

Hamas, from islamic revival-movement to Palestinian government

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Contary to the leading opinions of the American-European politicians and media, the main aim of Hamas in calling for the “destruction” of the State of Israel, is not to kill or expel the Israeli-Jewish population, but to dismantle the zionistic State Model and to make an end to the 39-year Israeli occupation and settlement policy

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In the Palestinian elections January 25, 2006, Hamas obtained a startling victory. Of the 132 seats of parliament, the Hamas party, which for the first time was participating in the parliamentary elections, obtained 74 seats, in contrast with the then-reigning Fatah Party, which obtained a mere 43 seats. The remaining 13 seats were obtained by different smaller political parties, as well as independent candidates.

This great victory for Hamas was no surprise, considering the ongoing corruption of the Fatah-government versus the fundamental political and military resistance by Hamas against the Israeli occupation, as well as the Hamas social activities on behalf of the impoverished population of Palestine, especially Gaza.

In spite of this, leading American-European politicians, as well as the newsmedia, not only showed great astonishment at Hamas' victory, they also demanded that Hamas renounce the violence against Israel and also acknowledge the State of Israel - and made this demand the condition of continued financial support to the Palestinian Authority.

When the newly-formed Hamas government refused to agree with those American-European demands, the American and Canadian governments, as well the European Union, decided to freeze the financial support to the Palestinian Authority, a measure which mainly affected the already seriously impoverished Palestinian civilian population, since at least 45% of the population [some reports put the number as high as 70 %] are living below the poverty-rate and 15% are living in extreme poverty.

Nutrition, education and medicine have been the areas most affected by the financial and economic boycott of Palestine. Moreover, 250,000 Palestinians depend on Palestinian Authority salaries, and

these government employees support nearly one million people, or 20% of the total Palestinian population. However, due to the American-European boycott, salaries haven't been paid since January, and the families of the government employees have had to bear the consequences.

Not only are the boycott measures morally reprehensible in regard with the humanitarian consequences for the Palestinian civilian-population, they have also led to mounting tensions within the Palestinian society.

Many international non-governmental organizations, as well as a number of United Nations agencies, have harshly criticized the economic boycott and blockade of Palestine.

Another consequence of the boycott is that, as a result of the freezing of European Union (EU) financial support, Hamas shall receive increased financial aid from the governments of the Arab and other Islamic countries. This will lead to the lessening of EU political influence regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the strengthening of the influence of regimes adhering to more radical political Islamic ideologies, such as Iran. Recently a number of Arab governments, and Iran, have either given or promised financial aid to the Hamas government.

No doubt aware of the above-mentioned political consequences of the diminishing EU influence regarding the Middle-East, the EU, represented by EU Commissioner Louis Michel (former Belgian minister of foreign affairs), has set aside a sum of 34 million euros for emergency aid to the Palestinian territories. This aid is to be delivered outside of the Palestinian government, mainly through non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Also the World Bank, which has predicted an increasing humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian territories, is exploring, in direct cooperation with the 'Quartet for Mideast Peace made up of the EU, USA, the Russian Federation and the UN, to resume financial aid to the Palestinian population, by going outside of Hamas channels, bypassing the Hamas-led Palestinian government by providing the aid by way of NGOs which are active in the area.

Double standards:

The basis of the American-European boycott of the financial aid to the Palestinian Authority lies in the refusal of Hamas to renounce violence against Israel and to acknowledge the State of Israel. A further argument given in support of the boycott is the fact, that Hamas has played a major role in the incitement to suicide attacks against Israeli civilians and is still continuing this strategy.

It is self-evident that suicide-attacks as military attacks on civilians are not only inhuman, but also illegal according to International Law. But what is seldom mentioned by the EU and the American-European governments are that these attacks are a matter of cause and effects, since they have been the result of the now 39 years of Israeli occupation of Palestinian land — an occupation which is in violation of the unanimously-accepted UN-Security Resolution 242 of 1967, in which Israel was required to withdraw its troops from the territories conquered during the June 1967 war, including the Palestinian territories.

Also, the boycotting countries are ignoring the fact that the attacks by Hamas do not consist solely of suicide-attacks, but also of the internationally-recognized legitimate acts of defense by an occupied population against the occupying military force — in this case, the Israeli army.

Repeatedly, the Hamas leadership has declared, both pre- and post- the January elections, the group's willingness to renounce violence against Israel, as soon as Israel is prepared to end its

occupation of the Palestinian territories [ie. its international obligation under UN Security Council Resolution 242], to dismantle its settlements in the Palestinian territories, which are illegal according International Law [see also UN-Security Council Resolution 1979], to dismantle the Wall, which is being built across occupied Palestinian territories [see verdict of the International Court of Justice dated 9-7-2004], and its acknowledgement of the internationally-recognized right of return for Palestinian refugees, a right which is confirmed by General Assembly Resolution 194.

All of the Hamas movement's demands are based on International Law, confirmed by the above-named United Nations resolutions, and are therefore absolutely legitimate demands that should be recognized as such by the international community.

What is striking in this particular case, however, is that the American-European boycotting governments are demanding that Hamas completely disarm on the one hand, while on the other hand, making no clear demands on Israel regarding the implementation of the above mentioned UN resolutions, which were voted for by many of these same American-European States.

Also this double standard is being applied in regard to Israeli and Palestinian violence.

Although the condemnation of suicide-attacks against Israeli civilians is correct and justified, there is however a strong undervaluation of the serious character of the Israeli human rights violations and war-crimes which have been committed by the Israeli army since the beginning of the occupation in 1967 (and before).

It is also significant to mention that from EU-side there is no real political pressure on Israel to end the occupation and withdraw from the Palestinian territories. Seen from that perspective, the American-European criticism against Hamas lacks moral credibility, as the boycotting nations are choosing to call for the enforcement of international law on a very selective basis. Why should international human rights standards only apply to Hamas? Why should they not apply to Israel as well?

The false international perception of Hamas ideology

It is a common standard in nearly all American-European newsmedia, as well in statements of politicians, to mention repeatedly that the Hamas ideology is associated with the "destruction" of the State of Israel.

In the context in which this statement is made, it is almost always implied that by calling for Israel's "destruction", Hamas intends to expel the Jewish-Israeli inhabitants out of the present Israel or even to kill them.

Before trying to unmask this stubborn American-European assumption I want to throw some light on the political history of the Hamas

Hamas [abbreviation of Harakat al-muqâwama al-islâmiyya, which means islamic resistance movement] was founded in 1987 as a religious-nationalistic resistance-organisation with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin as the spiritual leader. He was killed in an Israeli airstrike in March 2004, which, being an extra-judicial execution, not only killed him but also killed 7 other innocent bystanders.

However, since the beginning of the eighties, there was a predecessor of Hamas, also under the leadership of Sheikh Yassin, which was mainly an islamic revival movement, mostly directed toward social and charitable goals.

Although that movement of course opposed the Israeli occupation, it did not promote violent resistance, since the group considered the Israeli occupation as a punishment of God because of the lack of religious devotion in Palestine.

In other words, this revival-movement was meant to make the Palestinian population return to the basics of Islam, as explained by the movement, in their daily life.

This revivalist-ideological movement was supported financially by Israel, supposedly as a 'counterbalance' to the Palestine Liberation Organization, led by Yasser Arafat, which was, in combination with the al-Fatah organization, the most powerful resistance movement against the Israeli occupation at that time.

Even when the official Hamas organization was founded in 1987, initially there was no real resistance against the occupation, despite the anti-zionistic Charter of the group, written in 1988.

Only in the post-Oslo era (1993 on) did the Hamas organization become part of the resistance, resulting in military attacks against the Israeli occupation army, and, beginning in 1994, in suicide-attacks against Israeli civilians. The immediate cause of the first suicide-attack was the 1994 massacre by the Jewish-Israeli extreme-rightwing terrorist, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, on 29 Palestinians who were praying Palestinians in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron.

The Hamas Charter

An analysis of the Hamas Charter, that consists of 36 articles, reveals that the purpose of the group is to form a religious resistance against the Israeli occupation, as well as advocating for the dismantlement of the zionistic State of Israel, to be replaced by an Islamic Palestinian State with equal rights for all the inhabitants and religious freedom regarding Jews and Christians.

Seen from this perspective, the Charter has an anti-colonialistic character, because of its fundamental criticism of the colonial character of the foundation of the State of Israel in historical Palestine, first as a colony of the Turkish-Ottoman Empire, and after World War I, a British Mandate-area.

Following the plans of the European Zionist movement, the foundation of a "Jewish" State in historical Palestine took place in 1948, based on UN General Assembly Resolution 181, passed in 1947, which supported the division of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab part. The Resolution was made without any consultation of the indigenous Palestinian population, despite the fact that the Palestinians, along with the surrounding Arab states, had proposed at that time an alternative plan that would allow for Jewish immigration into Palestine without the separation of the state into "Jewish" and "Arab" areas, but that alternative was rejected by the United Nations, under pressure from the European Zionist movement.

It is of importance to mention here, that the objections of the Palestinians to Resolution 181 were not against the settlement of Jewish people in Palestine, but against the division of their country in two different States.

Apart from that, the Hamas movement is within its rights under international law to challenge the existence of the Zionist State of Israel in its current form, as the State of Israel in its current form is, at its basis, discriminatory against non-Jews.

One of the most striking examples of the discriminatory basis of the State of Israel is the fact that

any Jewish man, woman or child in the world has the right to settle in Israel, while the internationally-recognized right of return of the Palestinian descendants of the 750,000 Palestinians expelled by Zionist militias in 1948, a right confirmed in General Assembly Resolution 194, passed in 1948, is not acknowledged by Israel.

The statements often made by the American-European politicians and newsmedia that Hamas wants to expel or even kill the Israeli-Jewish inhabitants of Israel is made based on a false reading of the Hamas Charter.

Although in the Charter, reference is made to “the Jews”, a thorough reading makes clear that this is a reference to the Israeli Zionist system and the Israeli occupation, and not to the Jews as an ethnic-religious group. In Hamas bulletins, the group never refers to “the Jews” as such, but rather to the “Zionist enemy” or the “Zionist entity” - a reference to the political basis of the state of Israel, not to Jewish people as an ethnic or religious group.

Suicide-attacks

In any mention of Hamas in the American-European press, emphasis is always made on the suicide-attacks against Israeli civilians for which Hamas bears responsibility. It is evident that suicide-attacks are not only inhuman, they are also serious violations of International Humanitarian Law, which states that in any military conflict a clear distinction must be made between combatants [soldiers or fighters] and non-combatants [civilians].

From that point of view it is completely right that those attacks are being severely condemned by the International Community.

But it is important to realize that the cause of those suicide-attacks are rooted in the Israeli occupation of all Palestinian land since 1967. The attacks began in 1994 after nearly thirty years of continuous oppression, humiliation and unpunished war crimes by Israeli forces in Palestine with no international enforcement of United Nations Resolutions that both recognized and condemned the Israeli actions and war crimes.

Still, this is no justification whatsoever for any resistance group to also commit war crimes. According to International Law it is illegal to respond to a violation of one's human rights by committing a reciprocal violation, even in regard to an occupation.

On the other hand, any military action against an occupation army is considered legitimate resistance by an occupied population against the occupying power. However, there is little international attention to the fact that an important part of Hamas' strategy is also the use of this legitimate resistance method.

It is worth noting that Israel, as well as the USA, qualify those military attacks against the occupation army as 'terrorist acts', ignoring the internationally-recognized legitimacy of such acts.

Recently, Mr. Solana, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union, has confirmed the right of resistance against a foreign occupation.

The Israeli extrajudicial assassination policy

One policy of Israel that is both morally reprehensible and a violation of international law is the

policy of extrajudicial assassinations of the leaders and activists of the Palestinian resistance movements like Hamas.

These assassinations began in the beginning of the 1970s and have continued until the present day. Each successive Israeli government that has been elected has continued the policy unquestioningly.

Israeli assassinations of suspected Palestinian resistance fighters and leaders have taken a number of forms: the frontal shootings of cars, the exploding of mobile telephones and the current method: 'assassination-by-missile' - airstrikes by Israeli warplanes onto suspected cars or homes, regardless of whether the target is in a crowded refugee-camp, in a flat full of civilian apartments, or in a marketplace. All of these have been the sites of missile strikes by Israeli forces in attempted extrajudicial assassinations.

These attacks are severe violations of International Law, which states that every human being has a right on a fair and independent trial.

In the extrajudicial assassinations, which are still being carried out by Israeli forces on a nearly-daily basis, in many cases civilian bystanders are also killed.

In those cases, the extrajudicial assassinations become not just violations of international law, but war crimes. The fact that civilians are nearly always present at the assassination sites [streets, market-places, cars, apartments and refugee-camps] leads to a high probability of civilians being killed - this is a direct violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention's Principle of Proportionality, and thus is considered internationally to be a war crime.

However, despite the high humanitarian risk for the civilian population, the current Israeli Prime Minister Olmert has made clear that those airstrikes are to be continued, despite the continuous loss of Palestinian civilian lives.

It is a striking example of Western 'selective indignation' that this Israeli policy of extrajudicial assassinations, which nearly always leads to civilian casualties, is not criticized as harshly as Hamas' incitement toward suicide-attacks.

No sanctions have been taken against Israel in regard with those extrajudicial executions, as well the indiscriminate military attacks on Gaza. But all financial assistance has been cut to the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority.

Regarding this issue, Israel, being the occupying country, bears the lion's share in the escalation of the present conflict. The EU, which claims to consider Palestinian humanitarian concerns in its policies, must be held accountable for its hypocritical double standard in the enforcement of international law in this conflict.

Social-charitable Hamas-activities

One aspect of Hamas' activities that has long been undervalued internationally is the fact that Hamas has been engaging in social and charitable activities on behalf of the most impoverished in the two Palestinian territories, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Ironically, by doing this, Hamas is fulfilling the international-judicial obligation of the Israeli occupying power to take care of the humanitarian needs of the occupied Palestinian population - an obligation that Israel has failed to fulfill.

According one of the most important articles of the 4th Geneva Convention, an occupying power is responsible for the safety, well-being and the welfare of the occupied population, a population which, while under occupation, become “protected persons” - a class of people that have special rights under international law.

The impoverished situation of the Palestinian population is being intensified each day by the Israeli military attacks in Gaza and the West-Bank, which have also resulted in serious human rights violations and war crimes.

When such Israeli measures were taken in the past, Hamas has increased its efforts to support the most impoverished part of the population. Donors for the projects, which include schools, hospitals and daycare centers, have come from all over the world, but mainly from the Arab world. Hamas gained a reputation as a focused and devoted group that did not steal money for themselves and their own enrichment (as was the reputation of the ruling Fateh party), but dedicated funding to numerous projects that benefited the least-well-off of the Palestinian society.

Of course, this led to a great popularity of Hamas and the striking outcome of the elections.

Ongoing Israeli violations

In both Gaza and the West Bank, massive home demolitions of Palestinian homes have been carried out by Israeli forces, which is forbidden according to article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Also, in Gaza especially, the border with Israel is often completely closed, causing tens of thousands of Palestinians who work in Israel to lose their jobs — their only means of livelihood.

In July and August 2006, Israeli forces have not only closed the border with Gaza, but also bombed parts of the infrastructure [bridges and main roads], which caused considerable damage and has cut off the water and electricity supply for the entire population. This was done, according to Israel, as a retaliatory measure for the abduction and imprisonment of an Israeli soldier by Palestinian resistance fighters on June 25th.

Retaliatory measures such as these, as collective punishment of an entire population, are serious breaches of International Law. In particular, article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention forbids any collective punishment.

Epilogue:

In this article I've tried to make clear, that not only is the American-European freezing of the financial help to the Palestinian Authority is immoral, because it is at the cost of the impoverished Palestinian population, it is also a double standard to condemn the violence of Hamas, while not condemning the ongoing violence of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

No resistance organisation in the world can be expected to lay down their arms while the occupation and oppression they are resisting is allowed to continue in the most extreme way.

However, it must also be noted that a resistance movement must also adhere to its obligations according to International Law.

The international community, particularly the European-American nations that have chosen to boycott the Hamas-led Palestinian government, must respect the stand taken by Hamas against the

Israeli occupation and settlement expansion policy, as well as Hamas' fundamental resistance against the zionistic State-model of Israel. This must not be done by closing our eyes to the serious human rights violations of the group by the part it has played in suicide-attacks against Israeli civilians, but neither can we close our eyes to the ongoing human rights violations by Israel.

I sincerely hope that Hamas will not yield to the growing American-European political pressure to make the Israeli occupation and settlements policy points of negotiation.

But if Hamas really wants to be respected internationally, the group must refrain from attacks on Israeli civilians.

Every human being, whether Palestinian or Israeli, has the right on the same humane treatment and in my opinion, even living under an occupation as severe as the Israeli occupation of Palestine does not give a person or group the right to violate the rights of their occupiers.

"Power in defense of freedom is greater than power on behalf of tyranny and oppression."
- Malcolm X

P.S.

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