

Hamas: Governing Between Rhetoric and Reality

English Translation of [Hamas, entre retórica y realidad](#)

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In modern Middle Eastern history, the Hamas electoral victory in the January 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections has extraordinary potential to shock the region's political system. Political observers knew that Hamas was a viable political force in Palestinian politics. But its trouncing of the incumbent political party through fair elections contains unexpected implications as significant as Egyptian Nasser's overthrow of the monarchy in 1952, the overthrow of the Shah and the rise of Khomeyni in the late 1970s, or Saddam Hussein's fall from power in 2003.

This was a ballot box earthquake; it was a democratic coup d'état. It did not come through civil war or the violent removal of an autocratic leader. Because it came from the bottom up, its implications have stirred fears among autocrats throughout the region about change coming through constituent and electoral politics.

With ideological roots that go back to the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt in the late 1920s, Hamas was spawned by several factors: the ideological fervor of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, which overthrew a secular regime opposed to Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel, and the crying need of the Palestinian population for basic social needs and services. Created in 1987, Hamas rejected western secularism, emphasized the destruction of Israel, and aimed for the gradual return to Islamic values. Hamas firmly opposed the 1993 Oslo Accords, in which the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel engaged in mutual recognition. Hamas sees Israel as illegitimate; it sees Jews in occupation of Muslim land. Armed struggle is a legitimate tool to liberate that land. Hamas' objective is the establishment of a non-secular Palestinian state in all of Palestine, not just on the lands Israel won in the June 1967 War. The term "occupied territory" for Hamas is not just the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem; it is all of Israel. Therefore, any political leader-- Western, Arab, Muslim or otherwise-- who negotiates, compromises, or talks with Israel is the enemy. For Hamas a two state solution is a half-way point toward the control of all of the land west of the Jordan River.

Since its inception, Hamas activists participated in dozens of attacks against Israeli civilians, making it a major nemesis for Israelis and Israeli leaders. During the Intifada that broke out in September 2000, Hamas sponsored and organized actions that were responsible for the killing of more than 350 Israeli men, women, and children, and the wounding of

many others. From 2000 to 2004, Israel responded by building a fence around Gaza, the West Bank, and attacking perpetrators and planners of the suicide attacks.

In 1997, one of the co-founders of Hamas, Dr. Abdel Azziz al-Rantisi, told an interviewer in a Beirut newspaper that Islam does not allow support of the Oslo negotiating process (and that would include the 'Road Map') because it "boils down to relinquishing Palestine" to the Jews. A Hamas ceasefire with either the PLO or with Israel is tactical; it is only a temporary a "breather" allowing Hamas to regroup its strength, and then prepare to resume its attacks against Israel. Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar declared in March 2005, "Hamas is ready to accept a long-term truce, keep the conflict open ... if our generation cannot act, it must not make concessions...; we can establish a state on any inch without ceding the other inches."

With its charismatic leaders killed by Israel, Hamas reorganized under a collective and disciplined leadership. Following Arafat's death in 2004, Hamas had a real opening for controlling the Palestinian national movement. In 2005, it contested and won many municipal elections in Gaza and the West Bank and began to share local power with the ruling Fatah party of Arafat and his successor, Mahmoud Abbas. . Where Hamas politicians took control of local politics, it reportedly streamlined budgets and ended cronyism. Where necessary, Hamas politicians made tactical contacts with Israeli officials when essential needs such as electricity and other services were required from Israeli supply.

In the January 2006 parliamentary elections for the Palestine Legislative Council, Hamas won 76 of the 132 seats, emerging as the dominant political force among Palestinians. Fatah won 43 seats. It did not participate in the PLC elections a decade earlier, because it was significantly weaker, Arafat could not be unseated, and the elections were considered to be based on the despised Oslo Accords. Under Palestinian law, Hamas obtained the right to name the prime minister and Cabinet and run the daily affairs of the PNA. The presidency, however, remained in the hands of Mahmoud Abbas, leader of Fatah. Seven out of ten eligible Palestinian voters in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem voted, a comparatively high turnout for any democratically held election. Hamas's overwhelming victory was attributed to dismay with the cronyism, corruption, and mismanagement of the ruling Fatah party.

Hamas's polling strength was also aided by political fragmentation in Fatah, divided between the "old guard leadership" that had surrounded Arafat and Abbas and younger party stalwarts. Hamas engaged in disciplined electoral politics this time because it had a chance to control the politics and administration of the Gaza Strip evacuated by Israel in 2005. With Arafat gone, Gaza as a prize for rule, and international financial assistance waiting to pour into the PNA, Hamas had every incentive to participate in these elections. With its unexpected success, Hamas is faced with reconciling rhetoric with reality. Its rhetoric still calls for Israel's elimination. But realistically its objective must be to govern and at least control the education curriculum, social welfare, health care, and religious affairs. To receive the external funds the majority of Palestinians so desperately need, Hamas will have to find a formula that does not drop its political objectives, but is sufficiently moderate in tone and actions to open the cash flow. If Hamas puts together a workable government that reflects various strains of Palestinian politics and delivers on the issues of reducing unemployment and raising the standard of living, then it will have answered voters' key demands. If Hamas imposes restrictive religious rules on its Palestinian population, it will face an inevitable brain drain, and emigration by secular Muslim and Christian Palestinians alike. United States and European Union (EU) officials have said they will cut off aid to a Hamas government unless Hamas renounces terrorism. International diplomacy to catalyze a renewed negotiating process with Israel is not likely to unfold in the near future.

Only Hamas is capable of making core ideological compromises with Israel about canceling the claim of the "right of return" or over sharing Jerusalem. Hamas leaders may make the right public noises about wanting to live side by side with Jews, but are likely to be less than explicit about recognizing a sovereign, independent, and separate Jewish state. At all costs Hamas wants to avoid a Palestinian civil war. Yet tension between the thousands of Fatah activists who remain on the large PA security payroll, now destined to lose their jobs and wages are incendiary candidates for an insurgency against Hamas-led reforms.

As Israel passes through its March 2006 elections it is likely to continue a policy of "unilateralism," pursuing actions that protect Israel and Israelis without the consent of the Palestinians. In a broader historical context, Hamas is engaged in building a state west of the Jordan River, alongside Israel, the very state it seeks to eliminate. But as Zahar indicated, sharing a border in a two-state solution does not mean giving up one inch of what the next generation might achieve. To the consternation of neighboring Arab rulers, the fairly conducted electoral process ousted from power fossilized autocrats and political parties that remain unresponsive to their population's essential needs. What is certain is that Palestinian self-

determination will have an impact on the region for decades to come, what is unknown is what that impact will be.

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*This article is an adaptation of the author's entry of " Hamas " for Microsoft's *Encarta Encyclopedia*, 2006.