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**Abstract:** This is a series of papers that translate and analyze articles, reports, religious decrees, and other documents, written primarily in Arabic by Islamist scholars, clerics, operatives, or intellectuals.

**The Islamic Debate over Democracy:  
Jihadi-Salafi Responses to Hamas' Victory in the Palestinian  
Elections  
By Reuven Paz**

**Introduction**

Hamas' surprising victory in the recent Palestinian parliamentary elections—the first democratic elections to date—have raised a number of questions, not least due to the steep rate of the movement's success and its sheer unstoppable rise to power. These questions relate to Hamas' future policy, the next developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the very existence of the Palestinian Authority. Moreover, it seems that Hamas itself is unprepared to handle such an overwhelming victory, and there are signs that the need to compose the Palestinian government by itself with no significant partners puts the movement before significant challenges. .

Hamas' success of in free elections should be viewed as a landmark event taking place within the context of the highly-developed Palestinian public opinion, pluralism, and sense of democracy—a political culture quite unique in the Arab region. The elections were also regarded as another step in the U.S. campaign for the promotion of democracy in the Middle East, in line with the referendum on the new Iraqi constitution, the



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parliamentary elections in Iraq, and the U.S. pressures towards the parliamentary elections in Egypt.

The democratic process in the Arab world began in 1992 with the first free elections in Algeria, in which the Islamic front of FIS won the majority. This was followed by elections in Jordan, where the Islamic Action Front of the Muslim Brotherhood seized over one third of the seats. The Egyptian elections in December 2005, meanwhile, strengthened the power of the Muslim Brotherhood there, despite the substantial efforts by the authorities to limit the Brotherhood's potential power by means of massive waves of arrests and policies of intimidation. The Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood—the Islamic Party—supported the elections in Iraq, despite the controversy over them in the Sunni community, and the many attacks against its members and its platform by the various Jihadi insurgent groups.

In the past fifteen years it has become almost an axiom to say that free democratic elections in the Arab world give rises to the Islamic elements vis-à-vis the nationalist ones. One of the primary reasons for that is the ideological vacuum in the Arab world, where Islamism, especially that extolled by the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood, is the only ideology left. In addition, Arab governments and publics find themselves in a crisis as illustrated by a sense of social injustice perpetuated by the ruling classes, as well as almost apocalyptic sense in the course of which the old Brotherhood's slogan—Islam is the ultimate solution (*al-Islam hua al-Hall*)—has infiltrated large segments of Arab societies. Thus far, the Palestinian elections seem to close the circle of a process that started in Algeria, in which Islamic movements defeated liberation movements through democratic means, as illustrated by the Algerian FLN and the Palestinian PLO/Fatah.

### **Al-Qaeda and Hamas**

The democratic elections in Iraq and the Palestinian Authority, the semi-democratic elections in Egypt, and especially the role of the United States on one hand and of the Brotherhood on the other, have also generated controversy and an ambivalence over the attitude towards “Western” democracy among Jihadi-Salafi circles too. Moreover, Al-Qaeda, global Jihad, or Jihadi Salafiyyah, pose a threat not only to the West or to local governments, but also to mainstream Arab Islamic movements belonging to the school of the Brotherhood. In the case of Iraq, Jihadis seem, as of now to have a consensus against the participation in the democratic processes, no matter what form this process may take on. That said, the success of Hamas—a Jihadi movement, even if focused locally and only against Israel—has posted some question marks.



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These question marks are not new but rather a product of ongoing ambivalence towards Hamas in the past three to four years.<sup>1</sup> On one hand, Hamas has conducted most of the terrorist activity against “the Jewish State” while adhering to Jihadi tenets. It also served as a model of Jihadi sacrifice in the form of the suicide bombings and its martyrs (*Shuhada*). On the other hand, however, Hamas has been viewed as part of Palestinian nationalism, conducting a “Jihad for the Homeland” instead of a “Jihad for Allah.” For many supporters of global Jihad, Hamas is also an obstacle in the way of infiltration of Al-Qaeda to the Palestinian Authority. It is a movement that cooperates with Shi’i Iran and Hizballah; that defended Yaser Arafat until his death in November 2004; and that, more recently has shown signs of regression in its policy by accepting and keeping its promise of a period of truce with Israel. Hamas is also an integral part of the Muslim Brotherhood, a harsh rival in the eyes of Jihadi-Salafists, with a political and social doctrine that we might call “evolution, not revolution.” The Brotherhood also has a strong tendency to support, at least tactically, democratic processes in the Arab world in which its prospects to win look promising.

### **Jihadi-Salafiyah and Democracy**

Islam’s interaction with democracy is of key importance for Jihadi-Salafi groups since opposing democracy in the Western form in general, and rejecting man-made laws in favor of the principle of Divine Law in particular, is perceived as a sacred doctrine. Power derived from human beings rather than from Allah is an obvious heresy—*Kufr*. In recent years, the question of the legitimacy of elections became more controversial as more and more Muslims living in the West too questioned the religious legitimacy of participating in Western elections. Books on this topic, especially those opposing participation of Muslims in democratic processes, are now translated by Salafi scholars and groups into English.<sup>2</sup> Given the American campaign to bring democracy to the Arab world, Jihadi-Salafi groups view democracy not only as a heresy, but also as an integral part of the new “Crusader” campaign of colonialism—*al-Hamlah al-Salibiyyah al-Jadidah*—and the historical conspiracy against the Muslim world. This worldview is supported by more moderate Islamic elements in the Arab world, especially Saudi and Egyptian mainstream clerics and scholars, and has also been controversial also around the recent Iraqi elections.

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<sup>1</sup> On the issue of Hamas and Al-Qaeda see also: Reuven Paz, “Hamas vs. Al-Qaeda: The Condemnation of the Khobar Attack,” *PRISM Special Dispatch*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (June 2004). See on-line in: [http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM\\_Special\\_dispatch\\_no\\_3-2.pdf](http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM_Special_dispatch_no_3-2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See for example: *The Doubts Regarding the Ruling of Democracy in Islam*, A collection of Salafi positions and rulings, published by Al-Tibyan Publications, London, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, June 2004, No author.



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We should also bear in mind that democracy is also a threatening prospect for most Arab governments, be they kingdoms or republics. Conservative nationalist scholars perceive democracy in terms of “Western political-cultural imperialism,” a heritage of past periods where the Soviet Union and Arab socialism have been influential in the region. Furthermore, in many Arab countries, where Islamic movements are leading the opposition and hence, are oppressed, they are also the leading advocates for civil rights, starting from the Algerian FIS to the Saudi Islamic reform movement.

There are several famous Jihadi-Salafi edicts—fatwas—have been issued against democracy and parliamentary elections. Supporters of global Jihad have made intensive use of these fatwas in order to criticize the Palestinian elections in general and Hamas’ participation in particular. On 18 January 2006, the webmaster of Al-Maqrizi Center in London, which is headed by the Egyptian Islamist Dr. Hani al-Siba`i, posted on the Jihadi forum Al-Hesbah a list of names of 102 Islamic clerics, some of whom are already dead. All of them severely opposed any participation in parliamentary elections in the Muslim world.<sup>3</sup> The list was meant to influence the Palestinian Hamas not to take part in the elections. The list featured the names of 52 Egyptians, 22 Saudis, 5 Jordanians (among them “Sheikh” Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi), 5 Syrians, 4 Moroccans, two Sudanese, two Lebanese, two Kuwaitis, as well as one Iraqi, Nigerian, Mauritanian, and Yemeni each. The dominant share of Egyptians and Saudis reflects their significant role in the development of Jihadi Salafiyyah, as a result of the integration between Egyptian exiles from the Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia and Wahhabi scholars there.

Four were Palestinians, with no links to Hamas or the Brotherhood, among them two interesting individuals—Taqi al-Din al-Nabahani and Abd al-Qadim Zaloum, the founders and first two leaders of the Islamic Liberation Party (Tahrir Party). Another past Tahriri leader—Ahmad al-Da`our—is listed among the Jordanian clerics. This is interesting because in the debate over the elections in Iraq, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority, supporters of Jihadi-Salafiyyah for the first time bestowed a sense of legitimacy on the Tahrir Party and its positions against democracy and elections. In recent weeks, the Tahrir Party has published and distributed several pamphlets in the Palestinian Authority and on its web sites, calling for the boycott of the Palestinian elections, as well as those in Iraq. Several prominent members of the party took part in the debates in Jihadi forums and were welcomed for their stance regarding elections.

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<sup>3</sup> See the list on-line in: <http://www.alhesbah.org/v/showthread.php?t=48196>



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Several supporters of Jihadi-Salafiyyah even relied upon material written by the Tahrir Party, including Fatwas, and circulated on its forums.

The Tahrir Party has been traditionally ambivalent in its opposition to the elections, but developed more assertive opposition that has strengthened in light of events in Iraq and Central Asia. Despite the wide ideological gaps between the Tahrir and Jihadi-Salafist groups, as well as the severe attacks against it by the later against the former on many grounds, the issue of democracy and elections might provide be a basis for closer relations in the future. Even though the party is still regarding itself as being in the theoretical phase (*nazari*) and not in the practical one (*`amali*) yet, the dynamics of global Jihad brings Tahrir's younger generation closer to global Jihadi ideas than to the Brotherhood.

The most popular Jihadi rulings for Jihadi-Salafist opponents of democratic elections are those written by the Palestinian-Jordanian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the spiritual father of *Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*; Abu Basir al-Tartusi, the Syrian in exile in London; and the old-time ideologue of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad—Abd al-Qader bin Abd al-Aziz.<sup>4</sup> These writing were used by Jihadi sympathizers against Hamas relatively often prior to the elections.

The best example for the criticism of the Jihadi Salafiyyah over Hamas can be found in an article in the form of an interview with Abu Jandal al-Azdi, a Saudi cleric and one of the first leaders of Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, who is imprisoned by the authorities since 2003.<sup>5</sup> His main criticism over Hamas concentrated on its support for Arafat and the Palestinian national struggle. Arafat, according to Al-Azdi was a *Murtadd*—the worst form of apostasy—whose fate should have been by killing him, and “a greater enemy than the Jews.” Hamas' support for Arafat was unforgivable to Al-Azdi, since it turned the movement into infidels too. Hamas also supported Mahmoud Abbas Abu Mazen, the “known Baha'i,” and held open discussions with the Egyptian intelligence services.

Al-Azdi's main criticism, however, used widely by supporters of global Jihad in the period before the Palestinian elections, was that of Hamas' distinction between the

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<sup>4</sup> For the best list of Jihadi-Salafi writings on democracy and elections, see in the section on “democracy” in Al-Maqdisi's web site—*Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*-- <http://www.tawhed.ws/c?i=91>  
Abu Omar Seif, a Jordanian cleric who was the main cleric of the Arab volunteers in Chechnya, and was killed there in November 2005, wrote the most recent book on the issue. See his book—*Al-Nizam al-Dimuqrati nizam Kufr*—regarding Iraq, in: <http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=3639>

<sup>5</sup> See on-line in: <http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=1508&c=1573>



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external and internal enemies—a distinction adopted from the doctrines of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Azdi cited Abu Qutada who wrote, “the Jihad of the Muslim Brotherhood has only one meaning and narrow-minded understanding—the Jihad against the foreigners. The Egyptians should fight the British, the Palestinians against the Jews, and the Afghans against the Russians. They have never thought about fighting the Arab enemies, since they lack the legal basis for such a struggle, which is understanding the Tawhid according to the understanding of the Salaf—the companions of the Prophet.”

Abu Jandal al-Azdi disqualified also rejected any possibility of a temporary Truce—*Hudnah*—with the Jews or Israel, unless it includes the strict conditions of Salafism. Yet, he concluded his article by leaving an interesting opening for Hamas, by focusing on the principle that “the benefit of the peace—*Sulh*—for the interest of the Muslim public might be greater than the war. In such a case you are even allowed to prolong the truce for more than ten years.” The traditional Islamic principle of the benefit of the community works even in the case of the Jihadi-Salafists, and could always serve as a basis for pragmatism.

### **Responses to Hamas’ Electoral victory**

Hamas’ victory in the recent elections created a vigorous debate in Jihadi forums, which was somehow lost some of its enthusiasm as a result of the “virtual Jihad” currently conducted against Denmark. The stunning victory of Hamas heightened the ambivalence of the responses by Salafists. Early public statements by Hamas leaders, as well as Israeli, American, and European reactions, however, helped generate criticism over Hamas. In particular, members of these forums expressed fear that the movement might change policies in favor of entering the political process with Israel.

The opening tone of the critics was provided by the Kuwaiti Jihadi-Salafi cleric Hamed al-Ali, a very popular figure among the younger generation of supporters of global Jihad. In an article in the Jihadi forum Al-Hesbah dated 27 January 2006, titled “Hamas’ dilemma,” Al-Ali attacked Hamas, even though he could not refrain from blessing them for their achievement.<sup>6</sup> According to Al-Ali, Palestine is the focus of the Jihadi struggle and the most complicated place of the Muslim nation, “a microcosm of the entire *Ummah*.” Yet, “Palestine is not the property of the Palestinians, hence, they cannot decide by themselves what way to chose.” Even though Hamas deserves applause for its

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<sup>6</sup> Hamed al-Ali, *Ma’zaq Hamas* (Hamas’ Dilemma), 27 January 2006. See on-line in: <http://www.alhesbah.org/v/showthread.php?t=49903>



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victory and for gaining the trust of the Palestinian public, “it is badly in need of the advice and guidance of the Islamic nation.” In other words, Hamas won a trust that belongs to the entire Islamic nation, and therefore should consult the rest of the Islamists for its future decisions. Hamas should choose the only strategic path of the Islamists – resistance.

According to Al-Ali, by winning the elections and turning into the Palestinian Authority Hamas finds itself in a dilemma between two choices only: either falling under a strangling siege, or following the fate of Fatah towards a compromise with the Jews. Hamas, Al-Ali said, is facing now three contradicting situation:

- The contradiction between its Islamic ideology and a political situation that rejects this ideology. Every Islamic movement that joins the “path of democracy” falls into this dilemma and trap.
- The contradiction between Hamas’ solid and uncompromising positions regarding any concessions in Palestine so far, and the need to soften them now that they are the ruling element.
- The need to preserve the noble values of its martyrs while preserving its rule. Hamas is now like a “sheep besieged by wild animals that want to suck her blood.”

To sum up, Al-Ali criticized Hamas for its decision to participate in a process that put the movement in an almost impossible situation. At the same time, he urges the other Islamists to assist Hamas and guide it in the right path, instead of condemning it or ignoring their serious dilemma. His “softened” words, are akin to a sort of patronage as if Hamas should always bear in mind that its recent victory is not only its own, but that it needs to share it with the rest of the Muslim world in order to refrain from future mistakes.

Some of the responses to this article were not written in a “soft” tone. The stricter Salafis are unable to forgive Hamas for disobeying Allah’s rules by participating in the elections. Others, however, focused on Hamas’ social work in favor of the Palestinian public and its difficulties in fighting simultaneously on all the fronts. Some even call for changing the Islamic project in Palestine into several stages. Focusing on the welfare of the Palestinian public is therefore a noble phase on its own right, and Hamas is the only Palestinian movement capable of providing for the Palestinian people.



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One interesting criticism came from some supporters of global Jihad who claimed that the Palestinians should view themselves as part of the entire oppressed Islamic nation and should not isolate their case as Hamas seems to do.

### **Conclusion**

In general, most Jihadi-Salafi responses to the Hamas' victory were critical since Hamas entered a process that is contradictory to the Jihadi-Salafi worldview regarding democracy and elections, and the principles of the loyalty to Allah and refutation of its enemies (*Al-Walaa' wal-Baraa'*), in addition to the pragmatic nature of the Muslim Brotherhood.

We can assume that Hamas leaders are ignoring the Jihadi-Salafi voices or critics. There is, however, a slow but growing sense of apocalypse pervading many young Palestinians—a sense that is connected to the insurgency in Iraq, the global Jihad, and a sense of nihilism, which may increase in the face of Hamas' historic victory in the elections. The first Jihadi-Salafi Palestinian web site and forum has recently been opened—AlOmmh.net—which promotes the infiltration of Jihadi-Salafi ideas into the Palestinian public, and encourages the communication between Palestinian and other Islamists.<sup>7</sup>

Hamas' winning of the Palestinian elections is a turning point in various aspects. The Jihadi-Salafis would certainly try to push Hamas into more hard-line positions, through a slow infiltration into the Palestinian public. In case Hamas would gradually change its policy towards Israel and even abandon terrorism for a long temporary period, the global Jihadi groups such as Al-Qaeda or affiliated elements may try to take the "torch of Jihad" and establish affiliated groups in the Palestinian territories. We should bear in mind that the new situation in the Palestinian Authority could dismantle the Fatah, institute much change in the Palestinian security forces, and create new political, military, or family alliances, not to mention an interim period of chaos, more unemployment and financial difficulties, and an altogether unstable situation. Such conditions may be a golden opportunity for the Jihadi-Salafiyah to find supporting elements among the Palestinians in the Palestinian Authority, as they slowly but surely currently do in some of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

We may also assume that the issues of democracy and participation in elections will remain a controversial element in the Islamist discourse. Hamas' victory, however, may

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<sup>7</sup> Risalat al-Ummah al-Jihadiyyah -- [www.alommh.net/forums/](http://www.alommh.net/forums/)



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add to the controversy and even shake the Jihadi-Salafi persistent opposition. If Hamas succeeds, even partly, in directing the Palestinian Authority and people towards better conditions, it may serve for many Islamists as a model of successful Islamic Sunni rule. The “benefit and interest” of the Muslim public may play here a pragmatic role for change of policy, if not in the eyes of hard-line Jihadi groups, at least in the eyes of Arab publics.

In some way, Hamas’ victory might be a turning point that will affect larger segments of Arab societies in the region, especially those that are influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood.