

“Engaging the World”: Palestine and the Making of Hamas’ Foreign Policy

A Review of Daud Abdullah's Book

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Global Research, April 06, 2021

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

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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Hamas has been a strongly maligned actor within the western mainstream media. The concise and well written “Engaging the World” by Daud Abdullah presents a clear picture of Hamas’ attempts to act as an international state actor while at the same time continuing its role as a liberation movement against Israeli occupation. It is a very honest work, describing Hamas’ success in presenting a critical pragmatic formulation of its actions for other state actors, at the same time indicating where it has not succeeded, through its own relative political weakness in relation to considerable outside influences.

Starting positions

Above all it is not a polemical work attacking Israel or highlighting the history of Israel transgressions but limits itself strictly to what is indicated in the title. It examines foreign policy, Hamas’ attempts, successful and otherwise, to present its position to other countries. Yes, it does indicate its obvious position as considering “Israel in Palestine as a manifestation of European colonialism, acknowledging that the Zionist enterprise in Palestine could never have succeeded without western political and military support.”

Abdullah goes on to indicate that Hamas is “not attempting to establish a religious state or theocracy....it is seeking a civil state with an Islamic framework of reference through which the executive can be held accountable to the people.” Having identified those two large encompassing positions, the book proceeds to examine how Hamas has attempted to be both idealistic and realistic at the same time, a rational actor in its attempts to pursue its relationships with outside political entities.

Much of that is regional as Hamas “sought to avoid involvement in disputes between competing regional alliances” a not easy task when Arab countries tend to have strong internal conflicts and disputes (e.g. Iraq invading Kuwait, Saudi Arabia against Yemen, Qatar et al). Hamas reaches much farther abroad than its neighbours, engaging with the rest of the world.

Oslo

One position they do not accept – an internal one – is that of the PLO and its armed wing Fatah, considered to have been co-opted through the Oslo process and subsequent manipulation by the western community in its actions as being the enforcement police acting for the Israelis. The second chapter, “Rejecting the call to Oslo” outlines Hamas’ initiative to “situate the movement within the framework of international law....to enhance the international legitimacy of the movement...allowing it to reserve the right to accept or reject proposals or resolutions that did not uphold the rights of the Palestinian people.”

One of the more intriguing incidents is presented in chapter 3, “Opportunities from Marj az Zuhur” something I was vaguely familiar with but obviously had not recognized its importance before reading this section. This history indicates how significant the PLO – Hamas split was, how the Arab League operated with double standards, how for Israel it was “ill conceived and destined to fail,” but for Hamas it was a turning point that “evoked the solidarity of people across religious and political divides.”

2006 and Gaza

A brief examination of “Relations with the USA” leads directly into another highly significant chapter and a major turning point, “The 2006 elections and the trial of democracy”. It was this sequence of events which “highlighted all the posturing and pretence involved in the U.S. portrayal of itself as a champion of democracy in the Middle East and elsewhere.”

Abdullah recognizes that for “[failing to](#) see and avoid the trap that was set for them...both organizations [Hamas and the PLO] are responsible.” However at the same time, Hamas’ position was strengthened “because its political leaders were seen as competent, open, untarnished by corruption and unwilling to compromise their ideals.” Since then, Israel has militarily attacked the Gaza enclave three times against all standards of humanitarian and war law.

Beyond...

The rest of the record examines Hamas’ relationships with the European Union, the global south, Russia, and China, all a mixture of successes and resistance. It ends with an interesting account of Hamas’ interactions with the government of Syria and other Syrian leaders during the protests and civil war in Syria. Syria had been one of the strongest supporters of Hamas but the difficult situation in Syria proved too difficult for Hamas to negotiate its way through. It was viewed as “an internal problem” that hopefully “no foreign powers would have an excuse to interfere in their internal affairs.”

Contentions

Perhaps, as with most historical accounts, current events do not fit well within most people’s perspectives. There are two points, both intersecting with the U.S. and its allies, that fit within this possibly ‘too close for a good view’ perspective. First is the apparent view that Syria’s problems were internal – yes, they were, but they were also seriously aggravated by U.S. interference along with its regional allies, notably Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and of course Israel. It is noted that “A bloody civil war ensued.” And again, yes it did, but highly influenced, highly interfered with by the just mentioned adversaries to the Assad government.

The second item I have difficulty with is the argument that “Although the right to armed

struggle is upheld in UN Resolutions 2955 and 3034 of December 1972, the stronger trend in contemporary relations is for disputes to be resolved peacefully.” The counterpoint to this is a simple examination of U.S. foreign policy, its use of extremist forces to do much of their work, to use both covert and overt actions to influence and overthrow a wide variety of non-obliging governments, and the current use of economic sanctions to strangle the economy of whatever country they deem offensive to their privileges.

Conclusion

Neither of these two points refutes the overall position of Hamas – it means that perhaps in another few years, these events may take on a different meaning. In the closing Abdullah acknowledges that internal weaknesses need to be addressed, and “Ultimately, the greatest losses from the rift have accrued neither to Hamas nor Fatah but to the Palestinian national project.”

For the future, Abdullah recognizes that Hamas may have to face “realities on the ground” that may affect their favoured policy of non-alignment on the international scene. He recognizes that “Palestine...no longer seems to be a central issue for many regional governments,” while at the same time “Palestine remains one of the great moral and political issues of our time; it unites people everywhere.”

He sees that the “international community moves towards a multipolar world”, an indicator that both my contention about U.S. foreign policy and the need for a political realignment “contributing to the formation of new global alliances,” have actually been recognized and acknowledged.

A necessary read

“Engaging the World: The Making of Hamas’s Foreign Policy” deserves to be read by anyone interested in foreign affairs, in particular the Middle East (which admittedly affects most of the world). It should serve as a guide for any academic programs that contends to be about international affairs, foreign policy, or any other formulation of geopolitical interests. At the same time it is readily accessible to any other interested reader and while some background information on the overall history of the region is helpful, “Engaging the World” can also stand alone as an introduction to events in the Middle East.

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Jim Miles is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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