

HAMAS

**politics, charity, and terrorism
in the service of jihad**

matthew levitt

**foreword by ambassador dennis ross,
u.s. envoy to the middle east, 1988–2000**

yale university press / new haven and london
Published in cooperation with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Copyright © 2006 by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Set in Minion and Franklin Gothic by Integrated Publishing Solutions.

Printed in the United States of America by R.R. Donnelley, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Levitt, Matthew, 1970–

Hamas : politics, charity, and terrorism in the service of jihad / Matthew Levitt; foreword by Dennis Ross.

 p. cm.

 Includes bibliographical references and index.

 ISBN-13: 978-0-300-11053-1 (alk. paper)

 ISBN-10: 0-300-11053-7 (alk. paper)

 1. Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-Islāmīyah. 2. Da'wah (Islam) 3. Suicide bombings—Israel. I. Title

JQ1830.A98H3756 2006

956.95'3044—dc22

2006004381

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In honor of all victims of terrorism

Dedicated to Dina, my guiding light

CONTENTS

FOREWORD BY AMBASSADOR DENNIS ROSS, U.S. ENVOY TO THE MIDDLE EAST, 1988–2000	ix
INTRODUCTION	
Hamas' Muddied Waters	1
CHAPTER 1	
Origins of the Hamas Dawa	8
CHAPTER 2	
Terror and the Hamas Political Leadership	33
CHAPTER 3	
Economic Jihad: How Hamas Finances Terror	52
CHAPTER 4	
The Logistics of Terror: Tactical Uses of the Dawa	80
CHAPTER 5	
Teaching Terror: How the Dawa Radicalizes Palestinian Society	107
CHAPTER 6	
Foreign Funding of Hamas	143
CHAPTER 7	
State Support for Hamas	171
CHAPTER 8	
Will Hamas Target the West?	203

CHAPTER 9	
Displacing the Hamas Dawa	229
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	251
NOTES	253
INDEX	315

FOREWORD

Ambassador Dennis Ross
U.S. Envoy to the Middle East, 1988–2000

Who is Hamas? Where did they come from? How do they fund their activities? Why do they seem to have roots in Palestinian society? Can they accept anything but struggle and conflict with Israel? And, will they ever lash out at the United States or will they always restrict their terror to Israel?

Matthew Levitt addresses these and other questions in his very timely book on the Hamas. In Arabic, Hamas is an abbreviation for the Islamic Resistance Movement. The word literally means “zeal,” and that certainly describes those who have led this group.

As an organization, Hamas is much talked about, but poorly understood. Given its stunning victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in early 2006, Hamas is no longer a fringe player in the Palestinian political scene. While the champion of suicide bombing against Israelis, Hamas has developed an appeal among Palestinians for several reasons: It is not corrupt in the sea of corruption that has so characterized the Palestinian Authority. It provides services—clinics, after-school programs, food distribution centers—that the Palestinian Authority fails to offer. It has demonstrated that it can hurt Israelis when, in the eyes of Palestinians, the Israelis have been hurting them.

Notwithstanding the reasons for Hamas having a following among Palestinians, its popularity throughout the 1990s never exceeded 30 percent of the Palestinian population. And even that figure greatly exaggerated its standing for most of the period when Palestinians were more hopeful about the future. Support for Hamas has grown out of frustration and anger and the ability of the organization to fill a vacuum of leadership.

If there is a secular alternative that is credible, most Palestinians would support it, particularly because Palestinian society remains far more secular than religiously devout. If there was hope and belief again in the possibility of peace, Hamas would again be reduced in terms of its political potential. In reality, most Palestinians would like to have a normal life, and, as long as Hamas is defined by its commitment to confrontation with Israel, Hamas will not be able to deliver what most Palestinians seek. For that, Hamas would have to change its credo and objectives.

This book spells out in persuasive detail why Hamas is unlikely to undergo such a transformation. Dr. Levitt shows that Hamas emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt. He outlines the connection and, indeed, dependency of Hamas on the *dawa*, the social support structure and services of the organization. He demonstrates clearly that there is no separation between the so-called political and military wings of Hamas—both being tied together in an organic whole, with the political wing providing the guidance and the religious justification for the suicidal attacks against Israelis in buses, restaurants, and shops.

Dr. Levitt also exposes the use of charities to fund Hamas. While some of the funds from charities certainly have gone to finance the services of the *dawa*, they have also gone to support terror attacks. And, of course, even the services are shaped to recruit and socialize new suicide bombers.

Finally, this book reveals the extent to which Hamas uses funding from foreign sources to pursue its aims. Support has come from fronts in the United States, Europe, and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

This book would be of great value if it only provided this explanation of Hamas, its roots, its character, its funding, and its operations. But it does more, spelling out how the Palestinian Authority should have competed with Hamas by replacing the *dawa* and by providing the critical social services in its place.

Ultimately, it has been the corruption of the Palestinian Authority, the failures within Palestinian society, and the loss of hope that have fueled Hamas and its purposes. To be sure, Hamas is not passive in this regard. It has consistently carried out acts of terror whenever there has been even a hint of progress toward peace—not only because it does not believe in it, but also because it is unlikely to be able to survive in circumstances where peace, prosperity, and a sense of possibility characterize the Palestinian reality and its future.

With Hamas having now catapulted itself into a position of potential power, the prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians have never been lower. Nonetheless, Hamas for its own reasons may seek a continuing period of calm with Israel. Hamas in power needs to deliver reform and change—the banner it ran under—and that gives it a strong reason to avoid confrontation for the time being. After all, it can hardly remake Palestinian society, end corruption, lawlessness, and chaos on the one hand and produce economic renewal on the other if it is at war with Israel. Hamas is bound to seek help from the international community to produce societal renewal even while it resists all efforts to get it to give up its principles of re-

jection of Israel and promotion of violence. The international community should neither let it off the hook nor allow it to escape the dilemmas of actually having to govern. Hamas must be put in a position of having to choose: govern successfully by transforming itself or fail and be discredited.

Will it transform itself? Unlikely, but if one wants to understand what makes Hamas and its leaders tick and what may be the best ways to exert leverage on it, a good place to start is with Matthew Levitt's book. Policy makers would be well advised to shape their strategy with his prescriptions in mind.

introduction: hamas' muddied waters

How does Hamas, a militant Islamist group in a relatively secular society fatigued by conflict, attract and retain its base of operatives and supporters? How does it radicalize, recruit, and dispatch Palestinian suicide bombers and still woo Palestinian voters to vote it into power as the ruling political party? While it may be the case that Hamas' victory in Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006 was in large part a protest vote against the septuagenarian kleptocrats of Yasser Arafat's Fatah party, the vote undeniably demonstrated that under the right conditions a majority of Palestinians was willing to accept and support Hamas. But is this support a result of the group's bold suicide bombings targeting Israelis, of its campaign to Islamize Palestinian society, of its reputation for honesty in a sea of political corruption, of its grassroots social activism, or of some or all of the above? How are the political, charitable, and terrorist activities of Hamas to be understood and reconciled? Are these disparate activities carried out by separate and unconnected wings of a larger movement, or is Hamas a unitary organization that sees good works and murder as equally legitimate means to achieve its non-negotiable ends?

Hamas leaders, for their part, are keen to stress that Hamas is "one body." The day before Hamas' electoral victory, Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Zahar vowed that the group's military wing would never be disbanded. Miriam Farhat, a Hamas candidate who won a seat in the Palestinian Legislative Council, stressed that the group's participation in politics would not moderate its stance on continued terror attacks: "Those who say we have changed our methods, we will never change." Farhat entered the electoral race with a measure of name recognition as the mother who appeared on

her son's martyrdom video blessing his decision to participate in a Hamas suicide attack. Indeed, Hamas relies on its political and social activists and organizations to build grassroots support for the movement, to spot and recruit future operatives, to provide day jobs and cover to current operatives, and to serve as the logistical and financial support network for the group's terror cells. Often the Hamas operatives running the group's political and charitable offices are closely tied to the group's terror cells, or are themselves current or former terror-cell members. Muddying the waters between its political activism, good works, and terrorist attacks, Hamas is able to use its overt political and charitable organizations as a financial and logistical support network for its terrorist operations.¹

Some of the ways these institutions support Hamas terrorism are by glorifying acts of violence, Islamizing Palestinian society, and providing a social welfare safety net for Hamas activists and their families. As an Arab commentator noted in the online edition of the Egyptian weekly *al-Ahram*, "In Palestine, when young men and women who carry out suicide attacks are known to the entire public [sic]. Their pictures adorn homes, their stories are told, and their families get financial help." In the Palestinian context, the commentator continued, "a young man or woman undergoes a process of psychological preparation, a process captured on film which [is] later released to the public. The bomber is promised paradise in the after-life and glory in this one. Only God knows what goes on in paradise, but in the life the bomber's achievement is recorded and glorified." The financial assistance provided to martyrs' families also comes through Hamas *dawa* organizations under the banner of humanitarian aid.²

Little attention, however, is paid to the support Hamas terrorists receive through a network of political leaders and charitable organizations one, two, or several steps removed from terrorist attacks and operating under the guise of legitimate political, humanitarian, social, and communal activities. Understandably, analysts and pundits commenting on Hamas focus either on the group's surprise electoral victory in January 2006 or on its indiscriminate suicide bombings and other attacks. But what these commentators miss by overlooking this network of political and charitable support is the how and why behind Hamas' dramatic electoral and operational success.

THE MYTH OF DISPARATE WINGS

As a result of the heightened focus on exposing terrorist networks in the post-9/11 global environment, investigators have revealed how terrorist groups systematically conceal their activities behind charitable, social, and

INTRODUCTION 3

political fronts. Indeed, many of these fronts have seen their officials arrested, their assets seized, and their offices shut down by authorities. Still, Hamas benefits from an ostensible distinction drawn by some analysts between its “military” and “political” or “social” wings. Analysts who make such a distinction regularly dwell on the good works of Hamas, rarely looking at the connections between these activities and the attacks on civilians and the suicide bombings that are the organization’s trademark. Because of the notion that Hamas has independent “wings,” its political and charitable fronts are allowed to operate openly in many Western and Middle Eastern capitals. In these cities, Islamic social welfare groups tied to Hamas are often tolerated when their logistical and financial support for Hamas is conducted under the rubric of charitable or humanitarian assistance.

While convenient for Hamas and its supporters, this distinction is contradicted by the consistent if scattered findings of investigators, journalists, and analysts. A review of the evidence regarding the integration of Hamas’ political activism, social services, and terrorism demonstrates the centrality of the group’s overt activities to the organization’s ability to recruit, indoctrinate, train, fund, and dispatch suicide bombers to attack civilian targets.

The social welfare organizations of Hamas answer to the same political leaders who play hands-on roles in Hamas terrorist attacks. In some cases, the mere existence of these institutions is invoked to classify Hamas as a social welfare rather than a terrorist organization. To debunk these specious assumptions, it is necessary to fully expose what Hamas calls the *dawa* (its social welfare and proselytization network). This is sometimes difficult because, as one U.S. official explained, “Hamas is loosely structured, with some elements working clandestinely and others working openly through mosques and social service institutions to recruit members, raise money, organize activities, and distribute propaganda.”³

Nevertheless, there is ample evidence of the role Hamas social institutions and political leaders play in the terror activities directed and authorized by Hamas leaders and commanders. Consider, for example, the case of the Hamas suicide bombing at the Park Hotel in Netanya on Passover Eve, March 27, 2002.⁴

ANATOMY OF A SUICIDE BOMBING

Holocaust survivor Clara Rosenberger wanted to feel safe after a shooting attack in Netanya a few weeks earlier, so she decided to celebrate the Passover Seder in a communal setting at the Park Hotel. It was a decision she and 154 other wounded victims would live to regret; 29 less fortunate vic-

tims died when Hamas suicide bomber Abdel Aziz Basset Odeh, disguised as a woman to hide the explosives-laden vest strapped to his torso, entered the hotel dining hall and detonated the bomb sewn into his clothes in the midst of some 250—mostly elderly—people.⁵

The attack, perpetrated on a major Jewish holiday and targeting elderly civilians, was the most devastating one since the outbreak of the Intifada in September 2000. Despite early setbacks like the capture or killing of two bomb makers and the loss of one of two planned suicide bombers to the common cold, the Nablus-Tulkarm cell responsible for the attack successfully executed the most severe in a string of suicide bombings. Coming on the heels of this surge in Palestinian suicide bombings, the Park Hotel attack led to the reinvasion of much of the West Bank by Israeli forces in Operation Defensive Shield in March and April 2002. At the time of the attack Arab leaders were meeting in Beirut at an Arab League summit where Saudi officials proposed that Arab states agree to recognize Israel and establish normal relations in the event of a just two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin told Palestinian television that the attack was a message rejecting the Arab League proposal, adding, “the Palestinians will not surrender.”⁶

Beyond its timing and deadly effect, the attack also stands out as a paradigmatic example of how Hamas political and social activists play hands-on roles in the group’s terror attacks. The mastermind of the attack, Abbas al-Sayyid, served simultaneously as both the overt political Hamas leader in Tulkarm and the covert head of the Qassam Brigades terrorist cell there. Wearing these two hats, al-Sayyid gave public speeches and represented Hamas at public functions even as he secretly recruited military operatives and suicide bombers, received orders and funds from Hamas leaders in Lebanon and Syria, and personally planned and oversaw the cell’s operations. Al-Sayyid openly acknowledged his contacts with Hamas leaders abroad, but maintained these were purely political in nature. In fact, al-Sayyid took active measures to hide the military nature of these contacts. For example, while funds for Hamas political activity—\$10,000—\$13,000 a month—were overtly transferred from Hamas leaders abroad into al-Sayyid’s personal bank account, Hamas leaders in Syria transferred funds for Hamas terrorist operations to an account al-Sayyid opened under a fictitious American-sounding name.⁷ At the operational level, almost all the Hamas terrorists involved in the attack rose through the ranks of Hamas through the group’s Islamic Bloc student movement. Al-Sayyid himself began drifting toward Hamas while in high school after hearing the lectures of

Sheikh Jamal Mansour, a prominent Hamas political and dawa leader. Three of the operatives, including both intended suicide bombers, were members of a singing troupe called al-Ansar that lauded Hamas and its suicide bombers. Hamas dawa activists and institutions performed a variety of key functions like helping fugitive cell members hide from authorities. In one case female Hamas activists helped a cell member move around Tulkarm disguised as a woman. Covert operatives also used mosques tied to Hamas as meeting places and as dead-drops where messages and matériel—including the suicide bombing vests—were left and retrieved by parties unknown to one another. Long after the attack, the Hamas dawa would use the Park Hotel bombing as a means to radicalize and recruit future operatives by printing posters glorifying the attack and naming community events like a soccer tournament after Abdel Aziz Basset Odeh, the suicide bomber.⁸

MUDDYING THE WATERS

Inside the Palestinian territories, the battery of mosques, schools, orphanages, summer camps, and sports leagues sponsored by Hamas are integral parts of an overarching apparatus of terror. These Hamas entities engage in incitement and radicalize society, and undertake recruitment efforts to socialize even the youngest children to aspire to die as martyrs. They provide logistical and operational support for weapons smuggling, reconnaissance, and suicide bombings. They provide day jobs for field commanders and shelter fugitive operatives.

So why did Hamas surprise everyone, including itself, when it won 44.5 percent of the vote and became the majority party in the election of January 2006? Because Hamas also provides desperately needed social services to needy Palestinians and—until Hamas' stunning electoral victory—served as a de facto Islamist opposition to the secular Palestinian Authority (PA).⁹

It is a painful reality that Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza have endured a deplorably low standard of living for years. Palestinians suffer not only from living under occupation, but from the neglect of a corrupt Palestinian leadership as well. As a result, the economic, social, and health conditions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are truly miserable, leaving a void that groups like Hamas are all too eager to fill.

Palestinians suffer from extensive economic hardship. The West Bank and Gaza economies are in crisis, as evidenced by an unemployment rate as high as 33.5 percent in 2003. With a struggling economy and limited employment opportunities, it is not surprising that by 2004 approximately

three-fourths of the Palestinian population living in the West Bank and Gaza survived below the poverty line of \$2 per day. Health conditions in the West Bank, and especially Gaza, are very poor. As of 2003, 30 percent of Palestinian children under age five suffered from chronic malnutrition and 21 percent from acute malnutrition. In 2001, Palestinian Ministry of Health officials estimated that the infant mortality rate in Gaza was at 40 deaths per 1,000 live births.¹⁰

Clearly, the vast majority of Palestinians are in desperate need of assistance, ranging from unemployment compensation to food, childcare, and access to proper medical care. Both the Israeli government and Palestinian leadership have consistently failed to provide these essential services to the Palestinian community. The situation is further complicated by Hamas' efforts to capitalize on this humanitarian crisis to further its own agenda.

Hamas has successfully blurred the lines between political and charitable activities and terrorism in large part because many governments, experts, and academics continue to subscribe to the shallow argument that terrorist groups maintain distinct social, political, and militant wings. In fact, Hamas political leaders are intimately involved in the group's terrorist activities, as are the group's charities and social welfare organizations. Hamas uses the mosques and hospitals it maintains as meeting places; buries caches of arms and explosives under its own kindergarten playgrounds; uses social-welfare operatives' cars and homes to ferry and hide fugitives; and transfers and launders funds for terrorist activity through local charity committees.

The Hamas *dawa* serves several distinct functions in support of the group's objectives and through which it facilitates Hamas attacks. In many cases, *dawa* operatives and organizations fund and participate in Hamas attacks. Far more frequently, however, the *dawa* functions as Hamas' logistical support network and provides day jobs to Hamas leaders and operatives. Hamas *dawa* charities and social organizations radicalize Palestinian society, and their activities are targeted to building grassroots support for Hamas at the expense of more moderate Palestinian groups.

Hamas political offices, *dawa* organizations, and Qassam Brigades terror cells are funded through a combination of means. These include charitable giving, via both genuine Islamist charities and Hamas organizations fronting as legitimate charities, by states like Iran and Saudi Arabia, by individual wealthy donors, through front companies and criminal enterprises, and in cooperative relationships with other terrorist groups. Shutting off the flow of funds from such sources to Hamas is absolutely critical, but

must be accompanied by an international humanitarian aid effort—one with strict oversight components at both the donor and recipient ends of the aid spectrum—to fill the gap in desperately needed social services that shutting Hamas fronts would create. The international support necessary to crack down on Hamas, however, can be achieved only when governments, experts, and academics develop a fuller understanding of the role the Hamas dawa plays in the group's suicide and other terror attacks.

Moreover, while Hamas is not an al-Qaeda affiliate, the repercussions of Hamas terror echo far beyond the borders of the West Bank and Gaza. Not only does Hamas threaten peace and regional security in the Middle East, but by fanning the flames of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and laboring to undermine peace initiatives, the group directly contributes to the rabid anti-Americanism spreading throughout the region. To counter such a multilayered threat, one must first expose the veil of legitimacy behind which it hides. This book is the first open-source effort to do just that, and employs evidence that is qualitatively and quantitatively unmatched on the subject. It details the intimate ties between the political, social, and military “wings” of Hamas, catalogues the means by which Hamas political leaders and dawa organizations support Hamas terror, and offers concrete and detailed examples of such support. To do so as comprehensively as possible, and to offer the most concrete examples, the study makes use of previously undisclosed intelligence material, including declassified reports from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Canadian Secret Intelligence Service (CSIS), Israel Security Agency (ISA, or Shin Bet), Israel police, and more. These sources are supplemented by open-source material, including U.S. government affidavits and other court documents, seized Palestinian intelligence documents, congressional testimonies, official press releases, government and academic studies, press reports, and extensive personal interviews in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, Jordan, Europe, and the United States. The book was in the final stages of completion when the elections of 2006 occurred, and minor revisions have been made to reflect the outcome for the sake of clarification.