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**Hamas Comes to Power: Breakthrough or
Setback?; Strategic Insights, v. 5, issue 2
(February 2006)**

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Strategic Insights, v.5, issue 2 (February 2006)

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Hamas Comes to Power: Breakthrough or Setback?

Strategic Insights, Volume V, Issue 2 (February 2006)

by [Graham E. Fuller](#)

[Strategic Insights](#) is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

The preeminent Islamist organization in Palestine— Hamas—stunned the world on January 29, 2006 by winning an absolute majority in free, open, and peaceful parliamentary elections in Palestine. In final tallies, Hamas gained 74 out of 132 seats.

But what is this supposedly shadowy organization? Hamas is many things: a religious, social, and political movement, a guerrilla and terrorist force. Poised now to assume the ragged reins over the limited, constrained and contorted “national authority” in Palestine—whatever the scope and extent of “Palestine” may presently even be—Hamas faces a host of new decisions that come down to the key question: which faces of the movement will now dominate?

For the United States, this development in effect sweeps away all the shards of a moribund “peace process” that has dragged along over the past twenty years. From a Palestinian point of view it has brought them almost nothing—indeed worse than nothing since both parties in Israel have used this time to build ever more permanent “facts on the ground” that constantly weaken the prospects for any genuine Palestinian sovereignty in the future. Ironically, all this comes at a time when Israel itself may be coming to acknowledge the failure—and dangers—of its past approaches to the problem, including the use of massive violence in response to the Palestinian armed struggle.

Indeed the Palestinian-Israeli problem may be worse today than ever before. How will the West now treat a political party that it condemns for its policies and actions, yet that won a genuinely honest election with a huge turnout? Especially when it fulfills the Bush administration’s call for democratization? As for the Arab world, largely controlled by dictators and authoritarian structures, how will it react to this first fully free and open election in the Arab world—one in which the former ruling party actually acknowledged its electoral defeat and turned over power to the new victors?

It would be foolish and naïve to believe that everything will now flow smoothly now that “democracy” has come to Palestine. Serious, complex and daunting problems exist that cannot be underestimated and that will call for patient and balanced policies on both sides informed by more wisdom than we have seen heretofore. Nonetheless, we are entering a new era that could offer new approaches, especially now that much of the misleading rhetoric and false debating

premises of past decades on the Palestinian issue makes much less sense in the face of the new Islamist reality. This could be the moment for the ultimate triumph of extremists on both sides, or the beginning of a new realism all around.

Who are the Islamists?

But first, a quick working definition of the term “Islamist.” Islamists across the Muslim world constitute a *spectrum* of views that includes violent and peaceful, radical and moderate, traditional and modernist, authoritarian and democratic. I define an Islamist as “anyone who believes that the Qur’an and the actions and sayings of the Prophet (*Sunna*) have important things to say about Muslim governance and society, and who tries to implement these views in some way.”

This is very broad definition that includes Usama bin Ladin, the Justice and Development Party in power in Turkey today, and the Muslim Brotherhood, among many other groups. There is no consensus among Muslims as to what constitutes an Islamic state—because the Qur’an says nothing about it other than to posit certain requirements for overall just governance, the necessity for consultation between the ruler and the people, and the imperative of a just economic order. Thus Muslims are still debating what an Islamic state might look like—the word never even appears in the Qur’an—while, interestingly, Islamists increasingly look at western political experience and political thinking to find tentative models of what they might be looking for. All of this is a work in progress, changing and shifting. Any recourse by outsiders to “texts” to decisively “prove” that Islam is incompatible with democracy is nonsense: Islam will ultimately be what Muslims want it to be and their understanding of Islam will ultimately respond to concrete conditions and changes in the world.

But should the world have been “stunned” by this election victory of the Palestinian Islamists? To most who follow events fairly closely in the Muslim world, there was not really much surprise at all, except perhaps in the full extent of the victory. Indeed, this victory is part of a broader pattern we see all over the Muslim world: Islamists (moderate and radical) remain the dominant political force. They have few rivals—not even nationalists or leftists—in most countries. So, given genuinely free elections, it was not very surprising that Hamas did as well as it did. We have parallels in Turkey, Egypt and Iraq after all.

Regrettably however, Washington and much of European leadership still don’t seem to grasp the reality of the political and social dynamic in Palestine. The number one reality that dominates the entire daily life and psychology of the Palestinians is 38 years of Israeli occupation—almost two generations. Palestinians are bitter and angry. They support Hamas because Hamas has not been corrupt, it speaks in the name of Islam and Palestinian nationalism, and it conducts major social programs. Furthermore, it has been willing to undertake a vigorous, punishing—and yes, partly politically successful armed struggle in their view—against the powerful Israeli state that occupies them, imposing the reality that Palestinians will not give up their aspirations. I do not seek to justify Hamas policies, but only to make clear why Palestinians have turned to periodic terrorism in order to resist the occupation and why most of them, trapped in impotence, see violence as justified. So is this election an absolute setback for any hopes of achieving a Palestinian-Israeli settlement? Both positive and negative indicators exist. But most important, what can we expect from Hamas as an Islamist movement now in power?

Territorial Claims

According to its 1988 Charter, Hamas is determined to drive the Zionist enemy out of all of Palestine and recover Palestinian rights over their own land. The struggle for Palestine is now cast in *Islamic* terms with a vision transcending the narrower and more secular vision of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) of Arafat. For Hamas, recovery of Palestine becomes not

just an Arab but an Islamic goal, a task of the *umma*, because it involves not just the fate of Palestinians but of the Islamic Holy places of Arab Jerusalem itself, the third holiest city in Islam. "The land of Palestine is an Islamic *waqf* (endowment) for Muslim generations until the day of judgment. It is inadmissible to abandon it, or a part of it, or to concede it all or a part of it. No Arab state or all Arab states or all the Kings and Presidents have that right." The PLO limited its appeal primarily to an Arab and ethnic basis. Hamas has not only engaged in guerrilla operations against Israel (attacking the instruments of occupation) but has also engaged in numerous outright terrorist acts against Israeli civilians.

These are serious and seemingly inflexible positions that raise doubts about the ability of Hamas ever to reach peace. Yet the tragedy of the Palestinian-Israeli situation is that both sides are in the grip of this kind of mentality and rhetoric. In a mirror image of the Hamas statement, we have the common phrase echoed by many Zionists that "God gave Palestine to the Jews." These sentiments are reflected even in the very recent statement of Ehud Olmert, acting head of the new Kadima party, only weeks after Ariel Sharon departed the political stage following a severe stroke in January 2006:

We firmly stand by the historic right of the people of Israel to the entire Land of Israel. Every hill in Samaria and every valley in Judea is part of our historic homeland. We do not forget this, not even for one moment.

Yet in this same speech Olmert went on to say that preservation of Israeli lives and the long-term security threat posed by continuing occupation of the Arab-populated territories compelled Israel to think about the need for strategic withdrawal. Here we find a (belated but welcome) seeming triumph of realism over ideology.

Can we hope that gradually the same kind of political realism will come to inform Hamas policies, even while it too, like Likud, may never give up the *vision* of "all of Palestine." Hamas has been very capable of pragmatic cease-fires and armistices when it has been in their political or strategic interest to do so; there is no reason to think that it will not continue to do so, as long as genuine political progress towards Israeli withdrawal seems in the offing. One may argue that its Islamic ideology makes that impossible. But all ideologies are subject to alteration in the face of realities, even while they are never officially abandoned.

Hamas Commitment to the Armed Struggle

President Bush and many European leaders have stated that, democratic elections or no, they will not deal with Hamas until it renounces violence and accepts Israel's right to exist. Yet the reality is that Hamas is not going to do either anytime soon. Its political leader in exile, Khalid Mish'al, has stated that even when it takes over the Palestinian governing authority, it will not recognize Israel and will not renounce the right to use violence in resisting the occupation. What does this foretoken?

If Washington and the Europeans insist that first there must be peace and calm, "an end to terrorism" in the area before negotiations can move forward, then peace will be a very long time in coming. If we seek to untie the complex knot of fifty years of Palestinian-Israeli confrontation we must begin at the very source of the problem: the occupation itself. To insist on "law and order first" is to put the cart before the horse. It is tantamount to an almost deliberate choice *not* to deal with the root cause of the problem first. There is no question that Palestinian terrorism continues as the humiliating and crushing occupation drags on into the 38th year with no serious prospects for change yet. Indeed, for those many Israelis who do not want ever to give up the West Bank for strategic and/or religious reasons, insistence on a total end to violence as a *precondition* is a calculated tactic designed to ensure that Israel can hold the lands forever. Sharon himself followed this strategy almost to the end.

In the Hamas view—indeed shared by most in the PLO as well—the US and Israel have both set down a grossly one-sided precondition: Israel states it cannot trust the Palestinians enough to engage in a unilateral withdrawal before it sees a total cessation of Palestinian armed violence. Fair enough. But the Palestinian response is that it cannot trust the Israelis enough to give up the only two political “cards” the Palestinians have—the ability to inflict serious damage upon Israel through armed violence, and a non-recognition of the state of Israel—before it sees earnest of Israeli good intentions that it intends to fully withdraw—something that much of the Israeli right of center publicly says Israel must never do. Twenty years of insistence on one-sided preconditions have only perpetuated, even exacerbated, the present gridlock. All the while the occupation remains the first and direct cause of Palestinian armed violence. Neither side trusts the other.

All of these arguments applied just as much under PLO rule before the recent Hamas electoral victory. Today we are no longer simply discussing the problem of one-sided preconditions, but the broader question of what it means to have Islamists in power anywhere in the Muslim world. Does Islamism guarantee radicalism, a certain slide into authoritarianism, and a harsh and zealous fundamentalist society in the new Palestine? Or can Islamists be both democratic and pragmatic? This debate is not of course new, and applies to Islamist politics in many countries, not just Palestine. While there are no certainties, with the passage of time we do have some more evidence to back up earlier hypotheses about Islamist evolution.

Is Hamas a Terrorist Organization?

There is no question that Hamas has engaged in terrorist operations, among other things, justifying them as response to excessive and sometimes even reckless use of Israeli force that has also killed hundreds of Palestinian women and children over the years. Approximately three times more Palestinians have died than Israelis. And terrorism is the classic “weapon of the weak,” a force-equalizer for the side that does not possess the state's formidable repressive or war-making powers.

But does the label “terrorist organization” capture the full reality of what Hamas is about as we seek to deal with it? Lets compare it with al-Qa'ida, the terrorist organization *par excellence*. Al-Qa'ida espouses global goals in its struggle against “Western Crusaders” and American neo-imperialism and its quest for global hegemony. Al-Qa'ida's goals are grandiose and relatively abstract, sometimes verging on the apocalyptic. It has no address, no newspaper, no offices, no officials whom one can visit. Hamas, to the contrary, has highly finite goals—the recovery of Palestinian territory for the Palestinians and the establishment of an Islamic state on that soil. It has newspapers, publications, public representatives, press conferences, offices, policy statements, and its leadership regularly meets with journalists and visitors. Al-Qa'ida is global in reach, Hamas focuses exclusively on Palestine. Hamas is not part of a global vision, its members are not members of other terrorist organizations. It does not bring in foreign jihadis to fight for them—it is an exclusively a Palestinian game fought exclusively on Palestinian soil. It does not even attack Israelis outside of Israel, nor does it attack Americans or other nationalities.

None of this makes the problem any easier for Israelis, but we are discussing here the *character* of Hamas: its finite, concrete goals exist in a real world and are susceptible to discussion, negotiation, and even potential resolution. Usama bin Ladin-style apocalyptic calls can never be that. Thus for Hamas, terrorism is but one of many instruments, alongside of guerrilla warfare, political activity, mobilization and electioneering, and social and charitable activities to help the Palestinian community, as well as propagation of its Islamic vision. Terrorism does not define what Hamas is essentially about.

Hamas in Politics

Nonetheless, a series of key questions remain. What does the *political* nature of the movement mean, as opposed to its guerrilla and terrorist face? We need to remember that for Hamas, as for all Islamist political movements, the decision to enter politics is one not taken lightly. Yet it took it. Politics means public exposure, public debate, and above all, political compromise on concrete political measures; if Islamists are elected to parliament, they must negotiate over common goals and horse-trade with other political parties with whom they may have little ideological sympathy. Some Islamist movements actively avoid entering into politics precisely because they do see it as compromising to their ideals; they prefer to remain outside the hurly-burly of politics and make safe political pronouncements from there. Hamas is now directly engaged as a party. The political origins and evolution of Hamas provides a sense of its changing nature and adaptiveness to shifting conditions in acknowledgment of practical political realities. This is what all successful political parties do. (In the meantime let us lay to rest the canard that “Hitler too, was democratically elected to power.” Hitler was *appointed* as Prime Minister by the German President in a political compromise when Hitler was no more than the leader of a weak minority party in the Reichstag.)

The Historical Evolution of Hamas

Hamas is in fact intimately linked to the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, whose own roots go back to the original “mother organization,” the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood founded in 1928. The Palestinian Brotherhood branch emerged officially only in 1945.

For decades the Brotherhood in Palestine focused primarily upon education and propagation of the faith as key components in the creation of an Islamic society whose long term goal was the eventual foundation of an Islamic state. It sought to develop the foundations for an Islamic moral order within society rather than to enter politics. Even after the foundation of the Israeli state and the expulsion of tens of thousands of Palestinians the Muslim Brotherhood still tended to see the struggle to regain Palestinian land as an exceedingly long term goal, requiring first the establishment of an strong Islamic society as a prerequisite to any successful re-conquest of lost lands. Indeed, all the way up to the outbreak of the first *intifada* in 1987 the Brotherhood’s chief focus was still primarily upon *tarbiya*: the inculcation of Islamic awareness, concepts and ideological principles into society. (The Egyptian Brotherhood had already abandoned political violence by the 1960s and had turned both to politics, education, and social programs.)

The Intifada as Turning Point

Hamas neither invented nor inaugurated armed resistance against Israel—indeed it was a late-comer to it. The outbreak in December 1987 of the *intifada*, under mainly secular PLO leadership, posed a critical dilemma for the Muslim Brotherhood. If the Brotherhood did *not* participate in this defining national rebellion against Israeli occupation it would have ceded all leadership and legitimacy to the secular PLO. Its abstention would have and clearly marginalized the Muslim Brotherhood that had already lost following as a credible political movement in the preceding decades. Elements within the Brotherhood led by Shaykh Ahmad Yasin (assassinated by Israel in 2004) recognized the vital necessity of Brotherhood participation in this seminal national struggle. Yasin and others thus established a new organization, Hamas, to be distinct from the Brotherhood, thereby avoiding a divisive internal debate within the Brotherhood strategy over the virtues of armed resistance. Yasin also wished to protect the Brotherhood organization proper from punishment by Israeli forces. In this way, the Brotherhood could stake out a place for itself on the national political scene ready for any post-intifada political developments without compromising itself by support for the secular state vision called for by the PLO.

Indeed, Hamas maintained maximum distinction between itself and the PLO by rejecting cooperation or coordination with PLO actions in the *intifada*. Hamas regularly failed to respond to PLO calls for strikes, close-downs, etc., while proclaiming similar actions of its own on different

days. This approach was viewed by some Palestinians as divisive, and indeed, Israel took initial advantage of this split in Palestinian political ranks by encouraging the Muslim Brotherhood as an alternative to PLO leadership. Thus have these ill-conceived seeds of Israeli policy finally come to fruition today, to Israel's current dismay.

Hamas has consistently claimed, however, that its opposition to the PLO program and policies would be contested within a democratic framework; it has never undertaken violence against the PLO. This is in marked distinction to the savage internecine struggles among Islamist movements in Algeria, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Hamas has also suggested a willingness over time even to negotiate with Israel if certain basic Hamas goals were met: the right of Palestinians to return to their homeland, and the right to Palestinian self-determination.

Under these circumstances, Hamas stated it would not push for the destruction of Israel, but it insisted that a two-state solution could not be the basis for a permanent settlement—only an Islamic state over all of Palestine with full rights for Jews, Christians, and Muslims living side-by-side. In 1997 Shaykh Yasin hinted at a truce (*hudna*) with Israel as long as there was an end to Israeli settlements, and the withdrawal of Israel from the occupied territories. A truce by definition, of course, does not constitute a final settlement, but it could enable Hamas to maintain indefinitely its rhetorical support for a maximalist solution on Palestine even while "tactically" accepting a political solution far short of that. Of such tactical moves does ideological change come about.

The sophisticated political culture of Palestine also suggests that Hamas will demonstrate political sophistication in its own approaches and policies—if they ever take over the reins of power. Palestine has been at the crossroads of busy east-west contacts for several millennia. Palestinians by now have a powerful sense of national identity forged in the crucible of expulsion, Diaspora life, refugee camps, and ongoing Israeli occupation; they enjoy the highest degree of education in the Muslim world; and Palestinians have also learned much by watching Israel.

Will Hamas be Democratic?

Palestinian politics, for all its corruption, has always been relatively transparent and democratic. Following these elections, Fatah left power promptly upon its electoral defeat, despite having to give up huge shares in the spoils system. The possibility always exists that Hamas can always revoke the democratic charter and impose dictatorship, but the track record makes this unlikely. Indeed, Islamists the world over have been moving increasingly towards acceptance of democratic processes as the closest modern institutional equivalent of the Islamic imperative for a ruler to consult regularly with his people. This does not guarantee democracy forever, but it represents an encouraging trend that is probably more soundly based in Palestine than in any other part of the Arab world, despite the terrible political violence that has surrounded it and the ongoing assassination campaign by Israel of senior Hamas officials.

Getting What You Want

Hamas faces the classic dilemma of all Islamist parties: it is always easier to play from outside the system than from inside. Criticism of a bad status quo is always easier than providing answers. Islamists who have long repeated their slogan that "Islam is the answer" find they must deliver once they attain power. But gaining an absolute majority is not fully what even Hamas had bargained for: they had hoped to share power with Fatah, thereby sharing the burden as well. They know they will now have to face new and extremely complex challenges, if they ever do actually take over power.

Indeed, for those who believe, as I do, that integration into the political order is the best way to tame and moderate Islamist movements, the integration process still is ideally slow and gradual, enabling them to gain experience and practical insight into politics at the parliamentary and

cabinet level before taking on the burdens and dangerous temptations inherent in assuming full power. In this sense it is almost a disservice to Hamas itself to thrust it into full power from scratch, denying it the valuable on-the-job-training that more gradual integration into politics would afford it. Here, sharing power with the PLO would be valuable for all, and Hamas is open to this prospect.

Despite the existence of massive domestic problems, Hamas will still be tempted to accept stewardship over a broad range of domestic affairs in Palestine: in education, domestic security, the struggle against corruption, improvement and broadening of social services and the infrastructure of the territories. This is an arena where it could possibly chalk up some successes given its experience and skill in the area of social services before. But of course money is required for all of this and the outside world may now decide to starve Hamas to death unless it first changes its policies on political violence and Israel's right to exist.

Hamas and Guerrilla/Terror Operations

Hamas has so far said that it will not in principle abandon its policy of armed resistance. That seems to be predicated on the belief that it will not give away the Palestinians' armed resistance "card" until it is clear that the political process is moving in directions that will meet Palestinian needs. I suspect that Hamas will not prove flexible on this issue, regardless of foreign pressure. Palestinian public opinion is also likely to support the Hamas position: there is simply too much cynicism about a "peace process" that in their view has delivered nothing over twenty years except more Israeli facts on the ground by those hard-line Zionists who indeed want to play for time or even call for the expulsion of all Palestinians from the territories.

At the same time, Hamas is unlikely to automatically continue armed resistance after taking power. It will take the measure of what Israel, too, is doing on the ground. If both Israel and the United States, plus several European states insist there will be no dealing with Hamas until violence is renounced and Israel's right to exist recognized, Hamas is highly unlikely to yield at this stage. It perceives such demands as a trap: abandonment of its long-held commitment to resistance in exchange for probable non-gains of a return to an interminable and unfruitful peace process led by pro-Israel forces. It will likely declare that international conditions prevent it from governing in Palestine and might therefore unilaterally step down and turn over Palestinian foreign policy back over to Fatah and return to the armed struggle on an intensified basis. This would be a disaster, proving that U.S. insistence on democracy is a fraud and that there are no alternatives to the armed struggle. Palestinians will be deeply angered at the rejection of their chosen officials on the basis of one-sided preconditions.

In the unlikely event that the Israeli government really does take serious steps towards withdrawal from the West Bank and permitting the creation of a genuinely sovereign and cohesive national territory, Hamas could well suspend its armed struggle for an indefinite period that could ultimately become permanent, depending on the justness of the final status in Palestinian eyes. In other words, Hamas would be capable of simply putting on ice its long-range ambition of regaining all of lost Palestine and termination of the Israeli state. First, given the massive military and economic power of the Israeli state, it is not going to collapse or be defeated. Israel's biggest fear is that once having gained a viable Palestinian state, Hamas will then press for a stage two: the elimination of the state of Israel outright. It is highly unlikely that Hamas would gain any popular support for this from the Palestinian public in the event of a creation of a viable and prosperous Palestinian state. Under such conditions any non-Hamas Palestinian authorities could suppress Hamas or any other die-hard hold-outs with a broad degree of popular support and legitimacy. But right now no Palestinian leader could do so, as both Arafat and Mahmud Abbas have demonstrated.

Creation of an Islamic State?

How much, and what kind of efforts will Hamas dedicate to the creation of an “Islamic state?” We can only engage in informed speculation here, based on the past. There are no clear definitions of even what an Islamic state is. Certainly the Hamas social agenda will be conservative, particularly on social issues. Corruption will be a high priority target. It will probably encourage more conservative dress for women and less public display of alcohol. But there are not likely to be major changes in this arena: Hamas is pragmatic, knows the long-time secular and open character of Palestinian society. It will certainly not become a Taliban, Iranian or even Saudi-style regime, and it will not call for clerical rule. Hamas will have other broader political agendas that will take priority including public welfare, good and clean governance, and relief from the oppressions of occupation.

One key area to watch will be Hamas' relations with the guerrilla and terrorist organization Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The two organizations are quite different: Islamic Jihad is based almost solely on armed struggle to seek Palestinian liberation, and it also advocates attacks on existing corrupt Arab regimes as well, although it has targeted them very little to date. It is clandestine and closed and has no formal political program. It also has good ties with Iran, although decidedly is not a creature of Iran and has solid ties going back to the late 1970s with deep Palestinian roots. The Brotherhood on the other hand does not have good relations with Iran. A key question is whether Hamas will use its potential political power to eliminate Islamic Jihad, or whether it will seek to maintain an umbrella approach to the liberation struggle.

Western Policy towards Hamas

Washington must abandon the fantasy that it can get “moderate” Palestinians to crush Hamas and proceed to accept what are unsatisfactory peace terms offered by Likud. The much-reviled Arafat could not do so, nor could Mahmud Abbas, the “moderate,” both of whom were exquisitely aware that Hamas represents the views of a large number of Palestinians who cannot be excluded or suppressed. The Western search for a “Palestinian Quisling” in effect, based on a one-sided reading of the problem, is doomed to failure. The West will have to engage in a much more measured and balanced approach with Hamas if any prospect of political progress is to take place.

In the end the Israeli occupation remains the central problem, from which all other problems—despair, rage, and terrorism—flow. We must start by treating the core of the problem and not its symptoms. If the trajectory of other democratically-based Islamist parties is any indicator, there are reasonable hopes that Hamas, given the chance, will continue its evolution towards hard-headed pragmatism, even while not yielding its bargaining cards for free in advance.

Can we assume wisdom and patience on the part of the United States, Israel and the Palestinians in this next stage? If it is forthcoming, Hamas just might offer a surprise—the most legitimate Palestinian force to eventually reach a de facto settlement with Israel.

About the Author

Graham E. Fuller is a former Vice-Chair of the National Intelligence Council at CIA. His most recent book is *The Future of Political Islam*. He met with Hamas leaders in spring 2005.

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