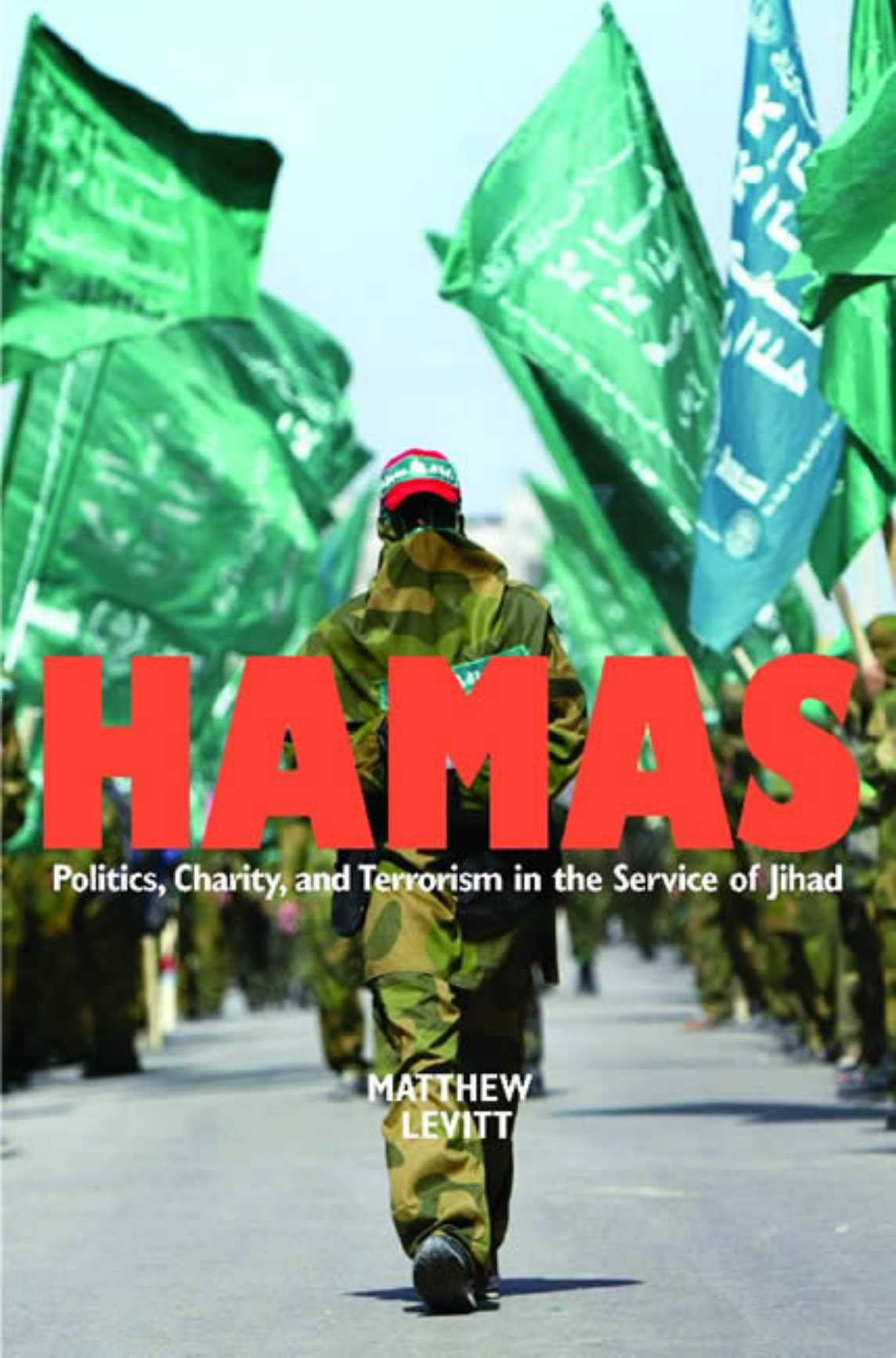
HAMAS
Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad
MATTHEW
LEVITT

HAMAS

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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 afterlife 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

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-