

BOOKREVIEW: HAMAS UNDER DIFFERENT SOCIAL MICROSCOPES

*The January 2006 legislative elections in Palestine changed the balance of power in the country and dealt a new hands of cards in the Arab-Israeli conflict...The new balance of power in Palestine has triggered new debates in the scholarly circles of the West...Although they approach Hamas from different perspectives, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence* by Jeroen Gunning; *Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement* by Zaki Chehab; and *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* by Khaled Hroub are considerable attempts to understand Hamas correctly. Even though these studies diverge from one another on the lenses that they use to explain Hamas, they complement each other by bringing different aspects of the movement to the foreground.*

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Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence

By Jeroen Gunning

London: Columbia University Press, 2008

Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement

By Zaki Chehab

New York: Nation Books, 2007

Hamas: Political Thought and Practice

By Khaled Hroub

Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000

The January 2006 legislative elections in Palestine changed the balance of power in the country and dealt a new hand of cards in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Receiving 42.9 percent of the votes, the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, gained the majority of seats and came to power. The West, which has been accustomed to thinking about Hamas only in regard to its armed attacks against Israel and radical Islamic discourse, did not welcome Hamas' election victory. The discontent of Western countries for the rise of Hamas led to the cutting off of Western financial aid to the Palestinians. Besides this, escalation of the tension between Hamas and Fatah in the aftermath of the legislative elections resulted in a bloody civil war, which ended with a new status quo in June 2007. Since June 2007, Hamas has been controlling Gaza, whereas its rival Fatah has been keeping the West Bank under its control.

The new balance of power in Palestine has triggered new debates in the scholarly circles of the West. The focal point of discussions on Hamas has moved away from Israeli security and Islamic violence to the compatibility of Islam and democracy and the evolution of Hamas. As Yezid Sayigh pointed out in his speech in the George Washington University, discussions that ignore the differences between Hamas-the-movement and Hamas-the-government are far from grasping the new dynamics of Hamas. Although they approach Hamas from different perspectives, *Hamas in Politics, Democracy, Religion, Violence* by Jeroen Gunning; *Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement* by Zaki Chehab; and *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* by Khaled Hroub are considerable attempts to understand Hamas correctly. Even though these studies diverge from one another in terms of the lenses that they use to explain Hamas, they complement each other by bringing different aspects of the movement to the foreground.

Jeroen Gunning is a scholar in the Middle East Politics, and Conflict Studies in the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University in the U.K. He is the founder of the world's first Master's program in critical terrorism studies,

at Aberystwyth University in Wales. He writes extensively on social movements in the Middle East in general and Hamas in particular.

In his work, *Hamas in Politics, Democracy, Religion, Violence*, by providing profound analysis of Hamas, he defends the idea that an Islamist movement is capable of evolution. Rejecting the basic argument of traditional terrorism studies and Islamic studies that there is a fundamental incompatibility between political Islam and democracy, Gunning highlights the wider social and political environment within which Hamas operates to come to the conclusion that Hamas is a product of its environment and can be compatible with democracy. Moving from the fact that politics is not static, he harshly criticizes the view of Hamas only in terms of its armed struggle, and deems the black and white conception biased. He argues that critical methodology which aims to humanize ‘the other’ and to place Islamism with its historical and socio-political context is essential.

Relying primarily on more than one hundred interviews with Hamas members and nine months of life experience in the Gaza Strip, Gunning’s main aim is to explain Hamas’ way of conceptualizing and practicing authority. In more concrete terms, Gunning strives to read the evolution of Hamas by focusing on its authority. The most noteworthy aspect of his book is that it uses sociology, political science, and social movements theories in harmony to delve into the political theory of Hamas. In this regard, although the study has negligible shortcomings that will be mentioned below, its way of problematizing the relations between democracy and violence, as well as democracy and secularism, with the help of Bourdieu, Derrida, Gramsci, Hegel, Rousseau, Rustow, Said, Tilly, and Weber is a striking contribution to literature.

Zaki Chehab, the author of *Inside the Resistance: The Iraqi Insurgency and the Future of the Middle East*, and *Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement*, is the political editor of *Al Hayat* newspaper and senior editor of the Arabic TV channel LBC. Reflecting insiders’ views is the main characteristic of his studies. For instance, he is the first journalist in the world to broadcast interviews with members of the Iraqi resistance. As he grew up in the Palestinian refugee camp Burj El Shamali and has many connections in Palestine, his second book *Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement*, successfully presents detailed observations of the daily lives of Palestinians in general and Hamas members in particular.

Criticizing Westerners’ ignorance of internal divisions among Palestinians, he goes far beyond the Hamas-Fatah split and sheds light on class based differences in Palestinian society and relations between locals in Gaza and returnees. Although he downplays the role of regional dynamics, his in-depth interviews with leading

Palestinians such as Yasser Arafat, Ahmed Yassin, Ismail Haniyeh and Abdel Aziz Rantisi, and his flowing narrative style makes the study a remarkable attempt to understand Hamas, or at least its internal dynamics. However, explaining the factors that influence the martyrs, informers and military attacks through the memories of individuals falls short of illuminating the broad picture in which Hamas is an actor. Nevertheless, thanks to its direct reflection of insider views, Chehab's study is an important contribution to the literature on Hamas.

Khaled Hroub of the University of Cambridge is widely known through his articles in leading Arab newspapers such as *Al-Hayat*, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, and in prestigious academic journals such as the *Middle East Journal*. Hroub is the author of two books on Hamas - *Hamas: A Beginners Guide* and *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*. In *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, he castigates other studies on Hamas for not using Arabic sources extensively and not being comprehensive. He emphasizes the movement's political thought and practice, in the context of the transformation of the Palestinian struggle and the emergence of Palestinian Islamism. Highlighting the various functions performed by the movement, he aims to understand Hamas' role in Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation.

Similar to Gunning's study, Hroub argues that Hamas is a product of the conditions and political environment within which it operates. In the study, he mostly focuses on Hamas' political relations with Palestinian, regional, and international political actors. In other words, he analyzes Hamas' political thought and practice alongside its relations with other political actors. In comparison to above-mentioned studies, while a lack of sufficient fieldwork appears as a shortcoming of the book, Hroub's extensive use of Hamas' official documents makes this study a noteworthy effort to understand Hamas.

Gunning, Hroub and Chehab agree on the idea that ideologically Hamas' inception dates back to the 1940s. Relying on Hassan el Benna's letters, Hroub argues that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt widened its sphere of influence in Gaza during the mandate period. Gunning states that the founding cadre of Fatah received their first military training in Muslim Brotherhood camps, whereas Hroub goes slightly beyond this idea, stating that the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood inspired Fatah.

Although both Gunning and Hroub highlight the passive role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1948 War, they diverge over the Brotherhood's situation after the war. While the former tends to present the Brotherhood as a unified body, at least until the 1970s, the latter puts an emphasis on the differentiation between the Muslim Brothers in Gaza and the West Bank by asserting the idea that the Brotherhood in Gaza was more zealous for an armed struggle. Though Chehab and Hroub overlook the relations between Arab nationalism and Islamism, Gunning, by

taking the 1967 War as a turning point, correctly mentions that the defeat of Arab nationalism paved the way for the rise of Islamism in Palestine.

Besides the defeat of Arab nationalism in the late 1960s, according to Gunning, there were other factors that explain dynamics behind the rise of the Palestinian Islamists as a powerful charity network, which began to show their influence in the student unions and universities, in the 1970s. These factors are the weakening of the traditional notable class and the emergence of a new counter elite, a strengthened civil society, partial integration of Palestine to the Israeli economy, the rise of income in Palestine, the support of oil-rich states in the Middle East, rapprochement between Egypt and Israel, and the PLO's ignorance of institutionalization. However, the question of whether the oil-rich Middle East states and Iran supported the PLO remains unanswered in Gunning's analysis. Hroub and Gunning take totally different positions towards the relations between the Likud Party and the Palestinian Islamists. While the former sees no connection between the Likud and the Islamists, the latter argues that Likud's religious claims over Palestine provided an opportunity for the Islamists to prioritize religious discourse on the conflict.

Interestingly, all the authors highlight different reasons, which are not mutually exclusive, to explain the militarization and the radicalization of the Palestinian Islamists in the 1980s and the establishment of Hamas in 1987. Hroub argues that the deadlock in the conflict and the increasing consciousness among Islamists in Palestine were the basic reasons behind radicalization. However, Gunning provides a multi-dimensional approach and gives more importance to unemployment in Gaza, Israel's iron fist policies, and the abandonment of external leaders such as Yasser Arafat in the 1980s. Moreover, Ahmed Yassin's and his son's prison memories and investigation records occupy a central place in Chehab's account of the establishment of Hamas. He also quotes from Prime Minister Rabin to denote the Israeli support for Hamas to undermine the influence of the PLO. Although Chehab's study downplays the regional factors and gives irrelevant details of Ahmed Yassin's life, his personal observations in Gaza and narrative style depicts a striking picture of how the first Intifada affected the daily lives of Palestinians in general and Hamas members in particular.

Gunning sufficiently explains Hamas – PLO relations during the first Intifada while the other two authors overlook this important dimension. Exemplifying Hamas' institutionalization in the late 1980s and its alternative days for strikes in Palestine, Gunning raises the idea that Hamas became an alternative to the PLO. He then asks the significant question of whether the PLO signed the Oslo Accords to respond Hamas' growing popularity. The common point of these three studies is the claim that Hamas owes its rise in the 1980s to the fertile social and political environment in the 1960s and the 1970s.

Until its election victory in 2006, world public opinion associated Hamas mostly with armed attacks against Israel, particularly suicide bombings. In comparison to Gunning and Hroub, Chehab's *Inside Hamas* puts more emphasis on Hamas' military wing, Ez Ed Din Al Qassam Brigades and its martyrdom discourse. Narrating the lives of Hamas' military leaders such as Imad Aqel and Yehia Ayyash, Chehab's flowing exposition sheds light not only on Hamas' armed struggle against Israel, but also on collaborators and other Palestinian organizations. Impressively reflecting on the lives of martyrs and their families, he clearly indicates that commemoration ceremonies and honoring martyrs' families reproduce the Hamas' martyrdom discourse. Hroub contributes to this topic by highlighting the effect of Hamas' armed struggle. Hamas' decision to target Israeli civilians as well as Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) after the Hebron Massacre in 1994 strengthens Hroub's argument.

Although Gunning does not allocate the lion's share of his study to Hamas' military attacks, he presents a highly analytical explanation of Hamas' violence. He argues that violence is neither irrelevant to the Hamas strategy nor religiously predetermined, but it is an integral part of Hamas' political makeup. For instance, during the first years of the first Intifada, Hamas' political wing gained ground thanks to armed attacks, which were highly valued among Palestinians. Gunning suggests approaching Hamas' suicide bombings both in the context of intra-Palestinian rivalry and its ideological opposition to peace process. He concludes that Hamas' violence is the outcome of its social and political environment within which the Israeli army, Jewish settlers, criminal gangs, and Palestinian rival groups operate as well. In order to support the idea that Hamas' violence functions as a security provider and reinforces Hamas' authority in Gaza, he also marks the lack of authority and the availability of arms in Palestine. However, his statistical information on the role of popular support in the use of suicide bombing is confusing.

Relying on Roy's study, Gunning argues that lack of popular support led Hamas to focus on social and political activities towards the end of the 1990s.¹ However, he then exemplifies the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) polls to show that support for suicide bombing increased from around 20 percent in the mid-1990s, to some 40 percent in the late 1990s.² It is worth noting that unlike Chehab's study, both Gunning and Hroub imply that Hamas gives more importance to its social rather than military infrastructure.

Gunning, looking from authority-individual relations, attempts to understand the implications of shariah law on Hamas and comes to the conclusion that given its

¹ Sara Roy, "Hamas and the Transformation(s) of Political Islam in Palestine," *Current History*, Vol. 102, No.660 (January 2003) p.13-20.

² "Index of Polls conducted between 1993-2000," *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research*, (<http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/cprspolls/index.html#1999>),

different interpretations of Islam, Hamas, though it primarily considers religion in decision-making, is not a monolithic body. Both Gunning and Hroub state that Hamas' decisions are based on shura (consultation) and ijma (consensus). In regard to decision-making, Hroub mentions the differences between internal and external Hamas leaders. Gunning correctly points out that Hamas-style decision-making is functional when the Quran is less specific or silent. However, religion oriented discourse does not mean that Hamas' authority is based on totally religious principles. Rather, Hamas' authority is more representative than religious. According to leading Hamas members, a state should be based on people's will, freedom, equality and justice. Exemplifying Hamas' education system, which aims to Islamicize people's will, Gunning finds this idea unconvincing.

Hroub also marks religious education as one of Hamas' major social services that it provides to fortify society. He presents Hamas' religious social services as the main component of the movement's Islamic social instructional discourse, which goes hand in hand with the discourse of nationalist resistance. Relying on these two discourses, he strikingly asks the question of whether Hamas aims to Islamicize Palestine or Palestinianize Islam. Hamas' dualistic discourse provides a political space for the movement to justify an interim solution, which refers to the liberation of Gaza and the West Bank, and an historic solution, which refers to the liberation of all Palestine. In this context, Gunning's explanation of dual contract makes more sense. He basically argues that Hamas' philosophy is composed of a social contract and a divine one. The tension between the former, which refers to the relations between Palestinian people and their representatives, and the latter, which sets a connection between people and God, may limit the freedom of the people. Ahmed Yassin was aware of this tension and he claims that religion provides a harmony with God's purpose for humanity on earth and hence brings freedom.

Gunning mainly contributes to Hamas literature by showing that Hamas was inspired not only from Islamic scholars such as Mawdudi and Qutb but also from Western political thinking. For instance, similar to Hamas, John Locke says authority to be legitimate lies only within the context of God's law. In addition to this, Hamas' idea that secularism, big interest groups and misguided masses are a threat to democracy is similar to the Gramscian understanding of hegemonic control. Gunning also influentially argues that Hamas has many theoretical dilemmas between Islam and the West, freedom and popular will, revealed law and legislative law, religious knowledge and popular mandate. Unlike Hroub's and Gunning's works, Chehab's study, except for mentioning the ideological differences between Hamas and Al Qaeda, ignores Hamas' political theory and philosophy. Instead of shura and ijma, Chehab sheds more light on Ahmed Yassin's ideas in regard to Hamas' decision making.

The concept of authority, which is ignored in Hroub and Chehab's studies, is analyzed deeply in Gunning's *Hamas in Politics*. Citing Bourdieu terms extensively and resorting to his interviews in Gaza, Gunning argues that Hamas' authority based on delegated capital, which refers to authorization by the electorate to represent them. His interviews with Hamas members suggest that unlike Fatah, Hamas internalizes the collective leadership culture and condemns nepotism and charismatic leadership. Focusing on consensual decision-making model of the movement, Gunning brings the main tension regarding Hamas' authority to our notice. He claims that only if you have wide public support or social capital, you can raise an alternative voice. Otherwise, dominant views in Hamas affect others' decisions. Notwithstanding this, Islam is not the major determinant in decision-making: as well as piety, knowledge on religion increases Hamas' leaders' symbolic capital and influence by strengthening their disciplinary role. Gunning also sheds light on the concept of trust, which occupies the highest place in Hamas' authority. Gunning uses Bourdieu's concept of mystery of ministry to explain that trust may lead to the suspension of individual judgment and may undermine the electoral process by making the people voiceless. Nevertheless, given Hamas' electoral practice and consultation, Gunning positively sees the flares of democracy in Palestine.

Elections, democracy and political participation have been debatable issues in Hamas' agenda since its inception. Although Hamas' leaders want political pluralism and multi party system, they had boycotted the general elections until 2006. As Hroub states, Hamas' non-isolation principle and desire for more legitimacy paved the way of its participation to the general elections in 2006. In fact, Hamas has already participated student council elections and has received more than 40 per cent of the student votes for almost two decades. Then, their idea towards the general elections shifted from boycott to participation and thanks to this shift, in 2006 elections, for the first time in Palestine's history, opposition factions gained real access to the structures of state via democratic means. Hamas' effective grass-root consultation network led to its election victory. In regard to the 2006 elections, Chehab and Gunning present detailed explanation of Hamas' election campaigns, strategies, slogans and budget spending. For instance, Chehab gives an example of how Hamas consciously misled opinion polls before the elections in 2006. Neither Gunning nor Chehab disagree with the idea that religious factors were effective in Hamas' election victory. Gunning indicates that 73 percent of electorate voted for socio-economic reasons. Chehab supports Gunning's statistical data by asserting the idea that Hamas' victory does not necessarily reflect the mass solidarity for the movement but it certainly points out the displeasure against Fatah's corrupted and nontransparent policies. In Gunning's more concrete words, Hamas did well in responding people's demands for change. Although Hroub is suspicious

of whether Hamas' participation to elections is tactical, Gunning comes to the conclusion that Islamism is a modern phenomenon, which is facilitated by the twin processes of modernization and urbanization, and contrary to belief, political Islam in Palestine increases the likelihood that people believe democracy and Islam to be compatible.

Hroub's and Chehab's studies put more emphasis on Hamas' regional and international relations than Gunning's study.

Hroub mentions the Oslo Accords as a turning point in Hamas-Fatah relations. In the post-Oslo period, while Hamas refrained from adopting a clear position and from declaring a civil war, Fatah was more violent towards Hamas. Hroub also adds that in regard to the relations with Arab states, for Hamas, representation of Palestinians was the main obstacle in the post-Oslo period. However, the PLO's relations with the regional actors affected Hamas positively in some cases. For instance, Chehab shows that PLO's support for Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War in 1991 increased Gulf States' sympathy for Hamas. Criticizing the idea of Israel supporting Hamas' growth, Hroub asserts the interesting opinion that Israel's policy toward the growing strength of Islamic movements until the first year of the Intifada was characterized by confusion.

To sum up, all of the above-mentioned studies, thanks to the different lenses that they use, contribute to the literature on Hamas. Zaki Chehab's *Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement* stands out with its flowing narrative style despite the lack of academic credentials and bibliography. Khaled Hroub's *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, with its select bibliography and presentation of Hamas' official documents, is a must-read. However, Hroub's study would have been more successful if he had given more emphasis on field research. Jeroen Gunning's *Hamas in Politics, Democracy, Religion, Violence* is a theoretically sophisticated study that explains Hamas by placing it into the wider social and political context. However, the reading circle may ask why he did not interview Yasser Arafat although he spent a long time in Gaza and interviewed many influential members of the PLO.