

‘The Islamic Nexus and the Future of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict’

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Although a lot has been made in the foreign press of the Mecca agreement in terms of its potential to stabilise intra-Palestinian politics and eventually re-start Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, what are the real prospects for the achievement of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement with *Harakat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya* (‘Islamic Resistance Movement’, *Hamas*) at the helm of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA)? The outlook for peace appears very dim given *Hamas*’ terrorist track record before and after it won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections on 25 January 2006.

The Mecca agreement obtained between *Hamas* and *Fatah* on 8 February 2007 under the auspices of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia will enable *Hamas* to form a unity government with *Fatah* without having to alter its Islamist ideological position as well as violent political-military strategy vis-à-vis Israel.¹ The agreement, in fact, has allowed *Hamas* to achieve what it has desired so much since winning the elections last year: political legitimacy and governance. Until now both of these seemed impossible to attain due to Israel’s, the US’ and Europe’s financial and diplomatic ostracism towards *Hamas* and due to the highly disruptive *Hamas-Fatah* power struggle that has ensued over the last year and which almost degenerated into civil war over the last few months. Despite the fact that it will take much more to convince Western states to re-establish real cooperative links with the *Hamas*-led PNA government and to release the much-needed financial aid that until now has been withheld, the Mecca agreement will substantially help *Hamas* recover from its economic crisis, reinforce its control over the PNA and possibly facilitate its attempts to win the next round of Palestinian presidential as well as legislative council elections.

By gaining official support from the conservative Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which will in theory replace Iran as the major financial backer of *Hamas*,² one hopes that *Hamas* will temper its extremist annihilatory goals in relation to the state of Israel. Yet, the Mecca agreement, which will bring about a power-sharing coalition government with *Fatah* did not compel *Hamas* to recognise Israel’s right to exist, to repudiate the use of terrorism and to acknowledge previous peace agreements with Israel. Thus, it is very difficult to envisage how such a unity government will actually conduct future negotiations with Israel or satisfy any of the conditions set out by the ‘Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East’ – mainly the acceptance of Israel’s right to exist in peace and security, the duty to fight terrorism, and the responsibility of creating viable democratic institutions within the PNA – given *Hamas*’ ideological aversion to such stipulations.³

In order to understand *Hamas*’ deeply ingrained opposition to Israel’s right to exist in the Middle East one must examine the Islamist roots of its belief system and *Weltanschauung*.⁴

¹ See: ‘Muted response to Mecca agreement’, *BBC News*, 9 February 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6345427.stm.

² See: ‘Iran offers *Hamas* Financial Aid’, *BBC News*, 22 February 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4739900.stm.

³ See: ‘Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East: Israeli/Palestinian Reciprocal Action, Quartet Support’, U.S. Department of State, 16 July 2003, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/rls/22520.htm>.

⁴ Whilst this presentation will delve into certain aspects of *Hamas*’ ideology and strategy, for a more in-depth analysis of *Hamas* see: Shaul Mishal & Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

According to *Hamas*, the Palestinian cause, rather than being a nationalist, is an Islamic one. As stated in one of its manifestoes, the cause 'is not about land and soil, but it is about faith and belief'. Such a declaration exposes a crucial transformation of the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, that of Islamizing them.⁵ At the centre of *Hamas*' belief system is the stress on the 'Islamic essence' of the Palestinian cause and Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Contrary to the conviction held by traditionally secular nationalist Palestinian organisations, such as *Fatah*, the liberation of *all* of Palestine can only be achieved through Islam, given that 'only Islam will break the Jews'.⁶

The method through which Jews and the state of Israel can be defeated is through the conduct of *jihad*, that is, 'holy war'. According to the *Hamas* Covenant, in fact, 'there is no solution for the Palestinian question except through *Jihad*.⁷ Initiatives, proposals and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavours'.⁸ The *Hamas* Covenant lays the obligation of *jihad* both on the individual ('Resisting and quelling the enemy become the individual duty of every Moslem, male or female and on the whole Muslim world') and on the whole Arab and Muslim world ('The question of the liberation of Palestine is bound to three circles: the Palestinian circle, the Arab circle and the Islamic circle. Each of these circles has its role in the struggle against Zionism'). This is due to the conviction that it considers Palestine 'Islamic land'.

The occurrence of mass and suicide terrorism, which had been introduced from Lebanon by Islamic *Jihad* and *Hamas*, was the direct result of the belief that in order to liberate Palestinian holy land *jihad* was to be carried out against Jewish civilian and military targets. This belief and the resultant tactic steadily became ingrained in Palestinian society throughout the 1990s. Whilst Islamist organisations introduced this devastating and morally questionable tactic, nationalist factions within the PNA in due course adopted similar methods. With the PNA on board, a process of mass indoctrination was initiated through various media outlets, religious teaching in Mosques and through the EU-funded Palestinian education system. This process ultimately helped cement the 'concept of martyrdom [*ishstishad*] in the Palestinian collective consciousness' as a symbol of rebellion against Israel.⁹

The effects of the conflict's Islamization and of the *Hamas*' (and of other terrorist organisations') real intentions can be understood by comparing the consequences of their terror campaign that ensued before, during and after the Oslo peace process. In the fifteen years prior to the 13 September 1993 Oslo Accords only 254 Israelis were murdered by Palestinian terrorists. During the seven-year Oslo peace process (September 1993-September 2000), Palestinian terrorists were able to kill 256 Israelis, whilst between September 2000 and September 2005 (the zenith of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* conflict) 1,097 Israeli deaths were suffered at the hands of Palestinian terrorists.¹⁰ Clearly, Islamists wanted to derail the peace process and are intent in doing so in the future.

Whilst *Hamas*' predecessor, the Muslim Brotherhood, focused on transforming the Palestinian population into a cohesive society through *dawa* (non-violent

⁵ Cited in: Meir Litvak, 'The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Case of *Hamas*', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (January 1998), p. 148.

⁶ Meir Litvak, 'The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict', p. 149.

⁷ To gain an in-depth understanding of the concept of *jihad*, the interpretations of the concept in Islamic theology and its history see: David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (London: University of California Press, 2005).

⁸ *Hamas*, 'The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement', 18 August 1988, *The Avalon Project*, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/hamas.htm>.

⁹ Meir Hatina, 'The "Ulama" and the Cult of Death in Palestine', *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 2006), p. 40.

¹⁰ Efraim Inbar, 'Israel's Palestinian Challenge', *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (October 2006), p. 828.

missionizing/Islamization) and its related Islamic educational, social welfare and humanitarian work, the first *Intifada* spurred the creation of *Hamas* as an off-shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood with the specific intent of carrying out an armed struggle, that is, a *jihad* against Israel. *Hamas*, nonetheless, did not forsake the goal of *dawa*. *Dawa*, in fact, came to be seen as a complementary strategy (see concept of '*tsaber*' below). It would be a strategy that could be employed whenever *jihad* would be unpractical or too dangerous to carry out at a particular time. Furthermore, through *dawa* the basis for *jihad* would be prepared in advance from a moral and ideological point of view.

The close programmatic synergy between *dawa* and *jihad* in the fulfilment of Israel's hoped-for defeat one day has permitted *Hamas* to carry out its goals even during periods of relative quiet such as in the past *hudnas* (ceasefires) and in last year's *tahadiye* (truce). During these periods, *Hamas* was able to revert to *dawa* tactics. These short-term respites from violence have been the means through which *Hamas* has continued 1) to win the 'hearts and minds' of the non-Islamist sections of Palestinian society; 2) to re-group and recover from Israel's unrelenting counter-terror campaign, which has been able to erode considerably its capabilities (but not its motivation) to execute terror attacks; and 3) to re-arm itself with ever more sophisticated and lethal weaponry (see below).

Hamas' twofold strategy of *dawa* and *jihad* as well as its many conflicting press statements (anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli in the Arabic press, ambiguous and verging on the conciliatory in the foreign press) have been undertaken in order to confuse both partial segments of Israeli public opinion as well as various European governments.¹¹ Combining socio-political programmes together with the strategy of terrorism has effectively confounded certain policy-makers who have fallen into the trap of making hair-splitting organizational distinctions that do not do justice to the reality that an institution, which perpetuates terrorism is a terrorist organisation regardless of whether or not it carries out other ancillary non-violent activities or whether or not its terrorist are posited in a clear 'political' programme.

Current Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema, for example, stated last August in an interview with *Corriere della Sera* that '*Hamas* and *Hezbollah* are not *al-Qaeda*' and that 'besides their well-known responsibilities for terrorist actions, they have a political side, they are engaged in assistance'.¹² It is precisely statements such as these that encourage and galvanise terrorist groups like *Hamas*, who are more than happy to manoeuvre in the international arena with relative impunity. Such statements, furthermore, weaken the global war on terror (GWOT) campaign as it creates fissures within the 'coalition of the willing' that are astutely taken advantage of by terrorists. They also contradict the increasing evidence that points towards the growing Islamic nexus that has coalesced disparate forces such as *Hamas*, *Hezbollah*, *Al-Qaeda* and the Islamic Republic of Iran, all of which have openly called for, amongst other things, the destruction of Israel.¹³

Whereas some might say that such declarations are purely rhetorical, one only has to look at the mounting political-military cooperation amongst them and at the operations that they have carried out against Israel in the recent past either directly or through proxy warfare to comprehend their gravity. Alarming, cooperation between *Hamas* and other Palestinian Islamist groups, most notably Islamic *Jihad*, and foreign entities will make it inevitable for

¹¹ See for example, 'The Forked Tongue of *Hamas*: How It Speaks Differently to Western and Arab Media', *Independent Media Review Analysis*, 11 April 2006, <http://www.imra.org.il/story.php3?id=29004>.

¹² 'Italian FM: Hezbollah, *Hamas* are not al-Qaida', *Associated Press and The Jerusalem Post*, 29 August 2006.

¹³ See for example: 'Iran leader urges destruction of "cancerous" Israel', *CNN*, 15 December 2000, <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/meast/12/15/mideast.iran.reut>; and 'Ahmadinejad: Israel's Destruction Near', *Yedioth Ahronot* (English edition), 13 November 2006.

Israel and its current neighbouring enemies to clash along the same, if not higher, levels of violence experienced during the Israeli-*Hezbollah* ‘Rocket War’ of August 2006.¹⁴

In 2004, a report stated that *Hezbollah* had been providing between \$750,000 and \$1.5 million to Palestinian terrorist groups on an annual basis and that over 80 percent of terrorist attacks originating from the West Bank were abetted by *Hezbollah*.¹⁵ Since Israel’s unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip in August 2005, *Hamas* and other Palestinian terrorist organisations have been importing at an alarming rate weaponry as well as providing refuge for various *Hezbollah* and *Al-Qaeda* operatives who have begun sharing both advanced guerrilla and terror tactics learnt respectively in their wars against Israel in the south Lebanon and against coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. *Hezbollah*, for instance, has helped Gaza terrorists build rocket hideouts, a large bunker network and procure an anti-tank missile armoury in order to enable them to fight using similar tactics that it used relatively successfully against the Israel Defence Forces in August 2006.

The extent to which *Hamas* and other terrorist organisations have set about amassing weaponry, despite Israel’s unilateral disengagement and affirmed willingness to resume peace negotiations on the basis of the ‘Roadmap for Peace’, is staggering. According to *Shin Bet* (General Security Services) Chief Yuval Diskin, terror organisations have continued to build a huge tunnel infrastructure in Gaza smuggling in an estimated 28 tonnes of standard-grade explosives, compared to *only* six tonnes in 2005. *Hamas*’ procurement list in 2006 comprised, amongst other things, 14,000 assault rifles (9,300 in 2005), around 5 million weapons-related accessories (2 million in 2005), 150 rocket-propelled grenade [RPG-29] rockets, 65 anti-tank [AT-23 *Sagger*] missiles and ten anti-aircraft missiles.¹⁶ Furthermore, when one analyses the actual and attempted attacks committed against Israelis over the last two years, it is clear to fathom *Hamas*’ lack of desire for peace. In 2006, 1,726 rockets were recorded to have fallen in Israel, compared to 401 in 2005. Diskin also reported that 279 potential suicide bombers were apprehended in the West Bank during 2006, nearly 80 percent more than in 2005 (154).¹⁷

In conclusion, *Hamas*’ twofold strategy of *dawa* and *jihad* has enabled it to adopt the conflicting strategies of an all-out *jihadist* struggle against Israel together with the relatively peaceful goal of Islamizing Palestinian society through *dawa* during periods of temporary weakness vis-à-vis Israel. This has been done without *Hamas* having to compromise the movement’s Islamist ideological purity and ultimate aim of defeating Israel. The perceived contradictory nature of such a strategy has been reconciled by assuming the religious notion of *tsaber* (patience, endurance). The term in practice involves, even encourages, the deferral of *jihad* until conditions are favourable for obtaining the ultimate aim, which is the creation of Islamic rule throughout the whole of Palestinian Islamic land. Consequently, efforts carried out by the *Hamas* leadership in the Territories to come to an agreement with *Fatah* or Israel, can be rationalised as a necessary readjustment to current constraints.¹⁸ Once such constraints, that is, weaknesses are overcome, then *Hamas* can resume *jihad*.

¹⁴ See: Sergio Catignani, ‘The Israeli-Hezbollah “Rocket War”: A Preliminary Assessment’, *Global Strategy Forum*, September 2006, <http://www.globalstrategyforum.org/upload/upload26.pdf>.

¹⁵ Zohar Palti & Matthew Levitt, ‘Assessing Hizballah’s West Bank Foothold’, *Peacewatch No. 463, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 18 June 2004, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2154>.

¹⁶ The sources of such weapons have been Syria, Iran and *Hezbollah*. ‘Shin Bet Chief: *Hamas* Using Calm to Build up Strength’, *Yedioth Ahronot* (English edition), 12 February 2007.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Anat Kurz, ‘*Hamas*: Radical Islam in a National Struggle’, *Memorandum No. 38*, July 1997, *Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies*, <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/memoranda/m48chp3.html>.

It is only a matter of time before *Hamas* and its allies resume hostilities against Israel on an even more lethal par. This will surely provoke major Israeli retaliation in order for it to re-establish some semblance of deterrence vis-à-vis the Palestinians, albeit this could occur at a greater risk of a major regional conflagration. It is up to the international community to make sure that the Mecca agreement does not dilute its efforts at containing *Hamas* until it accepts that a future Palestinian state can only be predicated on the preservation of an Israeli one within the greater Middle East.

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