

Book Review: Was Hamas Contained?

Wednesday 1 May 2024, by [FARBER Samuel](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2024).

THIS WELL-WRITTEN detailed history of Hamas, the Islamic movement ruling Gaza, takes a basically sympathetic but objective and often critical stance. The book's relevance, paradoxically, is outdated yet dramatically heightened in view of the explosive current events.

Hamas Contained, *The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*

By Tareq Baconi

Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018, 336 pages, \$26 paperback.

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Tareq Baconi, a former Senior Analyst for Palestine/Israel at the International Crisis Group based in Ramallah in the West Bank, honestly admits his own ambivalence when he writes in his Preface:

"Whether condemnation or support, it felt to me, many of the views I faced on Palestinian armed resistance were unburdened by moral angst or ambiguity. There was often a certainty or conviction about resistance that was too easily forthcoming. I have struggled to find such certainty in my own study of Hamas, even as I remain unwavering in my condemnation of targeting civilians, on either side." (xi)

As Baconi's history unfortunately ends in 2017 (Stanford University Press published it in 2018), the book could not have addressed subsequent events which contradict its main thesis as reflected in the title *Hamas Contained*. [For Baconi's current perspective see his interview with Ashley Smith in *Spectre*, February 9, 2024. —ed.]

At the time, as Baconi states at the end of his Preface:

"Through a dual process of containment and pacification, Hamas has been forcefully transformed into little more than an administrative authority in the Gaza strip, in many ways akin to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank." (xxiv)

Indeed, it was widely believed before October 7, 2023, that a *de facto* quasi-truce had developed between Hamas and Israel, as the political leadership of the Zionist state had become more preoccupied with the situation in the West Bank than in Gaza.

Illusions Shattered

As we know, on October 7, 2023, Hamas carried out a world-shaking surprise attack on southern Israel, including the killing of hundreds of unarmed Israelis as well as soldiers, and the alleged rape of Israeli women. (This writer would soon like to see the verdict on these accusations by prestigious human rights organizations that have taken a clear stand against Israeli Apartheid, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.)

This has been followed by the extreme response of Israel, going beyond even earlier assaults on Gaza over the previous 15 years, with the massacre of innocent Palestinians leading Gaza to the edge of collapse with catastrophic impact on its two million residents.

As of late March there are well over 30,000 Palestinian deaths, hunger to the point of famine, mass homelessness and virtual collapse of medical facilities under constant Israeli attack. In sum, Israel has stopped at nothing in its relentless aggression to remove the Palestinian population from Gaza — including genocide — for which Israeli public opinion has been prepared with the expectation that this will be the final and victorious war against Hamas.

Hamas, together with the Lebanon-based Hezbollah, have stood for the most militant opposition to Israeli expansion and its virtually limitless aggression (157), extra-judicial assassinations (38, 46), and total disregard of the Palestinian people's right to national self-determination.

Unlike Hezbollah, Hamas (in conjunction with the Sunni Gulf states such as Qatar that have been a critical source of support for the organization) did not support, either materially or politically, Assad's brutal Syrian regime. This led to Iran withdrawing its support from Hamas and redirecting it to the rival Gazan organization Islamic Jihad. (186)

Earlier, in contrast to the disastrous stance of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Hamas condemned Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. (27) It is difficult to tell how much these actions were due to Hamas' regional Sunni loyalties and how much to other considerations.

It is also worth noting that Hamas has limited its sphere of action to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), unlike movements such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State. In fact, Hamas has worked to control Salafi jihadists, such as groups linked to Al-Qaeda, in the Gaza strip. (139)

According to Baconi, Hamas clamped down on lawlessness and promoted public safety in Gaza. For example, they forbade public use of firearms at weddings, a popular custom in the region, and cracked down on gangs, drug traffickers and money launderers.

Baconi also relates how Hamas has also curbed powerful families that for a long time acted above the law and contributed to the violence that has plagued the Gaza strip. (138-9)

Political and Religious Repression

The Hamas government is nevertheless a dictatorship that has remained in power since it took over Gaza in 2006 after defeating Fatah in the legislative elections held that year, with no elections having been held since. (Political authority in the OPT has been divided between the PLO in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, following a failed 2007 CIA-organized coup against Hamas.)

In 2007, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights issued a scathing report that accused the Executive Force and al-Qassam, two repressive arms of the Hamas government, of a wide range of

human rights abuses in its policing of public places, attacks on journalists, illegitimate arrests, torture and other forms of inhuman treatment of prisoners, and intimidation of public servants. (138)

Baconi also points out that under the heavy toll of Israeli bombing, Hamas has taken advantage of the chaotic environment of war to settle political scores and carry out — as the Israelis do on a larger scale — extrajudicial assassinations of its domestic enemies, including Fatah members held in jail and suspected collaborators and informants for Israel. (217)

As well as heading a political dictatorship, Hamas installed in Gaza a conservative and repressive religious order. As early as 1976, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, who would become the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, had applied to the Israeli occupation authorities for a license to establish the Islamic Association.

This was in essence a legal and administrative cover for the Islamic Brotherhood (the Egyptian religious movement to which Hamas was related) to establish a Gazan branch dispensing social, religious, educational and medical services. Israel approved the license, intending that this would be a force that would weaken the secular Palestinian nationalism of organizations like Fatah and the PLO.

Since its formal founding in 1987, Hamas has made it clear that it intends to create a conservative virtuous society governed by righteous laws mandating, for example, sex segregation, although not to the extent of implementing shari'a law, which Hamas postponed to the future to give time for shari'a to organically develop in Gaza. (240)

In August, 1988 Hamas published "The Charter of Allah: The Platform of the Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS)" with the motto of "God is its goal; the messenger (the prophet Mohammed) is its leader; the *Quran* its Constitution; Jihad is its methodology'; and Death for the Sake of God is its most coveted desire." (21)

Years later, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh would proclaim to a vast crowd that "we are a people who value death, just like our enemies value life." (xix) In this context, Baconi points out that the Palestinian public in the past opposed suicide bombings. Thus for example in 1998, 75% of Palestinians opposed suicide bombings, and in 1999 Palestinian support for suicide bombings was under 20% and support for Hamas below 12%. (33, note 23 on page 261).

Baconi's citations in this context are a very important corrective to crude generalizations often based on Islamophobic prejudices. Besides, the tendency to exalt death, although in a different way and perhaps to a somewhat lesser degree than with Hamas, has existed in countries and political systems that have no relation whatsoever to Islam (including the Zionist movement).

Thus the American patriot Patrick Henry famously demanded "Give me liberty, or give me death" in March of 1775. The Cuban government has been sharply criticized in recent years for its slogan "Patria o Muerte" (Fatherland or Death) to which the opposition slogan "Patria y Vida" (Fatherland and Life) has been counterposed.

In fact, Cuba's national anthem, which preceded the 1959 Cuban Revolution by almost a century, contains the line "Morir por la Patria es Vivir" (to Die for the Fatherland is to live).

Whether in Patrick Henry's invocation in the 18th century, or in the 19th and 20th century Cuban versions, these entirely secular invocations of death have referred to possible death inflicted by the enemy in combat. In general this has not referred to combatants engaging in suicide missions and, in a secular spirit, contains no speculation about the world to come after life. In other words, the

defense of the Fatherland justifies many kinds of sacrifices, including the highest sacrifice of life itself in the fight against the foreign oppressors.

Shifting Strategy

Hamas' Charter has not spelled out in great detail the nature of the Islamic state or entity it was seeking, but did state that its Islamic policy would allow for Christians and Jews to live in peace under Muslim rule. According to Baconi, however, the text is full of antisemitic references and old stereotypes about the Jews accumulating immense wealth, having great influence over the media, and being treacherous and devious in nature. (22)

Elsewhere in the Charter, Hamas proclaims that its organization is dedicated to "rais(ing) the banner of God over every inch of Palestine," a proclamation that provides additional force to the religious character of its national proposals. (3) Baconi adds that during the first Intifada of the late eighties, Hamas' graffiti attacked Jews, Christians, as well as secular Palestinian nationalists. (25)

After the 2006 Hamas electoral victory, various efforts were made to bring about a reconciliation between Hamas and the dominant PLO party, Fatah.

In light of Fatah's concessions to Israel, It should be noted that Hamas leader Khaled Meshal asserted, while visiting Moscow in March of 2006, that if Israel withdrew from Palestinian land it had captured after 1967, including Jerusalem, implemented the right of return by Palestinians, released prisoners, destroyed the Separation wall and removed settlements, then Hamas "would be prepared to take steps that could produce a real peace in the region." (108)

The most notable of these efforts at reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah was the so-called Mecca Agreement sponsored by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah in early 2007. In the agreement, which provided for a division of posts in a unity government in the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas gave up important cabinet positions with the intention to reduce international reservations regarding its participation in government — while maintaining its ideological platform intact.

That March the two forces approved the political program of the new cabinet. This included respecting past agreements made by the PLO (obviously including the agreements made with Israel), the right of return based on UN Resolution 194, and the right of resistance (according to international law) that forbids the targeting of civilians in armed operations.

However, the George W. Bush Administration refused to deal with a Palestinian Authority that included Hamas, and Israel condemned the incoming unity cabinet.

In addition, despite the agreement, Fatah remained entrenched at all levels of government, and the United States maintained its military and financial support to the Fatah presidential guard.

With the subsequent militarized lawlessness of gangs and militias, as Baconi points out, by the end of May, both leaderships had lost control of their armed supporters. A month later Hamas had taken total control of the Gaza strip. (125-132)

Blockade and Siege

By mid-September 2007, Israel had declared Gaza hostile territory (140) which opened a process of restrictions that soon converted Gaza into what's been called an Israeli-made-and-controlled "open air prison." The Zionist government imposed a total blockade not only on the ground but also on access by air and sea.

Israel totally controls the entry and departure from the zone (aided by the Egyptian authorities that have not been any less harsh in enforcing the border controls in the south of Gaza.) Fishing in Gaza, once an important activity for the people living in the area, has been reduced by order of the Israeli government, to a maximum of 10 kilometers from the coast.

Israel does not allow Gaza to have a port or an airport. Control of the entry points from Gaza to Israel is very costly for Gaza's economy because the Israelis do not allow the importation of many machines and materials that they claim could be potentially used for military purposes.

Those border controls are also damaging to the relatively few thousands of workers who were authorized to participate in the Israeli labor market, and to Palestinians needing to travel, to Israel or another country, to obtain adequate medical attention. Importation of food into Gaza, before October 7, was reduced to the minimum necessary for the survival of its inhabitants.

As we've seen since October, the Israeli authorities can at any moment deprive Gaza of water, electricity, and access to cell phones and the Internet. Considering these conditions, it is not surprising that the unemployment rate is very high, and that young Palestinians living there are justified in not hoping for a better future.

Hamas and Terrorism

Many kinds of groups and governments support or condemn terrorism, but what do they mean by it? As we might expect, the U.S. State Department, as self-serving as one can imagine spokespeople for an imperialist power, defined terrorism as "premeditated politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatants by sub-national groups or clandestine agents." (xviii)

This definition blatantly excludes the far more consequential state terrorism carried out against non-combatants. In Israel's numerous previous bombing campaigns against Gaza since at least 2007, it was reproducing the actions of other, mostly imperialist, states. The widespread use of Napalm in Vietnam by the United States, as well as the deliberate famine provoked by Stalin in Ukraine in 1932, were examples.

So were the Nazi Holocaust principally directed against Jews but also against other smaller groups such as Gays and the Roma people, the millions of non-combatant victims of Stalin's totalitarian reign in the USSR, Winston Churchill's support for famine in Bengal in 1943, the massive rape of German civilian women by Russian soldiers in 1945, the extensive use of torture by both the British suppression of the "Mau-Mau" revolt in Kenya in the fifties and the equally ruthless French repression of the Algerian revolution in the fifties and early sixties.

Anglo-American political culture, traditionally preoccupied with whether political action is violent or non-violent, has paid much less attention to the issue of the important differences among various kinds of violent political action, which are by no means necessarily terrorist.

Thus, for example, Baconi tells us that less than a month after 9/11, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a secular Palestinian group, assassinated Israel's tourism minister Rehavam Ze'evi in retaliation for the assassination of its own leader Abu Ali Mustafa. (48)

Ze'evi (ironically nicknamed "Gandhi") was an Israeli general who had headed an elite "anti-terror" battalion and had founded the right-wing Moledet party that advocated population transfer. Thus, this was clearly a case of magnicide, i.e. assassination of a major political figure, and not terrorism against unarmed random people, as terrorism is usually understood.

Baconi's account makes crystal clear that Hamas adopted terrorism as a deliberate policy against unarmed Israelis. It is important to clarify the major difference between the terrorism that might occur as the spontaneous, unplanned explosion of rage by oppressed people as has occurred in numerous historical occasions, and the premeditated and planned actions of an organized government such as Hamas with a clear political and religious program, even though it also leads a population clearly oppressed by Israel.

Baconi points out that on April 6, 1994 Hamas carried out the first of many subsequent suicide bombings in Israel, when a member of Hamas arrived at a bus stop in Afula, a northern Israeli city, detonating a suicide vest killing seven Israelis.

Seven days later, another Hamas suicide bomber detonated explosives at a bus stop in Hadera, killing five Israelis. (29-30)

On a much larger scale, terrorist attacks were carried out by Hamas in southern Israel on October 7 killing hundreds of unarmed Israelis at a rock music concert, at a nearby kibbutz and among random drivers and passengers in nearby highways.

In return, as we previously pointed out, Israel carried out a grossly disproportionate "reprisal" (really massacres). As of mid-March there was no sign of even a short-term cease fire, nor of significant aid and relief to ameliorate the desperate situation of Palestinian Gaza, both strongly resisted by the Israeli government and military.

The Aims of Terror

Acts of terror, and of violent political action in general, have an explicit or at least implicit political logic — as in the concrete actions taken by the military wing of Hamas on October 7, 2023. As far as one can discern, this act seemed to anticipate the achievement of a smashing defeat of the Israeli armed forces and the Zionist state, to produce a massive departure of Israeli Jews towards other countries.

Such an event largely occurred in the 1960s in the case of Algeria with the exodus of the residents of that country of French origin. But there are important differences between Algeria and Israel: Most Israeli Jews do not have an equivalent of France where they could emigrate, as was the case of the Algerians of French origin.

This is aside from the fact that the Jewish population is approximately 50% of the total number of people in Israel and adjacent Occupied Territories. The descendants of the French settlers of Algeria in the 1950s constituted just 10% of that population.

It is important to stress that the terrorism described above is not only ethically wrong but that it is politically very counterproductive, because it substantially contributes to the internal solidarity of the oppressor nation such as Israel and tends to confer an undeserved legitimacy among its citizens to the monstrous retaliation conducted by their government.

Thus, rather than contribute to separate or at least neutralize that population from the ideological and political hegemony of its government, October 7 did the very opposite.

Apparently, the politics and strategy of October 7 was to fight precisely in the openly military field where the Zionist regime has the greatest possibilities to defeat Hamas, particularly if we consider that Israel is a nuclear power that could develop, if they have not done so already, tactical nuclear weapons to use in ground warfare. That is why the Lebanese socialist Gilbert Achcar has argued:

“Against an oppressor that is far superior in military means, the only true efficient way of struggle for the Palestinian people is by choosing the terrain on which they can circumvent that superiority. The peak in Palestinian’s struggle effectiveness was reached in the year 1988 during the first Intifada, in which the Palestinians deliberately avoided the use of violent means...The Palestinian struggle must rely primarily on mass political action against Israel’s oppression, occupation, and settler-colonial expansion. The new underground armed resistance organized by young Palestinians in Jenin or Nablus can be an efficient adjuvant to the people’s mass movement, provided it is predicated on the latter’s priority and conceived in such a way as to incentivize it.” ([October 8, 2023](#))

It is true that Israeli aggression has not been able to completely achieve some of its most important goals with its massive invasion of Gaza, such as the physical elimination of the top Hamas leadership, the complete destruction of the Hamas tunnel system and the wiping out of Hamas as an organization.

But only a complete political and human blindness could proclaim that this constitutes a Hamas victory considering the wholly disastrous effects of Israeli invasion on the Gazan society, economy, let alone its mere survival.

The South African Comparison

It is instructive to briefly look at the successful South African struggle against Apartheid because it offers a fruitful contrast to the strategies and tactics developed by some Palestinian groups in their struggle against Israel as their national oppressor. This comparison will also show once again that all acts of violent action, including terror, have an implicit if not explicit political logic.

As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established with the end of white political control and Apartheid in the mid-’90s explained in 2003, the explicit objective of the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress, was not to target civilians or white people as such.

Nevertheless, most of the casualties of the armed South African black rebels were in fact civilians. To be precise, a total of 71 people died in such attacks between 1976 and 1984. Of these, 52 were civilians and 19 security force members. Among these civilian victims were people whom the ANC regarded as legitimate targets, including collaborators such as councilors, state witnesses at the trials of ANC members and suspected informers.

There were also civilian victims who were not intended as targets, such as civilian passers-by when bombs were detonated outside buildings housing security forces, or because several blasts in public places such as restaurants were based on wrong intelligence that led the armed militants to believe that security force members frequented these places. (“ANC killed mostly civilians.” The O’Malley Archives, March 3, 2003.)

Thus, creating terror among white South Africans as such was not the aim of these violent actions. This should not be surprising when we consider that the Freedom Charter that the ANC adopted in June of 1955 as its official program stated:

“We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: That South Africa belongs to all the people who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people; that our people have been robbed of their birthright to land, liberty and peace by a form of government founded on injustice and inequality...”

It is important to clarify that this was not a declaration made in a neoliberal spirit after the victory

over Apartheid, but rather part of a revolutionary Charter that also declared: “the national wealth of our country, the heritage of all South Africans, shall be restored to the people; the mineral wealth beneath the soil, the banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole.”

I will leave it to the historians and experts on South Africa to explain why the ANC adopted such policies and approach. But I will venture some hypotheses. In the first place, we must consider that Blacks, undoubtedly the most oppressed and exploited group in South Africa, did not constitute as large as the 90% majority that Algerians of native origins were in their country.

Black South Africans constituted approximately 75% of the population while the remaining 25% were composed of the white, Indian, and Colored populations (these last two groups were also oppressed and discriminated by the white Apartheid system).

The necessity of coalition politics among the exploited and oppressed, and the need to reconcile different community needs and even political perspectives, was structurally built into the anti-Apartheid opposition.

This situation enhanced the need for democratic formulations, at least at the level of rhetoric. In fact, the Freedom Charter itself was the intellectual and political product of the South African Congress Alliance, which was a coalition of the ANC and its allies: the South African Indian Congress, the South African Congress of Democrats (a white left-wing organization) and the Colored People’s Congress.

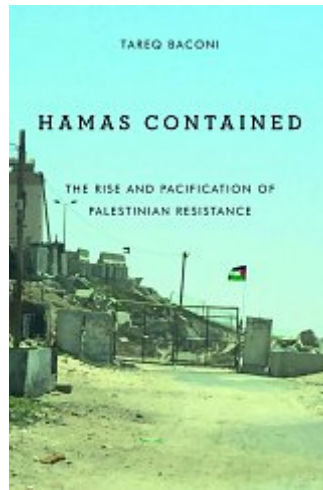
To be sure, the significant ideological and political influence of the South African Communist Party (illegal at the time of the creation of the Charter) was a significant part of this political context.

While white leftists were a clear minority of the white population, they were politically visible enough to help steer the alliance away from any terrorist activities against white people as such. Unfortunately, at present there is no Israeli Jewish anti-Zionist group with a visible and significant presence in Israel.

The distinctions made in the above analysis are not pedantic and academic, but instead are an attempt to think as clearly as possible on major political questions and dilemmas. I believe that it was in this spirit that the French revolutionary socialist Daniel Bensaid, one of the leaders of the 1968 movement in France, argued:

“Being unable to eradicate violence in a foreseeable future, we must at least work to discipline and restrain it, which presupposes the development of a new legal culture, and a culture of violence itself...Why should it be impossible to develop a culture of dominated violence? Certain military codes, and certain martial arts have sketched a few pointers in this direction. Under threat of collective self-destruction, our era has a responsibility to invent in turn new regulations and new customs..” (Daniel Ben Said, *An Impatient Life. A Memoir*, London, New York, Verso Books, 2013, 166.)

Samuel Farber



P.S.

- Against the Current No. 230, May/June 2024:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc230/was-hamas-contained/>