

PALESTINE'S "PARTY OF GOD"

Analysts expected Hamas to fare well in the January 2006 elections, but no one—including Hamas—anticipated it would emerge as the dominant political party and form a ruling cabinet. Overnight, Hamas went from planning how to operate as a parliamentary opposition to President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party to being asked by Abbas to form a cabinet and appoint a prime minister. But Hamas has a course to follow as it attempts to navigate the political waters between its rigidly conservative ideology, its stated intention to continue carrying out attacks, its need to actually govern, and Western calls for divorcing politics and violence. As it calculates how to balance these apparently competing interests, Hamas will look north to Lebanon's Hezbollah (Party of God) for a working model of a militant Islamist group that balances its political, charitable, and violent activities.

Although its presence in the Lebanese government is small, Hezbollah has held seats in the Lebanese parliament since 1992 and, in the wake of elections that followed Lebanon's 2005 "Cedar Revolution," the party joined the ruling coalition and assumed a cabinet seat. Despite its participation in mainstream Lebanese politics, Hezbollah maintains a large, independent militia deployed throughout southern Lebanon, as well as one of most formidable international terrorist capabilities under the direction of Imad Mughniyeh, one of the FBI's most-wanted terrorists. Like Hamas, Hezbollah seeks to Islamize Lebanese society (though in its case to the Shi'a branch of Islam)

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and destroy Israel. And like Hezbollah, Hamas is loath to forgo its jihadist agenda for the sake of political participation.³⁷

Indeed, for Hamas and Hezbollah alike political participation is just another means—alongside good works and militancy—to achieve their goals. Even were Hamas to agree to a long-term hudna with Israel, this would not indicate an end to its struggle against Israel but a shift in the prioritization of its means of doing so. Abbas al-Sayyid, the convicted Qassam Brigades commander behind the Park Hotel Passover massacre (who simultaneously served as the political leader of Hamas in Tulkarm), explained that a long-term hudna is merely a temporary truce, adding, “I will struggle to get back what is rightfully mine, and if I can not then maybe my son or grandson will.” A hudna, al-Sayyid explained, “is the truest solution for those of faith. Hamas is ready for a period of time of truce—but [it] can not agree to Israel taking Islamic lands, for religious reasons.” In the final analysis, “No Palestinian can accept a two state solution forever,” he said, adding, “this is very sensitive.”³⁸

Hamas has long cooperated with Hezbollah operationally, and in the lead-up to Palestinian elections it already began implementing a Hezbollah-style model in Gaza. Fathi Hamad, director of Hamas’ al-Aqsa television station, noted that the success of Hezbollah’s al-Manar satellite television was a key factor leading Hamas to open a television station of its own. Hamas has often issued claims of responsibility on al-Manar for its attacks and, taking another page from Hezbollah’s trade book, filmed living wills of suicide-bombers-to-be that were then aired on al-Manar.³⁹

Despite its militia and terrorist activities, Hezbollah is perceived in much of Europe and elsewhere as a political organization. While the European Union has designated Hamas as a terrorist organization, it has not so designated Hezbollah. In an attempt to reinvent itself as a political organization in Hezbollah’s image, in January 2006 Hamas went so far as to hire a media consultant to improve its image at home and in Western capitals. For a reported \$180,000 spent in the weeks leading up to the January elections, Hamas bought such advice as “Say you are not against Israelis as Jews,” “Don’t talk about destroying Israel,” “Do talk about Palestinian suffering,” “Don’t celebrate killing people,” and “Change beard color” (from the henna coloring preferred by Islamists).⁴⁰

But beyond mimicking Hezbollah’s propaganda techniques, Hamas also began to structure its militant components along the lines of Hezbollah’s parallel standing militia and terrorist elements. Like Hezbollah’s guerilla militia in South Lebanon and its Islamic Jihad Organization terrorist net-

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work, Hamas established a standing militia in Gaza in 2003 to complement its terrorist Qassam Brigades. Creating an army has long been a dream of Hamas leaders, who often justify suicide bombings as a poor man's F16. The day before the group's electoral victory, Hamas leader Khaled Mishal indicated Hamas' intention to unify all Palestinian factions under a "national liberation army that would continue the liberation march."⁴¹

Hamas' emulation of Hezbollah underlies the most significant parallel between the two militant Islamist groups: tactical flexibility should not be mistaken for strategic change. Both organizations see politics, charity, political violence, and terrorism as viable, legitimate tools to pursue their goals. At times they stress certain tools over others, but at no time do they see these as mutually exclusive. Thus, after casting his own vote in the parliamentary elections that brought his party to power, Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar pledged, "Hamas will not turn into a political party. Hamas plays in all fields. It plays in the field of resistance." As the Hamas charter stresses, there is a need for resistance through multiple, concurrent channels, including military, political, social, cultural, propaganda, and other fields. Zahar was very precise in his campaign speeches, telling one crowd, "We are entering the legislative council to make it a project of resistance." Underlying that theme, Zahar promised that Hamas "will not change a single word in its covenant," which calls for the destruction of Israel.⁴²

Meanwhile, Hamas remains an extremely capable opponent to both Israel and moderate Palestinians. Between the money it receives from radical Islamist NGOs, "charitable" donations, and the stipends of state sponsors like Iran, Hamas is as well funded and capable as ever before. Cutting off the flow of funds to Hamas, and replacing its largesse with an organized and regulated international aid effort to address the real and immediate needs of the Palestinian people, is therefore more urgent than ever.

Cracking down on terrorism is critical to meeting the social welfare needs of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, providing Israeli civilians a measure of security, and, should political conditions improve, returning to negotiations over a viable political settlement. To pursue these goals, donor countries must not be distracted from debunking the myth that Hamas conducts legitimate political and charity work parallel but unrelated to its suicide terrorism. It is worth recounting that Hamas activists meeting in Philadelphia in 1994 feared that American and Israeli investment in Palestinian territories would undercut "the Palestinian anger, desperation, revolution by raising the standards of living of the Palestinians" and hoped "the failure of the self rule administration to solve the problems

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of the Palestinian population and providing the needed services to them will be detrimental to the peace accord.” Therefore, they concluded, “to defeat the [Oslo] accord we [Hamas] should make services available to the population.” Indeed, for Hamas political activism and social welfare support are both tactical (as a financial and logistical support network) and strategic (as a means of undermining the PA and thwarting progress toward peace). For that reason, senior U.S. officials have stressed the need to “come up with a way to get [social welfare support] to the [Palestinian] people in some mechanism other than Hamas. We need to come up with an alternative to ensure that money still gets to the people who need it.” Similarly, it is critical that the international community keep to the pledges of leaders like British Prime Minister Tony Blair and American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that Hamas must, in Blair’s words, “choose whether they want a path of violence or a path of politics.” Having “one foot in terrorism and the other foot in politics,” Rice warned, “simply does not work.” Failure to live up to such standards would leave Hamas unfettered to continue undermining moderate Palestinians, radicalizing Palestinian society, and killing Israelis. The sad reality is that nothing undermines the legitimate goal of establishing a secure and independent Palestinian state that lives in peace side-by-side with its neighbors more than Palestinian terrorism.⁴³