

PALESTINIAN POLITICS *Hagai Segal*

Can the Hamas leopard change its spots?

Since Hamas' shock victory in the Palestinian election on January 25, one question has dominated – will Hamas now moderate. Having become by far the largest party in Palestinian politics, international attention has focused on whether the radical movement that has become synonymous with the suicide bomb will adapt a more pragmatic stance. Last Friday, we had our answer.

Khaled Meshaal, head of Hamas' political bureau and de facto head of the movement, told Palestinian newspaper *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*: "If you [Israel] are willing to accept the principle of a long-term truce then we will negotiate [but] we will never recognise the legitimacy of the Zionist state [Israel] that was established on our land."

While talk of a "long-term truce" may seem positive, regional and international decision-makers have focused on the reiteration of Hamas' stance on Israel's existence. Indeed, international aid donors to the

Palestinian Authority, as well as PLO president Mahmoud Abbas and the Arab League, have made it abundantly clear that Hamas' acceptance of Israel is a prerequisite for its acceptance as a party of government. Israel, of course, will not countenance negotiations with a group calling for its destruction.

It seems highly unlikely, however, that Hamas' position on Israel will change soon. The group's charter, which is its guiding covenant, is even more uncompromising than the sentiments expressed by Mr Meshaal. And it has always been perceived by the group as more than a political manifesto; it is an unalterable expression of theological obligations incumbent on all Muslims.

Its tone is set in its preamble – "Israel will rise and will remain erect until Islam eliminates it as it had eliminated its predecessors" – with an emphasis on jihad, or holy war, dominating the rest of the document. "Nothing is loftier or deeper ... than

waging jihad against the enemy". The most pertinent and worrying sections relate to peace, however. It says: "... the so-called peaceful solutions to the Palestinian problem are all contrary to the beliefs of Hamas. For renouncing any part of Palestine means renouncing part of the religion." Then there is the chilling conclusion: "There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by jihad. The initiatives and international conferences are but a waste of time, an exercise in futility."

Armed militant movements change, and many examples of groups laying down their weapons and becoming leaders of democratic governments provide hope. Yet all the telling examples – from Irgun (a militant Zionist group operating from 1931 to 1948) and the Palestine Liberation Organisation to the African National Congress and Irish Republican Army – were political movements, not religious

ones believing they are implementing God's will. We downplay the significance of this distinction at our peril.

Whatever its policy platform, Hamas is the democratic choice of the Palestinian people. The international community now has to deal with the consequences.

But it should also not be forgotten that the PLO still has a profound say in whether Hamas becomes a part of, let alone leads, the next government.

Israel has vowed not to send "one Shekel more" if Hamas (in its present form) enters government, and similar messages are coming from Washington and the European Union. The immediate economic viability of the Palestinian Authority may just rest on whether Hamas chooses to moderate or not.

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