

Understanding Hamas



The Palestinian unity government, Ismail Haniyeh center. (photo: Said Khatib/AFP)

In 2006 following Hamas's success in the Palestinian legislative elections, Ismail Haniyeh, the newly elected Prime Minister wrote a letter to President Bush. In this letter Haniyeh asked for his new government to be recognised, he offered establishing a border on 1967 boundaries and agreed to a long-term truce.

Haniyeh wrote,

“We are an elected government which came through a democratic process.”

“We are so concerned about stability and security in the area that we don't mind having a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders and offering a truce for many years.”

“We are not warmongers, we are peace makers and we call on the American government to have direct negotiations with the elected government,” he wrote. Haniyeh also urged the American government to act to end the international boycott “because the continuation of this situation will encourage violence and chaos in the whole region.”

President Bush never responded to the letter and the United States continued its boycott of Hamas and of Gaza.

Since their election in 2006 Hamas made repeated efforts to establish diplomatic contacts with EU and American representatives. All of which were denied. Hamas were elected through a democratic process which the EU welcomed, paid for, monitored and declared to be free and fair. While secret or unofficial meetings continued to take place between Hamas and Western diplomats, the content of

these meetings was always same. “Accept the Quartet’s principles or we will continue to treat you as an illegitimate actor and boycott you.”

In a leaked 2007 correspondence with Washington, Israeli Director of Intelligence, Amos Yadlin stated that “Israel would be happy if Hamas took over Gaza, as then the IDF could treat Gaza as a hostile country.” And this is exactly what has happened. Hamas took over Gaza through democratic elections and Israel treats it as a hostile zone, which we can observe occurring at this very moment. Israel stated that Hamas were terrorists and Western leaders did not challenge this line. On the contrary, they refused to meet diplomatically with Hamas leaders, they cut off all possible financing to the newly elected government and they supported Israel’s complete sanction and seizure of Gazan territory. Israel stated that Hamas were terrorists, so European and American governments responded accordingly.

This line has become so powerful in Western government’s state policies and mainstream media outlets the entire discourse around Gaza has been reduced to Israel’s ‘right to defend itself’ against Hamas; Israel’s defense against terrorism. Hamas has become synonymous with terrorism and Gaza has become synonymous with ‘terrorist harbouring territory’. As such, Israel has endowed itself with the heinous luxury of unmediated, indiscriminate and radically disproportionate action, because it says that it is defending itself from terrorism. And western governments and western mainstream media outlets continue to buy, support and spread this violent misconstruction of Hamas’s identity.

As someone who has met with many Hamas members and leaders I am deeply disappointed and disheartened, by mainstream western discourse’s reductionist and racist understanding of Hamas, its actions and of its position in Palestinian society. During a three month research trip in Gaza, September-December 2012, I had the opportunity to talk with Hamas members and leaders regarding the western response to their success in the 2006 elections. In my conversations they conveyed their own frustration and sadness at being so profoundly misunderstood and misrepresented.

Ahmad Majdi, an area manager for Hamas in Gaza, told me they are very aware that many external powers view them as terrorists, which they explain are based on mistaken reports from Israel. Ahmed Yousef, an advisor to Prime Minister Haniyeh, said they know they have been dehumanised and demonised in the West, and so they encourage western officials to come and meet with them so they can get a better understanding of Hamas and its policies, rather than simply stereotyping it. Yousef said Hamas had an open door policy to Western diplomats; Hamas desired to be recognised and engaged with diplomatically. However, US and EU state representatives refused to recognise the newly elected government and they continue with their financial and diplomatic sanctioning of Hamas.

Hamas leader, Ghazi Hamad told me, “when the EU opposed Hamas and squeezed them in a corner they wanted to make it fail. To show the world that we don’t want the Islamists in power. We don’t want democracy to come through the Islamists.”

The obsessive focus on the Hamas charter

Most often discussions regarding Hamas in the Western media begin with its notorious 1988 Charter. But have media outlets who spew obsessively narrow readings of Hamas's military position even bothered to do any research into its political work?

Have they bothered reading further analysis of this material by other experts, such as Menachem Klein, who wrote,

“The differences between the party's platform and the Islamic Charter do not represent an attempt at deception or the empty and unconsidered use of words. They are a product of a change and modification of lines of thought as a part of the process by which Hamas has become a political movement.”

Klein explains that Hamas will not revoke their Charter because it represents an important historical document for the group, which was written at the time of their inception during the first Intifada. The Charter, however, is not representative of Hamas in its current form. There are more contemporary Hamas documents, such as their 2006 election manifesto, which describes Hamas's broader vision for Palestinian society and which author Khaled Hroub states, “could be said that the document was designed to carry out exactly the kinds of reform that had been demanded by Western governments and financial institutions.” Still, US and EU officials continue to be obtusely obsessed with Hamas's Charter. Through this reductionist and reified reading of Hamas, Western officials continue to be blind to Hamas's politics. Hamas founder and current member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Khalil al-Aya expressed in an interview,

“Hamas gave lots of flexibility in lots of places. We had things that were strategic and things that were fixed. For example, we had that program with all the fractions of Gaza/ Palestine- we agreed for it. And until now the EU did not catch this initiative, and see that Hamas was already very flexible. And we have the agreements with Israel with the other parties and we accept 1967 borders- with the right to return. And this is big. But this did not affect them; it did not move them.”

Hamas is a pragmatic and flexible political actor and focusing on its 1988 Charter completely misses Hamas's contemporary identity. However, disgracefully the US and European states maintain their uneducated or purposefully misleading understanding of Hamas.

It appears as though when discussing Hamas or reporting on its activities it seems sufficient to regurgitate Israel's purposely scare mongering and racist discourse.

Perhaps what is more troubling is how the general public is also swallowing this horrendous misrepresentation of Hamas. Tweets, blogs, comments left on news reports are also engaged in this continual equating of Hamas with terrorists and Gazans with terrorist supporters. People who know absolutely nothing about Hamas or about Gaza feel comfortable supporting the bombing of Gaza

because Israel has stated that it has the right to defend itself. The public eye remains viciously blind to the destruction of Gaza and of Gazan lives because they appear to believe that they are all just a bunch of terrorists.

Israel has been so tragically successful in pushing, publicizing and controlling this particular line that it has installed a state of delusion among Western leaders and Western publics.

Palestinian unity

In 2007 Hamas and Fatah agreed to form a national unity government after the signing of the Mecca Agreement. Hamas leaders had been encouraged to form this government in order to receive international recognition and ease the boycott on Gaza and their government. After signing the agreement Prime Minister Haniyeh dissolved the 10th government, which was composed primarily of Hamas representatives and formed a national unity government, which comprised of an equal number of Fatah and Hamas members, as well as a significant number of independent representatives. Despite these changes Western leaders continued their boycott of Hamas and the siege on Gaza. In an interview, Hamas leader Ahmed Yousef shared his frustration at the continued policy of boycott,

“We are disappointed with the policies, because they are not fulfilling what they promised. They said to us, ‘when Hamas has the national unity government then the Europeans will open the door for Hamas. But unfortunately we had the unity government, and they didn’t open the door- they kept the door shut.”

Now seven years later, after a violent policy of collective punishment on the people of Gaza for voting in Hamas, Fatah and Hamas have tried to give it another attempt. Unfortunately, today we are not talking about this unity government. Unfortunately, today Western leaders are not following up on their desire to engage with this unity government. Unfortunately, today Fatah and Hamas are not talking about how this united front will assist in strengthening Palestinian society in their attempt to salvage what may be left of their political sovereignty. Instead, we are talking about the bombing of Gaza which continues to be regarded as Israel’s right to defend itself. Israel’s narrative of terrorism has again destroyed Hamas’s opportunity to govern as a political actor and western leaders have been stupidly or maliciously complicit in this. The people of Gaza continue to be reduced to an Israeli discourse that depicts them as terrorists, which has allowed for endless bombing and incessant attacks that continue at this very moment.