

## Hamas in Power

Written by Jonno Evans

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# Hamas in Power

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JONNO EVANS, FEB 10 2011

Hamas, 'Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya' (The Islamic Resistance Movement), has evolved over time from its humble beginnings as a faction of the Muslim Brotherhood, to an arguably legitimate political body, controlling much of the occupied Palestinian territories. Hamas was born out of a Palestinian search for identity that has been found in "the world of exile. The world of the occupied. The world of the refugee. The world of the ghetto. The world of the stateless" (Kimmerling & Migdal, 1994: xvii). What has emerged is a violent resistance movement and a symbol of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle; "the most protracted, implacable and dangerous conflict of our time" (Usher, 2006: 10).

Hamas is a complex movement however, and cannot be described as solely a resistance force. As Milton-Edwards and Farrell suggest, "it is neither al Qaeda nor the Taliban ... It is Islamist, but nationalistic; Sunni, yet supported by a Shi'a regional power; democratic, yet opaque; populist, yet cruel" (2010: vi). This illustrates the conflicting and often complex nature of Hamas, and gives some indication of the different ambiguities and contradictions within it. Hamas is often cast as the primary obstacle to peace; while others cite the political legitimacy and authority gained from election victory in 2006 in suggesting peace cannot be achieved in the Middle East without it (Byman, 2010). It is in this impasse that Hamas becomes a relevant entity that it is necessary to explore and understand.

The differing perspectives of history are considerable factors in the overall Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and consequently the rise and prevalence of Hamas. As Basler notes, "to know the truth of history is to realize its ultimate myth and its inevitable ambiguity" (Cited in Szasz, 1974: 553). The relevance of the region in a religious context is equally profound and intrinsically linked to its ambiguous history. It is therefore in its "religious and strategic significance [that] Palestine was destined to be the field of wars and invasion" (Hroub, 2010: 2). Although the innately linked nature of history and claims to territory will be referred to for context throughout, no particular conclusion will be reached with respect to it.

One of the key aspects in considering Hamas is the notion of it as a terrorist entity. Having largely led the Palestinian armed resistance to Israeli occupation in recent times, Hamas is often referred to in Western literature as a terrorist group (See Zanini, 1999; U.S. Department of State, 2010). This is a largely subjective notion however, and depends on the extent of ones sympathies with the group (Hoffman, 2006: 23). Further, as Chaliand and Blin note "terrorism exists only in a cultural and historical context" (2007: 6). Hamas is often considered a terrorist group as it uses violence as a means of achieving its political aims, often against civilian targets and using tactics aligned with Islamic extremism. While Hamas refutes the label of terrorist, they do accept that a large part of their strategy, militarily, is to create fear (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 114). The ambiguity of the term is such that, "one person's Arab terrorist ... is another's Palestinian freedom fighter" (Milton-Edwards, 2010: 4).

This paper will consider Hamas as an entity, and will reflect on the key factors in its development and features of the movement, while offering on-going insights into the extent to which one can and should label Hamas a terrorist group. The paper will follow on to discuss the Israeli and the international communities strategies in mitigating the threat of Hamas, particularly in connection with its label as terroristic. Each of these aspects will be closely considered in relation to the difficulties of Hamas's new, legitimate role, in the mainstream political sphere. The final section of the paper will discuss the future of Hamas as both an agent of armed struggle and legitimate political body and will seek to offer some concluding thoughts.

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## The ideology and development of Hamas

The State of Israel was officially created in 1948, following the Second World War and the rising force of Zionism, and was immediately recognised by the United States (US) and United Nations (UN) (Hroub, 2010: 4). In the subsequent decades, Palestinian resistance was led initially by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), followed predominantly by Fatah, and later came the rise of Hamas. After the Six-Day war in 1967, the Muslim Brotherhood's influence began to grow, particularly in Gaza (Hroub, 2008), with significant influence from Sayyid Qutb (Gunning, 2008: 64). Significantly, the period saw a gradual radicalisation of the population.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> August 1988, in the transient period at the start of the first uprising or Intifada, Hamas first came into being and was proclaimed a faction of the Muslim Brotherhood. It was Shaykh Yassin's fundamental notion to form "an ostensibly separate organisation" from the Muslim Brotherhood, to account for its involvement in the Intifada (Abu-Amr, 1993: 11). This allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to blame Hamas for its violence and avoid the inevitable retribution for this participation (Abu-Amr, 1993). Hamas later released its first Charter, stating its aims and ideologies.

The original Charter was one defined by its abrasive nature and a focus on violent resistance to Israel. The key aims and ideologies of Hamas have evolved over time, but the "liberation of Palestine" and the "recognition of the legitimate rights of Palestinians" have remained throughout (Hroub, 2010: 15). One Hamas leader suggests, "no occupier was ever removed without resistance" (Mashal, 2010) highlighting the rationale for such violent opposition.

Islamism and the notion and necessity of *jihad* is prevalent throughout the discourse (Hroub, 2010: 26). This early rhetoric and widely cited charge that the Charter called for the "destruction of Israel" (al-Mughrabi, 2007), although refuted by Hroub who suggests the phrase had never appeared in the document (2010: 29), inevitably gave Israel scope to highlight the violent strategy of Hamas and label it a terrorist group. The Charter did explain that, "the field of engagement is Palestine" (Hroub, 2010: 21), thus perhaps reducing the claim that Hamas is an international terrorist group, a pertinent distinction.

Significantly, Hamas started using suicide bombings in 1993 and quickly shifted from targeting the military to civilian areas (Gunning, 2008: 208). In creating 'martyr heroes', Hamas was able to frame suicide bombings as socially acceptable (Hoffman & McCormick, 2004) although Gunning does dispute that it made them morally so (2008: 220). Some consequently argue the tactic lost Hamas the moral high ground with the international community (Milton-Edwards, 2005: 315).

The period between the first and second Intifada's saw a profound change in direction of the movement, "away from political-military action to social-cultural reform" (Roy, 2003: 13). In an interview with Roy in 1999, one senior Hamas official stated, "we must plant the seeds for an Islamic future in the next generation through social change [and] ... alter the mindset and mentality of people through an Islamic value system" (2003: 13). There are differing perspectives on the reasons for this apparent shift, but one critical factor was the Palestinian population itself. It is argued they could no longer tolerate the level of extremism, due to the economic costs and the erosion of the socioeconomic environment, which coincided or resulted from military attacks (Roy, 2003).

A culmination of factors, including a depletion of the Hamas leadership from Israeli arrests and assassinations, meant survival became paramount for Hamas (Roy, 2003). By removing the key resistance or opposition players, the role of Hamas became less well defined. It was in this search for new meaning that there was an ideological and strategic shift towards the social sector. There was a sense that Islamists could maintain public support if they could provide important services, adjust conditions for the people and develop an institutional infrastructure (Roy, 2003).

There is much documented about the nature of these social institutions, such as charitable societies, mosques, health clinics, relief organisations, orphanages, schools and clubs. As Milton-Edwards and Farrell note, it is in the "sinks of poverty Hamas's non-military wing provide ... social services which are the bedrock of its success" (2010: 5). But equally, there was a notion that there was a set of ulterior motives here and an organic interconnectedness between political and social action (Roy, 2003). In essence, this was through teaching Islamic values and promoting

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“political indoctrination and military recruitment” within social services and institutions (Roy, 2003: 15). It was a profound shift, and by 2000, between 10 and 40 per cent of social institutions in the West Bank and Gaza were Islamic (Roy, 2003).

The success of the transition into a more legitimate, political and social sphere, certainly contributed to Hamas's success in the 2006 elections. This gradual movement into finding a role within society, not only in violence, is certainly one element in the process by which the Palestinians aligned themselves closer to Hamas. The progression also highlights that the movement is more than solely a violent, or terroristic force.

The failure of the Middle East Peace Summit at Camp David, diminished support for the Oslo Accord and a confrontational ‘walkabout’ from Ariel Sharon in Jerusalem's Old Town sparked the second Intifada in late September 2000 (Pressman, 2003). This period of heightened violence saw Palestinian attacks from gunshots, ambushes, snipers, drive through shootings and significantly, suicide bombings, alongside Israeli missiles, tank incursions and bombings (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 88-9). This was a considerably more bloody conflict than the previous Intifada, and in the first 12 months, 564 Palestinians and 181 Israelis had already been killed (Monitor, 2001). In March 2002, in the midst of a Saudi led Arab peace initiative in Beirut, Hamas carried out arguably its deadliest attack killing thirty Jewish worshipers as they celebrated Passover (Anonymous, 2002). The bombing was said to have “struck to the core of Israel's religious, cultural and national identity” (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 102) and ensured a severe backlash from Sharon in a “watershed in Israel's war on Palestinian terror” (Auerbach, 2003).

The 9/11 attacks in the US and high intensity suicide bombings from Hamas were also a significant juncture in this period and allowed Israel to associate Hamas with international *jihad* groups and include the wider Fatah, PLO struggle in the ‘War on Terror’ (International Crisis Group, 2006), a claim Hamas continually refutes (Laub, 2010). Milton-Edwards and Farrell suggest the distinction between armed Islamic groups defined by nationalist or jihadist notions was fast eroding (2010: 90). US support for Israeli action against ‘Islamic’ violence was inevitable, although Israeli rhetoric was still largely aimed towards Arafat, the PLO and Fatah, as opposed to Hamas. Suicide tactics employed by Hamas, while perhaps successful in raising awareness of the Palestinian cause, have led to significant repercussions, not least in that they have meant increased US backing of Israel over the Palestinians.

An important aspect when considering Hamas is whether one considers it a religious, or nationalistic organisation. While it has had disagreements with al Qaeda, who were reportedly unhappy about the entry into politics, suggesting a holy *jihad* was the only path (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 13), it is in Islam from which the territorial claims originate for Hamas. It is not so much a nationalistic claim, but a “thousand year plan” for an “independent state of Palestine governed in accordance with Islam”, that is Hamas's ultimate goal (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 14). In this sense, other Palestinian movements such as Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine pose an equal, although entirely different threat to Hamas (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 14). This would perhaps shift the movement closer to Islamic than nationalistic, and some would argue closer to terroristic as a result. Others would perhaps suggest that if there is some claim to territory, the distinction between these in religious or nationalistic terms is irrelevant. Equally, Hamas maintains that any such scenario would only be initiated with the democratic will of the people.

One question that has been raised is why Hamas, but not Fatah, is considered a terrorist group (International Crisis Group, 2006). Given Fatah have also used violence as a means of struggle (Jaeger & Paserman, 2006), it might be argued they should equally be targeted as terrorists. The nature of violence used by Hamas, particularly tactics of suicide bombing, often leads to an image of Islamic terrorism (Gunning, 2008). However, perhaps critically, Gunning considers Hamas's violence political, rather than either religious or sacramental (2008: 220), negating the notion of Islamic extremism. One might consider that it is the more secular nature of Fatah, alongside their greater willingness for negotiation, as opposed to the Islamic background of Hamas that are key to any distinction made between the party's by both Israel and the international community.

During the period up until the 2006 elections, Roy suggests that it was in the context of “desperation and hopelessness”, that Hamas was able to re-assert itself and persuade the Palestinians to turn towards violence (Roy,

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2003: 17). Increased popular sentiment after the failed peace process; internal conflict; disillusionment with the Fatah leadership and its failure to form a state or control borders (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 11); Israeli policies towards Islamist opposition (Roy, 2003: 18); and increased demand for Hamas's "shadow network of charitable support" due to Israel's destruction of Palestinian Authority (PA) ministries (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 11), all led to a shift in favour of Hamas. The Hamas leadership was also able to disperse, and an increasingly networked approach (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001) was undertaken. "Hamas's diffuse process of decentralized decision-making also made it harder for Israel to destroy its core" (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 108) and this lack of central targets allowed Hamas to regroup. Support for Hamas was reinforced in 2005 as Sharon pulled Israeli troops and as many as 8000 citizens out of Gaza, allowing the movement to claim a victory of armed resistance (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 130).

The 2006 Palestinian elections saw Hamas sweep to power in Gaza and "from Passover bomb to parliament, there is no better illustration of how Hamas uses violence and politics as twin levers to advance its ends" (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 112). There is considerable misunderstanding around why the Palestinians voted for Hamas, but it is summarised by Milton-Edwards and Farrell, who highlight that "where the world saw a vote for Hamas as a setback for the peace process, many Palestinians saw no evidence of a peace process, so voted Hamas" (2010: 9). Malley and Agha further that "in voting as they did, the Palestinians challenged Israel, whose persistent occupation, military attacks, and settlement expansion merited, they thought, a more forceful and effective response" (2006). Others have however alluded to the victory as a populist, 'democratic coup' (Massad, 2007).

There is much documented about the nature of Hamas's election victory and the extent to which violence and Islamism were significant. However, as Gunning notes, "the bulk of Hamas's election manifesto reads like that of any 'secular' political party." He alludes to factors of healthcare, housing, education, agriculture and government efficiency being of primary importance, unaligned with religion or violence (2008: 167). Equally however, the symbolism of violence was central in this victory (Gunning, 2008: 176), and "religion, reputation, skills and the capacity to perpetrate violence all play a role in the creation of a leader's symbolic capital" (2008: 143). Hamas consequently gained legitimacy from both the elections and through leading the struggle (International Crisis Group, 2009).

Israel, the US, UN, EU and Russia's refusal to recognise Hamas after its election victory (Hroub, 2010: 144), is questioned by Khaled Mashal:

"Was it a sin on the part of Hamas to win the elections? Yet any result that comes through free and fair elections but does not suit the designs of America and Israel is derailed... This is the first time in history that a people has been so punished for exercising its democratic choice." (2010).

The democratic nature of Hamas does create a different aspect of contention to consider in terms of whether it can be deemed terroristic. This is widely disputed, and some such as Jack Straw would not consider democratic status as a legitimating factor in this respect. "Violence, terrorism and democracy are wholly incompatible. You cannot interchangeably use the bullet and the ballot" (Straw, 2006). Others might suggest that in carrying such support from a population for violence, this by definition rules out the party's actions from being terroristic, as they are in the majorities' interest, thus negating a 'minority' defined as terroristic.

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh suggested "the real problem is that we are not a state but the government of an authority existing in territory that does not meet the criteria of a state" (Cited in International Crisis Group, 2006a). This lack of an official status is an important issue and there have been calls for the recognition of a Palestinian state by the UN (U.N. General Assembly, 2010). If this is granted, a new level of legitimacy might be gained, not least with respect to being granted a 'state army', a luxury that all other states are allowed which, to an extent, legitimises political violence.

Hroub suggests that the language used after election victory was "carefully crafted", to send a message that Hamas is not a "belligerent and war-loving movement" (2010: 152). Mishal and Sela argue this "enabled the movement to manoeuvre within the prose of political reality while never ceasing to recite the poetry of ideology" (2000: 12).

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Equally, its willingness to make alliances with those who hold differing views, underlines that Hamas is not always fanatical, but can compromise and is pragmatic (Gunning, 2008: 191). This is an evolving approach, and perhaps should have some implications for Israel's approach to the party and ones consideration of it as a terrorist group.

Ismail Haniyeh did however highlight that Hamas in power would not walk away from violence – “[i]t is premature to say that Hamas is transforming itself into a political party like those in countries that are stable and independent ... [and] for Hamas to drop its weapons” (Cited in Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 7). Further, and crucially, for both leaders and supporters, Hamas's violence legitimates the movement and “given the perception of a threat to existence, violence-as-protection is a valued commodity” (Gunning, 2008: 175). This seems crucial inasmuch as it illustrates that violence is not considered a byproduct or secondary factor, but inherently necessary to the Palestinian cause.

In consideration of the intrinsic nature of violence within the Hamas organisation, it is perhaps surprising how few of its leaders are commanders in the Qassam Brigades, its military wing. Gunning encouragingly suggests that increasingly, Hamas's leaders derive authority from sources other than violence, inferring a potential distancing from this rhetoric, if its members believe basic security can be achieved through other means (2008: 139). This has perhaps been forced, as leaders in political terms are forced away from fluid horizontal structures towards vertical power, necessitated by democratic politics.

There appears to be a continuing evolution of the Hamas movement, perhaps aligned to its more pragmatic role in power. Hamas leader Khaled Mashal suggests the group is realistic and can accept the Palestinian state based on 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as the capital and the rights of refugees upheld (2010). The International Crisis Group go as far as to suggest Hamas's “electoral platform is ... closer to Fatah's outlook than to Hamas's founding principles” (International Crisis Group, 2006). After the Gaza War however, the movement has moved away from the good governance and anti-corruption drives in 2006 and currently poses a “logical resistance” argument against an “illusionary peace process” (International Crisis Group, 2009).

The logical resistance rationale is largely based on the success of Hamas's violence since its inception. The nature of this violence has changed markedly over time. It has evolved from “stone throwing, knifings and shootings to kidnappings, suicide bombings and rocket attacks” (Gunning, 2008: 195). There are perhaps differing views on the extent to the success of this violence. That Hamas forced Israel's withdrawal from Gaza could be considered a success; yet, no peaceful resolution has been reached, Israeli settlement building continues and internal Palestinian conflict is rife. Hamas's argument would inevitably be however, that the peace processes have not worked, the occupation continues and therefore the only methods of gaining ground against Israel – as highlighted by Hezbollah in Lebanon – is violent resistance. Further, “without violence ... Palestinians have no leverage over Israel. In the absence of a powerful neutral arbiter who can force Israel to live up to its commitments, negotiations by themselves are unlikely to persuade Israel to do so” (Gunning, 2008: 203). One might have some sympathy with this, particularly given the lack of success Fatah had over a prolonged period of negotiation and equally that Israeli settlement building continues, often undermining earlier agreements (Mozgovaya, 2010).

Several studies have suggested that Hamas, to its own admission, directly used violence to disrupt the peace process (Kydd & Walter 2003; Bloom, 2005). This does add a difficult dimension to a consideration of their role in violence. If Hamas was more interested in furthering its own political gains and undermining the PA and Fatah than in a peace process, an argument of terrorism perhaps does hold some weight. Further, Hamas's military operation or ‘coup’ against Fatah in 2007 where savage violence including people thrown from high buildings, fire fights, sniper attacks, torture of its own people, often from Hamas supporters in black masks, created immense terror across Gaza (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 286-93; International Crisis Group, 2007). This was not pro-Palestine rhetoric, but anti-Fatah, a significantly worrying distinction in terms of their nationalistic, as opposed to terroristic claims. This has certainly occurred in both directions however, and the International Crisis Group allude to a whole host of human rights abuses, including torture, imposed by Fatah on Hamas followers, conjuring equal fear (International Crisis Group, 2010). The terror imposed upon Palestinians by their ruling parties, not Israel, does question the extent to which Hamas and Fatah are more concerned with power than any form of peace, and the subsequent implications this has for ones description of *both* the movements as terroristic, not simply Hamas.

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An aspect that is often overlooked in considering Hamas is in whether it is considered a terrorist or insurgent group. Bruce Hoffman suggests that a fundamental difference is that while they may appear to have similar tactics, insurgents are numerically larger than terrorist groups and further, they are looking to gain some territorial autonomy or control over a region and its population (1998: 35). As Evans and Bell note, “unlike the transnational nature of most contemporary terrorism, insurgency tends towards an overtly nationalist, spatially contained and classically defensive form of warfare designed to liberate a homeland” (Evans & Bell, 2010: 375). In defining a terrorist group, a government or international institution, by definition, removes any possibility of negotiation with such a body. This is clearly relevant in terms of Hamas, as Israel, with backing from the international community, is able to condemn Hamas as ‘terrorists’. This allows them the capacity of refusing to negotiate, or register the demands of the group, perhaps the strategic intentions of the Israeli government. If a perhaps more realistic notion of insurgent is placed on the movement, this not only opens up, but perhaps even necessitates some form of dialogue between the involved entities. This is a key distinction to make, as it defines both Israel and much of the international community’s approach towards Hamas.

## The Israeli response to Hamas

Israeli policies towards Hamas have changed considerably over the period of Hamas’s existence. After its inception and through the first Intifada, Hamas was a secondary concern and policy was largely directed at the PLO and Fatah, while any implications for Hamas were a bonus, rather than a necessity (International Crisis Group, 2006). As Hamas has grown into the major resistance force however, Israel has been forced into addressing the movement directly.

Throughout the second intifada, Israel targeted Hamas’s leadership, and by 2004 almost the entirety of Hamas’s senior tier of leadership within Gaza was assassinated (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 106-8). Arrests, imprisonment and execution weakened Hamas’s military capabilities and furthered a necessity to move away from violence and towards a social discourse. Equally, the period saw financial pressures on Hamas, as Israel convinced the PA to freeze bank accounts of affiliated charities and dry up funding from traditional sources (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 108). However, Milton-Edwards argues the strategy “failed to take account of the Hamas infrastructure and the inherent capacity of such a structure to absorb changes” (2005: 317), highlighting its resilience and fluid nature.

It has been suggested that during the second Intifada, Israeli policy was in effect, to clandestinely back Hamas over the PA, subsequently diminishing the PA’s power and legitimacy (Roy, 2003). Crucially, thus creating “a justification for maintaining the occupation since it will deal with Palestinians only as militant radicals and not on the basis of national rights or as a legitimate part of a political process” (Roy, 2003: 20). This seems relevant to the current situation, where the ability to use Hamas’ violence as a smoke screen for occupation and as a “pretext to destroy Palestinian life and society” (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 303), if this was the strategy, has perhaps been removed in the political legitimacy Hamas has gained.

In 1994, the Israel Gaza Strip barrier was constructed. According to Rabin, this was to “take Gaza out of Tel-Aviv”, after a string of suicide bombings (Cited in Makovsky, 2004). This was very much the forerunner for the construction of a barrier along and within the West Bank. The wall, built between 2002 and 2005 (Usher, 2006), was in response to the second Intifada and is considered a “security fence” by Israel but an “apartheid wall” by the Palestinians (Rogers & Ben-David, 2010: 203). There is not doubt of their success in terms of reducing suicide attacks. Between 1994 and 2004, there was not single successful suicide bomb from Gaza (Makovsky, 2004). Some reports suggest that there has been a 90% reduction in attacks since they were built (Bard, 2010); others allude to resistance having been “severely disrupted” by the barriers (Jones, 2009: 10). What is clear is that the tactics of Hamas were forced to change, and increasingly, rockets were chosen over the previous methods of suicide bombings. The International Crisis Group suggests that this policy backfired however, and only led to increased violence, through different means, harming both Palestinian and Israeli citizens (2008). As Fanon suggests, “the colonised man finds his freedom in and through violence” (2004: 86).

A secondary element of the policy, aligned with effectively creating a humanitarian crisis, is to “make clear to

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Palestinians the consequences of supporting Hamas” (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 295). This has meant a significant fall in the standard of living and human rights abuses for the Palestinians, including a lack of freedom of movement, right to work and access to education and health (Jones, 2009: 3). These policies have also fuelled the notion of ‘occupation’, a form of ‘post-colonialism’ (Sa’di, 2010:46), and its legality is highly questionable (Collins, 2007). The policies were a clear example of pre-emptive strategies, increasingly adopted by states in the global security era (Rumsfeld, 2002). The trade-off between liberty and security is clear and as Agamben notes “security has now become the sole criterium of political legitimization” (2001), clearly relevant for Israel.

After the 2006 elections, a new wave of action came from Israel and the international community. These strategies were increasingly indirect, unlike the formal barrier seen previously. Milton-Edwards and Farrell suggest that Hamas was very quickly introduced to the nature of realpolitik in international diplomacy through political, economic and military means (2010: 12). Israel’s initial policy was to attempt to ensure Hamas’s demise through cutting of funding on which the PA and Palestinian people relied on. Israel maintained its demand that Hamas must recognise Israel, renounce violence and abide by past agreements – which it failed to do. The international community also undertook an economic boycott of Gaza and redirected much of its funding through Abbas’s presidential offices, as much as £208 million from the US (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, Hamas: 262), in attempts to bolster his support over that of Hamas (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 276).

The implications of the economic blockade, particularly on Gaza, are mixed. The policies intended to create a level of economic hardship in Gaza and economic growth in the Fatah controlled West Bank (International Crisis Group, 2008), which would push the Palestinians towards voting Fatah in a ‘hearts and minds’ approach (Economist, 2008). However, the other side of this argument is that Hamas will simply obtain funding from elsewhere, most likely and more dangerously, Iran (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 266). The International Crisis Group also suggest the policy has fallen short. The humanitarian situation became so dire in Gaza in 2008 and poverty so acute that part of the wall at Rafah was knocked down in desperation. Consequently, there has been some disaffection and diminished support for Hamas, but this has not transferred to Fatah, who are blamed for complying with Israeli policy (International Crisis Group, 2008). “As is often the case with sanctions, the population’s suffering increases its dependence on its rulers” (International Crisis Group, 2008: 28).

Hamis also had to contend with Fatah, struggling to deal with its loss of power, internal battle between the groups became widespread in the latter part of 2006 and through 2007. “Armed clashes, assassinations, assaults, attacks and brutal bloody violence broke out between Hamas and its rivals” which some saw as a “deliberate strategy designed to make Gaza ungovernable for Hamas” (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 272-3). This deliberate strategy was led by Israel and the US, whose role was indicated in a Vanity Fair article in 2008 (Rose, 2008). They saw in militarily backing Fatah a process capable of overturning the Hamas reign. In effectively creating a civil war, Hamas would have “one-hand tied behind its back” (Cited in Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 281) while fighting Israel and simultaneously creating an environment of abject poverty for the inhabitants of Gaza. The theory was that this would highlight Hamas’s inability to govern and cause a shift in popular opinion back towards the ‘more manageable’ Fatah. Hamas certainly struggled to make the transition to civilian rule (International Crisis Group, 2008a: 1), with no clear ‘enemy’ to fight in this respect. It’s continued military approach to Fatah demonstrations and dissent has been described as repressive and even undemocratic, but this has not led to any significantly increased support for Fatah.

After a brief six-month ceasefire ending in December 2008, Hamas immediately resumed rocket fire into Israel. Without warning on the 27<sup>th</sup> December, Israel embarked on a brutal three-week assault on Gaza. Operation Cast Lead targeted Hamas security installations, training compounds and weapons storage facilities. Any known Hamas location was a target (International Crisis Group, 2009). “The war in Gaza has so far been one of the cruelest attempts to isolate and to depose Hamas” (Mashal, 2010).

The attacks had significant implications for Palestine, not least that 1,417 Gazan’s died, 5,300 were injured (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 2009) and there was enormous infrastructural damage. The human rights violated by Israel in the attacks have been raised in the Goldstone Report (U.N. Human Rights Council, 2009). Israel hoped it would discourage violence in fear of retaliation, but this has failed (International Crisis Group, 2009: 27). As one Palestinian suggested – “Israel’s overwhelming use of force would only provoke more Palestinian violence, not

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deter it" (Cited in Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 301). One poll even suggested after the campaign Hamas registered its highest opinion level at fifty one per cent, which Hamas claimed as a victory for resistance (Cited in Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 302). Significantly, the conflict did not break Hamas, but only inflicted huge pain and hardship on the Palestinians.

Since the 2006 election victory, the international community has essentially ignored Hamas (International Crisis Group, 2008), rather than confronting the movement. One reason for this is Israel's ability to control the imagery released from the region.

"While Hamas leaders claim the legitimacy of its violence as part of resistance against a foreign occupier, the rest of the world views it in a variety of different ways and draws its own conclusions. In this respect Hamas's words matter far less than the images of destruction, portrayed in an ever expanding propaganda war between the organisation and its Israeli enemy" (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 114).

This is a significant feature of Israeli policy, and its ability to influence the influential 'quartet' of the UN, US, EU and Russia is a factor which is likely to continue to impede Hamas's role in the peace process and classification as a terrorist group.

### **Future considerations**

The International Crisis Group suggests the international communities disregard for Hamas has only strengthened and emboldened the movement, and reduced the west's leverage over it (International Crisis Group, 2006). Gunning argues that "Hamas is here to stay... the international community, Israel and Fatah must come to terms with Hamas as a central political player" (2008: 2-3). There is then perhaps some argument "to maximise the Islamist movement's incentives to move in a political direction through a policy of gradual, conditional engagement" (International Crisis Group, 2006). This view is strengthened by the changing nature of the Hamas rhetoric, including a recent statement that Hamas would honour a referendum on peace with Israel (Anonymous, 2010) alongside its democratic legitimacy.

This democratic legitimacy is however becoming questionable for Hamas and it is not clear when the next Palestinian elections will be held. Originally scheduled for January 2010, there is some speculation that elections are no longer on Hamas's agenda, although this appears partly due to internal disputes between Hamas and Fatah on which elections should be held. Hamas leader Khaled Mashal claims, "we believe in democracy and are committed to it. Moreover we respect the majority's opinion even if it differs from ours" (2010). If elections are not held, one might begin to assume that power is being controlled by Hamas in an autocratic fashion, creating further negative speculation around their intentions.

It is possible, in line with a historical trend, that the militant wing of Palestinian struggle is likely to be transcended by a newer faction. As Hamas becomes embroiled within the political sphere, it is unlikely to function militarily to the same degree. Some have already alluded to the fact these divergences already exist (International Crisis Group, 2009) and that there is a "balance of power" and lack of control between Hamas and the Qassam Brigades (Gunning, 2008: 270). This process was previously seen when Fatah moved away from a military focus as they entered mainstream power. Since there is an insistence from Hamas that their military and political wings are separate (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 113), the natural division will perhaps lead to the development of more distinct groups over time. This might be preferable for Israel, left without the difficult paradox of the 'terrorist group' in power. The grave danger however, is that a 'splinter group' for *jihadi* military hardliners would provide al Qaeda with a foothold in Palestine (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 278).

### **Concluding thoughts**

Palestinian's are stuck attempting "to build a state while still under occupation ... and to reach an understanding with their historic foe even as they prove unable to reach an understanding among themselves" (International Crisis Group, 2010). Hamas are a fundamental element in this puzzle, and their ongoing struggle, primarily against Israel,



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but equally Fatah, mean the movement is a complex fusion of ideology, policy and resistance. In this slightly confused state, the notion of 'terrorist' is inherently important.

Clearly, the extent to which there is a legitimate territorial Palestinian claim is relevant in whether Hamas is terroristic, or protecting its right to territory and autonomy. Regardless of the legitimacy this claim however, the methods imposed by Hamas of suicide bombing and rocket fire, including towards Fatah; a lack of regard for human life; and a lack of desire for national unity between parties (International Crisis Group, 2008b: 20), would arguably indicate terrorism, negating the possibility of a peace deal. On the other hand, Israel's potentially illegal occupation and Fatah's failures provide an argument for Hamas's existence, and their more pragmatic charter and association with the social sphere indicate a role that is more than simply terroristic in nature. What is perhaps the most profoundly enlightening statistic taken in January 2009, was that over fifty per cent of Palestinians thought rocket fire from Gaza into Israel helped to "achieve the Palestinian goals" (Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre, 2009: 2). This democratic element must be a fundamental consideration in any notion of Hamas as a terrorist group.

Inevitably, Hamas's election victory had profound implications for Israel's policies and thus the populations of both nations. Israel was initially forced away from direct action against Hamas, towards more indirect sanctions and measures. While Israeli policies have arguably reduced violence, particularly from suicide bombings, they have equally failed to destroy Hamas. Given Hamas's likely longevity, Israeli and the international community's policy needs to recognise this and continue to evolve as a result, perhaps towards dialogue in some form. The Gaza War highlighted Israel's ability to use acute violence, but its failure suggests this strategy is unlikely to create long-term peace. Equally, Hamas's refusal to accept Israel, a price Fatah has paid for international legitimacy (International Crisis Group, 2009), albeit with limited payback, appears likely to continue to hinder this process. What is clear is that Israel's definition of Hamas as a terrorist group is certain not to change while this stance remains.

The label of terrorist is a fluid one however, and its theoretical grounding is dependent on ones view of a variety of different elements. In this situation these include territorial claims; a religious agenda; perceived intentions and ideologies; the nature of violence; democratic legitimacy; and media perspectives, among many other factors. It is perhaps then in this subjective paradigm that a label of terrorist, while critically important, becomes impossibly complex and inherently ambiguous. One might question whether the terrorist label is able to change, or further, whether Israel or the Palestinians want it to. If Hamas is broken or deprived of its violent credentials, would it allow a more dangerous Islamic group to take over (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, Hamas: 308), perhaps even aligned with al Qaeda? Can peace realistically be achieved without Hamas? Given Hamas's relatively pragmatic approach, and certainly more sympathetic charter since 2006, it could be argued this position should be exploited, before the next war, or more military hard-line faction is formed. Tension is already beginning to build in this respect throughout the Middle East as the most recent peace talks reach an impasse (Economist, 2010).

"In such a fluid and dangerous situation, summary labels like 'terrorist' or, indeed, 'democratic', often applied to the organization by critics or admirers, scarcely capture the complexity of Muslim politics" (Piscarali; Cited in Gunning, 2008: x). Given this, it is perhaps then in ones personal take on the following Hamas leaders statement which will ultimately underline the fundamental position we take regarding Hamas as terrorists, or not. "We are not war-mongers: we have not gone out of our way to seek war. It was imposed on us. When we resist, what we are doing is participating in order to establish peace" (Mashal, 2010).

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