

The Link Archives

Title: Hamas

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About This Issue

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reportedly was riding her exercise bike when the TV announced that Hamas had routed the pro-Western Fatah party at the polls. Stunned, she phoned the State Department to find out what had happened.

We phoned Khalid Amayreh. An American-educated journalist based in the West Bank town of Hebron, he is a former al-Jazeera correspondent who now writes for the Cairo-based Al-Ahram Weekly and the Palestine Information Center. I met Khalid some 20 years ago in Hebron where I remember him describing the occupation as “frozen rage.” That rage has erupted over the years in the form of two intifadas and the emergence of the Islamic movement Hamas.

We asked Khalid the obvious questions: What sort of organization is Hamas? Why should its electoral victory—a fair one by all accounts—not have surprised Ms Rice? And what, if any, role will this Islamic government play in the post-Annapolis process? Readers with questions of their own or comments for Khalid can e-mail him at amayreh@p-ol.com.—

John F. Mahoney, Executive Director, January 2008

Hamas

by: Khalid Amayreh

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Most Western media display a hostile attitude towards the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, known popularly as Hamas, describing it as a “terrorist group” devoted to the destruction of Israel. Especially in North America, Hamas is not only guilty until proven innocent, it is guilty even if proven innocent, while Israel is often treated not only as innocent until proven guilty, but as innocent even if proven guilty. This is the general perception among most Arabs and Muslims in the Middle East and beyond.

I have reported on Hamas and have interviewed most of its leaders since its appearance in Gaza in the closing weeks of 1987. My feeling is that it will continue, for the foreseeable future, to play a major role not only in Israel-Palestine, but throughout the Middle East, where concentrations of Palestinian refugees are scattered, and throughout the Muslim

world, where the Palestinian cause elicits strong emotions. For that reason it deserves fair and objective scrutiny.

The Beginning

Hamas has its roots in the worldwide Muslim Brotherhood, whose main goal is to re-Islamize traditional Muslim societies. This process of re-Islamization, e.g, propagating Islamic education and fostering Islamic consciousness, is expected to culminate in the reinstatement of a Sunni Islamic political authority, or Caliphate. The last expression of the Sunni Caliphate collapsed with the downfall of the Ottoman State at the end of the First World War.

Nearly all the founders and co-founders of Hamas have been members of the Muslim Brotherhood and have been involved in religious, cultural, educational and organizational activities first through al Jamaiya al Islamiya (Islamic Society) and later through al-Mujamma al Islami (Islamic Center) in the Gaza Strip. When Sheikh Ahmed Yasin, the main founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, was murdered by Israel in March, 2004, he was mourned all over the Occupied Palestinian territories as "head of the Muslim Brothers" in addition to being Hamas's chief.

Ahmed Yasin was born in 1936 in the village of al Jura, near the modern-day city of Ashkelon just north of Gaza. At the age of six, his father, Ismael, died which meant that Yasin would grow up fatherless and have to depend very much on himself, in addition to providing for his family. He was 12 years old when the Palestinian Nakba or catastrophe occurred in 1948, forcing his mother to flee with her children southward to the Gaza Strip. Here they lived a life of poverty, and from here the future Muslim leader could observe Jews from Europe and elsewhere settling in his village and taking over his home, claiming to have returned to the ancestral land they had left more than two thousand years before.

At the age of 16, Yasin fell on his back while playing sports, and lost the ability to stand or walk. His paralysis, however, did not prevent him from pursuing a career in education which brought him into direct contact with the people.

On the night of Dec. 9, 1987, the senior leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza, now headed by Yasin, held an emergency meeting and decided to officially launch Hamas as a resistance group against the Israeli occupation. In addition to Yasin, the participants included Abdul Aziz Rantisi, Abdul Fattah Dukhan, Salah Shehadeh, Muhammed Shama'a, Ibrahim al Yazuri and Isa al Nashar.

On Dec. 14, 1987, the first communiqué by Hamas was released to the press. The communiqué was unsigned and bore only the Arabic acronym of the three letters making up its name: hms. Eventually, it was decided to use the more euphonious name "Hamas" instead of the odd-sounding "hams." Hamas in Arabic means zeal and enthusiasm. A host of reasons contributed to its appearance and its subsequent growth and popularity.

The Israeli repression of Palestinians had become ever more ferocious as Israeli occupation soldiers dealt harshly with Palestinian demonstrators, killing them indiscriminately at the slightest provocation. At the same time, Israel had adopted a policy of narrowing Palestinians' horizons through settlement expansion as well as a number of other draconian measures, such as massive home demolitions, land confiscations and sweeping arrests. In short, the Israeli repression had reached the point where an explosion was looming, and the question was not if it was going to happen but when. Most Palestinians

thought the main strategic goal behind the escalating repression was to force them and their children to emigrate. Interestingly, even today, there are influential political parties in Israel that advocate expulsion of Palestinians, including the expulsion of Israel's own Palestinian citizens.

At the same time, the Islamic camp, which had been generally non-violent and engaged mainly in preaching and building up an Islamic consciousness, had come to the conclusion that the Islamists (the term had not been coined by that time) would stand to lose in the eyes of the people unless they took part in the struggle against the Zionist occupiers. One of the main propaganda assets that had been used by Fatah, the mainstream secular faction of the P.L.O. headed by Yasser Arafat, against the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine was that its members just indulged in rhetoric and empty talk in the mosques while avoiding the "field of struggle and resistance against the enemy." Hence, involvement in the resistance, besides being a religious and moral duty, would also silence the secular camp.

Another reason contributing to the appearance and rise of Hamas was the overthrow in 1978 of the Shah of Iran, who was an important regional ally of Israel and one of America's main strategic pillars in the region. For the Islamists the Khomeini revolution was a source of encouragement and inspiration, which prompted thousands of young Palestinians to join the Muslim Brotherhood.

Ironically, Israel, too, played a role in all of this. Prior to the launching of Hamas, Israel viewed the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza as somewhat expedient to the Israeli policy of divide and conquer. For this reason, Israel gave the Islamists of Gaza a license to establish a large community center known as al Mujamma'a al Islami and later the Islamic University of Gaza, one of the Brothers' chief achievements. Belatedly, Israel came to realize that Hamas could not be co-opted and that it was an avowed enemy that loomed more dangerously than Fatah and the left-wing organizations.

Hamas, however, is much more than a resistance group. It is, first and foremost, a religious and social organization. The movement maintains a vast network of social, educational, and charitable networks throughout the occupied territories, many of which date back to the Jordanian era and the first decades of the Israeli occupation. In the Islamic tradition of charity, Hamas has been helping the poor and the needy with food and money and offering cheap or free medical care to those who can't afford to pay. In numerous cases, Hamas also helped tormented Palestinians whose homes were demolished by Israel to rebuild, which earned Hamas respect and popularity among many ordinary Palestinians.

This positive image is often compared and contrasted with the generally negative image of the traditionally corrupt Fatah organization, many of whose leaders and members live in fancy villas and drive fancy cars as opposed to Hamas leaders who live a comparatively modest lifestyle in average or below average houses and often drive second-hand cars.

Hamas is actually a middle class movement with most of its support coming from urban centers rather than the Palestinian countryside. Its average supporter is more, not less, educated than the average Fatah supporter. Similarly, Palestinian women are more, not less likely, to support Hamas than are Palestinian men. This is certainly true at Palestinian universities where female students are on average more supportive of Hamas than are male students. Unlike in its formative years, when the movement was led by traditionalists, Hamas today is run mostly by western-educated intellectuals, including

many American-educated professionals, who seek to combine Islamic ideological purity with Western liberalism. Finally, the vast number of Hamas supporters and followers, probably 90-95 per cent, back the movement, not necessarily because they are infatuated with its ideological irredentism, e.g. dismantling Zionism and liberating all of mandatory Palestine from Israel, but because they see in Hamas an honest and selfless movement whose behavior is compatible with Islam.

Anachronistic Charter?

Nearly a year after its founding in 1987, Hamas published its charter, seen by many as a radical ideological document that precludes any practical possibility for a compromise with Israel. The charter is laden with Quranic verses and Islamic religious symbolism, and views all of Mandatory Palestine (which includes Israel proper, the West Bank and Gaza Strip) as an Islamic patrimony or "wakf domain" that can be liberated only through "jihad" or armed struggle.

Part 1, article 11 of the charter states that Palestine is an exclusive Muslim domain "until the Day of Resurrection," and that "No Arab country nor the aggregate of all Arab countries, and no Arab king or President nor all of them in the aggregate, have that right (to renounce it)."

Article 13 of the charter rejects all peace initiatives aimed at resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict because "Peace initiatives, the so-called peaceful solutions, and the international conference to resolve the Palestinian problems are all contrary to the beliefs of the Islamic Resistance Movement."

The charter makes clear that Hamas is not against Judaism or Jews, but only against the state of Israel, as the usurper of Palestine and oppressor of the Palestinian people. "Under the shadow of Islam," it says, "it is possible for the members of the three religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism to coexist in safety and security."

This is undoubtedly a radical document, not only because it rejects Israel, but also because it seeks to project inflexible theological and ideological positions as a manual for political action. In this sense it can be compared to the messianic Jewish ideology of "Eretz Yisrael Hashlema" or "Greater Biblical Land of Israel," which teaches that all of Mandatory Palestine (including Israel proper, the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem) as well as large parts of the Middle East belong exclusively to the Jews by a divine decree.

Against this background, it is often argued that the radicalism inherent in the Hamas charter is to a large extent a reaction to Israel's unmitigated settlement expansion, which was making the survival of Palestinians on their national soil uncertain, and to Israel's refusal up to then to officially recognize the existence of the Palestinian people.

In an October 2007 interview with Khalid Tafesh, I asked the Hamas parliamentarian representing the Bethlehem district why Hamas doesn't revoke its charter to prove its good will toward Israel. "First of all," he responded, "the charter is not a Quran, it is not a document from heaven; it can be revoked." He went on to call the charter a "historical document" that was part of Hamas's formative years, but had no bearing on its current political thinking. "How many times in the past ten years," he asked me, "have you heard Hamas leaders quote from the charter? I personally have not heard them do so even once."

Some Islamists also argue that references to the destruction of Israel have more to do with eschatological Islamic beliefs and prophecies about the end of time and less with practical ideological principles. This may be a sound interpretation since many of the Quranic verses and prophetic traditions cited in the charter are actually end-of-time prophecies resembling in one way or the other biblical prophecies that foresee the ultimate destruction of Israel, especially prior to the second advent of Christ, a Christian belief shared by Muslims.

Apologists and supporters of Israel have been trying to disseminate the message that Hamas's uncompromising stand vis-à-vis Israel stems from the movement's perceived anti-Semitic indoctrination. Hamas has repeatedly stated that the problem with Israel has to do with the occupation, not with Israel being Jewish.

On numerous occasions Hamas's founder Ahmed Yasin declared that Hamas was not against Jews but against the occupation: "I want to proclaim loudly to the world that we are not fighting Jews because they are Jews. We are fighting them because they killed us, destroyed our homes, and took our land away from us. They killed our children and our women. They scattered us all over the globe. All we want is our rights. We don't want more." On Oct. 4, 1997, Yasin met in Gaza with Rabbi Menchem Froman of the settlement of Tek'ua, near Bethlehem. According to Froman, whom I have interviewed several times, the Hamas founder told him that he favored the prospect of Jews and Arabs living together in peace in the "Holy Land."

Unquestionably, this pragmatic approach within Hamas has been weakened by the West's boycott of the democratically-elected, Hamas-led government, which has served to bolster the hard-liners who have been arguing all along that it is pointless to pin any hopes on Western good will.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that Israel, especially since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa uprising in September 2001, has been implementing a policy of "shock and awe" against Palestinians in general, and Hamas in particular.

The Israeli army has murdered scores of Hamas political leaders, including its founder Sheikh Ahmed Yasin. He was assassinated by three internationally banned flechette missiles that the Israel Defense Forces fired at him as he was leaving the Abbas Mosque in his wheelchair. Yasin's successor, Abdul Aziz Rantisi, was murdered a few weeks later when two missiles hit his car as he was driving through Gaza City. And Ismael Haniya, the current Hamas leader in Gaza, has been a frequent target of assassination by the Israeli army.

In some cases, Israel has exterminated entire families of Hamas leaders. On March 4, 2002, one moderate Hamas leader in Ramallah, Hussein Abu Kweik, saw his wife and three children annihilated by the Israeli army, apparently in a failed attempt on his life. The army simply bombed the family car as his wife returned home, after picking up her children from school. When I interviewed Abu Kweik in April, 2007, I got the feeling I was talking to a holocaust survivor. With his wife and three children blown to smithereens, Abu Kweik felt that he was living on borrowed time. Israeli death squads "visited" his home several times afterwards, telling his elderly mother "we want to kill Hussein so that he can join his beloved wife and children." Eventually, Abu Kweik was arrested and imprisoned for four years on charges of "advocating the destruction of Israel and holding anti-Jewish views."

Recognizing Israel?

Hamas has explained on numerous occasions why it believes the state of Israel has no "moral right to exist." Azzam Tamimi, a Palestinian Islamic scholar based in London, sets forth the main reasons in a Jan. 30, 2006 article in *The Guardian*: "Israel has been built on land stolen from the Palestinian people. 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 who are entitled to inalienable rights."

Tamimi concludes: "Hamas, like all Palestinians, refuses to be made to pay for the criminals who perpetrated the Holocaust."

Some Hamas leaders whom I have interviewed argue that recognition of Israel would imply an acceptance of the Zionist national narrative, namely that Palestine has always been a Jewish homeland and that 14 centuries of uninterrupted Palestinian presence in Palestine was an Arab colonization. This, argues Aziz Duweik, the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, who is now imprisoned in Israel for his affiliation with Hamas, is tantamount to demanding that the Palestinians embrace Zionism.

"We are not going to become Muslim Zionists just to obtain a certificate of good conduct from Israel and the west," Duweik told me soon after he won a seat in the Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006.

Unfortunately, instead of treating Hamas political leaders, many of whom are quite moderate, the way the British government treated I.R.A. political leaders, the Israeli army has stormed their homes and offices, blindfolded them, handcuffed them, and dumped them in jail. Today, as many as 47 out of 50 elected Hamas MPs in the West Bank languish in Israeli prisons and detention camps. The only "charge" against them is that they participated in an election under the banner of an illegal organization. This is the election, it should be remembered, that both Israel and the United States said Hamas could participate in; the problem is Israel and the United States never thought Hamas would win!

In addition, many Hamas leaders have come to believe that the issue of recognizing Israel is a red herring, used by Israeli propagandists to justify their ongoing colonization of Palestinian lands. The P.L.O.'s recognition of Israel, they argue, did not lead to Israel's ending its military occupation, so why should Hamas now fall into the same trap as the P.L.O.?

This is a plausible argument. While the P.L.O. did recognize Israel as part of the Oslo Accords in 1993, Israel only agreed to recognize the P.L.O. as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Israel has never given reciprocal recognition of a prospective Palestinian state. Nor has it ever viewed the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem as "occupied" territories, as does virtually all of the international community, including successive American administrations. Instead, Israel continues to insist that the "occupied territories" are actually "disputed territories"—a view that was totally rejected by the International Court of Justice in the Hague (I.C.J.) which, in 2004, reasserted the status of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem as "occupied territories."

This is an important finding. The I.C.J., the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, ruled that "the construction of the separation wall and its associated regimes are contrary

to international law." It pointed out that "all states are under obligations not to recognize the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall." It reminded Israel that it is "bound to comply with its obligations to respect the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and its obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law." And it concluded by urging Israel to cease construction of the separation wall and dismantle sections located in the occupied territories forthwith; repeal or render ineffective all related legislative and regulatory acts; compensate for damage caused; and, return Palestinian property or provide compensation if restitution is not possible.

The Bush administration rejected the ruling.

Emboldened by such unrestricted American support, Israel defied the I.C.J. ruling and continues to this day to build Jewish settlements on both sides of the wall.

There is another hurdle that makes Hamas's recognition of Israel even more unlikely. Israel, especially of late, has been demanding that Palestinians recognize it as the state of the Jewish people. Palestinians, including the American-backed Fatah-led regime in Ramallah, are worried that Palestinian recognition of Israel as a "Jewish state" could be used to justify increased institutionalized discrimination against Israel's non-Jewish citizens, particularly its 1.4 million Palestinians. Israel is also likely to use its "Jewish state" recognition to preclude the return of any significant numbers of Palestinian refugees who fled or were forced to flee their homes when Israel was created in 1948.

Despite its ideological "de jure" rejection of Israel, Hamas has given many signs of its willingness to recognize Israel "de facto." When I interviewed Ahmed Yousuf, political adviser to Prime Minister Ismael Haniya in September 2007, he told me: "Israel as a state is a fait accompli, and we cannot ignore this... If Israel considers Hamas's non-recognition a source of anxiety, then Israel should demonstrate its good will by implementing U.N. resolutions and ending her occupation."

The Hamas – Fatah Rift

Following Hamas's election victory in January 2006, the U.S., along with the European Union (E.U.) and other Western countries imposed drastic sanctions against the P.A., particularly the Hamas-led government. This included freezing all financial aid to the elected government as well as bullying international and regional banks to refrain from making financial deals with Hamas and its institutions. Non-conformist banks were to be blacklisted and punished.

The U.S. justified the actions by citing Hamas's refusal to recognize Israel, forsake violence and accept all U.N. resolutions pertaining to the Arab Israeli confrontation as well as outstanding agreements between Israel and the P.L.O., including the Oslo Accords. (The U.S., it should be noted, has never punished Israel for its numerous rejections of U.N. Security Council resolutions.)

In truth, Hamas on numerous occasions has voiced its willingness to abandon violence against Israel if the Israeli occupation army ceased its own violence against Palestinians. Israel has rejected all these offers, arguing that a ceasefire with a "terrorist organization" would grant Hamas legitimacy. Hamas has even said that it would be willing to respect outstanding agreements as a whole, but the Bush Administration has been in no mood to listen.

The harsh sanctions, coupled with an Israeli decision to withhold Palestinian tax revenues from the P.A., have caused immense humanitarian distress in the occupied territories, forcing the government to stop paying regular salaries to over 150,000 civil servants and public employees. The Hamas-led government has been forced to resort to unorthodox ways and means to keep itself afloat, such as bringing in or smuggling into Gaza suitcases stashed with millions of dollars in cash.

To make things worse, the Israeli occupation army launched a widespread military campaign in July, 2006, following the capture by Hamas fighters of an Israeli soldier during a cross-border guerilla attack on an Israeli army outpost. The Israeli army and Air Force targeted the Palestinian civilian infrastructure, including roads, public buildings, government headquarters and even a major university in Gaza. Israeli warplanes attacked and destroyed the American-insured power station in Gaza, plunging the Strip into darkness for weeks. The campaign lasted over a month, resulting in hundreds of Palestinians killed and maimed. Among the victims were entire families.

Eventually, the harsh Israeli-Western sanctions created a virtual implosion in Gaza which found expression in recurrent bloody clashes between Hamas militiamen and Fatah forces, especially those answerable to former American-backed Fatah strongman Muhammed Dahlan.

In mid-June, 2007, the showdown between Hamas and the American-armed forces of Dahlan culminated in a decisive battle that ended with Hamas's Executive Force taking control of the entire Gaza Strip. The mini civil war in Gaza, which continued intermittently for eight months, killed as many as 333 Palestinians, including militiamen and civilians.

While the mid-June events in Gaza were portrayed in much of the U.S. media as a bloody coup by Hamas against the "legitimate" forces of P.A. Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, the real picture was different, at least from Hamas's perspective.

In an interview I held in July 2007 with top Hamas politician Yahya Mousa, who is also deputy-head of the movement's parliamentary bloc, he vehemently denied Fatah's claims that Hamas carried out a coup against the legitimate Palestinian government. "First of all," he said, "we are the legitimate government. The people of Palestine elected us by a very large margin to restore the rule of law and put an end to lawlessness and chaos and protect people's lives and property. So all we did was to carry out our duties to the Palestinian people. Second, the real coup was being hatched and planned by Muhammed Dahlan in concert with the CIA and Israel. They were planning to carry out a bloody coup against Hamas, the democratically elected government. The American-backed coup was to involve the murder of hundreds of people, including Hamas's religious and political leaders. The coup was to take place on 13 July, 2007. They were planning to dig mass graves in Gaza for Hamas and its supporters. And, thank God, we forestalled and thwarted their heinous plans before they could put them into effect."

I asked Mousa if he possessed hard evidence to corroborate his claims; he replied: "These things are very clear. The American General Keith Dayton had been supplying Abbas's man in Gaza, Muhammed Dahlan, with heavy machineguns, anti-armored missiles, sniper rifles and tens of millions of rounds. Now let me ask you, why do you think the U.S. gave Dahlan all these weapons? To fight Israel? Besides, we have confiscated thousands of documents, damning documents, incriminating and criminalizing Dahlan. The man was simply a CIA agent whose main task was to decapitate Hamas and turn Palestine into another Somalia and another Iraq and another Afghanistan. The man (Dahlan) was simply

carrying out orders from Elliot Abrams, the American Zionist official who was in charge of the Palestine security file and also of foiling the Mecca agreement. So what was Hamas supposed to do, watching Abbas, Dahlan, Dayton and Abrams sharpening their knives and getting ready to decapitate the movement?"

Following the mid-June Hamas takeover in Gaza, P.A. Chairman Mahmoud Abbas dismissed the short-lasting national unity government that had been created pursuant to the Feb. 8, 2007 Saudi-mediated Mecca agreement, which the Bush administration had opposed. Abbas immediately formed a de-facto government in Ramallah, headed by the American-favored former Palestinian finance minister Salam Fayadh. It was this "authority" that carried out a violent crackdown on Hamas during which more than 1,500 Hamas activists were arrested, with many reportedly subjected to physical and psychological torture.

Citing the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip, Israel—probably in collusion with the U.S. and the Fatah-dominated P.A. regime in Ramallah—on Sept. 19, 2007, declared the Gaza Strip a "hostile entity," and imposed a harsh blockade of its 1.4 million population. In addition to significantly reducing supplies of fuel and electricity to Gaza, Israel now bars most Gazans from either leaving or returning to the Gaza Strip, which causes tremendous distress to tens of thousands of students, workers, patients seeking medical care abroad, as well as ordinary people. Some reports from Gaza have begun comparing the situation there to the Warsaw Ghetto and "a genocide in slow motion." These descriptions may have a whiff of exaggeration about them. What is clear, however, is that a real, man-made, humanitarian disaster has materialized in Gaza.

Hence, it has come about that Palestinians have two governments, one in Ramallah enjoying Western political support and financial backing as well as Israeli acceptance; and another in Gaza, led by Hamas, reviled, boycotted, isolated and blockaded.

Hamas and al-Qaida

Ever since Sept. 11, 2001, Israel and her supporters, particularly in the United States, have been making strenuous efforts to conflate Hamas with al-Qaida as indistinguishable political groups. These efforts have yielded significant successes in North American and, to a lesser extent, in Europe, where governments have moved to classify Hamas as a terrorist organization. Israel apparently hopes that by associating Hamas with al-Qaida, it can foster an impression in the West that the Palestinian problem is first and foremost a terrorist problem and that Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands is not done through choice, but through necessity, as an essential part of Israel's Western-oriented war on terrorism. In a nut shell, Israel wants to convince the world, or at least the Western world, that the Palestinian cause has little or nothing to do with a genuine struggle for freedom and justice, and that priority should be given to the "war on terror" rather than ending Israel's occupation.

The truth of the matter is that Hamas and al-Qaida are entirely different organizations in terms of ideology and political thought as well as methodology and public discourse.

Ideologically, Hamas follows the relatively moderate school of the Muslim Brotherhood, which advocates peaceful means, not violence, in effecting change in Islamic societies. In contrast, al-Qaida adopts a school of thought called "Madrasat al Fikr al Salafi al Jihadi" or "the school of the fighting salafi ideology." (Salafi is a person who follows the true, authentic way of the Prophet Muhammed.)

Hamas adopts the principle of gradualness, both with regard to the creation of an Islamic society and an Islamic state. Al-Qaida strongly rejects this methodology and dismisses the concept of truce or coexistence with the enemy as incompatible with the Sharia or inexpedient to the cause of Islam.

Hamas believes in the principle of political participation and effecting change through direct involvement in the political system, as evident from Hamas's participation in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. Hamas also is committed to democratic governing principles and Hamas officials are held to standards set by constituent groups that are representative of a broad-based polity. Al-Qaida, on the other hand, explicitly prohibits any participation in parliamentary or other elections on the grounds that the entire system is "kafir", e.g. run by secularists or un-Islamists.

Hamas believes that the conflict with Israel should be confined to the Palestinian theatre (Palestine-Israel) for tactical, organizational, pragmatic and military reasons. Hence, it has never purposely targeted foreigners in any of its military actions. In contrast, al-Qaida believes that the entire world should be the theatre of jihad against the enemies of Islam. Acting on this principle, al-Qaida has been attacking both Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the region and the world.

Hamas rejects al-Qaida's "al-Manhaj al Takfiri," (the doctrine of judging Muslim opponents as disbelievers or apostates) and doesn't allow itself to be drawn into judging existing Arab-Islamic regimes as un-Islamic or Kafir. In contrast, al-Qaida ascribes apostasy to nearly all existing Arab regimes and governments and sees no need for establishing relations with them for religious and practical considerations.

Finally, Hamas rejects the principle of using violence against Arab and Muslim societies. Unlike al-Qaida, Hamas recognizes and calculates the actual balance of power in its struggle and does all it can to retain its means of resistance and maintain its survival as a movement. Hamas has a tactical policy based on the neutralization of as many potential enemies as possible, and tries to build friendly relationships with as many potential friends as possible.

In a speech he gave on May 5, 2007, al-Qaida's second-in-command, Ayman al Zawaheri, castigated Hamas for sacrificing the Sharia' for the sake of an agreement with "the secularists." His condemnation of Hamas symbolized the depth of disagreement between the two groups: "I ask the leadership of Hamas, first, not to turn away from the rule of Sharia', and to only agree to participation in elections on the basis of an Islamic constitution. And I ask it, second, that if it is given the choice between abandoning government and abandoning Palestine, it should abstain from government. The culture of concession and methodology of backtracking bore their evil fruits, and the Hamas leadership agreed to participate in the aggression against the rights of the Muslim Umma in Palestine. I request every Muslim to look at this map to appreciate the ugliness of the crime in which the leadership of Hamas took part."

Hudna

It is important to remember that Hamas does not believe that the alternative to its non-recognition of Israel must be perpetual confrontation and war with the Jewish state. On several occasions, Hamas, including its founder, Sheikh Yasin, has proposed a lengthy hudna or truce in exchange for total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, releasing Palestinian prisoners and dealing seriously with the right of return of Palestinian

refugees pursuant to U.N. Resolution 194. More recently, a number of Hamas-affiliated intellectuals have sought to upgrade the concept of hudna or sulh (extended peace bound by time limitations) into a virtually open-ended peace, something that would look very much like a formal peace treaty.

Fathi Amr, a prominent Islamic thinker from the southern West Bank told me in an October 2007 interview that the Islamic concept of sulh is a sincere and 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 Muhammed forged a ten-year truce with the polytheists of Quraysh. And he would have kept the truce for its entire duration had Quraysh not violated it when its allies, the Banu Bakr, attacked and murdered members of the Banu Khuaza'a tribe, who were Muslims."

Some Islamic thinkers, like Ismael Shindi, Professor of Islamic Fiqh (Jurisprudence) at Hebron University, believe 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. "When people on both sides of the divide are given the chance to get accustomed to a peaceful coexistence," Shindi told me when I interviewed him in October 2007, "a state of normality would gain a foothold, and their mutual perceptions and attitudes would certainly change." He takes encouragement from the transformation in Europe. "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 virtually one country."

Hamas's willingness to accept a balanced peace settlement along the lines of United Nations resolutions, also has found expression in Hamas's election manual and in Prime Minister Ismael Haniya's inaugural speech in the spring of 2006. These documents reflect more the concept of the two-state solution, without any hint of the liberation of Palestine from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean or the destruction of Israel, as found in the original charter. This stand is further reflected in Hamas's reference to the "apartheid wall," the refugees' right of return, stoppage of settlement expansion, and the end of occupation of territories occupied in 1967—all of which, again, rest on U.N. pronouncements.

Notwithstanding these overtures, Israel has constantly rejected the idea of a prolonged truce with Hamas as is evident from its ongoing policy of territorial expansion and continuing to build the separation (Palestinian call it apartheid) wall in the heartland of the West Bank in violation of international law.

Democracy

In contrast to its early beginnings in the late 1980s, Hamas today seems a different organization. In 1988, a religious-theological fundamentalism shaped Hamas's charter and molded its thinking and political discourse. Indeed, the phraseology used in the charter reflected a movement that is parochial, demagogic and to some extent anti-Jewish. (Hamas then did not make the necessary distinction between "Jewish," "Zionist" or "Israeli" by using the three interchangeably.)

Since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000, and the growing influence of Western-educated activists within the movement, religious demagoguery has given way to political realism. The movement now refers to itself as "an Islamic-democratic party," with some Hamas members going as far as comparing their movement with Christian

democratic parties in Europe. On many occasions it has asserted its commitment to "political plurality" and "transition and rotation of power." In part, this evolution is consistent with general trends within the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan and other countries.

According to the political adviser to Prime Minister Haniya, Ahmed Yousuf, the relationship between Islam and democracy is one of "adaptation" and "coexistence" not one of "paradox and contradiction." In a September 2007 interview he explained: "We in Hamas don't see estrangement or incompatibility between Islam and democracy. We believe that democratic transformation is an asset for our people. We also realize that efforts to bolster the democratic course will eventually help us reduce the chances for corruption and nepotism in the Palestinian society." And he went on to argue that life in a democratic climate is conducive to building a healthy society, adding that the Arab world, including the occupied Palestinian territories, was suffering because of the excess of despotism and authoritarianism. "As a governing authority, we have realized that it is a must to allow civil liberties and freedom of speech and expression and refrain from introducing restrictions on the mass media. A free society would enable us to see our mistakes and flaws which, in turn, allows us to rectify our mistakes as soon as possible."

Indeed, even after Hamas's takeover in Gaza in mid-June 2007, Hamas made it clear that it did not aim to create an Islamic state in Palestine or even apply the Islamic (Sharia') law in Gaza. Instead, it would pursue the goal of establishing a just and egalitarian society based on moral principles, such as justice, equality and social solidarity.

Having said all this, however, it would be misleading to conclude that Hamas is becoming or about to become a secular, liberal movement. The fact is Hamas, like other Islamist movements in the Arab world, is trying "to democratize Islam and Islamize democracy." The most significant evolution in Hamas's political discourse came following the decision to participate in the legislative elections which took place in January 2006. The 14-page electoral platform for the Change and Reform List seems to constitute the broadest vision that Hamas has ever presented concerning all aspects of Palestinian life. Compared with the 1988 charter, the 2006 platform looks almost void of religious-ideological zealotry. The following clauses are indicative of the significant transformation the movement has gone through since its birth in the late 1980s:

—The organizing system of the Palestinian political action should be based on political freedoms, pluralism, the freedom to form parties, to hold elections, and on the peaceful rotation of power. These are the guarantees for the implementation of reforms and for fighting corruption and building a developed Palestinian civil society.

—Hamas will adopt dialogue and reason to resolve internal disputes, and will forbid infighting or the use of threat of force in internal affairs.

—Hamas will emphasize respect for public liberties including the freedom of speech, the press, assembly, movement and work.

—Hamas forbids arbitrary arrest based on political opinion. It will maintain the institutions of civil society and activate its role in monitoring and accountability.

—Hamas will guarantee the rights of minorities and respect them in all aspects on the basis of citizenship.

In the summer of 2006, Hamas accepted the National Reconciliation Document of Palestinian Prisoners inside Israeli Prisons (NRD). Signed by President Abbas and Prime Minister Haniya, the NRD called for forming a national unity government that would include all Palestinian parliamentary blocs, especially Fatah and Hamas, within a common platform capable of dealing with the problems of poverty and unemployment caused by Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people. However, due to intensive pressure by the United States and Israel on Fatah to dislodge from "the dialogue with Hamas," and because of Fatah's decision to create conditions that would lead to the collapse of the Hamas-led government, the NRD eventually drifted into oblivion. Moreover, it was obvious that the sweeping arrest and incarceration by Israel of the vast number of Hamas's elected lawmakers in the West Bank made the task of following up on the NRD virtually impossible.

This political transformation was echoed in Ismael Haniya's inaugural speech before the Palestinian Legislative Council on March 27, 2006 in which he called on the international community, particularly the Quartet (U.S., E.U., Russia and 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 that called for dialogue with Hamas, the Palestinian prime minister criticized the U.S. for its 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. 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."

Annapolis and After

Like most Palestinians, Hamas rejected the Annapolis conference on the grounds that the United States, especially the Bush administration, cannot be an honest broker between the Palestinians and Israel. Speaking on Palestinian al-Aqsa TV, Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Zahar asked: "How can we possibly trust George Bush, who invaded and occupied and destroyed two Muslim nations and killed or caused the death of nearly a million people, to bring peace to Palestine? How could we trust a man who described Ariel Sharon as a man of peace, and who told Israel that it could keep the settlements in any future peace settlement with the Palestinians? Can a man like this be trusted?"

Even in the West Bank, despite a decision by the American-backed Palestinian government in Ramallah to ban protests against the Annapolis conference, thousands of people took to the streets to show their displeasure with the conference. They were met by poorly-trained and utterly-undisciplined P.A. police who attacked both them and the journalists covering the demonstration. One protester was killed in Hebron, and several others injured, one seriously. And a number of journalists were beaten and arrested. P.A. officials, including the P.A. government spokesman Riyadh Maliki, refused to apologize for the police brutality, insisting that the protesters had acted against the rule of law and endangered national security.

Hamas cannot destroy Israel, a nuclear-armed power that exerts immense influence on American politics and policies, as former President Jimmy Carter and a number of prominent American academics have recently asserted. Hence, invoking Hamas's "dedication to the destruction of Israel" is very much a theoretical question bordering on absurdity. This is another issue Israel uses as a foil to consolidate its occupation of the West Bank with ever more Jewish-only settlements.

So where do we go from here?

Hamas is willing to give Israel de facto recognition and virtually an open-ended peace provided Israel agrees to end its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, carry out U.N. resolutions with regard to Palestinian refugees, and allow for the creation of a sovereign and viable state on these territories.

Hamas is also willing to halt all forms of violent resistance against Israel if the latter is willing to reciprocate and stop its own much superior violence and terror against virtually unprotected and helpless Palestinians.

The latest cease-fire offers by Hamas were made by Prime Minister Haniya himself on Sept. 20, 2007, and again on Dec. 19, 2007. Both offers Israel rejected out of hand.

Hamas wants to be a genuine peace partner, not an inferior vanquished supplicant begging for everything from Israel and the United States, from travel permits to accessing food and work. The fact that Hamas has agreed to get involved in Palestinian politics should testify to the organization's willingness to play by the rules of international law.

At the same time, it is equally clear that Hamas will not be bullied by sticks or induced by carrots to give up all its bargaining cards before negotiations with Israel begin. When the P.L.O. recognized Israel in the early 1990s and agreed to revoke the Palestinian National Charter, Israel's response was to double its settler population. In light of this history, it should not have been surprising—disappointing, perhaps, but not surprising—when, days after the American-led conference at Annapolis had prepared the ground for the first serious peace talks in seven years, Israel announced it would be adding 307 new homes to its settlement of Har Homa south of East Jerusalem. And the day before Israelis and Palestinians were to hold their first talks on a comprehensive peace following Annapolis, Israeli troops, tanks, and helicopters invaded southern Gaza, killing six and wounding 12 Palestinians.

Hamas will continue to be a key political player, one that should not be ignored. It is an integral part of the Palestinian political landscape, a mainstream political movement that is committed to the principles of justice, civil society, civil liberties and human rights.

As for insisting that Hamas must recognize Israel as a Jewish state as a prerequisite for inclusion in any peace endeavors, this is probably a pointless demand. Hamas recognizes Israel's existence, but will not recognize Israel's "moral legitimacy." This is a matter of religion for Hamas. At the same time, it is willing to abandon armed resistance, especially violence against Israeli civilians, provided Israel genuinely reciprocates.

Interestingly, while the Israeli government continues to reject Hamas's calls for an honest and mutually binding truce, some Israeli intellectuals have welcomed 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 Zionist-Jewish intellectuals, on Sept. 23, 2007, signed a petition urging the Israeli government to negotiate a ceasefire with Hamas. The signatories included the novelists Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, David Grossman, Meir Shalev, Judith Katrir, Eli Amir, Savyon Liberecht, Yehuda Sobol and Dorit Rabinyan. If Israeli Zionist Jews are calling for negotiations between their government and Hamas, it is difficult to understand why the United States and especially the European Union refuse to engage with a movement that has been voted into office by a majority of its people.

In short, the West, especially the U.S. and E.U., should push for a long-term modus vivendi between Hamas and Israel. Such an arrangement, especially one lasting for 20-50 years, would be conducive to creating a healthy environment that would very much pave the way for a lasting historical peace between the Palestinian people and Israel.

As a longtime reporter covering events here in Palestine, it is my strong recommendation that the West initiate as soon as possible a meaningful and sincere dialogue with Hamas. This would encourage the democratically elected organization to walk in the path of moderation, which would eventually serve the cause of peace in this troubled region, and help mend the equally troubled relations between the West and the Muslim world. ■