

The Hamas Victory and the New Politics that May Come

THE TITLE TO THIS ARTICLE may sound terribly pretentious since, for all we know, in the coming months the Hamas government may very well end up under siege like Arafat and his entourage. And that's assuming their main moral and material backer – Iran – doesn't get nuked in the meantime.[1] Still, the probability that the Palestinian cause and the Arab-Israeli conflict will be managed according to different principles with different rhetorical strategies and political alignments, local and international, is worth looking into, if only because a goodly number of these implications flow out of the reasons behind the Hamas victory itself. Something very interesting has taken place in the occupied territories thanks to a not unrelated combination of America's apparent assault on Islam through its global war on terror and continued Israeli belligerence over the peace process.

Better the Devil You Don't Know

A CONCLUSION WAS REACHED by the rank and file of Palestinians, registered voters included, that there is little point in worrying about electing leaders that can push the peace process forward. One way or another the Israelis will block progress and assault Palestinians – just look what happened to Arafat and what little progress Abbas, who came by U.S./Israeli request, has made. Therefore, the collective decision taken by Palestinians was to vote for a party that would ensure an end to corruption and an improvement in the economic situation. A change in management was long overdue and people had lost hope in change from the top. The common sentiment over Fatah on the Palestinian street is, "They had their chance and they blew it."

No one expected a Hamas majority, not even Hamas, and

the polls didn't indicate such a sweeping majority, so it is safe to say that the Palestinians weren't really thinking in terms of the consequences of the vote for the "peace process." Domestic issues were paramount. There is, however, a distinct angle even here. Having spoken to Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza I was startled to discover that a great many people that voted for Hamas were employees of the Palestinian Authority (PA) itself. Far from being loyalists to the regime which created their jobs they have grown sick and tired of seeing their superiors and colleagues grow fat – literally – off corruption, whether in the form of bribes extorted from citizens or from aid money they have pilfered away from the Palestinian cause.

Most of the corrupt employees are Palestinians from outside of the territories who, when they first arrived, couldn't afford their children's school bills. Yet, after only a few years, they came to live in villas with swimming pools. This is a frequent and consistent observation, with the added problem that, thanks to the Israeli policy of economic strangulation, the honest civil servants who aren't politically connected have to put up with their equivalents in the private sector making more money, and they are people – mostly migrant labor – who can barely scratch together a living since Israel closed the borders. Increasingly in Gaza you are either corrupt or you have no effective income. The disparity between the rich and the poor, and the causes of wealth and poverty, within the ranks of the PA itself are a major factor behind the victory.

Hamas has acquired a good reputation over the years in local government and charity work and the Palestinians wanted this experience to be transferred over to the national arena with either a Hamas government or a Palestinian Legislative Council with a powerful Hamas presence. I would suspect that the Arab governments are thinking on the same lines, given that concerns over corruption – aid making its way into Swiss

bank accounts – ground to a halt the process of delivering on the emergency funds promised in Arab summits. So far the Arab League and Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been making good on compensating the PA against any shortfall in its budgetary requirements with American and European threats to cut off aid.

There is also an important generational factor at play, and one with a twist. The young, particularly in Gaza, the homeland of Hamas, are very pro-Hamas indeed, seeing them as the embodiment of the Palestinian cause as the PLO and Fatah became co-opted into the American dominated system of power in the region. Hamas has long taken the place of Fatah in the hearts and minds of the energetic youth. There is Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. While respected, effective militarily and in some ways more steadfast than Hamas, neither has the grassroots reach of Hamas as both are essentially organizations of the Diaspora. But there is more to the story than just that.

RELIGION IS, or was, a generational issue as well. The older generation in Gaza were initially secular in their political leanings and ideological outlook and cautioned their children against being swept up by religious sentiment pointing in Hamas' direction. There were widespread rumors of fanatics within the ranks of Hamas who overzealously "encouraged" young girls to wear the *hijab*, anything from impolitely insisting that they dress a certain way to violently forcing them.[2] When the secularists took over with the coming of the PA, things began to change. Even the older generation was disgusted with the boozing and gambling and female immodesty and became increasingly conservative in outlook, allowing their children to do likewise and even finally agreeing with them when it came to voting.

Rumors have been leaking out of the Gaza strip for quite

some time of "officials" either altruistically creating jobs through nightclubs or covertly making money off of prostitution. The closest I have come to confirming any of these accounts are the more common experiences women and girls have had to suffer whenever trying to finalize paperwork involving the PA. Apart from bribes and cronyism – *wasta*, or recommendation – certain "favours" are frequently requested of Palestinian females. There is nothing overtly sinister requested but in a conservative Arab society, more so in a place like Gaza, the acts implied are unacceptable.

The exact nature of the "religious" factor in the Hamas victory cannot be overemphasized. In conservative Arab cultures, and this transcends Muslims, protecting *i'rd* – purity of blood through female chastity, and the related notion of *sharaf*, honor – is not something to be trifled with. People are often willing to give up their political rights provided that the sanctity of their households remains intact. One reaction to widespread moral laxity is piety, nostalgia and outward religiosity, such as the *hijab*. When this attitude takes on an explicitly political character, government policy and participation, the reaction often takes on a political character. Fortunately in the Palestinian case democracy transformed this groundswell of conservative disgust into votes, a sentiment that could easily have turned violent if no other avenue for change existed.

Soft Power Ripples [3]

THE HAMAS VICTORY is following in the tracks of a trend of Islamist electoral successes – Bahrain, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq – and the Americans have no one to blame for this but themselves. Islamist rhetoric has gained ascendancy as Muslims increasingly perceive what is happening in the world not as a war on terror but as a war against Islam. Needless to say, the Danish newspaper cartoons and the rallying of European governments and newspapers to the Danish side has further solidified this misperception.[4] Everyone in the region,

Islamists most particularly, will have their eyes on the performance of the Hamas government to bolster their own rhetorical war. If the Palestinians can have a "fundamentalist" group in charge, why can't we? Where are all your prophecies of doom and gloom? Look how uncorrupt they are, how efficient, how tolerant, democratic, etc.

Hamas could very well become the rallying point for Mideast Islamist activity. The Arab regimes by and large have reacted positively to the election results and seem adamant to hold Washington to task on its commitment to democracy in the region – you made your bed, now you have to sleep in it. Much has been made of the U.S. and European decision, taken rather hastily, to punish the Palestinian people for exercising their democratic right. The message coming out of the (state-owned or supervised) mosques certainly has taken this latest development onboard as part of their anti- American, anti-Western propaganda campaign – where are the human rights of the Iraqis, Afghanis and Palestinians for you to call on us to respect human rights in our countries?

More than just this the very animating concepts underlying the Arab-Israeli conflict may change, resulting in an Islamicization of the confrontation between Israel and the Arabs. Helen Rizzo, a sociologist who specializes in political and social movements in the Middle East, is of this opinion, believing that what could also come about is a pragmatic awareness that religion is a factor that can be utilized in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, much as the secularist Zionist movement itself employed religion. Ideological and sectarian concerns – many of the Marxists who set up the Palestinian factions were Christians – always got in the way in the past, gaining sustenance from the secularism of Nasserism, Baathism, and the whole Communist bloc. They forcefully de-Islamicized the original pan-Islamic nature of the confrontation at the time of the Palestinian Hajj Amin Al-Husayni, Egyptian Hassan Al-Banna and Syrian Sheikh Abd Al-

Karim Qassam.[5]

The nationalist rhetoric that this is a war for national independence between the colonial West, embodied in Israel, and the Third Worlders known as Arabs will increasingly succumb to the notion that there is a religious war with a Zionist-Crusader West, to quote a bin Laden characterization verbatim. I mean, haven't the nationalists tried and failed because they were co-opted by the very Western imperialist enemy they claimed to fight against? Isn't the Al-Aqsa mosque, the third most holy mosque in Islam, under threat from Jewish extremists? Wasn't Palestine the focal point of the Vatican-launched Crusades? Arab nationalism has been in a nosedive since the 1967 war and in many ways Arafat himself was the last of that secularist, Palestine is above-any-particular-religion generation. Not to forget that we all have Samuel Huntington to thank for convincing a goodly portion of "the Rest" of the world that "the West" is in a civilizational confrontation with it.

From this point onward the trials and tribulations of Hamas and the Palestinian people will be seen and presented to the Arab and Muslim worlds in religious terms, with Islam triumphing for divinely ordained reasons whenever Hamas has a victory, while failures will be understood as the result of an anti-Islamic conspiracy. This will also have a democratizing effect since the argument that democracy cannot be attained without achieving national sovereignty and autonomy first will no longer hold. Opposition parties and the attentive public will be on the move, transforming large sectors of the Arab population into readymade audiences. A propaganda war, then, is in the offing and the first rounds have already been fired and from the most unlikely corner.

Low Intensity Conflict

I SPEAK, OF COURSE, of Russian President Vladimir Putin's happy endorsement of the Hamas victory, something that does not

quite fit the resume of a former KGB man who has pulverized thousands of Islamic fundamentalists into dust in Chechnya. Then again, looked at in a broader perspective, one begins to see the logic behind this move given Putin's persistence over Russian membership in the Islamic Conference Organization and his more recent pro-Islamic comments on the Danish cartoon affair.[6] There is also the matter of Akram Khuzam, an Arab journalist who shot to fame as Al-Jazeera's Moscow correspondent, now heading the Arab service for *Russia Today* television. Prior to all this, of course, there is Putin's position on Iran and its nuclear program, trying to compensate for the strides made by the United States in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia through a strategic realignment centering round China and Muslim states in the Eurasian arena.

According to Linda S. Heard, the " Hamas invite was an indication that Russia wants to show goodwill toward Arabs and Muslims as is its stance over Iran's nuclear enrichment program." She agreed with me that a "new low-level cold war" was "in the offing" and that propaganda tools may very well be utilized. She couldn't comment on Khuzam – it's too early to say – but Russia does definitely seem to be "wooing parts of the Arab world," with a "new detente between Egypt and Russia" developing recently.[7] Russia has many professional Arabists left over from the Cold War and a large domestic Muslim population it can deploy in any propaganda war for the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims. If a country as tiny as Qatar can give the United States hell and foil its information war strategies in Afghanistan and Iraq through Al-Jazeera, one can imagine the soft power weight of a more assertive Russia on the Arab and Islamic fronts.[8] Putin, moreover, in his efforts to solidify power round the presidency has consolidated his control over Russia's televised media among other key sectors.[9]

Jerusalem Syndrome

IT IS POSSIBLE, OF COURSE, that the Hamas regime – Netanyahu christened it Hamastan* – may implode internally, saving the Israelis and Americans the trouble of economic strangulation or military cornering. There are many fault lines and ticking time bombs in the Palestinian arena, such as a confrontation with Fatah and other factions and the more recalcitrant members of the security forces. One that is paramount given Hamas' fundamentalist credentials is the position of non-Muslims, a worry highlighted early on by Hanan Ashrawi, a Christian Palestinian herself. There is the general worry about the fissures that could result from the implementation of Islamic law among a secularized society. Events following the election seem to have belied these fears, though, with Christians and women included in the ranks of the new Hamas cabinet.

I wasn't surprised in the slightest because Hamas, as a Palestinian movement, doesn't suffer from the standard problems afflicting fundamentalist movements. Hamas, as Palestinians, see themselves not just as representatives of the Palestinians but as representing *Palestine*, embodying everything that it means in terms of religion – holiness to three monotheistic faiths. When former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami once described Yasser Arafat as someone who thinks he is both Richard the Lionheart and Saladin, he wasn't exaggerating. This is an occupational hazard for Palestinians, the internalization of the religious traditions of the land to the point of mania. Saladin suffered from it himself, a man known for his respect of his Christian foes and his excellent relations with the Jews who called him their savior and the new Cyrus.[10] His personal physician was Moses Maimonides and he was the first person in Muslim history to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

In fact, the only people he didn't get along with were fellow Muslims, whether the Shiite Fatimids in Egypt he ousted or the Shiite Hassassins in Syria he besieged or Sufi

dervishes of Sahravardi's variety he executed.[11] This religious factor, then, will guard Hamas against tensions with the other non-Muslim groups but could, paradoxically, create problems with fellow Islamist groups, such as Jihad which has refused to join the government and is being punished by the Israelis, no doubt in an effort to drive a wedge between the Palestinian factions in the new post-election context.

That is my only worry, on the domestic front, but any burgeoning relationship between a Hamas-run PA and Iran may help alleviate this. Tehran, as a major financier of all the factions, could play the role of mediator on the local front, much like Egypt but in a radicalizing direction. Jihad is ideologically closer to Shiite Iran. In fact, Hamas itself could play a mediator of a certain kind in the Iranian sphere of influence, namely, Iraq, mending bridges between Sunnis and Shiites. The threat of a sectarian civil war à la Lebanon is quite eminent in Iraq and the example of a region-wide popular Sunni organization – Hamas – supported by a the focus of Shiite power in the region – Iran – could quell Iraqi paranoia in the Sunni triangle of the "Iranian-Shiites-are-out-to-get-us," variety. I made this suggestion to Harvard's Professor Roy P. Mottahedeh, an Iranian Shiite himself, during a seminar lecture of his** and he endorsed it as a viable possibility. In the end, the only remaining danger facing the Hamas victory would be a too close relationship between Iran and the PA, something the Israelis and Americans could exploit to force a confrontation, let alone a relationship that also involves U.S.-occupied Iraq. And we all know what the consequences of that would be. An end to the new politics I want to write about!

Footnotes

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academic contributions.

*Gerarld Kaufman, "A Triumph for Sharon," *Guardian*, January 28, 2006.

** The lecture was entitled "The Shi'a of Iraq" and took place on March 21, 2006, at the American University in Cairo.

1. According to Michel Chossudovsky, modifications taking place in America's nuclear doctrine are giving increasing leeway for the usage of tactical nuclear weapons in conventional conflicts, with plans in this regard already drawn up for Iran. (Please see "Is the Bush Administration Planning a Nuclear Holocaust?" *Global Research*, 22 February 2006.)

2. There is talk of acid being thrown in the faces of girls. But to be evenhanded, the late Sheikh Ahmed Yassin said on Al-Jazeera that such acts were carried out, in the early days that the movement was establishing itself, by other competing Islamic groups. Hamas exerted its influence to put a stop to this with only individual figures who advocate such methods remaining. Please see the "History Witness" website of Ahmed Mansour (on www.aljazeera.net) the journalist who conducted the interview in a documentary series about Sheikh Yassin.

3. Soft power, in contrast to hard power which is measured in terms of economic and military might, does not refer to tangible assets but the ideological and cultural appeal of a country. (Please see Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The Changing Nature of World Power," *Political Science Quarterly*, 105 (2), Summer 1990, 177-192, for an introduction to the concept). Soft power can be implicit, the collective weight of a nation's informational output, or deployed explicitly through the instruments of public diplomacy.

4. I say this as a Muslim and Palestinian Arab who has been

busy chronicling and deconstructing 'Orientalism' for quite some time now. There is a war against Muslims and their beliefs, but not for any particularly religious reason. It just so happens that Islam has the irritating tendency of getting in the way of post-Cold War imperial projects, so friction is interpreted in religious terms, by both sides.

5. The Al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military wing, is named after this Syrian Islamist freedom fighter who came to Palestine. Hassan Al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, originally set up the secret military branch of his movement on request of Al- Husayni, for military operations in Palestine against Zionist colonists.

6. Putin said that he condemned "the caricatures, which widen the gulf between faiths, which provoke and offend the feelings of the faithful." He added that "you should reflect 100 times before publishing or drawing something" and that "if a state cannot prevent the publication of things like this, it should at least apologize for them . . . When we condemn child pornography, we don't hide behind freedom of expression" (Dmitry Babich, "Russia's Spectrum of Response," *Russia Profile*, February 8, 2006).

7. Personal email to the author from Linda S. Heard, "Re: Hamas victory and Russian response," March 6, 2006.

8. For an account of the wide-ranging problems facing American soft power appeal in the post-September 11th world, please see Emad El-Din Aysha, "The Limits and Contradictions of 'Americanization,'" *Socialist Register*, Vol. 40, 2004, 247-262, and "September 11 and the Middle East Failure of US 'Soft Power,'" *International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 193-210.

9. If Putin's activities in the oil sector are any indicator, the point of such growing state control is to plug the holes in the power structure of what's left of the Soviet Union

while giving Putin direct access to the day-to-day operations of such crucial sectors. According to Chatham House researchers Glada Lahn and Keun-Wook Paik, there are early indicators that the Russian government plans to create one huge state-controlled oil conglomerate by 2008, just before the next Russian presidential election, with Mr. Putin as its CEO. (Please see "Russia's Oil and Gas Exports to North-East Asia," REPORT for Sustainable Development Programme, Chatham House, April 2005). Such moves shed light on the standoff with OAO Yukos's CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, reportedly the wealthiest man in Russia. Khodorkovsky was both an oil tycoon and, prior to his incarceration, a serious presidential candidate. He's currently serving an eight-year sentence on corruption charges and, to add insult to injury, had his assets frozen and has been put in solitary confinement for egregious tea drinking.

10. John Rose, *The Myths of Zionism* (London, Pluto Books, 2004), 69.

11. Please see David Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1992).