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The Political Implications of the Hamas Electoral Victory from the Islamist Perspective

By Azzam Tamimi

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Précis: The Hamas election victory in January of 2006 sent shockwaves through the Arab world -- and through Islamists with varying convictions. The debate among Islamists over whether Hamas should have participated in the elections has been intense. But Hamas's willingness to maintain its principled non-acceptance of the Quartet conditions has dampened Islamist criticism of the movement and bolstered the movement's argument that participation does not entail compromise.

When the official results of the legislative elections held in Palestine on 25 January 2006 were announced, shockwaves travelled at lightening speed stunning observers around the world and sending Islamists of various shades and convictions celebrating. Pre-election opinion polls had predicted that Fatah was going to win the elections followed by Hamas -- which was expected to poll a sizable opposition bloc inside the Palestinian Legislative Council. One of these polls, conducted by the *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research* in early December 2005, showed that Fatah enjoyed 50 percent of the support of the public while Hamas enjoyed no more than 32 percent. A poll conducted from 29 to 31 December 2005, by the same institutions, claimed that Fatah was likely to win 43 percent of the vote, leaving Hamas with 25 percent of the seats. A third poll, conducted by the *Palestinian Public Opinion Polls* (on 5 and 6 January 2006), narrowed the gap between Fatah and Hamas -- giving the former an 39.3 percent victory and the latter 31.3 percent of the vote. An exit poll on election day indicated that Fatah was winning more seats than Hamas. According to the *Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research*, Fatah was heading toward a 42 percent gain while Hamas was likely to achieve 35 percent. Likewise, a *Birzeit* University poll gave Fatah 46.4 percent of the vote and Hamas 39.5 percent of the vote. But the polls were wrong: Hamas won 74 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council while Fatah won 45 seats.

Those disappointed by such an unwelcome result insisted that voters chose Hamas in order to punish Fatah. This may indeed be true. Undoubtedly some voters were exercising their franchise by protesting against the failure of the peace process or against the rampant corruption within Fatah. But Hamas's electoral victory may, in fact, be attributed to a number of factors and the reason voters chose them over Fatah were varied. Some voters, surely, rewarded Hamas for what they believed

was loyalty to the Palestinian cause. Hamas has always insisted that it would never recognize Israel's right to exist on the land of the Palestinians. In contrast, the Fatah-dominated PLO decided in 1988 to recognize Israel's right to exist in exchange for being recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. This has been seen by many Palestinians as a betrayal of their struggle to return to the homes and the lands from which they were uprooted when Israel was created in 1948. Additionally, since its founding, Hamas had proved to be a credible alternative national liberation movement that was prepared to lead the resistance against occupation and was willing to bear the consequences.

Another factor that may have contributed to the success of Hamas is the record set by the movement and its precursor -- the Muslim Brotherhood -- in providing badly needed social, educational and medical services through NGOs and charities established in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since the early seventies -- just a few years following Israel's occupation of these territories in June 1967. Additionally, throughout the past four decades since the 1967 war Palestinian society has been undergoing gradual, yet profound, Islamisation -- rendering Hamas more amenable than the 'secular' or 'westernized' Fatah.

I. - Islamist Attitudes on Democracy

In as much as the victory of Hamas was disappointing for the supporters of Fatah, both locally and internationally (and terrifying for regimes in the region that had been suppressing their own Islamists), Islamic circles around the world received the news of the election success with immense delight. This, for many Islamists, was further proof that once the people in the Muslim world are given the freedom to choose, it is Islamists whom the masses are more likely to entrust with the responsibility of running their affairs. However, Islamists and Islamic movements, most of whom rejoiced at the Hamas win, do not all agree that elections, or democracy, provides a credible way forward. Some Islamists oppose democracy for ideological reasons, believing it incompatible with Islam, while others believe it to be a futile exercise: the only democracy allowed to work in Muslim lands, they contend, is the one that is guaranteed to install Western clients into office. It did not take the sceptics long to feel vindicated. There is no better proof of what they claim than the Palestinian experience that saw the Palestinian people getting punished for voting for Hamas with a strict regime of sanctions. They point also to the Algerian experience of the late 1980s and early 1990s -- which saw the Algerian army, with the support of France, intervene and cancel the voting process. The consequence was a civil war that cost the lives of more than one hundred thousand Algerians.

When it comes to power and authority, several trends are identifiable within the phenomenon of Islamic activism or what has also been termed the "Islamic

resurgence.” One of the major issues dividing contemporary Islamic movements is the position toward democracy and participation in the political process conducted by a regime that is not strictly Islamic. There are Islamic groups that accept the status quo and recognize the legitimacy of the existing political order. They do not see the necessity, let alone the legitimacy, of rising against regimes or even of seeking their reform. This model is represented by some of the *Salafi* groups that recognize the legitimacy of the Saudi regime. ‘*Salafi*’ is the name or description taken by (or given to) certain Islamic trends that claim to draw on the Qur’an and the Sunnah (the way of the Prophet) as the primary sources for guidance in life and religious rituals. Although *salafism* has, throughout its different phases, remained a movement for reform and renewal, some of its manifestations (particularly those attributed to Wahhabism), have opted to defend and maintain the status quo. This group has no political ambition and focuses mainly on matters of creed and morality -- such as strict monotheism, divine attributes, purifying Islam from accretions, anti-Sufism and developing the moral integrity of the individual.

Tablighi Jama’at is another model of a non-political Islamic trend. This global movement, which has millions of followers all over the Muslim world and in many parts of the West, originated in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent. Now one of the most important grass-roots Islamic movements in the contemporary Muslim World, it was founded in 1926 by the Sufi scholar Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944). Members are taught the fundamentals of Islam and how to perform its rituals, and are sent on missions to recruit others. *Tablighi Jama’at* is strictly apolitical; not only is it disinterested in politics but it discourages, or even bans, its followers from involvement in political activities. Members of this group believe that eventually, as a result of the process of reforming the individual and by means of a spiritual revival through example and through education, divine intervention may replace current bad rulers with better ones who will implement Islam.

II. - Hamas’s Position on Democracy

Hamas’s position on democracy and power-sharing in a non-Islamic regime is consistent with the *Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn* (Muslim Brotherhood) school of thought to which Hamas belongs. Affiliates of this school generally accept that democracy, as a system aimed at guaranteeing good governance, is compatible with Islam.¹ The trend to which Hamas belongs is that represented by the *Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn* model. The Ikhwan was originally Egyptian, but over the past seventy years has grown into a global movement. The mother organization

¹ For a detailed study of the development of this school of thought see Chapter Three entitled “The Question of Democracy” in Azzam Tamimi, Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat Within Islamism, New York: OUP, 2001.

was founded by Hassan Al-Banna (1906-1949) in the Egyptian town of Al-Isma'iliyah in 1928. Combining elements of spirituality acquired from his association with the Hasafiyah Sufi order with the pristine monotheistic teachings of Islam learned inside the Salafi school of Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935) -- a disciple and close associate of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) -- Al-Banna's project had great popular appeal. Soon after its birth, the Al-Ikhwan movement grew rapidly within Egypt and beyond. Inside Egypt, it had four branches in 1929, fifteen in 1932, 300 by 1938 and more than 2000 in 1948. By 1945, it had half-a-million active members in Egypt alone. Between 1946 and 1948, Al-Ikhwan branches were opened in Palestine, Sudan, Iraq and Syria.

Al-Banna's genius was manifest in his ability to take to the masses the concerns of the intellectuals of his time and transform into a grassroots movement the elitist projects of the reformists that preceded him. He did not work from mosques, for those who frequented the mosques were not his target. Nor did he work from cultural clubs or other elite meeting places. His field of activity was the café shops and popular meeting places where he reiterated in simpler more direct terms the calls for change made by reformers of the 19th century. Al-Banna's priority was to alert the people of Egypt to the importance of unity and cohesion. His movement's long-term goals were: first, to free the Islamic homeland from all foreign authority and second, to establish an Islamic state within this Islamic homeland. But neither objective could be achieved without first attending to the more immediate needs of society. His project was, above all, an endeavour to "rehabilitate" the Ummah. This rehabilitation would start with the individual, then move to the family and end with society as a whole through a process of gradual reform.

These two goals have been pursued, using the same methodology of gradual reform, by Al-Ikhwan offshoots across the Arab region -- including in Palestine, where the Palestinian Ikhwan took root immediately after the end of the Second World War. Not only in Egypt, where the movement was born, but worldwide, the Ikhwan are today at the forefront of the struggle for democracy.

Notwithstanding the official position adopted by the global Ikhwan movement, it is not unusual to hear members of the Muslim Brotherhood, including some prominent thinkers, voicing reservations about democracy, though usually for purely practical or technical reasons. It is not unusual to hear such figures express opposition to democracy as a whole or to the idea of participating in a non-Islamic system of governance.² Nor is it unusual to hear voices from within this school of thought make a distinction between participating in parliamentary elections, which they see nothing wrong with, and forming or sharing a government. Nevertheless, what distinguishes the Al-Ikhwan from other groups is that, despite this plurality of opinion and the existence of a wide margin for difference within

² Opposition to democracy within Islamic circles is discussed in Chapter Seven entitled "The Islamist Obstacles to Democracy" in footnote 1 above.

their house, once a decision to take part in the political process is adopted by the leadership, the group's members generally comply with the decision and act on it. Nine years had passed since the last Palestinian presidential and legislative elections were held when, on 9 January 2005, the Palestinians were summoned once more to the polls to elect a new president.³ Hamas, who deemed the presidential election a Fatah-exclusive affair that was aimed at installing Mahmoud Abbas as a successor to Yasser Arafat, ran no candidate in opposition to him, but refused to boycott the election. Perhaps had Fatah's imprisoned leader Marwan Barghouti been allowed to run Hamas might have supported him.⁴ For months, Hamas had already been deliberating within its own ranks its political strategy for the post-Arafat era. One of the movement's priorities was to decide whether or not to participate in the legislative elections Mahmud Abbas had promised to call for in the summer of 2005. The movement had already taken part in the first municipal elections to be held in the territories since 1967 and had done quite well.⁵ Encouraged by that success and confident that they could easily win a comfortable majority in the legislative elections, Hamas members in the Gaza Strip were the most enthusiastic about participating in the national polling. In contrast, there was a shortage of enthusiasm among Hamas members in the West Bank, especially among those in the city of Hebron, who opposed participation in the elections.⁶ Their expressed concern was over the possibility that the public might perceive the decision to participate as a sign of Hamas's hypocrisy -- proof of a double-standard. After all, in 1996, Hamas refused to take part in any Palestinian election because the frame of reference for those elections

³ Yassir Arafat was elected president of the Palestinian Authority on 20 January 1996. With only one other candidate standing against him, a lady-charity organizer by the name of Samiha Khalil, he won an 88.2 percent majority. His Fatah movement secured 51 out of the 88 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council. Hamas and a number of other movements boycotted the elections.

⁴ The younger generation within Fatah wanted to nominate Marwan Barghouti, a hero of the second Intifada who had been jailed for life by Israel. Through a combination of chastisement and enticement, enormous pressure was brought to bear on Barghouti to persuade him not to spoil things for his Fatah organization by standing in the election against Abbas. Barghouti might have had more support within the organization than Abbas had Israel not insisted he would never be released even if elected to the presidency. Some influential figures within Fatah started warning against the potential threat of a split within the movement that would only serve its rival, Hamas, and bolster its position. It was these concerns that convinced the feuding tribes of Fatah to put on hold their infighting and rally behind one man, Abbas. Barghouti agreed to withdraw his nomination after successive Fatah visitors to his prison cell persuaded him that the organization could lose U.S. and European political and financial support should someone other than Abbas win the election.

⁵ The first round of the first stage of municipal elections took place on 23 December 2004; it covered Jericho and twenty five villages across the West Bank. Fatah won the majority of seats in seventeen municipal councils (135 seats in total) while Hamas won the majority of the seats in nine councils (75 seats in total). The PFLP came in third place. Hamas won seven out of a total of ten councils (78 out of 118 seats) in the second round of municipal elections that were held in Gaza on 27 January 2005. Fatah won no more than Fatah thirty seats. The PFLP secured one seat while the nine remaining seats went to independent candidates.

⁶ Hebron is a known stronghold of *Hizb Al-Tahrir* (HT). It is likely that Hamas in Hebron was anxious that HT's vehement opposition to democracy might have had a negative impact on enthusiasm of the city religious community to participation in the elections.

was the Oslo peace process, which the movement judged as illegitimate. Mixed feelings were expressed by Hamas members inside Israeli prisons, whereas Hamas members abroad were cautiously supportive of participation. The outcome of all these deliberations was submitted to the highest authority in Hamas, *Al-Majlis Al-Istishari* (the Shura Council), which made the decision that Hamas should participate.

According to Izzat Al-Rishiq, Hamas Political Bureau member and head of its election committee, the decision to participate was reached following extensive deliberations and thorough consultations. All of the movement's leading institutions and organs both inside and outside Palestine, including Hamas prisoners detained by Israel, were consulted. It was agreed that participation should in no way prejudice the movement's commitment to safeguard the Palestinian people's "legitimate rights and protect the program of resistance as a strategic option until the occupation comes to an end."⁷ Izzat Al-Rishiq added that the decision was consistent with the popular sentiment and "in fulfilment of our people's desire to see all Palestinian factions participate in the political process." The movement's leadership concluded that in view of significant changes, mainly brought about by the second intifada, the Oslo era was over and therefore the legislative elections to be held in January of 2006 were likely to be free from any manipulation or constraints. It was explained then that the movement was discouraged from taking part in the 1996 elections because of such constraints and because of Fatah's monopoly over the political process. Al-Rishiq further elaborated: "Our boycott then was not ideological; it had nothing to do with whether taking part was *halal* (permissible) or *haram* (forbidden); it had only to do with our own assessment of what was in the interest of our cause and our people and what was not. We knew the Oslo Accords were doomed and it was only a matter of time before peace making between the PNA and Israel reached a dead end and collapsed. We decided to stay away because we did not wish to support the unjust settlement in anyway; our participation then would have bestowed legitimacy on what was in our opinion illegitimate."⁸

In other words, Hamas's decision to participate in the January 2006 legislative elections was purely pragmatic. Similarly, its decision to boycott the January 1996 presidential and legislative elections and the January 2005 presidential elections was based on the movement's conviction that those elections were conducted in circumstances that did not guarantee fairness.

Several factors contributed to boosting Hamas's confidence that this time participating in the political process was only likely to reap it dividends. The failure of peacemaking with the Israelis and its enormous cost to the Palestinians topped the list, followed by the disappearance of Yassir Arafat from the political scene. Israel unwittingly lent Hamas a helping hand by withdrawing from the

⁷ Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas Unwritten Chapters*, London: Hurst & Company, 2007; pp. 210-1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Gaza Strip. Many Palestinians had, by then, reached the conclusion that it was the resistance, primarily by Hamas and to a lesser extent by the other factions, that had forced the Israelis out of Gaza. Finally, Hamas benefited from the continuing disarray within the Fatah movement, as well as from the disillusionment of the public with the PNA because of corruption and because of its failure to deliver many of the promises associated with the peace process. In view of these dramatic and rapid changes in the Palestinian scene, Hamas seemed to have no choice but to take up the challenge of proposing itself as an alternative to Fatah's failed project.

Over the past few years, Hamas has proved capable of accurately gauging the public mood in Palestine as well as among Diaspora Palestinians. Palestinian public opinion seemed overwhelmingly disposed to seizing the opportunity of a political process conducted in conditions that were most favourable to Hamas. Nevertheless, Hamas senior officials and spokespersons inside as well as outside Palestine soon found themselves on the defensive. Critics needed to be reminded that Hamas was not just a resistance movement, but a project for reforming Palestinian society and attending to the essential needs of the public in various fields. Leading figures within the movement were under pressure to provide explanations or come up with justifications for agreeing to join the political process despite having resisted invitations to do so for the previous ten years. Dr. Muhammad Ghazal, member of Hamas political leadership in the West Bank, convened a press conference on 17 April 2005 in the city of Nablus to announce the decision and satisfy the curiosity of observers as to why the movement, which had pointedly boycotted previous elections, had now decided to participate. He explained that the movement's decision to participate in the elections had followed extensive deliberations and consultations that encompassed the various institutions of the movement and its leadership councils inside and outside Palestine -- including the movement's captives in Israeli detention centres. He went on to say that Hamas's objective was to reinforce the movement's approach in serving the Palestinian people in all fields, caring for and protecting the people's interests, rights and gains, contributing to building the institutions of Palestinian society on sound foundations, remedying all aspects of corruption and malfunction and accomplishing comprehensive national reform.

Apparently the need to justify the decision to take part in the elections emanated from concern that there might not have been a clear understanding of the Hamas decision in Islamic circles outside the movement. Emphasizing the changes that had occurred over the past few years was one way of appealing to the Islamists to appreciate the movement's change of policy. Ghazal affirmed in his press conference that the participation decision was in response to public demand and to people's need to see all forces and factions engage in the political process -- a decision that took into consideration the changes effected by the resistance, by the intifada and by the sacrifices made by the Palestinian people over the past years. It was necessary too to emphasize that participating in the political process was not going to compromise the programme of resistance or concede Palestinian

rights. “The Al-Aqsa intifada has surpassed the Oslo Accords,” Ghazal said. “New political realities are today in place. We emanate in our decision from the post-intifada reality which is characterized by an overwhelming popular support for the resistance.”⁹

Ghazal further clarified that Hamas found no contradiction between being present inside the legislative council and adhering to the option of resistance. “Being inside the Legislative Council does not necessarily mean taking part in the government,” he said. One may deduce from his remarks that at the time the movement had not yet settled the prospect of being present within the government. When asked whether there was opposition within Hamas to the participation decision, Ghazal said that any issue discussed within the institutions of the movement may have supporters and opponents. “This is what happened when the issue was discussed at the time of the 1996 elections. However, when a final decision is reached through the process of shura, all members abide by it.”¹⁰ As the date of the election approached, Hamas’s top leaders came under further pressure to reassure the Islamic public opinion that they were heading in the right direction. Anti-democracy movements such as *Al-Qaeda* and *Hizb Al-Tahrir* intensified their criticism, accusing Hamas of Machiavellianism and even of selling out and of betraying the Palestinian cause. In a bid to counter these attacks on the movement, Sa’id Siyam, a member of Hamas political leadership in the Gaza Strip, gave a detailed interview to the Jordanian weekly newspaper Assabeel to refute the claim that Hamas had been pursuing partisan interests rather than Islamic ones:

We say to those who refer to Hamas’s decision to boycott the 1996 elections to claim that Hamas allows and forbids [things] in order to serve personal or partisan interests that this is not true. We neither allow nor forbid in order to serve our own interests. We pursue a legitimate Shari’ah-based policy aimed at serving the national interest as assessed by the movement. In 1996, the movement reckoned that participating in the election would not have been in the interest of the Palestinian people. It was evident then that all matters passed from underneath the Oslo mantle. The days that followed proved that staying out of the Legislative Council was of great benefit to our people and our movement. However, ten hollow years on and in the aftermath of the considerable suffering endured by the Palestinian people and the end of what is known as Oslo, the movement decided to participate. In fact, the statement we issued in 1996 (declaring the decision not to participate) did not refer to prohibiting or permitting, but to a boycott based on a certain political vision. So, the issue here is not one of a religious edict to prohibit or permit. What determines whether we participate or not is the

⁹ Muhammad Ghazal, Press Conference at Salim Affandi Hall in Nablus on 17 April 2005 as reported by the Arabic website of the Palestine Information Centre. The second intifada erupted in response to Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon’s intrusion into the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem on 28 September 2000.

¹⁰ Ibid. Shura is the process by which members of a community or movement are consulted prior to taking a decision. The decision is usually an expression of the wish of the majority or the outcome of consensus.

assessment of the best interest (of the nation) in accordance with a Shari'ah-based vision.”¹¹

The end of Oslo and its irrelevance was also stressed by Dr. Ahmad Bahar in his own defence of the movement's decision to participate in the election. In an article posted on the Arabic website of the *Palestine Information Centre*, he wrote: “It is certain that following the defeat of the enemy and the victory of the resistance, the Oslo agreement has become irrelevant and so have all the agreements that came after it such as those of ‘Tenet’, ‘Mitchell’ and the Road Map; they have all been crushed by Sharon's tanks. On the other hand the resistance has changed the political map of the Palestinian people. Resistance has won over (peace) negotiating. The campus is now pointing in the direction of liberating Jerusalem just as Gaza was liberated. This conviction is widespread even among those who have supported and defended negotiating. Many have now become convinced that the Israelis understand nothing but the language of force. The only peace they seek is that which may preserve their security, finish off the resistance and incur more destruction on the Palestinian people in the fields of security, morality, economics and politics.”¹²

In the days immediately preceding the elections on 25 January, several statements reached the media in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip claiming to represent certain unidentified Hamas cadres criticizing the decision to participate in the election and questioning the legitimacy of the Hamas leadership. One such statement, signed by the wing of Abdullah Azzam within the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas in Palestine, insisted that the forthcoming elections were still being conducted under the Oslo mantle -- and were, therefore, illegitimate. While the authenticity of these statements could not be verified, a prominent Hamas figure in the Gaza Strip, Sheikh Ahmad Nimr, issued a religious edict forbidding any form of participation in the legislative elections. In his statement, Nimr rejected the explanations or justifications given by the Hamas leadership and emphasized that it was not true that circumstances had changed. As far as he was concerned, both the 1996 and the 2006 elections were equally based on Oslo. Undoubtedly echoing anxieties expressed more discretely by a segment of Hamas members and supporters, Nimr asked what would become of the resistance to Israeli occupation if Hamas joined the political process. Fearing that participating in the legislative elections might be the first step in the direction of the collapse of the movement as a result of its embroilment in the policy of negotiating a peaceful settlement with Israel and falling into the trap of Oslo, he asked: “Where in the movement's election manifesto can we find the legitimacy of resistance and the movement's priority of liberating Palestine?”¹³

¹¹ Sa'id Siyam, interview in *Assabeel*, 21 December 2005; Amman, Jordan.

<http://www.assabeel.info/inside/article.asp?newsid=11726&version=6068>

¹² http://www.palestine-info.com/arabic/palestoday/readers/article/bahar/2006/15_1_06.htm

¹³ London *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 18 January 2006; p. 1.

Nimr's statement, or fatwa, prompted Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri to deny that a split existed within Hamas. Abu Zuhri considered Nimr's fatwa a reflection of a personal view point. Responding to the statement signed by the wing of Abdullah Azzam, Abu Zuhri denied the existence within Hamas of any military wing other than *Izziddin Al-Qassam* -- and affirmed that the decision to participate in the elections was taken as a result of thorough consultations involving members and leaders of the movement inside and outside Palestine. He went on to accuse "certain Palestinian circles" of propagating these kinds of allegations and promised to expose the identities of the persons involved in this conspiracy.¹⁴

III. - The Al-Ikhwan's Position on Hamas's Victory

Within Islamic circles responses to the movement's decision to participate in the election were expectedly mixed. Initially, the debate was lukewarm, but it soon gained heat and intensity when, in March 2006, Hamas formed a government. The official position of *Al-Ikhwan* across the globe was one of consent and support. This is best exemplified in the opinion expressed by Ibrahim Munir, the London-based member of the *Al-Ikhwan's* International Irshad (Guidance) Bureau. In a televised debate about the issue conducted by the London-based *Alhiwar* Arabic satellite television channel, he noted: "Participating in the political process is another form of resistance. Issues of jihad, struggle and liberation cannot be settled in one generation. This is particularly so in the case of the Palestinian issue. There is no just one single approach or a single method in this regard. Hamas's participation in the political process was a natural outcome of the precipitation of events along the past decades of Palestinian activity starting from the intifada, through Madrid and the Oslo accords, the return of Abu Ammar and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority."¹⁵

Defending Hamas's decision to participate in the elections, Munir went on to say: "The public knows that Hamas has come in with a well-known programme that combines political action and providing services to the people inside the territories. The movement gained the confidence of the people on the basis of that programme which does not ignore the aspect of resistance, as is known to everyone. I believe that things have complemented each other despite the difference in political view points. I believe this has been a perfectly natural development. Eventually, Hamas had to be consistent with the will of the Palestinian people who elected it. I believe that the movement did well when it

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Alhiwar Arabic Satellite TV Channel, from the transcript of the weekly TV programme Qadaya wa Ara' (Issues and Opinions) shown on 12 May 2007. The programme was in Arabic. The translation of this segment and subsequent ones referred to or quoted in this monograph are the author's own work. The intifada referred to here is the first uprising that erupted on 8 December 1987. The Madrid peace conference was held in October 1991; the Oslo accords were signed in Washington in September 1993; and Yassir Arafat returned to Gaza in June 2004.

entered into governance too despite the numerous problems (involved) and despite the fact that the brothers in Hamas do realize that this is not a (proper) state (they are running) and that contrary to what has been depicted (the Palestinians) do not yet own the land, the sky or the air.”¹⁶

There have been a few voices from within the Muslim Brotherhood’s school of thought that disagreed with the official position of the movement as expressed by Ibrahim Munir. One of these voices has been that of Fathi Yakan, former leader of the *Al-Jama’ah Al-Islamiyyah* in Lebanon, which is the Lebanese platform of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is worth noting that Yakan’s reservations are technical, not ideological: they are not based on a religious edict, but rather on his lack of confidence in the political process. His scepticism might have been crystallized by his own parliamentary experience in Lebanon in the 1990s. He experimented with parliamentary life from 1992 to 1996, but was disappointed and had deep disagreements with the leadership of his own group. In spite of having been an advocate of power-sharing and participation in the political process, his own experience and those of other Islamic movements convinced him that both Islamic parliamentarianism and governance were futile exercises.

Yakan does, however, distinguish between parliamentary activity and taking part in government. He is less opposed to the presence of an Islamic movement in parliament than in government; in the former case the movement does not shoulder responsibilities comparable to those it does once in government. The logic here is that once in government, the Islamic movement has to shoulder the economic, political and social responsibilities of the society in a local, regional and international milieu. Apprehensive, like many fellow Islamists, about the negative impact which engaging in the political process might have on the movement, Yakan would rather spare the Islamists the repercussions of this adventure. One of these feared repercussions is the feud erupting as a result of a dispute over authority. “Experience has shown that other parties, when they come to power, develop divisions within them -- as was the case with the communists, the Ba’thists and other parties.” In the case of Palestine, he concluded, such divisions created a duality. “On one side there was the Hamas movement and on the other there was the Fatah movement, which believes that historically it has had the responsibility of governing. Eventually, the division led to the situation in which there are two governments in Palestine. This has obstructed the operation of government and has resulted in the blockade that the Palestinians are now facing.”¹⁷

Another source of anxiety expressed by Yakan is the hostility shown by the United States, the West and Israel towards Hamas in particular and Islamic movements in general. Although such a position was predictable, it meant that

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Fat-hi Yakan, transcript of his presentation at ‘The Political Implications of the Hamas Electoral Victory from Islamist, Regional and Western Perspectives’ conference; Organized by Conflicts Forum in Beirut in March 2007.

Hamas, and for that matter any other Islamic movement in the region, would not be permitted to govern if elected. Like other sceptics, Yakan sees that the background of this position has more to do with the Western view of religion than it does with politics.

Indeed, the European enlightenment was born out of a gradual process of secularization that severely restricted the role of religion in the public sphere. With varying degrees, religion in the West has been prohibited from engaging in political life. Western powers that colonized much of the Muslim lands had sought, from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, to mould Muslim societies in the shape of their own models when it came to the role that religion played in the lives of the people. It was in such a climate that secularism entered the intellectual debate in the Arab world, and from then on a new cultural model began to be quietly introduced by enthusiasts and admirers of the West, or more forcefully imposed by the colonial authorities.

The early Arab debate on secularism centred mainly on the relationship between religion and state, and on matching European successes in science, technology and governance. The decline of Islamic civilisation prompted a number of Arab intellectuals, including some already exposed to European culture and impressed by the accomplishments of Europe, to call for radical reform based on limiting the role of religion and religious institutions in the running or administration of life. Invariably, post-independence regimes in the Muslim world, and more specifically in the Arab region, inherited the determination to maintain the divide and perpetuate the separation.¹⁸

Yakan sums up the problem as follows: “Since the West and the Zionist lobby brought down the Caliphate, regardless of how weak it was or how committed to Islam it was, the Sykes-Picot arrangement -- fearing the Islamic world -- aimed to separate politics from religion and substitute nationalism in order to replace Islam. What was intended was to confine Islam to the practice of worship, religious rituals, and the administration of cemeteries.”¹⁹ Yakan is convinced, and is now joined in this conviction by an increasing number of Islamists – Ikhwan and non-Ikhwan alike -- that so long as the West is able to intervene in and influence politics in the Muslim world, it would seem highly unlikely that democracy might ever be granted the opportunity to work. This cynicism is further reinforced by the assumption that the West in general, but more specifically the United States and Israel, view the democratic success of Islamic movements, including Hamas, as an alarming development, since these movements constitute an impediment to their plans for the Middle East and pose a threat to the existence of Israel in the region.

¹⁸ For further discussion of this issue see J. Esposito & A. Tamimi (Ed), Islam and Secularism in the Middle East; London: Hurst, 2000.

¹⁹ Yakan, op. cit.

IV. - The Position of the Islamic Opponents of Democracy

Fathi Yakan's apprehensive position of opposition to Hamas's participation in the political process, which is representative of a strand of opinion within the Ikhwan school of thought, emanates from the anxiety that the experiment in political engagement might meet failure. As argued above, this is not an ideological position but a pragmatic one and stems from the fear that the Islamists may yet again be forced to fail. These Islamists have been traumatised by the Algerian democratic process of 1991, as well as by the persistence of autocratic regimes across the Arab region to prevent opposition groups, the Islamists in particular, from winning more seats in elections that have usually been strictly controlled and routinely rigged. In contrast, the Islamic ideological opposition to any Islamic participation in a power-sharing arrangement is best exemplified by the positions adopted by groups such as Al-Qaeda and *Hizb Al-Tahrir Al-Islami* (The Islamic Liberation Party - HT). These groups believe that as a matter of principle a Muslim should not participate in a power-sharing arrangement involving non-Islamists. Simply put, a Muslim, according to them, is not allowed to participate in a project whose objective is anything short of the creation of a strictly Islamic state or a Caliphate.

HT represents a trend of its own and by itself. While sharing many ideas and aspirations with other Islamic groups, it is unique in putting much on hold until the Caliphate is reinstated. In this sense, this group is messianic in character; its affiliates believe that once the Caliphate is reinstated, all will be well, Shari'ah will be implemented and Muslim lands will be free from foreign occupation. The idea of the Caliphate here parallels the notion of the Mahdi in Shi'ism, where it is believed that the coming of the Madhi will solve all problems. The way to reinstate the Caliphate, which came to an end in 1924, would be to create an intellectual elite that would in turn effect a coup using the army with the assistance of some foreign power. HT was established in Jerusalem in 1953 by Taqiy-ud-Din Al-Nabhani (1909-1977). The party declares itself to be a political party with Islam as its ideology and the revival of the Islamic Ummah as its goal. It seeks to achieve this goal by creating a single Islamic state, erected on the ruins of existing regimes. It is currently banned in most of the Arab countries, but has lately been active in several Western countries among the Muslim youth and has seen a marked growth inside the Palestine where it is not banned.

HT is vehemently opposed to democracy and to any form of power-sharing. Democracy is described in HT literature as *nizam-u-kufr* (a system of blasphemy) and is said to have been marketed in the Muslim countries by the blasphemous West. Not only is democracy said to have nothing what-so-ever to do with Islam, but it completely contradicts its code in all issues, both major and minor; it is said to contradict its source, the ideology it emanates from, the foundations it is based on and the ideas and systems it has come up with. Therefore, it is strictly *haram* for Muslims to adopt it, implement it, or call for it. In addition to stressing that democracy emanates from the unacceptable ideology of excluding religion from

public life and of awarding sovereignty to the people, HT is of the conviction that democracy eventually does not achieve what its advocates claim it would. In the West, as is the case in America and Britain (it is argued), elected members of parliament do not represent the majority of the people, but represent business interests. It would therefore be misleading, and even an act of falsification, to claim that parliaments in democratic countries represent the majority of the public. This is notwithstanding the assertion that majority rule is considered un-Islamic because it could lead, as has happened in the West, to legalizing forbidden matters such as *riba* (usury) and *liwat* (sodomy). The concept of public liberties, it is claimed, is the worst thing the democratic system has come up with; it transforms the human community into herds of animals. Examples from public life in the West, cited to prove that democracy eventually leads to a decline in morality and to exploitation of the majority by the minority, include individualism, disintegration of the family, promiscuity, homosexuality, capitalism, and exploitation.²⁰

The ideological opposition to democracy aside, *Hizb Al-Tahrir* (HT) -- which is hostile to any form of political activity other than seeking to reinstate the Caliphate -- believes that Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections as a result of a plan designed and implemented by the U.S. Administration. This plan, it is claimed, was coordinated with collaborators working for the United States within the Palestinian Authority and the Fatah movement as well as with the middlemen within the Egyptian regime. The objective of this plan, according to the HT, was for Hamas to win a majority and end up being the actual governor inside the Palestinian Authority. It is assumed that Hamas had already embroiled itself in this plot when it signed up to the Cairo accords of March 2005. By doing so, Hamas is said to have implicitly recognized Israel by virtue of agreeing to join the political process and take part in the municipal and legislative elections, which effectively means agreeing to be part of the “capitulation process that stemmed from the Oslo Accords.”²¹

A trend that has more recently been identified with Al-Qaeda is representative of what has become known as the Salafi-Jihadi groups. This is a different form of Salafism from the one discussed above; this trend endeavours to change the status quo through the use of force. Their way to bring about change is to destroy the existing political structures and replace them with Islamic ones. Prior to the emergence of the Algerian GIA in the mid-1990s and Al-Qaeda in the late 1990s, Egyptian groups such as Al-Jihad and Al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyah best represented this trend.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ A statement issued by Hizb Al-Tahrir on 2 March 2006 entitled in Arabic: “The Political Commentary: Analysis of the Hamas win in the Palestinian Elections and Commissioning it to form the Forthcoming Government.” Posted on HT Arabic website; see: <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/arabic/index.php/polycomment/single/1054/>

In a number of audio and visual messages since Hamas won the elections held in January 2006, Al-Qaeda's second man Ayman Al-Zawahiri condemned the movement and accused it of deviating from the right path. Similar charges have been expressed by HT as well. As a prelude to discussing this position, it might be useful to consider briefly the ideological opposition to democracy and power-sharing in general by Hamas's Islamist detractors.

Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who started his career as a medical doctor but soon retired from medicine to become an ideologue of the Egyptian Jihad group, opposes democracy for being *shirk-u-billah* (assigning partners with God). He understands *tawhid* (monotheism) to entail the belief that legislation is the sole prerogative of God, whereas democracy is the rule of the people for the people. Whereas in democracy the legislator is the people, in *tawhid* God is the legislator. Hence, democracy is *shirk* (idolatry) because it usurps the right of legislating from the Almighty and puts it in the hands of the people. Saying that he based his conclusions on the writings of the Indian thinker Abdulala Al-Mawdudi and the Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb, Al-Zawahiri denounces democracy as a new "religion" that defies humans by awarding them the right to legislate without being bound by a superior divine authority. His entire discourse is based on the argument that, since democracy is the recognition of the sovereignty of the people, it would have to mean the denial of God's sovereignty. Consequently, those who believe in democracy, like the post-Qutb Muslim Brotherhood (including Hamas), are compared with those who assign partners with God. It follows that the members of the people's assembly (parliament) are the idols, and those who elect them commit, by doing so, the arch-sin of *shirk*. Thus, participating in the democratic process at whatever level is *haram* (forbidden) and those who perpetrate it are apostates and infidels.²²

The first significant criticism by Ayman Al-Zawahiri of Hamas's participation in the political process in Palestine was made in his video tape that was reported by Reuters and aired by Aljazeera Arabic satellite TV Channel on 4 March 2006, several weeks before Hamas formed its first government. Al-Zawahiri's message, which also attacked the West for insulting the Prophet Muhammad through the publication of cartoons demonizing him, called on Hamas not to recognise past peace deals with Israel and to fight on with arms. Accusing the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority of betrayal, Al-Zawahiri warned that "no Palestinian has the right to give away a grain of the soil." As if hinting that Hamas was heading in the direction of compromising the cause, Al-Zawahiri went on to say: "The secularists in the Palestinian Authority have sold out Palestine for crumbs. Giving them legitimacy is against Islam."²³

²² For a detailed discussion of the position of various Islamic groups on democracy and power-sharing see Chapter Seven of Azzam Tamimi's *Rachid Ghannouchi A Democrat Within Islamism*; New York:OUP; 2001.

²³ Reported by the BBC on 5 March 2006; see: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4775222.stm and by Aljazeera on 6 March 2006; see: <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/archive/archive?ArchiveId=313627>

V. - Responding to al Qaeda

Al-Zawahiri's message did not fall on deaf ears; Hamas leaders heard his comments but immediately dismissed them. At the time when the tape was released Hamas Political Bureau chief Khalid Mish'al, was concluding an official visit to Moscow. "Hamas does not need al-Qaeda's advice," he said. "Hamas has its own vision and always acts in the interests of the Palestinian people." Another response came from Gaza, where Hamas legislator Mahmoud al-Zahar denied that Hamas had "walked into a US trap" when it participated in the Palestinian elections. He affirmed that "entering these institutions does not mean that we will be a carbon copy of other factions, something that Mr al-Zawahiri warned of. Our position is very clear in this regard."²⁴

Al-Qaeda's response soon landed at Hamas's front door. Abu Yahya Al-Libi (the Libyan), another Al-Qaeda leader, who is believed to be hiding somewhere in Afghanistan since he escaped from the U.S. detention centre at Bagram, accused Hamas of betraying God. In a video released at the end of April 2006, he said Al-Qaeda could not "keep silent" over Hamas path "which will lead to hell." As if inciting a rebellion against Hamas, Al-Libi -- who from then on released several tapes or issued statements chastising or admonishing Hamas -- went on to say: "Hamas has abandoned jihad for politics. It has betrayed its youth. Its main activity is politics. Since its decision to go down the path of politics, Hamas has begun to descend on a downhill slope. They betrayed the dreams of their young fighters and they stabbed them in the back." Dismissing Hamas's reasoning for joining the political process, he added: "All of the pretexts Hamas gives for pondering the political path do not even convince Hamas. They don't believe their own rhetoric. They themselves know they are not pursuing the true path of Islam."

Although Hamas is a Muslim Brotherhood organization, it had rarely been criticized in this way by any of the Jihadist groups. While refraining from endorsing the movement, Al-Qaeda and its adherents could not afford to be seen criticizing a Muslim organization that was putting up a resistance to Israel -- depicted, by the group, as a cancerous growth in the heart of the Muslim homeland and the colonial outpost of the archenemy of Islam and the Muslims, Western imperialism under the leadership of the United States of America. This may explain why Al-Libi in this videotape complains that "al-Qaeda leaders tried to advise Hamas about its policy and told Hamas leaders that they are not going in right direction. But Hamas has been firm in maintaining that its path is different from that of al-Qaeda." In fact that there has never been any direct communication between Hamas and Al-Qaeda, and most probably Al-Libi here means to point to Zawahiri's earlier videotaped message which Hamas leaders, as shown above, had dismissed. Evidently, Al-Libi bitterly laments that "Hamas told

²⁴ Ibid.

al-Qaeda they don't need al-Qaeda's advice." In a direct reference to Khalid Mish'al he went on to say: "Some of their most prominent leaders went as far as making public declarations during a recent visit to the atheist capital of Russia, Moscow, distancing themselves from al-Qaeda. They did so openly after the meeting with the murderous corrupt Russian leaders whose crimes are worse than those of Sharon." In reference to Putin's role in exacerbating the plight of the Chechens, with whom Muslims around the world generally sympathize, Al-Libi asks: "Is Putin and his corrupt and murderous regime more relevant to Hamas's political equation for Palestine than advice by our great leader Ayman al-Zawahiri?"

Echoing Chechen disgust at Hamas's visit to Moscow, Al-Libi accuses Hamas of "betraying the Chechnyan cause" by meeting with the Putin government.²⁵ He then asserts that Hamas is trying to promote secularism among Palestinians and therefore "Al-Qaeda cannot remain silent over this, because what Hamas is doing amounts to betraying the martyrs of the Palestinian people and God." Pledging that "al-Qaeda will stick to the path of true jihad," al-Libi appealed directly to al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas's military wing: "Where are your bombs, where is your fire, which should shine like the sun in the enemy's backyard? Your martyrs used to fight for al-Aqsa, and today you replaced the heavy sword with dialogue. Hamas is a part of the conspiracy against the Palestinians. Anyone who takes this path is bound to descend to hell because they are moving away from the true nature of their religion."²⁶

As time went by Al-Qaeda's criticism of Hamas increased in intensity as well as in frequency. Nearly a year following his first videotape criticizing Hamas, Ayman Al-Zawahiri released a new audio message, which was played by Aljazeera Arabic channel on the evening of 11 March 2007, in which he launched a scathing attack on the movement. He accused it of selling Palestine in exchange for a number of cabinet portfolios in the Palestinian government. He mourned Hamas to the Muslim Ummah (nation) saying that it had expired by "falling in the quagmire of capitulation."²⁷ This time he was particularly critical of Hamas's

²⁵ Hamas political leadership's visit to Moscow angered the Chechens the most. Movladi Udugov, one of the leaders of the Chechen resistance was quoted as saying: "We regret this decision of Hamas. Through this action, the leaders of Hamas will shake the hands of the killers of 250,000 Chechen Muslims, including 42,000 Chechen children." He added that people justifying the murder of the Chechen people could in no way be seen as friends or comrades of the Chechens." The Chechens seemed to have been particularly enraged when Khalid Mish'al, responding to a question at a press conference in Moscow about Chechnya, said that this was a Russian domestic affair and that Hamas could not interfere in it. Hamas had hitherto been, like many other Islamic movements and organizations, quite supportive of the Chechen struggle for independence even declaring close cooperation with the Chechens. See: <http://www.hri.org/news/turkey/trkpr/2006/06-03-06.trkpr.html>

²⁶ See: <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3396525,00.html>

²⁷ Reported by CNN- Arabic on 12 March 2007; see: http://arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/3/11/alqaeda.hamas/index.html

decision to form a national unity government with Fatah -- as a result of the Mecca Agreement. Lamenting that Hamas had followed in the footsteps of former Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat, he accused the Hamas leadership of “conceding most of Palestine to the Jews in exchange for keeping the premiership of the Palestinian government.”²⁸

Al-Zawahiri managed to put Hamas once more on the defensive at the time when the Mecca Agreement, followed by the formation of a national unity government, further divided opinion among the Islamists. There was hope among some that the deal might usher a new era of mutual understanding and closer cooperation between Hamas and Fatah -- and perhaps pave the way for an end to the sanctions. In this environment, Hamas responded to Al-Zawahiri -- in a statement dated 12 March 2007 -- that rejected his accusation that the movement had surrendered and reiterated its position that Palestine was Islamic endowment land and that no one could concede any part of it. Dismissing Al-Zawahiri's remarks as erroneous and opportunist, the movement insisted that it would never betray the cause, assuring Al-Zawahiri and those favouring the Palestinian cause that Hamas is still the same Hamas they had known before. The statement concludes by affirming that Hamas only joined the political process, formed a government and then agreed to the Mecca Accord for no reason other than to preserve the highest interests of the Palestinian people.²⁹

Hamas representative in Lebanon, Usamah Hamdan, commented on Al-Zawahiri's criticisms: “Hamas has not and will not compromise on Palestine or the rights of the Palestinian people.” In his rebuttal, Hamdan noted that the Mecca Agreement was supported by most of the respected leaders in the Muslim world and would not be undermined by a comment from anyone who was not aware of all the facts and political developments. He went on to say: “If anyone wishes to express reservations on the Mecca agreement, we respect that but at the same time we affirm that Hamas would never accept to be dealt with as if the movement is not rational and needs guidance from someone. Hamas has managed to withstand an unfair blockade for a year now. This blockade on Hamas could have been lifted if Hamas agreed to recognise the Zionist entity, but Hamas will never recognise Israel.”³⁰

Nothing could be more pleasing for Ayman Al-Zawahiri than the total collapse of the Palestinian national unity government and the divorce between Hamas and Fatah. In the aftermath of Hamas's take over in Gaza, Al-Zawahiri re-emerged

²⁸ Reported by Aljazeera on 11 March 2007; see: <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/E63EA439-C428-4914-9985-C51D3F2118A7.htm>

²⁹ The full Arabic text of the statement was published on the Palestine Information Centre website; see: <http://www.palestine-info.info/>

³⁰ Reported by Aljazeera on 12 March 2007; see: <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/C2710B3A-52A2-4971-AB27-B4D4DB072377.htm>

with an audiotape -- this time to hail what had happened and offer full support to Hamas (which only weeks earlier he had denounced in the strongest of terms). He found it conducive to his aims to quote Palestinian Prime Minister Isma'il Haniyyah as saying that a current within the Fatah movement had been planning a coup under the supervision of U.S. General Keith Dayton -- with the assistance of the Egyptian regime that had trained and armed five thousand of Abbas's men. Yet, Zawahiri did not miss the opportunity of blaming some Hamas leaders for adopting certain stances: such as considering the Chechen cause a domestic Russian affair or criticizing the statements made by Osama Bin Laden. He went on to call on Hamas to correct their course, because "you have to remember that attaining authority is a means toward implementing God's programme in the land."³¹ Al-Zawahiri seemed jubilant that the events of June 2007 had proven him right. He had warned Hamas that there was no point in joining the political process -- and so had many others within the fold of Islamism.

VI. - The Current Debate

The events that unfolded since Hamas took the decision to participate in the elections until the collapse of the national unity government continue to stir debate among Islamists across the world. Ideology has since then taken a back seat in this discussion, while the current debate revolves around the futility of the democratic exercise. Spokespersons for groups such as HT and Al-Qaeda sound more convincing when they talk about the futility of the political process. It should not be surprising to find that scepticism is on the rise even among those who initially supported Hamas's decision to participate and celebrated its massive win in the elections.

A prominent figure and regular commentator in the Arabic media - Cairo-based lawyer Muntasir Al-Zayyat, known in Egypt as an attorney for Islamic groups - was among the earliest to respond to Hamas's victory. He published an article entitled "Hamas's Predicament" in which he opined that following its victory, all Hamas's options were equally difficult and equally bitter.³² He reiterated the same position more than fourteen months later in a television debate about the Islamists and Hamas's electoral victory. Affirming that he, like many others, was surprised by Hamas's success in the legislative council elections, he insisted that the movement was still in a predicament: it had fallen into the trap set for it in just the same way that Arab or foreign countries set up traps for Islamic movements that agree to participate in the political process. "It is true that the Palestinian people voted for Hamas; undoubtedly it is popular. But this is part of the trap

³¹ Reported by CNN- Arabic on 25 June 2007; see: http://arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/6/25/hamas.zawahiri/index.html

³² His article, in Arabic, is dated 3 February 2006 and is posted on his own website; see: http://elzayat.com/show_artcl_117.htm

because the Palestinian people cannot in their entirety become a resistance movement.” Al-Zayyat would have preferred that “ Hamas should remain in the position of confrontation with the Zionist enemy because it is fundamentally a resistance movement.” He finds it odd that a resistance movement should opt to take charge of a symbolic authority while foreign occupation is still in place. He would have preferred that “ Hamas should have left the job of running the fragile authority to the PLO for being the proprietor of Oslo.” This is so, he went on to explain, because “ the authority was born abnormally and is entirely dependent on Israel.” He could not accept that an ideological group whose frame of reference is Islam, would agree to acquire its legitimacy from its own enemy. By agreeing to take part in the political process, Hamas, Al-Zayyat concluded, “ had entered the Oslo lobby.”³³

Another commentator from the same school of thought is Hani Al-Siba’i, who heads the London-based *Al-Maqrizi* Centre in the United Kingdom and who is known to have links with Egyptian jihadist groups. He too believes that Hamas was lured into taking part in this futile political exercise. The movement, he insists, entered the elections under the Oslo umbrella. According to him, Hamas could not withstand the pressure it suffered as a result of the liquidation of a number of its leaders and the subsequent siege imposed by the West. Alluding to Fatah, he goes on to say that Hamas should never have put its hand in the hands of the murderers who shed the blood of its leaders. While launching a scathing attack on Saudi Arabia, the broker of the Mecca Agreement, Al-Siba’i criticizes Hamas for having accepted the Saudi invitation to meet in Mecca, which in his opinion was “ the work of Prince Bandar, the American godfather.” He also believes that Egyptian intelligence played a role in the scheme to convince Hamas to join the political process after convincing it not to seek revenge for the blood of its leaders Sheikh Yassin and Abdul Aziz Rantisi. “ What has Hamas reaped?” he asks. The answer: “ It has reaped only a [bitter harvest] of concessions of principle and received nothing in return ... Here it is today recognizing, out of what is called political realism, the 1967 borders. Having succumbed to pressure, here it is now recognizing the Zionist entity.”³⁴

But Hamas has its defenders. One is Faraj Shalhub, managing editor of the Amman-based *Assabeel* weekly newspaper in Jordan, which has close links to the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. In the same televised debate, Shalhub explained that Hamas won the confidence of the Palestinian electorate and therefore had no choice but to rise to the expectations of the people who voted for it and be present in the Legislative Council -- as well as in the government. Seeking to refute the allegations made against Hamas by its critics, he begins with the charge that the elections were conducted under the umbrella of Oslo. “ We do injustice to Hamas and do injustice to the truth when we talk about its participation (in the political

³³ Al-Hiwar Arabic Satellite TV Channel, from the transcript of the weekly TV programme *Qadaya wa Ara’* (Issues and Opinions) shown on 12 May 2007.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

process) having been part of Oslo. Hamas's participation came on the basis of the Palestinian accord signed in Cairo. There was an understanding that by then Oslo was no longer in existence." He reminds his interlocutors that it was Ariel Sharon who sealed the fate of the Oslo Accords by declaring unequivocally that as far as he was concerned they did not exist and that he was not willing to commit himself to any of their articles. Shalhub found it necessary to correct the record: "Four years of the second Palestinian intifada has ushered in a new reality in which Oslo has no existence. The Cairo agreement [of March 2005] laid the foundation for a new era of political partnership aimed at conducting municipal and legislative elections and rebuilding the PLO." He asserted that Hamas's participation in the political process was actually a total demolition of Oslo, and therefore it is not right to claim that Hamas has committed to Oslo or that it accepts it as a frame of reference. Shalhub rejected the idea that Hamas was lured or trapped. In his assessment, Hamas's participation created an extremely difficult situation for the United States, which claims to be seeking a peaceful settlement for the conflict in the region. "The elections and Hamas's considerable win and its prevalence in Palestinian politics created a new reality in which it is impossible to surpass resistance movements ... Hamas had one of two choices. It either participates and exposes the defects of this ugly reality and creates a new centre of gravity, influence and effectiveness in political decision-making or it stays away while the legislative and municipal elections were held without its participation giving the opportunity to the allies of Israel and America to win."³⁵

VII. - The Current Reality

Hamas continues to govern in Gaza, while Fatah governs in the West Bank. There has been, so far, little to suggest that the sanctions imposed since the January 2006 elections have weakened the movement. Yet, the debate about the soundness of its political choices is far from over. However, since the events of June 2007, when Hamas defeated Fatah and took over in Gaza, the balance seems to have tilted in favour of those who defend Hamas's decision to participate in the political process. Their assertion -- that participating does not necessarily entail compromising -- has been vindicated. Undoubtedly, this position of Hamas's defenders, mainly found within the Ikhwan school of thought, is bolstered by the fact that Hamas has made no significant concessions, and that it has constantly refused to accept the three Quartet conditions, conditions which the international community insists should be met prior to lifting the sanctions or communicating with the movement.

³⁵ Ibid.

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