

Hroub, Khaled: *Hamas. A Beginner's Guide*. Pluto, London – Ann Arbor 2006. 170 S. ISBN 0-7453-2590-4

Israel, the United States and the European Union call Hamas a “terrorist organisation”. Yet Hamas swept to victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections and stunned the world. It is now a democratically elected political party. All the election observers agreed that the elections were free, fair, and democratic. The Palestinian people showed their ability to establish a second democratic state next to Israel. But two democracies and the EU did not like this idea of a democratic Palestinian state and the outcome of a democratic election. According to their opinion, the Palestinian people voted democratically, but for the wrong party. Perhaps the West should look for another people in Palestine who will vote according to their wishes, to paraphrase Bertolt Brecht. The Palestinians did not confirm the PLO elite which had always been accused by the US and Israel and some European states of being corrupt and irresponsible, and consequently they voted them out of office. An unprecedented and unique incident in the Arab world. It was an example of a peaceful “regime change”, but not according to the neo-conservative model. The West should have been glad, but they decided to boycott a democratically elected government, because Hamas did not want to recognize Israel, renounce terror, and stick to the Road Map. The West has been violating its own values, convictions, and rhetoric. Western credibility suffered a great blow not only in the Arab and Islamic world. In the future, nobody in the Arab world will care for Western democratic rhetoric, especially when it comes from the US. The Bush administration has lost its credibility in this part of the world and the EU does its best to follow this disastrous path.

After the election of Hamas the book market boomed. The German political scientist Helga Baumgarten published a book on Hamas in German which is the only publication of its kind in German. A totally different perspective presents Matthew Levitt who works for an American think tank. He describes the Israeli scenarios of Hamas which the US government should follow. The foreword by Dennis Ross, the US envoy to the Middle East from 1988 to 2000, praises his view. Now one can understand that the US went so much astray in its approach not only towards Israel's occupation policy but also in respect to the raid of Iraq. Ross's advice is that

“... Policy makers would be well advised to shape their strategy with (the author's) prescriptions in mind.”

After this biased suggestion one can understand why the US totally failed in Iraq and the Middle East.

Khaled Hroub works as a director of the Arab Media Project at Cambridge University. He hosts a weekly book review programme for *Al-Jazeera TV*. In 2000 he already published a book on the political thought and practice of Hamas. Hroub is the best expert on this Islamic Movement and has deep insights into the organisation. He tells the story of the “real Hamas” and the “misperceived and distorted one”. By “real Hamas” he means the reality of Hamas as it has been on the ground in all its aspects – debunking any reductionist approach. The book is structured chronologically and thematically starting with the origin of Hamas and closing with Hamas after the elections, the so-called new Hamas. The book follows a

question and answer structure which makes it a good read with steps that can easily be comprehended. All realists of international relations in the West, who show some understanding of Hamas policy, are usually branded “terrorist sympathizers”. Knowing that, Hroub makes his position clear:

“My own perception of Hamas goes beyond the mere question of being with or against the movement. As a secular person myself, my aspiration is for Palestine, and all other Arab countries for that matter, to be governed by human-made laws. However, I see Hamas as a natural outcome of unnatural, brutal occupational conditions. The radicalism of Hamas should be seen as a completely predictable result of the ongoing Israeli colonial project in Palestine. Palestinians support whichever movement holds the banner of resistance against the occupation and promises to defend the Palestinian right of freedom and self-determination. At this juncture of history, they see in Hamas the defender of those rights.”

The brutality of the Israeli occupation really started with the outbreak of the first Intifada in December 1987. Before that, Israel pretended to exercise a “benign occupation” (Moshe Dayan). Nowadays, seeing the degree of Israeli oppression, everybody can understand why Hamas exists and became the strongest party in Palestine. From the beginning of the Oslo process, which was called “peace process” by the West, Hamas never participated in the Oslo structure and opposed its agreements arguing that it would only serve Israeli interest. During this interim period

“Israel did everything possible to worsen the life of Palestinians and enhance its colonial occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.”

During this time the number of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories doubled. A new infrastructure was created which partially is “for Jews only”. Critics call these streets “Apartheid roads”.

There has never been any sign that Hamas has engaged in “globalized Jihad”, writes Hroub. Hamas has remained

“... nationstate based, limiting its struggle to one for and within Palestine, and fighting not a local regime but a foreign occupier. This differentiation is important as it exposes the shallowness of the widespread (mostly Western) trivializing conflation of all Islamist movements into one single ‘terrorist’ category.”

Hamas has a political and a military wing. From the start there has been discussion about which wing will predominate. The movement suppresses any implicit or explicit tension between the two. Only time will tell which wing will prevail. From a military perspective, Hamas adopted a controversial tactic of “suicide bombing”. The first terrorist attack happened in 1994, in retaliation for the massacre of Palestinians praying in Ibrahimi Mosque in the city of Hebron. The Israeli extremist Baruch Goldstein killed 29 worshippers.

“Since then all and each Hamas's vicious attacks against Israeli civilians have been directly linked to specific Israeli atrocities against Palestinians civilians.”

These suicide attacks have not only caused great damage to the reputation of both Hamas and the Palestinians worldwide, but also to Israeli citizens. Hamas is an Islamic organisation, but it can hardly be said

“... that the Palestinian people voted for Hamas primarily on religious grounds.”

Hamas supported Christian candidates who won seats in the parliament and the organisation has never exerted any

pressure on other believers. Why is Hroub so uncritical of the terrorist attacks by Hamas, Al-Aqsa-brigade or the Islamic Jihad?

What Hroub writes about the meaning of the Hamas charta does not fit into the Western perception of Hamas. He confirms that the charta from 1988 contains many "anti-Jewish" statements. But it is also true that years later

"... these statements are irrelevant to the present Hamas party, the Charter itself has become largely obsolete".

The rhetorics of the charta and the language of the election programme

"... almost appear to describe two completely different movements."

Radical Western critics argue that Hamas is "anti-Semitic". One should bear in mind that "anti-Jewishness", which one comes across in Palestinian and Arab societies, is not "based on religious, racial or cultural hatred, as in the Western rubric 'anti-Semitism', writes Hroub.

"The roots of any anti-Jewishness in Arab society are entirely political, in response to aggression, and any other form of anti-Jewishness would be completely refuted from the perspective of Islamic theology. Military actions taken against 'Jewish' targets are taken against them as representatives of an illegal, aggressive occupier, and have nothing whatsoever to do with their creed, race or non-Islamic culture."

The phrase "the destruction of Israel", which is often used by Western media when referring to Hamas's ultimate

goal, is in fact never used by Hamas, writes Hroub. Even in its most radical statements Hamas speaks of the "liberation of Palestine". In the obsolete charta there are statements that could be interpreted as referring to the destruction of Israel, the author reports. If that is true why does Hamas not get rid of the charta? Did not Arafat change the PLO Charta when it was political opportune? Hroub should have been more critical here.

The book has ten chapters, starting with Hamas's history, the movement's ideology, strategy and objectives, Israel and Judaism, the resistance and military strategy, international Islamism, leadership and structure, the stance towards the West, and the new Hamas et cetera. In a question and answer sequence all the relevant questions are posed. The answers, which Hroub gives, will not be appreciated by the West, because they do not fit into the "terror image". The book presents such a differentiated picture of the organisation that it does not go along with the Western image of Hamas. For policy makers the book would be an asset if it was taken into consideration. Hroub's book can be an eye-opener for all those with an open mind. It gives a sober analysis of Hamas and can only be adequately judged in the light of the Israeli occupation. The book is a must read for all policy makers who want to understand Hamas as a Middle Eastern player. Like Helga Baumgarten in his book on Hamas, Khaled Hroub hardly ever speaks of Hamas terror. Why? This would have made his views more authentic and the book more acceptable to his Western audience.

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