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Hamas through Rose-colored Glasses

Hamas: A Beginner's Guide

Khaled Hroub

London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006.

Khalid Hroub's book has a number of purposes, some declared, others implied. It "sets forth to tell the story of the 'real' Hamas'...in all its aspects...not the misperceived and distorted one" so prevalent in the West, which is said to view Hamas solely through the lens of terrorism. Providing the "basic information and necessary clarifying analysis," says Hroub, the director of the Arab Media Project at Cambridge University and host of a weekly book review programme for al-Jazeera TV, will enable the reader to shape her or his own opinion about the movement. It is not his intention, Hroub declares, to provide an "apologetic treatise" for Hamas. Indeed, he prefers the organization's nationalist agenda to its religious one, and occasionally express concerns over Hamas's desire to Islamize Palestinian society. But the book's overall tone is clearly sympathetic. Hamas is presented as a deeply rooted force in Palestinian society waging a just struggle against a powerful imperialist-colonialist enemy – Israel - even if its means are at times objectionable or counter-productive. Whatever "radicalism" Hamas exhibits, he says, is a "completely predictable result of the ongoing Israeli colonial project in Palestine." At the same time, Hroub argues that Hamas has evolved over time, demonstrating a pragmatism which "hovers around accepting the concept of a two-state solution." By emphasizing Hamas's pragmatic side, Hroub is sending a message to Western public opinion and governments that Hamas is worthy of additional support and sympathy, and should be engaged lest it become "radicalized and militarized." And finally, one can surmise that Pluto Press, which according to its website has always promoted a "radical political agenda" and whose authors have "a wide range of progressive political viewpoints," aspires to help build a common front between secular "progressives" and a religious-based mass movement against the oppressive forces of Western imperialism. Doing so, the publishers and author apparently believe, would undermine the "clash of civilizations" theory which supposedly drives Western policy in the Middle East, and re-orient Western governments and societies away from support for Israel. It would also help resolve the so-called progressives' conundrum of why religion has proved to be a greater mobilizing force among the downtrodden of the Middle East than class solidarity or a common Third World, "anti-imperialist" agenda.

Knowing these purposes is essential if beginners, for whom the book is explicitly designed, are to make an informed judgment regarding Hamas. But this alone is not enough. Although the book does contain much useful information and provides food for thought, its pretensions to objectivity and facts are too often exposed as hollow, and its list of recommended reading highly skewed. One can't help but think that Fox TV News's unintentionally ironic slogan, "we report, you decide," applies to this book as well. Thus a reader, even one sympathetic to a "progressive", pro-Third

World, anti-American position, should be aware that the lens is frequently distorted, either by commission or omission.

Those aware of some of the basic contours of the history of the region and of the Arab-Israeli conflict will immediately note that Hroub unabashedly presents the Palestinian narrative of events in a way which plays fast and loose with facts and context. Palestinians have "peaceably occupied" their lands for over 2000 years; Jerusalem was the Palestinians' "capital city" before 1948; in 1967, "Israel launched another successful war" (without any reference to the Arab war coalition which had formed on its borders); the first *intifada* in December 1987 was sparked by an Israeli truck driver who responded to the killing of an Israeli settler by deliberately running over and killing four Palestinians (presenting rumor as fact); all of Hamas's suicide bombings have been "directly linked to specific Israeli atrocities against Palestinian civilians" (taking Hamas statements at face value); the Dome of the Rock was built adjacent to "where the Jews say the Old Temple of Solomon was built," language which calls into question the Jewish people's historical connection to Jerusalem. Inexplicably, Hroub states that the final status talks stipulated by the Oslo Accords never took place, ignoring entirely the Clinton-orchestrated negotiations in July 2000 and the follow-up intermittent high-level talks over subsequent months.

Hroub's treatment of Hamas's founding 1988 Charter also raises questions. While acknowledging its numerous anti-Jewish statements (including the Charter's approving referral to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*), he dismisses them as irrelevant to contemporary realities and describes the Charter itself, with its "embarrassing" rhetoric as "largely obsolete." Hamas's governing platform, issued after its surprise 2006 election victory, he says, is so far away from the Charter in its concrete treatment of the issues facing the Palestinians that one can even speak of a "new Hamas". But what about Hamas's numerous statements and publications in recent years which convey the same message as the Charter, including Holocaust denial?

Hroub poses the question: "Is Hamas planning the destruction of Israel?" His answer is that Hamas's "ultimate slogan," 'the liberation of Palestine', "falls short of saying what would actually be done with Israel should that goal be achieved." Such verbal acrobatics strain his credibility. But in any case, he insists, the argument that Hamas desires Israel's destruction is irrelevant and unrealistic: no Palestinian or other Arab party or state dreams of having the ability to destroy Israel; "it is an uncontested fact that there is no threat to the existence of Israel in either the medium or long term," and saying otherwise "is a matter of political propaganda and emotional sensationalism." One wonders if the numerous explicit statements advocating Israel's destruction by senior Hamas leaders, from Khalid Mash`al on down, which he conveniently ignores, also fall in the realm of propaganda and emotional sensationalism.

If Hroub is referring only to possible military capabilities, then there may be a point to his argument, even as he ignores the threat of nuclear terrorism. But his categorical statements mesh seamlessly with the larger themes he is trying to promote, of a Hamas which is evolving in the direction of pragmatism, realism and statesmanship.

But why, one must ask, should Hamas's increasing sophistication and focus on immediate issues be seen as pulling it away from its long term goals, instead of

serving them? Does the fact that the movement has evolved both in discourse and tactics mean that it has abandoned its ideals? In fact, Hamas spokesmen have long claimed that time is working in the Palestinians' favor, and that Israel will disappear within the next few decades. It is within this context that one should understand the Palestinian interest in a *hudna* (ceasefire) over a defined period, to be renewed only if Israel were to accede to Palestinian demands. Establishing a *hudna* would require an Israeli withdrawal from the entire West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem and the establishment of a Palestinian state there, while not compromising Palestinian rights, i.e. the "right of return" of refugees and their descendants, numbering, he says, "more than six million". Since the book appeared, even more explicit statements have been made by Hamas officials proclaiming acceptance, and even implementation of the "right of return" as a condition for accepting the *hudna*. Given the fact that the refugee issue is, as Hroub rightly says, "the most intractable one" in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, one is hard-pressed to see the *hudna*, in the Hamas world-view, as being anything but a stage in realizing the movement's ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic state in all of historic Palestine.

Indeed, one may conclude from the book that Hamas has gone from strength to strength, and thus has the confidence and staying power to reconcile short and long term goals. Hamas appears here as a multi-pronged organism which has succeeded in anchoring itself in Palestinian society, through a combination of "resistance," political action, social and charitable work underpinned by religious principles, and avoidance of corruption. Viewed in this light, Hamas's sweeping electoral success a year ago was a natural outcome, even though Hamas's and affiliated independents' share of the popular vote (45%) was considerably less than the figure Hroub cites (almost 60%).

Moreover, in spite of the steadily worsening situation in the territories since Hamas's assumption of leadership over the Palestinian Authority, Hamas has maintained and even enhanced its popularity, as the Palestinian public has blamed other parties, foreign and domestic, for its difficulties. Can Hamas maintain its newly achieved role as the leading force in Palestinian affairs? Can it successfully manage the inevitable differences between its internal and external factions, and its military and civilian wings? Can it break the international boycott and siege which has played havoc with Palestinian finances and living standards? And can it avoid fatally compromising its underlying principles that reject any historic compromise which would entail legitimizing the State of Israel? Israeli policy makers, and Israeli society, should assume that the answer to these questions will be affirmative. Armed with such sobering knowledge, Israel should seek creative and prudent ways to protect its vital interests and manage the bedeviling and protracted conflict with its Palestinian neighbors and adversaries.

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