:

Is this something to encourage internationally? There are substantial costs to be sure. First, it would be difficult to carry on serious, conflict-ending diplomacy in a context in which Hamas was given a powerful voice. The basis for a two-state solution would not be totally removed. Hamas for its part has left the door slightly open by indicating its willingness to accept a state based on the 1967 lines. It has rejected the idea that it will recognize Israel, but, as suggested above, the relevant question is whether it would accept as binding a Palestinian decision to recognize Israel, not whether it would change its own ideology. And Israel similarly has sometimes shown a willingness to negotiate indirectly with Hamas.⁴⁵

The writer admits here:

In speaking to some officials who were involved with Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy in 2005 and 2006, I have been struck by how many—especially on the European side, but even among some U.S. officials—see the reaction to Hamas's victory as a tactical mistake. Rather than react by squeezing the movement at a moment when, for the first time, it had both a share of political responsibility and something to lose, the international reaction was to crush it.⁴⁶

Furthermore, he summarizes the issue, adding: “taking a cautious rather than a hostile stance when it comes to Palestinian reconciliation and Hamas's baby steps

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

toward evolutionary change would not erase the mistakes of the past decade. But it may lay the basis for eventually recovering from them.”⁴⁷

Benedetta Berti, a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), conducts research on political violence and conflict in the Middle East, non-state armed groups, as well as well as Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian politics. The member of the faculty at Tel Aviv University wrote an article in 2012 about the changes in Hamas, entitled “Meet the ‘New’ Hamas: Strategic Shift or Temporary Deviation from a Violent Path.” She claims that

two factors will contribute specifically to determine the future development of the group: its perception of the security environment and the success of the political reconciliation project. If inter-Palestinian reconciliation does indeed achieve the normalization of Palestinian political life and result in the creation of a united political coalition, then Hamas will have a higher interest in continuing to invest in nonviolent politics—provided the group is allowed to have a significant share of political power in “post-reconciliation” Palestine. Similarly, if the group perceives the security environment as non-threatening, it may have an interest in deemphasizing its military apparatus. However three important factors stand in the way of this development: firstly, Hamas has over the past few years invested in boosting its military apparatus, suggesting that any attempt to sideline the military leadership might result in dire internal conflicts. Secondly, it is unclear whether Hamas’s “hardcore” constituency would allow a nonviolent strategic shift, or whether this would lead to additional internal conflict, deeply threatening the internal cohesion of the group. Thirdly, a resolute international and Israeli refusal to deal with any Palestinian government that includes Hamas may indeed lead to a renewed marginalization of the group, which could in turn backfire, empowering Hamas’s more radical leaders and minimizing the nonviolent discourse. In this sense, the future of Hamas’s nonviolent strategy is as promising as it is uncertain, hanging by the thread of the Palestinian reconciliation process, the internal tensions along the political-military line, the evolution of the “Arab Spring,” and international and Israeli responses to these developments.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Benedetta Berti, Meet the New Hamas: Strategic Shift or Temporary Deviation from A Violent Path, site of Open Democracy, 15/1/2012, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/benedetta-berti/meet-%E2%80%98new%E2%80%99-hamas-strategic-shift-or-temporary-deviation-from-violent-path>

As for the impact of the Arab uprisings on Hamas, it was discussed by the Middle East Report number 129, which was issued by the International Crisis Group in 2012. The report argues that

the international community has a stake in the choices Hamas ultimately makes. The movement will continue to play a vital role in Palestinian politics, affecting the prospect of renewing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations as well as their odds of success. Reuniting the West Bank and Gaza is not only desirable; it also is necessary to achieving a two-state settlement. And territorial division, coupled with Gaza's persistent economic isolation, contains the seeds of further conflict with Israel. For these and other reasons, the world—and the West in particular—must do more than merely stand on the sidelines as Hamas wrestles over its future. Instead, the US and Europe should test whether they can seize the opportunity presented by two related developments: first, the rise to power (notably in Egypt) of Islamist movements that are keen on improving relations with the West, crave stability and are signaling they do not wish to make the Israeli-Palestinian issue a priority; second, the intense internal debates taking place within Hamas over the movement's direction.⁴⁹

The report asserts the importance of not losing the chance given regionally by the Arab uprisings, investing in the chances and challenges facing Hamas, and understanding and approaching the movement in a new way. It concludes:

Twice in the past—after the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections and after the 2007 Mecca unity accord—the international community missed the boat in its approach toward Hamas, adopting policies that produced almost precisely the reverse of what it expected: Hamas consolidated its control over Gaza; a war and dangerous flare-ups have occurred with Israel; Fatah has not been strengthened; democratic institutions in the West Bank and Gaza have decayed; and a peace deal is no closer. With a third chance coming, amid dramatic improvements in relations with Islamist movements region-wide, the West should make sure it is not, once more, left stranded at the dock.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas & the Arab Uprisings*, Middle East Report no. 129, 14/8/2012, International Crisis Group, p. ii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

The approach to the Islamic resistance movement, Hamas, by western researchers and experts sometimes involve differences and contradictions. This is caused by lack of direct and available information about Hamas and its leadership, or by judging the movement according to the reactions and stances of main parties affecting the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Furthermore, three important contextual factors that lead to the publication of misleading studies on Hamas could now be confined to the following three:

The first is focusing on judging the movement as a part of political Islam, regardless of its special situation as a national liberation movement.

The second is judging Hamas on the basis of items in its historical Charter of 1988, while neglecting its political pragmatism in facing changes.

The third factor that causes such contradiction lies in the approach towards Hamas as a militia embracing “violence” against Israel without paying attention to its popularity among Palestinians, the majority of whom still believe that resistance is vital in order to defend themselves and regain their rights in the absence of any valid outcomes from the peace process.

All studies that investigated the organization from within, listened to its decision makers, studied the social and political context that affects the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and observed the developments in the field, tend to be more successful in its approach to the movement. These studies contradicted those based on the analysis of documents and studies conducted by Hamas’s enemies and rivals (such as Israeli and Zionist references), and those that relied upon judging Hamas by some articles in its Charter.

While analyzing these scholarly studies, and many more, about Hamas and political Islam in Palestine, an important deep question accompanies the journey: Why do EU and US policies still embrace the conservative approach towards Hamas in spite of the huge volume of research studies that call for engaging the organization? This may open the door for future discussions on the importance of western studies of the movement, from the perspective of their impact on western policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This Book

The Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas is a prominent Palestinian resistance movement. It enjoyed, and continues to enjoy, broad popularity in the Palestinian arena. Hamas adopts Islam as a creed, way of life, and a code. It belongs to the school of Muslim Brothers movement.

Credit for the idea behind this book is owed to the late Prof. Ibrahim Abu Rabi'. 17 academicians, researchers and senior Hamas leaders participated in writing the chapters of this book.

This book is indeed one of the most specialized references regarding Hamas thought and experience, and it is an indispensable source for those interested in studying the Movement. It committed itself to the methodologies of academic research and all this entails in terms of accuracy, objectivity, and documentation. The contributions by several Hamas leaders shed additional and up-to-date light on a number of controversial issues surrounding Hamas and its experience.

Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

Islamic Resistance Movement

Hamas

Studies of
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مركز الزيتونة للدراسات والاستشارات

P.O. Box: 14-5034, Beirut - Lebanon
Tel: +961 1 803 644 | Tel-Fax: +961 1 803 643
info@alzaytouna.net | www.alzaytouna.net



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