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December 11, 2005

HAMAS AT A CROSSROADS?

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The terrorist attack in Netanya in the first week of December is but the latest in a string of suicide bombings carried out by Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) after the declaration of *tahidia* (temporary lull in violence) by mainstream Palestinian organizations. And it demonstrates, once again, that neutralization of the PIJ, which sees in terrorism the only course to follow, is a shared objective of Israel and the Palestinians.

Islamic Jihad is concerned about the very real possibility that it will find itself alone in its campaign of terror against Israel. In light of the impending elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, it fears an agreement between Fatah and Hamas, PIJ's partner in terror for over a decade, to endorse the political process as the main channel for managing the conflict with Israel. This would constitute a dramatic change from the situation that prevailed during much of the decade following the Oslo Agreement on 1993, when both Islamic Jihad and Hamas were marginal elements in Palestinian society and had to operate underground and in defiance of majority Palestinian opinion, which preferred to seek independence through political means.

True, the violence that erupted in late September 2000 sucked in all other Palestinian

organizations, including the security agencies of the Palestinian Authority. But over the past year, the paths of Hamas and PIJ have diverged as the former has begun to experiment with changes in its posture both in Palestinian politics and with respect to Israel. These changes might stem from Hamas' growing popularity, which holds out the prospect of a more central role for it in Palestinian politics; they may result from an appreciation of the hardships imposed on the Palestinian public by the "armed struggle," or they may be the consequence of the heavy blows inflicted by Israel on the Hamas leadership and infrastructure. But whatever the reason, the result has been remarkable. Hamas was a senior partner in the Palestinian decision to adopt the *tahidia* unilaterally, and apart from a few deviations – inevitably rationalized as responses to Israeli policy – it has maintained the lull even more assiduously than have its partners in Fatah. After the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the northern West Bank, Hamas played a prominent part in the victory parades while claiming to have led the resistance that drove Israel out, obviously in the hope of translating that claim into greater political power. But during one of those armed parades, there was an explosion that killed about twenty people. To deflect public criticism of its behavior, the organization's spokesmen rushed to

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

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blame Israel – although everyone knew that it was Hamas' fault – and then "retaliated" with rocket attacks on Israeli towns. But in the post-disengagement environment, Israel felt free to respond more harshly than before and inflicted major damage on Hamas personnel and infrastructure. And in response to the stinging criticism of its actions by both the PA and the public in Gaza, Hamas felt obliged to recalibrate its posture and reaffirmed its commitment to the *tahidia* – with the predictable reservations and exceptions (including the kidnapping and murder of an Israeli civilian shortly thereafter).

Hamas is investing considerable resources in the parliamentary elections planned for January 2006. Its leaders expect that the elections will formalize a transformation in Palestinian political life and that they will become a senior partner in the management of public affairs after four decades of domination by a single movement and a single man. Of course, approval of the *tahidia* and participation in the elections do not necessarily guarantee that Hamas has abandoned the path of armed struggle or repealed those parts of its Covenant that call for the elimination of Israel. Proof of that can be found in interviews by Mahmoud az-Zahar, in which he reaffirms traditional Hamas positions. Nevertheless, even az-Zahar did not rule out the possibility that the organization might eventually moderate its policy and amend its Covenant in light of changing realities, although he did indicate his preference that such changes be left to future generations.

Israel's dilemmas with respect to Hamas are clear. On the one hand, it cannot confer legitimacy on an organization still bent on destroying Israel and killing its citizens. At the same time, Israel has an interest in encouraging Hamas to embrace politics as the sole means of prosecuting its conflict with Israel. A policy that views all Palestinians as terrorists would not achieve this aim; a policy that distinguishes

between those whose only resort is to terrorism and those who see it as but one means among many might be capable of inducing the latter to abandon terrorism completely.

Historical experience suggests that the entry of terrorist organizations into political processes and parliamentary competition has a moderating effect on their behavior. In certain circumstances, it has even prompted them to abandon terrorism as the primary mode of action and replace it with political activism. Israel's stance with respect to Hamas participation in Palestinian parliamentary elections has oscillated between categorical rejection, backed up by indirect intervention to hinder it (by means of arrests of Hamas candidates), and growing acknowledgement by senior personalities that Israel ultimately cannot prevent Hamas from taking part. The latter position has also been expressed by the American spokesmen.

The willingness of some international actors to confer on Hamas the status of legitimate political movement and remove the stigma that comes from being included in American and European lists of terrorist organizations may be premature. After all, Hamas has not yet proven its commitment to a strategic and enduring change in its approach to the use of terror. Although it undoubtedly covets international legitimacy and rehabilitation, it still seems to want the best of both worlds: to gain international recognition as a legitimate political movement while also preserving the option of using the most extreme forms of violence to impose its maximalist demands on Israel. European-American coordination and cooperation in forcing Hamas to choose between those two worlds may also help encourage it to abandon violence altogether and embrace the path of politics as an alternative strategy.

KEYWORD: Palestinians