

## Denying democratic rights to Hamas

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Global Research, December 27, 2005

[Dawn \(Pakistan\)](#) 27 December 2005

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

THERE is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the western project of bringing democracy to Arab-Islamic societies. Stripped of rhetoric, democracy is meant to be a procedure to elect representatives and rulers approved in advance by the principal arbiters in centres of global hegemony. A verdict by a Muslim electorate in favour of a political party that anchors its agenda in Islamic values is virtually a *casus belli*.

The denial of this democratic right was the beginning of a protracted conflict in Algeria. Now Israel insists that Hamas cannot be allowed to participate in the forthcoming Palestinian elections and if Mahmoud Abbas does not eliminate Hamas from the contest, Israel will not allow voting in Jerusalem. Sharon's spokesman considers a possible Hamas victory as the end of the peace process.

This is a disconcerting and perplexing response to the recent gains made by Hamas in the local body elections. Analysed in the framework of accepted norms applicable to conflict resolution, the transition from armed struggle to a readiness to participate in a political process — the momentous shift from bullets to the ballot — is a desirable transformation that should be encouraged.

This is the matrix of all initiatives by the United Kingdom, Ireland and the international community in the case of Northern Ireland. This is what every Arab-Islamic government would devoutly pray for in the case of Palestine. This is, indeed, what many thoughtful Israeli peace activists would want. But this is the change that Sharon fears most for the obvious reason that it would deprive him of a major excuse for systematically dismantling the peace process painstakingly put together at Madrid and Oslo.

"Historical experience," writes Yoram Schweitzer of Israel's Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies in a recent article "suggests that the entry of terrorist organizations into political processes and parliamentary competition has a moderating effect on their behaviour. In certain circumstances, it has even prompted them to abandon terrorism as the primary mode of action and replace it with political activism."

This observation would be widely shared but unfortunately it runs counter to Israel's project of coercing the post-Arafat Palestinian National Authority into accepting a settlement that cedes a large chunk of the West Bank to Greater Israel, abandons all Arab claims on Jerusalem, negates the Palestinian right of return forever and abridges Palestinian sovereignty to municipal powers in some disconnected territories.

Democratization of Arab Palestine is expected to be synonymous with the legitimization of Israel's expansionism since 1967.

Since Hamas' entry into the political arena may give heart to Mahmoud Abbas' resistance to this self-serving interpretation of democracy for Palestinians, it must continue to be demonized as a 'terrorist organization'.

Opposing the historic manoeuvre by which Hamas seeks to assume a political role alongside Fateh and other Palestinian factions, albeit without giving up the right of armed resistance to the 38-year-old occupation, demonstrates more than anything else how deep-seated is the fear of peace in some of the most powerful echelons of Israel's establishment. Evidently, this opposition at this point of time is a tactic that reduces the options available to Mahmoud Abbas and perhaps forces him to postpone the elections scheduled for January 2006.

Israel's own political spectrum extends from enlightened left-liberals of the Labour party to rightist extremists whose irrationality and racism match the political ideology of Hitler's Nazism. This spread of opinion and policy is cited as proof of the democratic temper of the Jewish state but the same state arrogates to itself the right to prescribe to the Palestinians the limits of their politics.

HAMAS — Harkat al Muqawwama al-Islamiyya — is a child of the Palestinian intifada. It was born out of a painful realization that the broader secular Palestinian struggle for freedom needed to be reinvigorated, and if need be supplanted by, a movement drawing upon Islam's historical conflict with injustice. Its roots are to be found in the growing apprehension that PLO's decision to embark upon the uncharted peace process had been cynically exploited by Israel to intensify land appropriations, settlement activity in the West Bank and Jewish colonization of East Jerusalem. Nor had the peace process curbed the Israeli extremist view that ultimately the Palestinian question would have to be solved by the mass expulsion of Arabs from Eretz Israel.

Faced by the threat of annihilation, a segment of the Palestinian activists turned to the experience of the Muslim Brotherhood for inspiration and concluded that they must build an enduring capacity to counter the incremental depredation of Israel. Sharon's invasion of Lebanon and a clear demonstration that the only effective resistance to it came from the much maligned 'warriors of Islam' added a new dimension to the Arab struggle for survival. This development is reminiscent of similar stages in the emergence of the French resistance, the Yugoslav partisans who took on the might of the third Reich, the IRA and countless liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Its essence is clear enough: the martyr embraces death so that his people can live.

In its formative years, Hamas talked of supplementing Yasser Arafat not challenging him, of deepening the intifada by enabling the people to absorb the Israeli reprisals and of creating a multi-tiered long- term resistance in collaboration with the PLO cadres.

Gradually, Hamas designed itself as an alternative to the PLO with its own distinctive political, intelligence-gathering and military wings. Its point of departure from the PLO was two-fold. First, PLO was a national platform that united Muslim and Christians in a joint secular liberation movement. Hamas reflected the view that this unity should not obliterate the Islamic identity of the Muslim component of the nation.

Secondly, even as the majority of Palestinians followed Yasser Arafat in exploring all available avenues of negotiating a settlement with Israel under the US-driven peace

process, there was a strong body of opinion that Israel would never offer honourable terms for it.

A Hamas leader, Ibrahim Al-Quqa defined intifada as going beyond the “circles of politics, or raising (of) and discussing (the) issue in conferences and organizations” and aiming at “liberating the land, and the honour and creed” — a comprehensive and extensive liberation of Palestine from imperialist oppressors, as he put it. It was, as the memorable writings of late Edward Said showed, by no means a mere Islamist or Jihadist view of the Palestinian dilemma.

Sharon’s invasion of Lebanon and Israel’s subsequent determination to virtually annex a sizable part of southern Lebanon has never been fully discussed in our own midst. In fact, I recall a number of occasions when Arab intellectuals and diplomats showed me copies of a strangely composed tribute to Sahabzada Yaqub Khan by the internationally known American columnist, Safire, in which this distinguished writer strained an observation made by the Pakistani foreign minister to him to imply that he advocated a continuous American military presence in Lebanon. This was clearly a motivated construction put on what he had said to Safire but it underscored the role that Lebanon was expected to play in the destruction of the Palestinian liberation struggle. That Israel was to hold on to this strategic enclave till the Hezbollah made it materially untenable lent credence to the view that resistance to Israel could not be exclusively political.

In its early years, the relative emphasis by Hamas on community values and welfare projects made it relatively more acceptable to Israel than the militant wings of the PLO. In Islamic Politics in Palestine, Beverley Milton-Edwards has documented Israel’s hope that Hamas, as a reformist, welfare-oriented movement would actually dilute Yasser Arafat’s hold on Palestinian politics. There are several milestones marking the ascendancy of the Izzul Din al-Qassam brigade in the Hamas hierarchy but perhaps no more dramatic than the massacre of 29 Muslim worshippers in Hebron by an Israeli settler on the fateful February morning 1994.

There is an inherent banality in such random acts of violence but in the context of the Sharon-authored colonization of the West Bank, it dramatizes a fear of extermination. Earlier, in December 1992, Israel had rounded up more than 400 Hamas activists and left them stranded and derelict in Marj al-Zahour in occupied southern Lebanon.

Unlike some other militant factions such as Islamic Jihad, Hamas has shown an awareness of present day regional and global realities by its willingness to terminate its boycott of political institutions under conditions of alien occupation. It regards abandonment of armed struggle as premature, but implicit in its bid for a share of political power is the promise of accepting Israel’s right to exist within its pre-1967 borders.

Political participation will change the semantics of intra-Palestinian rivalries and set the stage for productive negotiations between the two nations for a genuine two-state solution provided Israel throws up a leadership that accepts peaceful co-existence within secure frontiers as its principal objective. Security in the Middle East is not divisible and Israel will never find it without according it to the other party.

For the Arabs, it has been a long retreat since 1949 but there is no space left for its further extension. Doubtless, Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas know this reality. The Palestinian voter is making it manifestly clear that it now leans towards those who rule out anything less than a

viable nation state of their own with East Jerusalem as its capital.

*The writer is a former foreign secretary of Pakistan.*

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