

Dealing with Hamas: Palestinians make their choice

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue



Hamas was formed in 1987 as an Islamist movement in opposition to Israel. It was linked to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. In spite of its resistance rhetoric, the organization received early covert backing and financial support from Israel. In promoting Hamas as an alternative to Yasir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization, Israel was following the adage that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

In January Hamas defeated Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah Party to win a majority of seats in the Palestinian legislature. Hamas won thanks to party discipline and a promise to maintain graft-free services. Its leaders limited their candidates to the exact number of seats open in each district. Fatah leaders lacked that discipline, and diluted their vote total by "overfiling" in every district.

Hamas could not have accomplished this rise to power without Israel's ongoing occupation, which has caused the Palestinian population to become increasingly angry and frustrated. Israel has controlled Palestinian leaders to a humiliating degree ever since 1994, when it brought Arafat to Gaza to serve as sheriff over "his people."

Israel gave Arafat a presidency, a flag and a headquarters in Gaza City, and it promised him an airport and seaport (still not delivered). These token gifts distracted outside attention while Israel increased its settlement building program and tightened its military control over the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem.

Arafat was an ineffective sheriff. He refused to risk a civil war by taking on an increasingly strong Hamas, and with his limited administrative skills, he allowed corruption to grow within his government. He failed to squeeze even a few concessions from Israel to lighten the occupation grip.

When President Bill Clinton invited Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak for peace talks at Camp David in 2000, Arafat naively expected Clinton to serve as an honest broker. The offer he was given was an ultimatum that humiliated the Palestinians by demanding that Arafat accept a bantustan state with borders controlled by Israel, give up claims on East Jerusalem and repudiate the “right to return” for Palestinian refugees. Arafat refused the offer, a move that lost him world support even though it briefly enhanced his standing at home.

During the recent campaign, Hamas reminded voters that it had provided social services with more efficiency and less corruption than the government. Although Hamas was signaling that it was willing to be pragmatic and ready to assume a governing role, the U.S. media hardly noticed. This would explain why the media accepted Israel’s claim that the Hamas victory came as a “complete surprise.” In fact, Israel’s network of spies must have known that Hamas was winning consistently in local elections, and that Fatah leaders were overfilling in the districts. Israel, by insisting that the election outcome was surprising, could now tell the world, “The terrorists are coming!”; abandon a peace process that it never really endorsed; and have its way with the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem.

Some inside Israel have objected to its rejection of the Hamas victory. Gila Svirsky, an Israeli activist with the Women’s Coalition for a Just Peace, wrote that the election was not an endorsement of violence. Rather, Hamas won because of “Israel’s failure to sit down and negotiate an end to the occupation.”

Amira Hass, writing in the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz*, said that Hamas’s victory came in part “from Israel’s supremacist and patronizing position, from [which it] dictates the agenda of media issues that portray the Palestinians as yet another persecutor in a historic chain of persecutors of Jews, and Israel as a victim.”

On election morning in Bethlehem, I walked to the nearest polling place with a group of United Methodists from the U.S. who were on a tour of church-supported Palestinian mission projects. We found a large gathering of people, some waiting in line to vote, others handing out campaign literature. The square was plastered with campaign posters. The Hamas green was noticeable—Bethlehem has elected seven Hamas members to its city council.

The day before the election I attended a meeting between a team of international observers led by former president Jimmy Carter and members of the Palestinian Central Election Commission, headed by Hanna Nasir, the retired president of Bir Zeit University, who was deported to Lebanon by the Israelis in 1975. When Carter asked how election preparations had gone, Nasir responded that the commission faced many difficulties in trying to run a democratic election under a military occupation. Still, he said, he anticipated a smooth process and a fair outcome.

Nasir described the problems facing Palestinian voters who live in East Jerusalem. Israel, which claims East Jerusalem as Israeli territory (contrary to international law and numerous UN resolutions), allowed only 6,300 of the eligible 125,000 voters to cast their “absentee ballots” in six East Jerusalem post offices. This approach perpetuates the claim that East Jerusalem is “now and forever an Israeli city.”

Israel set the limit of 1,050 voters per post office—a total of 6,300—because Israel determined that only that many could be accommodated. That meant that the other Jerusalem voters had to travel into the West Bank to vote, and maneuver around the separation wall that blocks most of East Jerusalem from the West Bank.

Peter Bourne, an official observer in the Jenin area, described the voters in Jenin, site of an Israeli invasion in 2002: “Most were young and dynamic, some were religiously fundamentalist Muslims, but most were not. They all viewed Fatah as what we would describe in the U.S. as ‘the old fat white guys’ who had been in power too long and both were corrupt and had failed to deliver any benefit to local communities.”

In a postelection analysis, Azzam Tamimi, head of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought in London, quoted the words of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, who was head of Hamas before he was assassinated by an Israeli missile. Yassin had said that Hamas “shall never recognize the theft of our land, but we are willing to negotiate a ceasefire whose duration can be as long as a generation, and let future generations on both sides decide where to go then.”

Many believe that Yassin's statement will be reflected in the stance taken by the Hamas government, which is likely to be led by Ismail Haniya, 42. Haniya has been described in a *New York Times* analysis as a pragmatist and a potential Palestinian prime minister.

Raji Sourani of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights says that Haniya is the Hamas leader who "commands the most respect [in Palestine]." A few days after the election, Haniya said he wanted to work with the international community and asked it not to terminate aid to the Palestinians. Haniya is pragmatic, but he is also a politician. He has declared that he still would not "accept Israel's right to exist," the defiant platform on which Hamas ran.

Focusing on that part of the Hamas platform has long been Israel's way of controlling the debate. From the Palestinian perspective, the question is not whether Hamas will recognize Israel's right to exist, but whether Israel will accept Palestine's right to exist as a state. Former CIA analyst and Middle East expert Kathleen Christison says that this is the key question—for Israel already exists, but Palestine does not.

When Israel announced that it would withhold tax dollars it had collected from Palestinians, *Ha'aretz* editorialized: "First, quite simply, this is not our money, it is theirs. Second, starving Palestinians will not make our lives more secure." Acting prime minister Ehud Olmert told the BBC that "Israel would continue transferring monthly tax payments to the Palestinian Authority as long as Hamas was not in control."

Hamas won in a free and fair democratic election. Not to accept that fact is to announce a new definition of democracy in the Middle East: election winners may govern only if they are approved by the U.S. and Israel.