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Hamas, Unwritten Chapters, by Azzam Tamimi, Hurst

Hamas, A Beginner's Guide, by Khaled Hroub, Pluto

The American and European response of cutting aid to the Palestinians when Hamas won 74 seats to Fatah's 45 in the January 2006 elections for the Palestinian legislative council, was profoundly anti-democratic, and illustrated the deep misunderstanding of the West about Hamas - its capacity and its standing.

The idea was, presumably, that the Hamas government would collapse under the Western pressure, and that there would be a backlash against them from a desperate population, which would then elect a new government ready for more compromises with Israel and the US. With Israel also withholding about \$600 million of tax revenues, it is not surprising that the UN is warning of a grave economic crisis, with two thirds of the Palestinian population below the poverty line.

Azzam Timimi's Unwritten Chapters is an excellent history and analysis of Hamas which puts into perspective how this is just the latest very serious crisis the organization has had to surmount from both internal Palestinian and regional policy upheavals in the last 40 years. If Western policy makers had read this book perhaps they would have taken a different attitude and not sought the current confrontation.

The story is dramatic, and Tamimi tells it well. The book is deeply researched, with 34 pages of footnotes which allow the reader to trace the many interviews Tamimi has done with all the key players in Hamas who clearly gave him their trust. It gives access for a non-Arabic reader to a wealth of fascinating detail not available in English before.

In these pages the organization comes to life. The book traces the years of formation through education and social work, in Egypt and inside Palestine, against the background of failing Arab nationalism; then the setting up of a prosperous network from Kuwait; the slow move towards armed struggle; the waves of mass arrests of Hamas members in 1988, '90, '91 and '92 inside Palestine; the good years for the leadership in Jordan when King Hussein had a warm and pragmatic relation with the organization (and saved its leader Khaled Mish'al from death by poison at the hands of Mossad and engineered the release of Sheik Yassin); followed by the souring of relations after the US-led Wye River meeting in 1998 between Yasser Arafat and Binyamin Netanyahu, and the ratcheting up of US pressure on the Jordanian government as the King became iller, which finally resulted in Hamas' expulsion.

Tamimi's account of Sheik Yassin's 1998 four month tour of the Islamic world and the immense prestige of the slight figure in his wheelchair is just one part of the book which gives an insight no Western media has ever conveyed. "Speaking privately, where their words would not be reported to the US administration, most Arab and Muslim leaders, though they could do little, would express sentiments of the utmost respect for Hamas." He goes on to write of Hamas leaders' reputation for "asceticism, altruism, dedication and honesty". Much has been written elsewhere of the contrast with Fatah's reputation for corruption. But for Tamimi the primary reason for Hamas' success at the polls in 2006 was "Hamas's fidelity to the Palestinian dream."

Both Tamimi and Hroub write of the out of date Hamas Charter as a false image of a matured organisation. Tamimi includes as appendices several articles written recently by Hamas leaders which spell out their current political positions.

Hroub's book is a very different style, with much less research and less substance. It is written in a simple question and answer format which makes it very accessible to the most casual reader.

Together these two Palestinian academics and journalists offer a new view of Hamas past and present, and its collective leadership, which is essential to understanding the current dynamics of resistance to occupation in Gaza and the West Bank.

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