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Eyal Pascovich
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Zionist lawyer, especially in the conclusion. Here, he strangely claims that the IDF committed more atrocities than the Arabs without proving it, and falsely argues, for example, that the massacre of the Hadassah convoy to Mount Scopus (13 April) was a ‘battle’.

Finally, the book is marred by mistakes in the spelling of names (e.g. not Cisling but Zisling, Rusnak, not Rosnak or Roznak). Last but not least Morris should know that the word ‘right’ (of return of Arab refugees) is not mentioned in the UNGA resolution 194 of 11 December 1948.

Joseph Heller
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Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence
Jeroen Gunning

Jeroen Gunning opens his very interesting book Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence with a critique of much of the academic, journalistic and semiacademic attention which Hamas – an impressive and controversial movement – has received in recent years, be it Western, generally opposing Hamas, or Arabic, understanding it. Gunning’s attack, from page 4 onwards, highlights their ‘static approach’ which is ‘incapable of capturing the complexity of Hamas’ and its changing nature; their reliance ‘too much on secondary sources and too little on fieldwork and interviews’, though sometimes this is due to objective constraints; and for seeing Islam through Western eyes. Gunning avoids attacking these researchers because of biased motivation but attacks them for failures concerning their ways of research, their conclusions and the way these conclusions are introduced. Gunning’s approach is practical and instils hope that by avoiding these failures it will be possible for him – as he declares – to be objective and to understand ‘the other’ by empathizing rather than sympathizing with it. The author emphasizes that he condemns ‘violence directed at non-combatants regardless of whether this violence is perpetrated by Hamas, the Israeli army, the IRA or British Special Forces’ (p.15).

Gunning’s book, written according to the social movement approach, focuses ‘on the role of democracy, religion and violence in Hamas’s political thought and practice’ (p.3) and tries to answer a number of serious questions. At their core is whether Hamas sees authority and its origins stemming from God or from the people, hence making deductions about Hamas’s willingness to change and compromise. Gunning examines this question based on the political thought of the movement (chapter 3) and its practice on three main levels: internally (chapter 4), domestically within the Palestinian arena (chapter 5) and vis-à-vis the peace process (chapter 6).

Gunning dedicates this book to the memory of his father, ‘who taught me to question dominant “truths”’. Indeed Hamas in Politics challenges stigmas and dominant ‘truths’ regarding Hamas, though Gunning did not write it provocatively, but instead just describes his own truths, his own perspective on Hamas based on materials he has explored and an impressive and long collection of interviews and
conversations he held with Hamas supporters, its activists and leadership (the ‘external’ and ‘internal’ ones, from Hamas’s civilian, and especially its political, wing) whom he thanks at the head of his acknowledgements: ‘to the many in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon and Syria who were willing to talk to me and gave their time generously to be interviewed’ (p.xi). A full list is given on pages 276–80.

Hamas as it appears in this book is not as demonic as it seems. Some of its ideas are somewhat pluralistic, and compromise, for tactical reasons and perhaps also strategically, is not necessarily interpreted by the movement as unacceptable. Gunning quotes a senior Hamas legislator: ‘I will negotiate for my usurped rights from the river to the sea, but I will suspend my rights over what was seized before 1967 in order to achieve all my rights that were taken after 1967’ (p.237). The movement is rational, and its decisions are based on considerations of gains and losses. Hamas is certainly not an autocracy, having both pragmatics and extremists (whom Gunning refers to as ‘absolutes’). It is certainly not static either, and its political agenda is changing as a consequence of its constituency, whose opinions Hamas takes into consideration rather than making assumptions about them. Moreover, it is not just that Hamas is not necessarily anti-democratic (as commonly mistaken also regarding Islam as a whole), but it implements democratic practices in its internal behaviour and the way it treats its constituency and the Palestinian Authority (at least until its violent takeover of Gaza in June 2006, mentioned just briefly as the book was concluded in August of that year). Gunning dares to assert that in its practice Hamas encourages democratization in Palestine.

Gunning found that Hamas’s leaders consider elections and the popular will – and not religion – as the primary source of authority. Their utopian Islamic regime will consist of an executive, a legislative and a judicial branch. Its legislation will be based on the Islamic law of Shari’ah, though its adoption will not be according to the model of the more radical takfiri jihadi groups like al-Qaeda. Thus, ‘Hamas does not necessarily interpret Islam conventionally or in accordance with Western stereotypes’ (and, Gunning adds, ‘a point which should be obvious but unfortunately is not’, p.170).

Gunning finds that Hamas’s political theory echoes key themes from Western political theory, themes which are interpreted – not without internal tensions – in a way that will not contradict basic ideas of Islam. Throughout the book Gunning does not hide evidence that derives from these tensions and opposes his conclusions, and actually most of his statements are followed by qualifying paragraphs, not an indication of inconsistency but an attempt to describe the picture as it is, which is complex and multi-dimensional.

More interesting findings are the quite democratic, though not bias-free, way Hamas chooses its leaders and political candidates, and that most of them do not have a military or a religious background. Hamas’s pragmatic 2006 election campaign, with the slogan ‘change and reform’, focused on socio-economic issues; in Gunning’s opinion, there is not necessarily a correlation between Hamas’s suicide attacks and its apparent aspiration to destroy the peace efforts between Israel and the Palestinians (I do not totally agree with Gunning here). Some of Gunning’s analysis is based on Western theories,¹ like his assertion that ‘Hamas can be seen as one of the factors encouraging democratization by virtue of its location in the constellation of class, state and civil society alliances’ (p.253).
Hamas in Politics is a well-structured book and very clear in presenting its ideas and arguments. One idea leads to another without unnecessary repetition. Gunning’s way of thinking is very clear and logical and he knows well the art of argumentation as a tool for convincing.  

But despite the praise this book is entitled to, it is important to express a few reservations regarding some of its slightly too decisive conclusions. First, most of the interviews Gunning bases his argument on, especially in the third chapter which examines Hamas’s political ideology, were held in the late 1990s (Gunning lived in Gaza City for nine months in 1998), nearly a decade before the book was published. Gunning’s argument (pp.23–4) that Hamas’s political ideology has not changed over time, in addition to his unconvincing argument that most of his interviewers held their positions within the movement during the last decade, contradicts his correct description of Hamas as a dynamic movement willing to make changes and compromises and influenced by political and socio-economic developments such as the collapse of the peace process after the failure of the Camp David summit in 2000 and the beginning of the al-Aqsa Intifada, both of which occurred after he conducted most of his interviews. Gunning repeats this argument several times, which may hint that he himself is not entirely convinced by it.

Second, the June 2006 events in Gaza – which occurred after most of the book was completed – might cast doubt on some of its decisive conclusions. Gunning, who foresaw these doubts, tries – in what seems a last-minute attempt – to limit the future validity of some of them. Although we cannot yet reach final conclusions, I must express my opinion that Hamas’s violent move weakens Gunning’s assertion that Hamas encourages democracy and respects symbols of civilian rule. Also Hamas’s incessant rocket launching resulting in the Israeli military operation of December 2008–January 2009 may show that Hamas is not as attentive to the opinions and will of the Gazan public (which to my understanding ascribes more importance to its economic welfare than to national, not to say Islamic, goals) as Gunning assumes. On the other hand, Gunning’s claim that Hamas is not as Islamic as may be assumed and will impose Islam by persuasion, not by force, indeed fits the current reality where Hamas does not impose Islamic law as the ruling one (and, as far as we know, there are only very few examples of Hamas enforcing a moral way of life as decreed by Islam3).

Moreover, some of Gunning’s arguments and wording are in my opinion superfluous and slightly weaken his objectivity and non-biased position. Thus, for instance, he argues that the reason why ‘individual Hamas members and units have become embroiled in vigilante violence [in moral deviations] is in part a function of the general breakdown of central authority’ (p.190). According to Gunning, Hamas is less responsible for the rise in the Palestinian popular acceptance of extreme methods of violence (like suicide attacks) than Israel is (p.217). I agree that many of the Israeli activities in the Palestinian territories – including the December 2008 operation in Gaza – arouse hatred, though the way Gunning puts it is slightly provocative.  

Also the international community is blamed by Gunning (p.239) for treating Hamas as a ‘total spoiler’ of the peace process, and not as a limited one, therefore not encouraging Hamas to become more pragmatic (again – it sounds logical, but is simultaneously slightly provocative as well).
Gunning’s focus on Hamas’s political, not its para-military, activity\(^5\) is absolutely legitimate – I believe that it is possible to separate the two wings of Hamas, although there cannot be a total separation. Gunning deals with Hamas suicide attacks merely in order to shed light on its political decisions. However, an ‘uninvolved’ reader might conclude that the picture Gunning draws is the complete one, though it is not. The picture is even more complex than the one Gunning describes in his book: though not totally ‘black’, one should not go to the other extreme by drawing it with bright colours.

Finally – and despite these very few reservations – Gunning’s book on Hamas is innovative and pioneering, and tries to examine the movement objectively. Continuing to see Hamas as a demonic movement, even if there is proof for that (but just partly, as Gunning demonstrates), will not lead towards a better future.

Eyal Pascovich

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Notes

1. Gunning adopts ‘a dialogue approach, which has sought to probe Hamas’ political theory through comparison with Western political theory’ in order to ‘sharpen our understanding of Hamas, by suggesting similarities, raising deeper questions, and highlighting differences’ (p.272).

2. Though because the topic is not a scientific one that follows after absolute facts and proofs, but part of social sciences where an important value is given to the interpretation of events, the layman reader can also easily be convinced by biased books showing opposite interpretations, like Matthew Levitt’s very biased *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (2006). Gunning attacks this book – which wrongly claims a direct and clear linkage between Hamas’ social-civilian apparatus, the Da’wa, and its military wing, based on Israeli intelligence propaganda materials – but does it in a practical, professional and somewhat gentle way (pp.23, 115, 217–18).

3. Up to now Hamas seems to fulfil what Muhammad Ghazal, a Hamas leader from Nablus, promised: ‘We do not have a policy of interfering in the personal lives of anybody. Not now. Not tomorrow. Never’ (p.189).

4. Gunning blame Israel for radicalizing public opinion in the territories (due to acts like economic blockades, arrests and targeted killing), therefore public opinion does not put pressure on Hamas to compromise (although it is true, in my opinion it is an opposite logic).

5. Gunning argues that ‘violence will receive less attention than it has received in other studies, not because it is less significant but because it has too often obscured other aspects of the organization’; and that ‘moving away from a narrow fixation with violence, and from looking at Hamas from dominant state-centric perspectives, enables us to observe a much wider set of dynamics and paint a more complex picture of an organization such as Hamas’ (p.8).

The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War

Yaacov Ro’i and Boris Morozov (eds.)


The June 1967 War has been the subject of a considerable number of studies ever since the conclusion of the Six Day War. In brief, one may divide the studies into three categories: works written shortly after the war, the so-called contemporary works with a narrow historical perspective which were based on newspapers, interviews, official declarations, memoirs of politicians and other figures who were