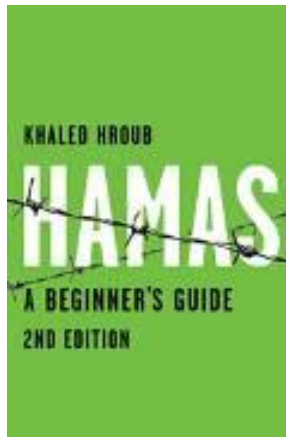


Khaled Hroub, Hamas. A Beginner's Guide, Pluto, 2nd Edition, London-Ann Arbor 2010 (2006), 196 p., € 24.



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 democratic state next to Israel. But Israel, the United States and the EU did not like this idea of a democratic Palestinian state besides Israel and the outcome of a democratic election. According to their opinion, the Palestinian people voted democratically, but for the wrong party. What is wrong with the Hamas movement? And why is it demonised by Israel, the US and the European Union? The reviewed book asks all relevant questions concerning Hamas and gives very balanced answers.

Khaled Hroub is one of the best experts on this Islamic Movement. He works as a director of the Arab Media Project at Cambridge University. In 2000 he already published a book on the political thought and practice of Hamas. Hroub, a secular Palestinian, 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. It follows a question and answer structure, which makes it a good read, with steps that can easily be comprehended. The book has thirteen chapters, starting with Hamas' 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, Hamas in power, the future of Hamas and Hamas and the Gaza war et cetera..

Western experts in international relations, who follow the realist school and show some understanding of Hamas policy, are typically branded "terrorist sympathizers". Aware of this predicament, 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 un-natural, 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 that occupation and promises to defend the Palestinian rights of freedom and self-determination. At this juncture of history, they see in Hamas the defender of those rights."

The extreme 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, perceiving the degree of Israeli oppression, the incompetence of the ruling Fatah elite, the corruption, and the bad governance, everybody can understand why Hamas exists and became the strongest party in Palestine. From the beginning, they refused in a charade, which Israel, the US and PLO-chairman Yassir Arafat called "peace process". Hroub writes that after Hamas' foundation they challenged the role of the PLO as "the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people". The biggest blow to the after-Arafat PLO was the defeat in the elections in 2006 and the loss of power. They could only gain their power back by ousting a democratically elected government with the "support" of Israel and the US.

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

limits its fight to within the borders of Palestine, and its enemy is Israel." Hamas has remained "nation-state 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." That is why "Hamas is indeed very anxious to keep itself well distanced from al-Qaeda, and certainly does not engage in any co-operation with it."

According to Israeli and Western perceptions, Hamas is branded a "terrorist organization" which wants to destroy Israel. To support such an accusation, the Hamas Charter is quoted as a case in point. What Hroub writes about the importance of the Charter contradicts the Western image of the organization. The author admits that the Charter, which was written by one person from the Muslim brotherhood, who belonged to the 'old guard' and was "completely cut off from the outside world", was never officially adopted by Hamas. The document contains many generalisations, all kinds of confusions, and conflations between Zionism and Judaism that led to charges of anti-Semitism and of a naive worldview, writes the author. Hroub also mentions that no Hamas official ever revered to the Charter as a leading policy paper. The statements of the Charter "are irrelevant to the present Hamas party, the Charter itself has become largely obsolete". The charges "that the Charter explicitly calls for the 'destruction of Israel' or the 'termination of the Jews' are not accurate; no such literal phrases occur in the Charter". If the Charter has harmed Hamas, as the author writes, why does Hamas not get rid of it? Hroub gives the following explanation: Hamas leaders fear this would be construed by many as giving up on the basic principles of the movement. Phrases like the "destruction of Israel" or the "termination of the Jews" which are often used by Western media or pro-Israeli supporters, when referring to Hamas' "ultimate goal" are in fact never used by Hamas, writes Hroub. Neither the Israel public nor the Israel government and its Western supporters will buy such an assertion.

What is Hamas's view of Israel? "According to Hamas, Israel is a colonial state established by force and resulting from western colonialism and imperialism against Arabs and Muslims before and after the turn of the twentieth century." Hroub writes that at the beginning of Hamas its view of Israel was loaded with "religious significance, holding that Israel was the culmination of a Jewish onslaught against Muslims and their holy places in Jerusalem". The Western encroachment was seen as a "renewal of the medieval Crusaders". For Hroub, Hamas does not aim at the "destruction of Israel" as its "ultimate goal" because Hamas has never used this phrase, not even in its most radical statements. The organization's ultimate goal is "the liberation of Palestine". Any realist knows that neither any Arab state or all together nor Hamas or Hisbollah are capable of destroying Israel. "Depicting Hamas (and the Palestinians) as any such threat to Israel is a matter of political propaganda and emotional sensationalism." According to Hroub, Hamas has never used the old rhetoric after they were elected into power in 2006. The discourse is dominated by resistance against the occupation and the illegal seizure of Palestinian lands. "Any suggestion that Hamas plans or aims to destroy Israel is obviously naïve".

The author points at the pragmatism and realistic approach of Hamas which does not exclude the recognition of Israel by the organization. As long Israel does not recognize the right of the Palestinian people of self-determination, Hamas will not recognize Israel. (According to international law, the Palestinian Authority has recognized Israel already several times. But the Israeli political class demands more than the just a "simple" recognition under international law. It demands from the Palestinians the recognition of Israel's "right to existence". Such a "right" is, however, un-known in international law. It's a political demand, which would, if accepted, leave the Palestinians without any rights in their own country, and would, retroactively legitimate all the injustices which were inflicted upon the indigenous people of Palestine. (L. W.) Hroub mentions that Hamas would accept a deal with Israel of the final settlement when a referendum about the status would be held in Israel and Palestine.

The latter Bush administration claimed it wanted to create a "New Middle East". At the end of his second term the "Bush-warriors" have indeed created a "New Middle East", but it was a Middle East they would not have dreamt of when they stated their adventure. All Israeli interventions (this holds also true for the US-American one's in Iraq and Afghanistan L. W.) strengthened the determination of resistance to occupation as is the case of Hamas after the Gaza war, writes Hroub. "The Gaza war is, in certain ways, a result of Bush's short-sighted Middle Eastern policy." The result: "The moderates have been knocked out, the resistance forces have become stronger, anti-Americanism is deeper, and Palestine as the core issue in the region is as persistent as ever." Should there be no Palestinian state under the Obama presidency, there will be a "new resisting Middle East" a new wave of radicalisation with Hamas as a part of it, writes the author. Building hope on Obama, as the author insinuates, might be like building on quicksand. The US Middle Eastern policy is as one-sided and depended on the wishes of Israel and its cronies in the US as ever. For the region, the worse might yet come, should an Israel-US-American alliance attack Iran.

The highly differentiated picture of Hamas painted by Hroub will not be appreciated by Western policy makers, because it does not fit into their "terror mythology". The book would, however, a veritable asset to politicians' who want to contribute to a genuine and just peace in the Middle East. Hroub's book will be an eye-opener to those with an open mind. It provides a sober analysis of Hamas and can only adequately judged in the light of the Israeli occupation. The book should be read by policy makers and political analysts who want to understand Hamas as a major Middle Eastern player.

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