

FOREWORD

Ambassador Dennis Ross
U.S. Envoy to the Middle East, 1988–2000

Who is Hamas? Where did they come from? How do they fund their activities? Why do they seem to have roots in Palestinian society? Can they accept anything but struggle and conflict with Israel? And, will they ever lash out at the United States or will they always restrict their terror to Israel?

Matthew Levitt addresses these and other questions in his very timely book on the Hamas. In Arabic, Hamas is an abbreviation for the Islamic Resistance Movement. The word literally means “zeal,” and that certainly describes those who have led this group.

As an organization, Hamas is much talked about, but poorly understood. Given its stunning victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in early 2006, Hamas is no longer a fringe player in the Palestinian political scene. While the champion of suicide bombing against Israelis, Hamas has developed an appeal among Palestinians for several reasons: It is not corrupt in the sea of corruption that has so characterized the Palestinian Authority. It provides services—clinics, after-school programs, food distribution centers—that the Palestinian Authority fails to offer. It has demonstrated that it can hurt Israelis when, in the eyes of Palestinians, the Israelis have been hurting them.

Notwithstanding the reasons for Hamas having a following among Palestinians, its popularity throughout the 1990s never exceeded 30 percent of the Palestinian population. And even that figure greatly exaggerated its standing for most of the period when Palestinians were more hopeful about the future. Support for Hamas has grown out of frustration and anger and the ability of the organization to fill a vacuum of leadership.

If there is a secular alternative that is credible, most Palestinians would support it, particularly because Palestinian society remains far more secular than religiously devout. If there was hope and belief again in the possibility of peace, Hamas would again be reduced in terms of its political potential. In reality, most Palestinians would like to have a normal life, and, as long as Hamas is defined by its commitment to confrontation with Israel, Hamas will not be able to deliver what most Palestinians seek. For that, Hamas would have to change its credo and objectives.

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This book spells out in persuasive detail why Hamas is unlikely to undergo such a transformation. Dr. Levitt shows that Hamas emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt. He outlines the connection and, indeed, dependency of Hamas on the *dawa*, the social support structure and services of the organization. He demonstrates clearly that there is no separation between the so-called political and military wings of Hamas—both being tied together in an organic whole, with the political wing providing the guidance and the religious justification for the suicidal attacks against Israelis in buses, restaurants, and shops.

Dr. Levitt also exposes the use of charities to fund Hamas. While some of the funds from charities certainly have gone to finance the services of the *dawa*, they have also gone to support terror attacks. And, of course, even the services are shaped to recruit and socialize new suicide bombers.

Finally, this book reveals the extent to which Hamas uses funding from foreign sources to pursue its aims. Support has come from fronts in the United States, Europe, and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

This book would be of great value if it only provided this explanation of Hamas, its roots, its character, its funding, and its operations. But it does more, spelling out how the Palestinian Authority should have competed with Hamas by replacing the *dawa* and by providing the critical social services in its place.

Ultimately, it has been the corruption of the Palestinian Authority, the failures within Palestinian society, and the loss of hope that have fueled Hamas and its purposes. To be sure, Hamas is not passive in this regard. It has consistently carried out acts of terror whenever there has been even a hint of progress toward peace—not only because it does not believe in it, but also because it is unlikely to be able to survive in circumstances where peace, prosperity, and a sense of possibility characterize the Palestinian reality and its future.

With Hamas having now catapulted itself into a position of potential power, the prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians have never been lower. Nonetheless, Hamas for its own reasons may seek a continuing period of calm with Israel. Hamas in power needs to deliver reform and change—the banner it ran under—and that gives it a strong reason to avoid confrontation for the time being. After all, it can hardly remake Palestinian society, end corruption, lawlessness, and chaos on the one hand and produce economic renewal on the other if it is at war with Israel. Hamas is bound to seek help from the international community to produce societal renewal even while it resists all efforts to get it to give up its principles of re-

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jection of Israel and promotion of violence. The international community should neither let it off the hook nor allow it to escape the dilemmas of actually having to govern. Hamas must be put in a position of having to choose: govern successfully by transforming itself or fail and be discredited.

Will it transform itself? Unlikely, but if one wants to understand what makes Hamas and its leaders tick and what may be the best ways to exert leverage on it, a good place to start is with Matthew Levitt's book. Policy makers would be well advised to shape their strategy with his prescriptions in mind.