

Israel's Hamas Portfolio

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The Hamas movement has been around for less than a quarter of a century. Its covenant and charter, approved in 1988, a year after the organization was established, clearly propagates a policy designed to bring about an end to the State of Israel. To fulfill that aim, Hamas has resorted to armed struggle, terrorism targeting innocent civilians (particularly children), and has launched and maintained a capacity to train and dispatch suicide bombers to densely populated urban targets, shopping malls, central bus stations and discothèques, all in Israeli territory.

Throughout its short existence, just over two decades, the movement has borne the brunt of the combined force of Israel's security and defense capabilities. The Israel Security Agency (ISA, commonly known as the Shin Bet) has mounted and perfected a massive intelligence-collection operation, second to none in the history of modern anti-terrorist warfare. All other branches of the Israeli intelligence community have joined hands with the ISA and the IDF in executing daring and precise surgical operations directed at terrorist groups and individuals in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip with deadly effect. The core leadership of Hamas, including its founding leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, has been brought before Israeli courts, tried, sentenced and detained for long periods of time.

The leading figures, both "political" and "military," of Hamas have been removed from the scene on more than one occasion. Yassin himself was killed in 2002, in an Israeli aerial attack, as were other leading figures around that time, such as Abd' Aziz Al Rantisi. Meantime, Israeli jails house several thousand Hamas detainees, and Israeli forays into the West Bank yield scores of Hamas arrests on a monthly, some say weekly, basis.

The first ten years of the existence of Hamas were marked by the first Palestinian intifada (1987-1992) and also the Oslo process. The Oslo Accords were implemented in 1993, when Israel facilitated the return of Yasir Arafat from his

Tunisian exile to the territories. It thus granted him ten squandered years of self rule—a move bitterly opposed by the nascent Hamas group. The Hamas military wing staged its first suicide operation in April 1993. In 1996, shortly after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the hands of an Israeli zealot, Hamas unleashed a bloody series of suicide attacks inside Israel with an emphasis on targets in Jerusalem. Arafat came to regard this as a challenge to his authority and responded with a major operation directed at Hamas. His methods were no less brutal than those employed by his Palestinian adversaries. The die was cast and Fatah, Arafat's mainstream movement, and Hamas became locked in battle ever since, the outcome of which is yet to be determined.

The years 2000–2005 provided the conditions for Hamas to rapidly mature into a full-fledged political-social-ideological component of Palestinian society. This was the period of the second intifada when Israel faced down the Palestinians, Fatah and Hamas, and conducted a series of campaigns both in the West Bank and in Gaza, designed to uproot Palestinian terror. Notwithstanding its notable successes mentioned above, the period was marked by the loss of over a thousand lives on the Israeli side; well over half of these losses were inflicted by Hamas.

At the height of the second intifada, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel declared that in his eyes “the fate of Netzarim should be identical to the fate of Tel Aviv”—Netzarim being the most isolated and threatened Israeli outpost in the heart of the Gaza Strip and a constant target of Hamas suicide and other attackers. A very short time later, Sharon announced his decision to withdraw unilaterally from the entire Gaza Strip and to evacuate its 9,000 Israeli settlers from their homes. Whatever Sharon's motives for so deciding, and regardless of my view of the circumstances that led him to that conclusion, Hamas viewed this as its first major victory. Moreover, this rapidly became the accepted view of the Palestinian public.

The Israeli withdrawal from Gaza provided Hamas with its first opportunity to craft a strategy vis-à-vis Israel that went beyond the initial (and basic) one of violent confrontation. The circumstances were very beneficial for Hamas. Israel emphatically declared that it was about to take a unilateral step. It was a step in which the Palestinian Authority played no role, nor was a party to; needless to say, Hamas was certainly not a legitimate interlocutor in Israeli eyes. Belatedly, Egypt was brought into the picture and asked to cooperate, although Cairo had pointedly been kept out of the picture during the formative stage of the Israeli plan.

Israeli military planning for this major redeployment had to take into account the possibility that Hamas or others in Gaza might take advantage of the withdrawal to launch attacks of one form or another against what was seen, in Hamas eyes,

as a major retreat. Contrary to Israel's redeployment along its northern border in 2000, when the decision was made and implemented virtually overnight, the Gaza disengagement necessitated months of planning and the commitment of large Israeli elite military contingents to forcibly evacuate the thousands of Israeli settlers. In good time, Hamas was certainly capable of planning and mounting one or more operations that might complicate things for the IDF.

Hamas decided that its interests lay in a different direction. It feared provoking the IDF, lest it be subjected to massive retaliation; but it also saw the political advantage for itself, were it to complement the Israeli unilateral policy with one of its own. It would "withhold fire" as Israel withdrew. It would show that it was capable of more than just brazen inhuman terrorist acts and it would enforce discipline in bringing this about. Barring one exception, a terrorist attack in Beersheba, Hamas was true to its word. It chalked up a first notable strategic success of its own without firing even a single shot. It created a precedent, a strategy that could be repeated.

From its very inception, it was clear to Hamas that it would never accept Israel's right to exist; this was totally unacceptable for a truly religious Muslim. After all, the world is divided into two distinct parts—*Dar al-Islam* [the World of Islam] and *Dar al-Harb* [the World of the Sword]. For that matter, Hamas, or any truly religious Muslim movement, could not accept the legitimacy of a "Christian" sovereignty. The contradiction between the religious world order and the secular world order was ideologically irreconcilable. And yet, Hamas was fast entering the practical, day-to-day world, and as a young and inexperienced movement was compelled to make strategic decisions that would enable it to function as both a military and a political force in its geographical environment. It had little or no time to work it all out, and it had to operate under especially difficult physical conditions because it was being constantly and effectively harrassed by Israeli forces.

Hamas, in line with similar ideological-religious movements, determined at a very early stage that it would have to seek cover under political and religious fictions that would give it the necessary public "oxygen" to survive and gain strength. In the days when its leader was incarcerated in an Israeli jail, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin frequently, even regularly, met with Rabbi Menachem Froman, a unique figure on the Israeli scene. A rabbi living in the settlement of Tekoa in Judea, Froman discoursed with Yassin on theological issues, but also touched on current affairs. Yassin raised the possibility of an extended truce between Israel and the Palestinians, a thirty-year truce, and spoke of the possibility of accepting the 1967 borders as temporary borders for a Palestinian state for that period of time. In 1997, King Hussein of Jordan conveyed a similar proposal to Israel on behalf of

the Hamas leadership, barely a week before the unsuccessful Mossad operation launched in Amman to eliminate Khaled Mash'al, the Hamas leader then living in Jordan and a citizen of that country. Due to circumstances at the time, the proposal reached the desk of then prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, only after that attempt had failed. The gist of the Hamas approach was that since Hamas could not "recognize" Israel, it would enter into "temporary" arrangements with it, without paying the ideological price of reneging on one of the basic tenets of Islam as it saw them.

Israel rejected this approach out of hand, viewing it as a honey trap that would allow Hamas to consolidate its strength and status until such time as it would be capable of confronting Israel in battle, with a chance of winning. Subsequent Hamas statements appeared to provide proof of this. In 2004, with Yassin dead, one of his senior aides, Rantissi, proposed a ten-year truce, a *budna*, in exchange for the withdrawal of Israel to the 1967 borders. He stated that Hamas had come to the conclusion that it would be difficult for it to liberate all of the land, so it would have to opt for a "phased liberation."

Hamas was going through a very difficult period in its history as in 2005, when Israel withdrew from Gaza. Concurrent with its ongoing daily confrontation with Israel, it had to decide whether it would enter the political game inside the Palestinian Authority, whose legitimacy it had hitherto denied, and if it should countenance laying down its arms as a price it would have to pay for so doing. After all, until 2006, the international community, led by the US, had maintained a tough stance on this issue and had unequivocally stated that no one was entitled to go to the ballot box with a gun thrust under his belt. In a surprise move, Hamas decided to participate in the national elections for the Palestinian legislative assembly in 2006, only a year after it had boycotted the elections for the presidency. For reasons still inexplicable several years later, the US performed a policy u-turn and prevailed upon Israel and PA President Mahmoud Abbas to permit Hamas to go to the polls without giving up their arms. The elections were free and democratic, and the results astounded all and sundry, including Hamas themselves: Hamas won 74 of the 132 seats. Its election manifesto called for the "establishment of an independent state whose capital is Jerusalem." No mention of the destruction of Israel was made in that manifesto.

Subsequent events followed in rapid succession. Hamas formed a cabinet under the premiership of Isma'il Haniya. The international community, following Washington's lead, made a second u-turn and laid down three policy conditions for Hamas to accept before it would be received as a partner in any shape or

form: It must accept Israel's right to exist, renounce violence and honor all previous agreements made by the Palestinian Authority.

To be sure, nobody ever believed that Hamas could accept the first condition. It would be tantamount to ideological suicide. Such a condition was never imposed as a precondition for negotiations with Israel in the past. Israel negotiated and signed armistice agreements with Arab states in 1949, after the War of Independence, without demanding that they recognize its right to exist. Indeed, twenty years later, after two successive wars, the Arab world rejected Israel's right to exist at the infamous Khartoum Conference of 1968—"the three NOs": no to recognition, no to negotiation, and no to peace were uttered in response to Israel's appeal to negotiate without any preconditions. It was demanded that Hamas accept an ultimatum never presented before to any Arab party to the conflict.

Israel and the Quartet (the US, Russia, the EU and the UN) moved in 2006 and 2007 to delegitimize the results of the 2006 Palestinian elections and to prevent the Fatah under President Abbas from consummating a reconciliation with Hamas, which was launched by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in Mecca in February 2007. Parallel to that, the US and several European governments initiated an effort to train and create a military force led by Fatah loyalist leaders in the Gaza Strip. The mission of this force, extensively equipped with weaponry and related intelligence and logistic assets, would be to allow the Palestinian Authority to exercise its authority over the Gaza Strip, which was fast becoming a Hamas-dominated area. In June 2007, fighting broke out between Hamas and Fatah forces in the Gaza Strip and within less than forty-eight hours, the American-trained Fatah force fell apart. Its entire command echelon fled to the West Bank. Just as Hamas was surprised by its election victory in the 2006 elections, so was it dumbfounded by its sudden victory over Fatah in Gaza. Overnight, Hamas took entire control of Gaza. This was the first time that a Muslim Brothers national branch came to power in the Sunni Muslim world. The youngest wing of the Muslim Brothers movement came in first.

The year 2007–2008 saw a rapid deterioration in conditions in Gaza, an escalation of fighting between Israel and the Gaza Strip and an ever-growing desire of Hamas for a "lull" of sorts, a *tahadiya* [respite]. Hamas was hard-pressed and obviously had to acknowledge that Israel had the upper hand. Israel, for its part, was anxious to put an end, or at least bring a temporary halt, to the daily attacks of Qassam and other rockets targeting the cities and villages of the southwest portion of the country over a very long period of time. The actual damage inflicted by the rocket attacks was surprisingly low and the casualty rate was similarly marginal, but the negative effect on the morale of the Israeli population in the areas under fire was constantly in the public domain for everyone to sense and see. Israel appeared to

have no adequate response to the primitive threat it was facing. Moreover, it also strove to create more favorable conditions for a successful end to negotiations to obtain the release of its kidnapped soldier, Gilad Shalit, who has been in Hamas hands since July 2006. This *tabadiya*, negotiated indirectly through Egyptian good offices, was effected without the two parties ever meeting each other in direct talks and without either of them having to make any political concessions. Hamas was able to achieve its aim without facing Israeli representatives, and Israel was able to maintain its stance of nonrecognition of Hamas. What we saw in June 2008 might not have been a situation of mutual deterrence, but it was certainly one of common interest in a cessation of hostilities, at least temporarily.

In view of this concise, and necessarily incomplete, history of the Hamas–Israel portfolio, where do we now stand and where do we go from here?

Israel is now negotiating with Abbas for a permanent settlement to the Israeli–Palestinian dispute. However, even in a best-case scenario, no one expects the result to lead to its speedy implementation in the foreseeable future. Hamas is deeply entrenched in Gaza and still has considerable influence in Judea and Samaria, notwithstanding the nightly incursions of IDF elite units into every nook and cranny in the entire area. Hamas still has grassroots support there, including that of key elements of the middle class.

Almost a quarter of a century after the founding of the movement, it is becoming more than obvious to Israel that Hamas is here to stay, and it is becoming more than obvious to Hamas that they have no chance in the world to witness the destruction of the State of Israel. Given the constraints on both sides, the only viable chance of containing violence and to lessen tension is to change course from conflict resolution to conflict control. This change, of course, requires the realization that the only feasible solution at present is an interim one—a solution that leaves issues open for future handling under improved circumstances. Hamas offers such a solution, but on terms totally unacceptable to Israel. Israel would accept this, but on terms unacceptable to Hamas.

Yet this is a path worthy of greater study. First, because there is no other viable alternative available at present. Even those who support the current negotiations between the government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority on a permanent solution to the conflict do not hope for more than a solution that will be shelved until such time as implementation in the entire area of Palestine is feasible. No one, to date, foresees a revival of the Fatah movement and the simultaneous demise of Hamas. Hence, anyone who seeks a practical solution must see Hamas as moving from being an insurmountable problem to becoming a factor in the solution. Second, because both sides need a period for internal healing and domestic reconciliation.

Third, because Hamas, although a highly religious movement, does not defer to a religious leadership for its decision making. As such, it has room for flexibility. In several utterances, both public and private, Khaled Mash'al, now domiciled in Damascus, has said that Hamas would accept a solution negotiated with Israel if it were approved in a national Palestinian referendum. Granted, there are many loose ends to all these elements, and the devil, as always, is in the details, but such details cannot be pursued unless Hamas is engaged in meaningful discussion.

Fourth, the Hamas leadership is by no means unanimous concerning the policies it should adopt. There are the pragmatists, the die-hard ideologues, the politicians and the commanders in the field. All are now locked in serious debate over the future. As long as the door to dialogue is closed, there is no doubt as to who will prevail in this continuous deliberation and soul-searching.

Finally, Hamas was pronounced a traitor to the cause of Islam on the morrow of the Mecca Agreement by none other than the number two of the al Qa'ida group of Bin Laden. In the final lineup on the issue of Islamic international terror, Hamas has been exiled to the other side and is considered to be in league with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and, yes, Israel.

So is the current approach of Hamas genuine or is it a honey trap? Who can say? But at the end of the day, we will never know unless we try. Nearly ten years ago, King Abdullah II of Jordan expelled the Hamas leadership from Jordan and exiled it. In recent months, his aides have begun exploring the parameters of a partial or gradual change of policy toward this movement. Maybe we should attach importance to the instincts of this enlightened Jordanian monarch. Does he know something that we do not? Does he sense something that we cannot yet feel?

We must maintain our vigilance and we must constantly prepare for a major showdown, which may or may not come about. Still, Israel must be prepared militarily, armed with the moral stamina to sustain the losses that a successful campaign would entail. But might we, simultaneously, also pursue the other option — a “time-out” for ten, twenty, thirty or even fifty years? Europe has enjoyed a *hudna* for around 300 years. In view of there being no really viable alternative, should we continue to ignore Hamas in any political context?