

Another Look at “Israel’s Hamas Portfolio”: A Response to Efraim Halevy

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Readers of this journal were undoubtedly jarred when they opened the pages of its most recent issue and read the radical suggestion that Israel test Hamas’s proposal of a *hudna*. It was not just the proposal itself that shocked, but the source—it emanated from a pillar of Israel’s security establishment, Efraim Halevy. In his article, “Israel’s Hamas Portfolio,” Halevy recommended giving serious weight to a medium-term cease-fire with Hamas—an idea that many would have seen as delusional even before the most recent round of combat.

However surprising the content, Halevy’s hard-headed, no-nonsense analysis was in one sense encouraging. It indicated that Israel has not lost its capability of producing clear, unemotional thinking in difficult, emotional times. A close reading of Halevy’s article reassures the reader that its author was not deluded—he advanced his proposals blinded by neither idealism nor hope but only after careful consideration of unpleasant realities and a menu of unattractive, almost unpalatable, choices.

But that does not make him right. Clear thinking is not always correct thinking. Did Halevy offer a persuasive analysis? And is his jarring recommendation worth considering? I think so, but the real question is whether Halevy’s fellow citizens will be convinced. And that question has only acquired newfound, and perhaps even existential, urgency as Israel is embroiled in a war against Hamas in Gaza.

There was clearly much for an academic to quibble with in Halevy’s article. Some of the statements about the history of Israel’s dealings with Hamas can be contested. His presentation of the group’s ideology—while welcome for its insistence on the deep differences between al-Qa’ida and Hamas—sometimes revealed an overly simplistic understanding of political Islam. And while Halevy was correct to portray Hamas as a deeply ideological movement, its ideology is sufficiently general to be a poor predictor of behavior over the short term. The

fact is that Hamas has mastered the art of marrying tremendous tactical flexibility with strategic consistency.

Yet despite such quibbles—and this is only a partial list—there is much to learn from Halevy's analysis, whatever one's policy preferences. His article presented some sobering claims, either explicitly or implicitly, that analysts of all political persuasions should pay close attention to:

- Any ideological change in Hamas will come slowly, if it comes at all.
- Israel and its allies have a major impact on shaping Hamas's strategic environment—and hence its actions—but have frequently erred, and quite seriously, in anticipating the effect of their own actions on Hamas.
- Hamas is formidable because it is organized and disciplined, especially in comparison with its rivals on the Palestinian political scene. And it is an organization that must be treated and understood as such, rather than as an extension of the personality of a single charismatic individual—again in contrast to its competitors.

One might go further than Halevy did in his appreciation of Hamas's strengths. From the perspective of its founders, Hamas has reason to look over its two decades as a tremendous success story. The founders themselves must make such an evaluation from the next world rather than this one, partly because the organization's growth has prompted a harsh Israeli response. But in a bizarre sense, this suggests their greatest achievement—they built an organization that has outlived them; Hamas is the most successful political organization the Palestinians have produced. From a small group of determined but naïve militants, Hamas has grown into a complex organization that occupies the attention of leading global decision makers.

Success, however, brings problems—and the group's rigid, extreme ideology does not always help it address these problems. Hamas's growth and increasing complexity have led to multiple demands, diverse constituencies and conflicting short-term priorities. The Palestinian stepchild of the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to govern, "resist," conduct diplomacy, feed the poor and educate the faithful—all at the same time. Hamas sees itself simultaneously as a religious movement, nationalist organization and social service provider.

In a sense, and to his credit, Halevy's suggestion was designed not to shape the movement but to take Hamas as it is. He seeks to turn the organization's discipline

into an asset for Israel. Hamas often boasts that it keeps its word, and Halevy therefore wishes the movement to promise to adhere to its proposed *hudna*. He does so not to tame the movement—he has no illusions there—but to live with it.

It is refreshing to read a policy prescription that is not oversold—Halevy did not pretend to offer a panacea. He did not even promise success. He offered only a proposal to consider a medium-term arrangement justified, above all, by the absence of alternatives. In his own words, he proposes a shift in emphasis from “conflict resolution” to “conflict control.” Halevy’s prescription was married implicitly to an assumption that the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians has no solution at the moment and therefore will continue for the foreseeable future.

But what about the unforeseen future? Of course, by definition, we will have to wait and see. But can we hope? Even those who are willing to follow Halevy in exploring ways to live in the midst of existential conflict may balk at his vagueness in considering the long-term implications of the *hudna* path. Halevy offered not peace but indeed nothing more than an interim *modus vivendi*. There is a reason John Lennon did not try to inspire his generation by singing “Give *hudna* a chance.” Can a *hudna* be used more ambitiously than either Hamas or Halevy promises? Can it alter the strategic environment or reconcile the Israeli and Palestinian national movements? Halevy did not bother to beguile his readers with such an offer. His approach combines a long-term dedication to Israeli security with an unemotional practicality about short-term arrangements—oddly mirroring the stance of Hamas.

Yet even if Halevy and like-minded Israelis merely wished to persuade rather than inspire, they will need to address how the period of the *hudna* can be used constructively for means beyond mere survival. Is a *hudna* an end in itself or a means to the goal of promoting some positive change in the environment? Halevy hinted in both directions. In order to convince, he will probably have to do more than hint.

Can Hamas’s complex nature and its multiple identities be used to give the movement a strong interest in, of all things, continued stability? Can political power, influence, diplomatic attention, and the needs of its followers slowly domesticate the movement? Can a “honey trap” (the metaphor Halevy used to describe Hamas’s offer) be used against, rather than by, Hamas?

Perhaps definitive answers can be avoided for now. But I suspect Israelis emerging from a round of fighting will at least demand careful thinking before they accept Halevy’s suggestion. And the questions have no easy answers. Past attempts to tame Hamas have failed. And the movement itself is well aware of projects to

declaw it. Fear of such a “honey trap” runs deep in Hamas and its allies—it is expressed occasionally in public and routinely in private. This explains why it was so difficult for Hamas to enter elections, why the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan advised the movement to lose the 2006 elections and why the agreements negotiated with Fatah in 2006 and 2007 (the prisoner’s document, the Mecca Accord and the national unity government) were so controversial among its members. And, of course, it helps explain why these efforts collapsed in Gaza in June 2007.

It is not only Hamas that might disrupt such efforts. Hamas’s many adversaries have good reason not even to trust themselves. In the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, no actor has shown a sufficiently steady hand to carry out such an ambitious project of taming a movement. Just as those who try to remove a stain by rubbing it often only make the mark permanent, the efforts of Hamas’s adversaries have been counterproductive.

This can be seen most clearly in the erratic attempt to use elections to tame Hamas. Here my version of the story departs slightly from that narrated by Halevy—though it comes to a similar conclusion. Convinced that elections could co-opt his opponent, Mahmoud Abbas moved to bring the Islamists into the 2006 parliamentary balloting. When Hamas won, its horrified opponents in Washington, Jerusalem, and Ramallah focused on ousting it from power immediately through any means, however illegal. That effort helped lead to a brief Palestinian civil war. And it ensured that the means used to bring Hamas into power (elections) could not be used to oust it by forcing the collapse of already-weak Palestinian constitutional arrangements. Hamas had taken so much pride in its electoral triumph that it would have been difficult for the movement to avoid another round of balloting in 2010. But rather than plan for those elections, Hamas’s opponents ensured that they would not take place. Were Hamas’s opponents a bit more coolheaded and competent, Hamas would be facing Palestinian voters next year with little to show for their performance.

To be fair to Halevy, his proposal was not that Hamas’s proposed *budna* be embraced but only that it “receive greater study.” Studying the proposal should be the occasion for—rather than a way of continuing to avoid—cool calculation and strategic thinking.

If this is Halevy’s proposal, I have to agree with him that a *budna* is worth exploring. But if Halevy wishes to convince his fellow Israelis, rather than a distant American academic, he will have to demonstrate to them that they can outsmart Hamas.

Efraim Halevy

responds:

It is hoped that the serious and extensive comments of Professor Brown precipitated by my article open a necessary and timely debate over the future of Israel– Hamas relations. For this I am most appreciative and grateful. By the time this edition of the *Journal* reaches its readers, the January 2009 war between Israel and Hamas will probably have reached its end, and an assessment of the way each side has emerged from this ferocious confrontation will surely provide a major point of discussion over the pros and cons of pursuing the proposition of an alternative approach.