



A Conflicts Forum Monograph

Hamas Debates the Future

**Palestine's Islamic Resistance
 Movement Attempts to Reconcile
 Ideological Purity and Political Realism**

By Khalid Amayreh

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Palestine's Islamic Resistance Movement Attempts to Reconcile Ideological Purity and Political Realism

By Khalid Amayreh*

Précis: Palestine's Islamic Resistance Movement -- Hamas -- won a surprising electoral victory in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections. Almost immediately, Hamas leaders, movement activists, and Islamist academics began to debate the future course of the movement. Under what conditions would Hamas recognize Israel? What was its place as a movement in the Middle East? How should it approach the question of governance of the Palestinian territories? And finally, and most importantly, how would it balance its need to remain an Islamist party while adopting more pragmatic political programs?

Introduction

Since the moment that it scored its impressive, but unexpected, election victory in January, 2006, the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) has been debating ways and means to reconcile its erstwhile radical Islamist ideology with the pressing need to meet practical political requirements. Most of these informal but serious discussions, which began immediately after the elections, were not covered by the local and international press. The discussions were wide-ranging and detailed, held in private homes and involved Islamist intellectuals, veteran activists and Islamic religious scholars. Most of the participants were veterans of the movement and of the fight against the Israeli occupation and had spent years in Israeli jails and detention camps for opposing and resisting the Israeli occupation.

Participants in these discussions generally agreed that Hamas's original charter, adopted in 1988, had lost much or most of its political relevance and could no longer dictate Hamas's political behavior. Islamists who took part in these meetings described the charter in terms that were critical: the charter was "anachronistic," "outdated," and "historical." Participants were asked to state their views with regard to a host of issues such as Palestinian statehood, relations with Fatah, recognition or non-recognition of Israel, and relations with the Arab world (and particularly Jordan and Egypt), as well as with other Muslim countries. During these informal discussion meetings, a diverse set of views were heard -- an indication that Hamas, though generally ideologically homogenous, is not

politically monolithic. The informal discussions, what one participant called “brain-storming sessions,” produced a variety of views ranging from advocating quitting the PA government altogether (and leaving the “business of government to Fatah”), to joining the peace process on the basis of relevant U.N. resolutions.

Eventually, “practical suggestions and recommendations” intended to reconcile ideological purity with political realism were compiled and presented to the movement’s political leadership, including the movement’s politburo, headed by Khalid Mashal. It is widely believed that the outcome of these discussions played a key role in getting Hamas to accept the so-called “Prisoners’ Document” in the summer of 2006. This document, which later came to be known as the “National Reconciliation Accord” included a key clause stating that Palestinian national and Islamic factions agreed to “respect” all relevant UN resolutions, including UN General Assembly resolution 194 which calls for repatriation of and indemnification for Palestinian refugees uprooted from their homes in 1948 in what is now Israel.

To many Islamists, the acceptance of the National Reconciliation Accord by Hamas represented a fundamental ideological concession, which included an implied recognition of Israel. The key to accepting the document may have come in an agreement over a clause in the document over the status of refugees -- which reportedly induced Hamas and the Hamas-led government to accept the document in its entirety. Needless to say, the tacit recognition of Israel implicit in the document was, as always, conditional on the Jewish state meeting certain conditions, including ending the occupation that started in 1967 and resolving the refugee problem pursuant to UN resolution 149. Interestingly, this same position is the official position accepted by Fatah.

A few weeks prior to Hamas’s endorsement of the prisoner’s document, which enjoyed overwhelming support among the Palestinian masses, Hamas leaders asked for advice from a number of Islamic intellectuals and political experts who overwhelmingly recommended that the document be accepted, despite the tacit recognition of Israel implicit in it. The acceptance of the document by Hamas apparently surprised the leadership of Fatah, which had been seeking to discredit Hamas’s perceived holier-than-thou attitude with regard to Israel. Fatah leaders interpreted the Hamas acceptance of the document as the movement’s concession that the recognition of Israel was tacit and practical. It should be noted, however, that Hamas’s endorsement of the prisoner’s document was not necessarily a significant shift in direction: despite its incessant rhetorical overindulgence, Hamas had voiced a certain willingness to “come to terms with” Israel’s existence, but without having to formally recognize the Jewish state, on a number of occasions. Hamas politburo chief Khalid Mashal, for example, declared rather solemnly at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo in February 2006 that Hamas “doesn’t rule out recognizing Israel if Israel recognizes the rights of the Palestinian people and withdraws from our land.” Mashal added: “Then, there will be a certain willingness on our part and on the Arabs’ part to reciprocate. The

ball is in the Israeli court. When Israel recognizes our rights, we would reciprocate.”¹ Mashal made similar statements, primarily during interviews with Arab satellite television networks, voicing his organization's willingness to come to terms with Israel's existence if Israel agreed to completely end its occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.

Prior to the 2006 elections, the Hamas internal debate revealed that a majority of the movement's top cadres and activists (including intellectuals, college professors and mosque preachers), advocated participation in the Palestinian polity, either as a junior partner or as “second- among- equals” with Fatah. So while Hamas's top leaders, particularly in the West Bank, did not believe that their movement should take a subservient place to Fatah, they did not necessarily want their movement to be in a premier leadership position; it was enough for them that Hamas remain in a position of influence. This viewpoint was dictated by the overall unsympathetic international political environment following the events of 9/11 in the United States. This also explains why Palestinian Islamist leaders were privately ambivalent (even to the point of anxiety) about Hamas's election triumph; they came to realize that they would be forced to deal with hostile political realities from a position of both political weakness and international isolation.

More specifically, the harsh financial blockade imposed on the Hamas-led government by Israel and the West -- which was enforced stringently by local and regional banks at the insistence of the United States -- forced the Islamist movement into a state of virtual bankruptcy within months of their election victory. The crippling sanctions forced the Hamas-led government to suspend payment of regular salaries to tens of thousands of civil servants and security personnel. Eventually, the international blockade (coupled with mounting tension with Fatah), caused a political and social implosion, especially in the Gaza Strip, which culminated in the takeover by Hamas of the Gaza Strip in mid-June, 2007. Indeed, some Hamas leaders now privately admit that the harsh predicament facing the movement since January, 2006, can be attributed in part to the fact that Hamas was unprepared for assuming the task of governing.

While retrospective assessments can not reverse past mistakes, past miscalculations can serve as a useful guide to prevent reoccurrence in the future. This is why Hamas is continuing to search for expedient and dignified ways to reconcile ideological purity with political realism, a task that requires creativity, flexibility and wisdom.

¹ “Hamas's Plan for Governance turns the equation upside down,” Muhammed Jamal Arafa, Feb. 14, 2006, www.alwihda.com (Arabic).

Recognizing Israel

It is generally well-known that Hamas's refusal to recognize Israel is the main obstacle impeding Western acceptance of the Palestinian Islamist group. Moreover, the generally negative Western attitudes toward Hamas are further reinforced by the exaggerated perception, incessantly disseminated by a sophisticated Israeli "Hasbara" (propaganda) campaign that Hamas not only refuses to recognize Israel's existence but is dedicated to Israel's destruction. The truth is that while Hamas does not and probably will not recognize Israel's "moral legitimacy" (since such a recognition would imply that Islamist group would effectively embrace the classic Zionist narrative), Hamas has effectively stopped even alluding to the destruction of Israel. At the same time, the 1988 charter is rarely if ever referred to by the movement -- it seems to have faded into oblivion. The continuing silence over these issues is reflected in the movement's statements and speeches: the movement's election platform of 2006 and all other subsequent pronouncements, (including speeches and interviews by Hamas' officials and leaders, including Prime Minister Haniya, politburo chief Khalid Mashal and Palestinian Parliament Speaker Aziz Duweik), have made no mention of "the destruction of Israel"² since the Hamas election victory of 2006.

Hamas has explained on numerous occasions why it believed Israel had no "moral" right to exist, by arguing that Israel's existence came at the expense of the Palestinian people. To wit, recognizing Israel's right to exist would imply a recognition of the legitimacy of the expulsion by Israel in 1948 of the bulk of the Palestinian people from their ancestral homeland as well the destruction and depopulation of hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages. This point is argued tirelessly by proponents of Palestinian rights. For example, Azzam Tamimi, the author of an authoritative study of Hamas and a person close to the movement's leadership, elucidated the main reasons for Hamas' refusal to recognize Israel. "Israel has been built on land stolen from the Palestinian people," he points out. "The creation of the state was a solution to a European problem and the Palestinians are under no obligation to be the scapegoats for Europe's failure to recognize the Jews as human beings entitled to inalienable rights." He adds: "Hamas, like all Palestinians, refuses to be made to pay for the criminals who perpetrated the Holocaust."³

Additionally, Hamas leaders in the occupied Palestinian territories are always careful to stress -- at least in their public pronouncements -- that the movement's refusal to recognize Israel, in no way implies that Hamas is intent on physically destroying Israel. Khalid Tafesh is a prominent Islamic leader in the Bethlehem

² Aziz Duweik, Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, told the author, in an interview in early January 2006, that Hamas wouldn't remain hostage to past rhetorical slogans such as "the destruction of Israel." (Arabic)

³ "Hamas will Make a Deal," Azzam Tamimi, *The Guardian*, Jan. 30, 2006.

region, who is also a member of the Palestinian legislative council. Tafesh argues that the West should preoccupy itself with “ending the occupation” at least as much as with “revoking Hamas’s charter.” He argues: “First of all, the charter is not a Quran, it is not a document from heaven; it can be revoked. Secondly, Hamas has neither the power nor the inclination to destroy a nuclear-armed Israel. The continued invocation of this matter by Israeli leaders and apologists is aimed primarily at giving Israel a pretext to perpetuate its military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.”⁴

When asked why Hamas doesn’t formally revoke the 1988 charter to prove beyond doubt that it is not dedicated to the destruction of Israel, Tafesh called the charter “a historical document” that was part of Hamas’ formative years and that it had no bearing on Hamas’ current political thinking. “How many times have you heard Hamas leaders quote from the charter in the past ten years?” he asks. “I personally have not heard them do so even once.”⁵ Tafesh is not the only Hamas, or Palestinian, figure that believes the role of the charter has been purposely exaggerated. Some Islamists are convinced that the Israeli fixation on the 1988 charter is being purposely used by Israel to distract attention from Israeli intransigence and refusal to end the occupation. “There are political parties in Israel that call for the expulsion of the Palestinians from all of mandatory Palestine. There are even some Zionist parties represented in the Knesset that believe that the sovereign state of Jordan is part of Israel and should be occupied and annexed to Israel. So why does the West not classify these parties as terrorists groups?”⁶ Tafesh advises the West to deal with the real problems of the occupation instead of following its fixation on “this issue of Hamas charter and destruction of Israel.”⁷ He further argues that there were many people who did not initially recognize the moral legitimacy of certain countries, such as the United States, Australia, and Canada, which had carried out widespread ethnic cleansing against their native populations. “So does that mean that adopting a moral stance with regard to the way these countries came into being implies dedication to the destruction of these states?” he asks.⁸ “How can Hamas, a small organization, with utterly primitive means, possibly hope to destroy a country armed to her teeth and possessing hundreds of nuclear warheads and bombs?”⁹

⁴ Interview with Khalid Tafesh, October 2007.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

A Third Approach

During the past few months, Hamas's political leaders and a large number of the movement's intellectuals have been exploring a "Third Approach" towards Israel and the enduring Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The essence of this third approach has been described by one Hamas leader in the West Bank as a sincere endeavor to reach an extended peaceful coexistence with Israel based on "de facto" rather than "de jure" mutual recognition. (The two other 'alternatives' are Israel's continued occupation of the Palestinian homeland and the Palestinians' continued resistance to the Israeli occupation.) This writer has interviewed a host of Islamist leaders in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since the January 2006 elections and obtained from them a detailed description of Hamas's concept for peaceful coexistence with Israel. Interestingly, most of these influential Islamists are little known to the West, since they do not speak English, and their views are not therefore so readily accessible to English-reading audiences.

The "third approach" encompasses a combination of some or all of the following elements:

First: A prolonged "Sulh" or "Hudna" -- an extended peace bound by time limitations. This "Sulh" or "Hudna" is by no means a new concept. Hamas's founder and spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yasin had proposed a truce with Israel in the early 1990s and reiterated the same proposals several times. More recently, a number of Islamic thinkers have sought to "upgrade" the concept of Hudna into a virtually open-ended peace; something that would look very much like an extended peace treaty.

Fathi Amr, a prominent Islamic thinker and theologian in the southern West Bank, says that the Islamic concept of *sulh*, or an extended truce, is an honest endeavor to prepare for ultimate peace. "A truce can last for as long as the two sides want, it can be for ten years, twenty years, or even fifty years," he says. "The Prophet Muhammad forged a ten year truce with the polytheists of Qaraysh. And he would have kept the truce for its entire duration had Quraysh not violated it when its allies, the Banu Bakr tribe, attacked and murdered members of the Banu Khuza'a tribe, who were Muslims,"¹⁰ According to Hatem Qafisha, a Legislative Council Member affiliated with the Reform and Change Bloc (Hamas), Israel and a prospective Palestinian state in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip could have normal diplomatic and economic relations in the context of a possible extended *hudna* between the two sides.¹¹ He cited the "Sulh al Ramle" or "Truce of Ramle" which Sallahudin (Salladin), reached with the Crusaders in Palestine in 1192.¹²

¹⁰ Interview with Fathi Amr, a prominent Islamic scholar from Dura, October, 2007 (Arabic)

¹¹ Interview with Hatem Qafisha, Oct. 2007.

¹² "Sulh al Ramla," -- the Truce of Ramla -- was reached between Salladin and Richard the Lion-Hearted in 1193.

A number of Islamist academics further contend that a prolonged period of stability, calm and peace could bring about a positive transformation in people's thinking which could lead to permanent peace in the region. Ismael Shindi, professor of Islamic Fiqh (Jurisprudence) at Hebron University, explains that a hudna is not a ploy, but a sincere effort to establish peace. "When people on both sides of the divide are given the chance to get accustomed to a peaceful coexistence," he says, "a state of normality would gain a foothold, and peoples' perceptions and attitudes toward the other would certainly change." He adds: "European countries fought two harsh world wars in the past century during which tens of millions of people were killed. But look how Europeans are getting along these days. Europe is becoming one country."¹³ It is important to note that such quasi-moderate views are currently more common among western-educated Hamas leaders in the West Bank than among their colleagues in the Gaza Strip, where perceptions toward Israel are shaped by the much harsher realities of Gaza.

Second: A post-dated (or delayed) recognition of Israel. This concept has been voiced several times by Hamas's political leaders, including Khalid Mashal. They argue that it is unfair to ask Hamas to recognize Israel when the Jewish state is continuing to oppress the Palestinians and occupy their homeland. According to Hatem Qafisha, recognition should be the outcome of a peace process, not a prerequisite or precondition for it. "Besides, Israel is a country with no fixed borders, so how can we possibly recognize an amorphous state as such?" he asks. "I simply want to know the exact entity I am supposed to recognize, otherwise I would be buying fish in the sea."¹⁴ Interestingly, this stand -- that Hamas shouldn't recognize Israel unless Israel recognizes a Palestinian state on 100 percent of the occupied territories -- enjoys widespread support among Palestinians who are deeply disenchanted by the PLO's failure to extricate recognition of a Palestinian state from Israel in exchange for PLO recognition of the Jewish state pursuant to the Oslo Accords. The concept of post-dated recognition, since it is based on reciprocity, is likely to be viewed by Israelis as a public-relations ploy by Hamas since -- as many will claim -- the movement is unlikely to extend full recognition of Israel for mainly religious reasons.

Third: Conditional recognition. This view was on several occasions presented by Islamist leaders in the West Bank, including such moderate leaders and activists as Nasseruddin al Shaer, Muhammed Ghazal, and Hasan Yosuf. These leaders argue that Hamas will be in a position to recognize Israel if the latter recognized a Palestinian state on 100 percent of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip, and if Israel agrees to repatriate all or most of those Palestinian refugees who fled or were expelled from their homes in what is now Israel when the Jewish state was established in 1948. These Islamist leaders argue that repatriation of the refugees, which is compatible with international law, would constitute a long-due implementation of UN resolution 194. More to the point, they argue that an Israel

¹³ Interview with Ismael Shindi, Oct. 2007

¹⁴ Interview with Hatem Qafisha, Oct. 2007.

that would allow the refugees to return to their homes would be a different country than the one that now holds an intransigent view on this issue -- and therefore a nation that could be readily recognized by Hamas and the rest of the Arab world without ideological or religious reservations. When reminded that Israel will never agree willingly to allow millions of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel within the 1948 borders, since this would endanger Israel's Jewish identity by creating a non-Jewish majority, Islamist leaders resort to arguing international law. They quote Article 13, part 2, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." Their view is that if people leaving their homeland voluntarily have an inherent right to return, those expelled, uprooted or forced to flee have even a stronger right to return home.

Muhammed Ghazal, a lecturer at Najah University in Nablus in the northern West Bank, says that Palestinian demands for the repatriation of the refugees are totally compatible with international law. "Where in international law does it say that Israel has the right to have a permanent Jewish majority?" he asks. "International law treats Israel as a nation-state like all other nation-states. Moreover, it is clear that the Palestinian refugees' right to return to their homes from which they were expelled at gunpoint overrides whatever right Israel claims to have to maintain a Jewish majority."¹⁵ This is not to say, however, that Hamas insists that each and every refugee must return. Hamas, as indeed every other Palestinian political movement, insists that each and every Palestinian has the right to return, since this right is inalienable.

Fourth: Joining the PLO. This is probably the most realistic option that Hamas leaders and activists have been debating. In fact, Fatah and Hamas had already agreed on several occasions that the Islamic Resistance Movement would join a restructured and reformed PLO -- which would include membership in the Palestinian National Council as well as in the PLO Executive Committee. The Mecca agreement, concluded between Hamas and Fatah under Saudi auspices on 8 February 2007, contained a key clause to this effect. While such agreements have been rendered irrelevant, mainly (it is argued) as a result of Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip in mid-June (and as a result of the subsequent retaliatory measures by Fatah against Hamas in the West Bank), the idea of Hamas (and Islamic Jihad) joining the PLO continues to meet widespread popular acceptance and legitimacy. Hamas believes that joining the PLO would enable the movement to have strong influence on the organization's decision-making process and prevent the mainly secular PLO factions from compromising vital Palestinian interests. More specifically, some Islamist leaders argue privately that in case the PLO decides to recognize Israel (in the context of a final status solution to the conflict), Hamas could not bear the "moral consequences" of such a recognition. "We would respect the rule of the majority. If the PLO recognized Israel, we

¹⁵ Interview with Muhammed Ghazal, October 2007.

wouldn't seek to undo this recognition through unconstitutional means," said Qafisha.¹⁶ He adds that Hamas's only condition (which is not rejected by Fatah), is that any final-status settlement with Israel would have to go through a referendum process in which all Palestinians, including Palestinian refugees, would participate.

In truth, Hamas had already agreed to "authorize" the PLO to negotiate a prospective deal with Israel, which Hamas realizes would involve recognition of the Jewish state. Hamas's insistence on the referendum concept (interestingly the PA doesn't reject the idea), stems more from worries that Fatah might be bullied into a compromise position on certain core issues, such as Jerusalem and the right of return, and less from considerations related to the issue of recognizing Israel. "If the PLO succeeded in getting Israel to leave all the occupied territories and accept a just resolution of the refugee plight, we will be the first to congratulate the PLO", Qafisha says.¹⁷ When reminded that such an achievement wouldn't be possible without a price, namely a complete and absolute recognition of Israel, the Islamist leader agreed: "Yes, we know and understand this too well. And frankly, Fatah is in a better position to recognize Israel, since Hamas cannot do so for mainly religious and moral reasons."¹⁸

Fifth: A One-State Solution. The one-state solution idea is being touted by some Islamist intellectuals, including members of Hamas. Indeed, during recent debates in the Hebron and Ramallah regions, the idea of the one-state solution was touted forcefully by some veteran Hamas members who argued convincingly that the creation of a Palestinian political entity would not constitute a true and lasting historical solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. One of the main proponents of the one-state solution is Adnan Miswadi, an otolaryngologist and veteran Islamist leader from Hebron. He believes that the one-state solution constitutes the only historically viable solution of the Palestinian Israeli conflict. "The area from the Mediterranean to the River Jordan is not capable of sustaining two viable states," he says. "Hence, a genuine and durable solution of the conflict lies in the creation of a single state whereby the adherents of various religions are treated as equal citizens."¹⁹

Miswadi insists, however, that within the context of a unitary state in Palestine-Israel, Jewish immigration would have to be terminated and Palestinian refugees would have to be repatriated. "I believe that the creation of a Palestinian state within the 1967-territories would be a resolution of the Zionist problem, not the Palestinian problem," he says. "A Palestinian state that is crammed between Jordan and Israel will always be in an inferior and subordinate position vis-à-vis the two countries. Hence, such a state would be a prescription for poverty,

¹⁶ Interview with Hatem Qafisha, October 2007.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Interview with Adnan Miswadi, Oct. 2007.

constant tension and instability in the region.”²⁰ More to the point, Miswadi cites another reason for the futility of the two-state solution: he believes that Israel has actually killed the possibility of building a true and viable Palestinian state by building numerous Jewish colonies in the West Bank and by transferring hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers onto occupied Palestinian land. “And given the political climate in Israel today,” he says, it is highly unlikely that any Israeli government would agree to dismantle all the settlements and return to the 4th of June, 1967 borders.”²¹ Miswadi believes that the “one-state solution” would be the “right solution for both us and the Jews” while admitting that there are disparate views within the Islamic movement on this idea. “Some Islamists are demanding a return to the partition plan, others say they would be willing to recognize Israel if the Jewish state agreed to allow for the repatriation of the refugees,” he notes. Asked if he would recognize the legitimacy of Israel if it allowed the refugees to return home, Miswadi said the following: “Undoubtedly, the return of all or most of the refugees to their homes and villages and former places of residence in what is now Israel would alter the face of the Arab-Israeli conflict. And, yes, then Israel would be justified in asking us for recognition.”²²

Interestingly, support of the one-state solution among Palestinians ranges from 20-35 percent of the population, while the idea enjoys probably 20 percent support among Islamists. However, it is important to note that the low Palestinian support for a bi-national state in Palestine-Israel is attributed mainly to the vehement Israeli rejection of the idea rather than to the rejection of the idea itself. There are some Israeli intellectuals who accept the idea of one civil, democratic state in all of mandatory Palestine as the ultimate lasting solution of the Israeli-Palestinian problem. Even so, it is important to point out that most Palestinians, particularly the Islamists, don't like the term “secular” (as in “secular state”) and prefer the term “civil” (a “civil state”) -- since secularism in the Arab world is widely viewed as denoting “atheism” and “hostility to religion.” Even so, and despite the growing talk of a one-state solution among both Israelis and Palestinians, it is clear that the vast bulk of Israel's Jewish-Zionist society strongly rejects the idea on the grounds that a bi-national state would ultimately spell the end of Zionism and eventually cause Jews to become a minority in a new bi-national state, particularly given the significantly higher birth rates among the Palestinian Arab population.

Democracy, Human Rights and Civil Liberties

There is near consensus among Muslim intellectuals in the Middle East that Hamas's approach to the issues of democracy, human rights and civil liberties is enlightened -- particularly in comparison to other Islamic political parties. Hamas,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

though an Islamist movement and an important offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, does not believe in the concept of “the religious state.” This point is argued by Professor Muhammed Ghazal of Najah University: “A state, by definition, should represent all citizens regardless of their confessional backgrounds. True, ultimate sovereignty lies with the Almighty, but the people, the masses, have the ultimate authority over how to understand and apply God’s sovereignty.”²³ He adds: “We don’t believe in a theocracy, or ‘Mullah-ocracy’ (a government ruled by mullahs). Hamas believes in a civil state, a civil society, not a religious state. Have you ever heard that Hamas has arrested a foreign tourist or any other person for wearing immodest clothes? You see, Christians are to have the same rights and same duties as the rest of citizens. There will be no discrimination or prejudice based on religion or race.”²⁴ Ghazal argues that equal treatment for non-Muslim citizens is not an invention of Hamas or of any other Islamic movement. “This is an established principle in Islamic law. In the early Islamic period, there were Christian ministers and advisors. Besides, discrimination against non-Muslim citizens of an Islamic state is *haram* or prohibited pursuant to Sharia, or Islamic, law.”²⁵

Nonetheless, it is clear that many Islamist leaders (not only in Palestine, but throughout the Muslim world), have grown up impatient with, and dismissive of, western preaching about democracy and human rights. One Islamic preacher from the southern West Bank told this writer that “the West is in no position to lecture us on democracy and human rights. During the years the U.S. and Europe were lecturing us on the merits of democracy and when we finally walked in the way of democracy and held elections, the West frowned in our faces, boycotted us and colluded with Israel for the purpose of starving our people, all because the West didn’t like the outcome of the elections.”²⁶ This Islamist added that there is “a widespread conviction that the West will not allow Islamist or even Islamic political parties to reach power via elections. The experiments of Algeria and Palestine are a clear testimony of western hypocrisy with regard to democracy.”²⁷

International Relations

Hamas has made tremendous efforts toward integrating into the international system, but without allowing itself to become subservient to foreign powers -- whether they be Arab, regional or Western. According to Hamas leader Ahmed Yousuf, as a result of Hamas’ election victory in 2006, the movement opened “communication channels” with civil society and non-governmental organizations in Europe and other parts of the world. “There is a deep conviction among Hamas

²³ Interview with Samar Ghazal, October 2007.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Interview with Walid Suleiman, Sept. 2007.

²⁷ Ibid.

leaders and government officials of the importance of initiating dialogue with the west, given the interdependency of the contemporary world, which really makes it difficult for any nation-state or even organization to isolate itself," he says. "Moreover, it is imperative that we deal with political realities whereby certain mechanisms and policies control the course the world's economy."²⁸ The spirit of this remark was echoed in Ismail Haniya's inaugural speech before the *Palestinian Legislative Council* on 27 March, 2006. Haniya called on the international community, particularly the Quartet (the U.S., E.U., Russia and the U.N.) to side with the values of justice and fairness for the sake of a just and comprehensive peace in the region and not to side with one party at the expense of the other. And while Haniya lauded the position of Russia (which called for dialogue with Hamas), the Palestinian prime minister criticized the US for moral duplicity. "The American administration, which has been preaching democracy and the respect of people's choices, is called to support the will and choices of the Palestinian people," he said "Instead of threatening them with boycotts and cutting aid, it should fulfill its promise to help in the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital."

The tone of Haniya's speech continues to characterize Hamas's overall political discourse and constitute presumptive and convincing proof that Hamas has effectively abandoned much of its erstwhile ideological rigidity. This has been noted by a large number of researchers. For example, Khalid Hroub noted that "Hamas was interested in presenting itself as a moderate Islamist movement worthy of trust by secular as well as religious Palestinians, not only through its programmatic content per se but also by striving to transcend its own partisan constituencies."²⁹ He adds: "But it is equally true that the 'new' discourse of diluted religious content -- to say nothing of the movement's increasing pragmatism and flexibility in the political domain -- reflects genuine and cumulative changes within Hamas."³⁰ While it is true that this "pragmatic approach" is not endorsed by all of Hamas's leaders, other Islamists have clearly come to think of the movement as decidedly less Islamist -- and more "semi-secular." Additionally, it is also true that Western pressure and the boycott of the democratically-elected Hamas-led government has served to weaken the pragmatists with the movement while strengthening the hard-liners who have been arguing that it is pointless to pin any hope on Western good will.

²⁸ Interview with Ahmed Yosuf, Sept. 2007

²⁹ Khalid Hroub, "A New Hamas through its own documents," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Issue 140, Summer 2006

³⁰ Ibid.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Hamas cannot destroy Israel, even if it wants to. Thus, the continued invocation of the mantra that Hamas is dedicated to “the destruction of Israel” should be viewed as more of a political tactic that is aimed at maintaining the status quo than an actual and accurate critique of the movement. What is increasingly clear, however, is the fact that Hamas, despite its perceived ideological rigidity toward Israel, is willing to give the Jewish state de facto recognition (with the promise of a virtually open-ended peace), if Israel agrees to completely end its occupation of the Palestinian territories it seized in 1967, if it agrees to implement UN resolutions regarding to Palestinian refugees, and if it allows for the creation of a completely sovereign and truly viable Palestinian state on 100 percent of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip. Moreover, Hamas has repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to halt all forms of violent resistance to the Israeli occupation if Israel undertakes to stop its own violence and terror against the Palestinian population. Furthermore, it is clear that Hamas is willing to give peace negotiations with Israel a chance. The movement has agreed to authorize the PLO to negotiate a possible final-status settlement with Israel.³¹

The fact that Hamas has agreed to become involved in Palestinian politics testifies to the organization's willingness to play by the rules of international law, provided that these rules are applied honestly to all parties. Even so, it is equally clear that Hamas will not be bullied by sticks or induced by carrots to give up its “bargaining cards” even before negotiations with Israel have begun. The PLO recognized Israel in the early 1990s and agreed to revoke the Palestinian “National Charter.” However, Israel apparently viewed these serious steps as a sign of weakness, and not an expression of good will. The Israeli policy of settlement expansion, continued occupation and subjugation of the Palestinians led to the failure of the Oslo process -- just as the failure of the Camp David process led to the second intifada. There is no doubt that Hamas will continue to be a key political player in the Palestinian arena, being an integral part of the Palestinian political landscape. It is a mainstream political movement that is committed to the principles of civil society, civil liberties and human rights.

It is pointless to continue to insist that Hamas recognize Israel as precondition for the inclusion of the movement in peace initiatives. In the final analysis, Hamas will not recognize Israel's “moral legitimacy” -- at least for the foreseeable future. However, Hamas would be willing and ready to abandon armed resistance, particularly violence against civilians (which it has offered Israel on 3 occasions, but has been rebuffed each time), provided there is genuine Israeli reciprocity. Interestingly, while the Israeli government continues to reject Hamas's calls for an honest and mutually binding truce, some Israeli intellectuals have welcomed

³¹ Ghazi Hamad, (“Hamas: we don't oppose negotiations with Israel if this leads to ending the occupation”), *Maan News Agency*, Arabic site, (Maannews.net, 16 October), also see: the Jerusalem-based *Arabic Daily*.

the prospect of a ceasefire with Hamas, especially in the Gaza Strip. According to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, a long list of prominent Israeli intellectuals signed a petition in September 2007 urging their government to negotiate a ceasefire with Hamas. The signatories included prominent novelists and others including Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, David Grossman, Meir Shalev, Judith Katrir, Eli Amir, Savyon Liberecht, Yehuda Sobol and Dorit Rabinyan.³²

This is not the first time Israeli intellectuals have called on their government to talk to Hamas. Soon after the Palestinian elections of 2006, Uri Avnery, a prominent Israeli journalist and peace activist, called on Israel (and the U.S. and Europe) - to do the inevitable and talk to Hamas now, rather than later after much blood had been spilled. He urged them not to get bogged down in slogans like "Hamas seeks the destruction of Israel", and noted: "A group that is ready to negotiate with Israel, thereby already recognizes the State of Israel. And if it is not ready to negotiate, the problem does not arise. A matter of simple logic."³³ So, if Israeli intellectuals are calling for negotiations between their government and Hamas, it is difficult to understand the EU's refusal to engage with a movement that has been voted into office by a majority of Palestinians. In short, the West, but most especially the E.U., should push for a long-term modus vivendi between Hamas and Israel. Such a modus vivendi -- an environment of coexistence and especially a prolonged one lasting for twenty to thirty years, would be conducive to creating a healthy environment that would pave the way for a lasting historical peace between the Palestinian people and Israel.

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³² "Leading Israeli Authors, Intellectuals, call for Truce with Hamas," *Ha'aretz*, 24 September, 2007.

³³ "To Talk to Hamas -- Israel, Europe and the USA must talk to Hamas now," Uri Avnery, 29 January 2007.

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