Democracy in Palestine and the Middle East Peace Process

As part of a wider British Academy-funded project on democracy in the Arab-Mediterranean world, **Dr Michelle Pace** *conducted a number of interviews in Palestine, including with representatives of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (*Hamas*). Here Dr Pace provides an account of those interviews, and goes on to discuss ways in which external actors such as the European Union may rethink democracy-building efforts.*

DURING September 2007, as part of my British Academy-funded project on 'A "Modern" Islamic Democracy? Perceptions of democratisation in the Arab-Mediterranean world', I embarked on a two-week fieldtrip to Palestine to interview various Palestinian academics, representatives of NGOs, political party activists and parliamentarians (including Islamists), and journalists. From *Hamas*, I interviewed officials from its political wing in Gaza and Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) members in Nablus.

Hamas achieved electoral victory in the January 2006 elections (which were declared free, fair and transparent by international observation missions), which many Palestinians described as a protest vote against *Fatah* for its corrupt practices and its failure to secure any political solution to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. Elaborate efforts to forge a common political position between *Hamas* and President Abbas on the new government's programme appeared to have yielded results in February 2007 with the formation of a National Unity Government (NUG).

However, both *Hamas* and *Fatah* found it extremely challenging to share power. Although Palestinians – across the political spectrum – accept democracy in principle, they have a hard time accepting the idea of power sharing. Therefore, a big gap emerged between, on the one hand, the belief in democracy and the rhetoric of agreeing on it, and on the other hand, accepting each other and sharing power. This gap culminated in bloody clashes in Gaza, with a subsequent military takeover of the entire Strip by *Hamas* forces in June 2007.

Interviews: the perspective of *Hamas*

Hamas officials told me that what the movement had been confronted with since its victory was a set of forces opposed to their efforts at governing – including *Fatah* (their long-term internal rivals), Israel, the US, the EU and the international 'community', as well as Arab leaders. Following the results of the 2006 elections in Palestine, the international community boycotted *Hamas*, and imposed three conditions on the movement. Although *Hamas* rejected these demands outright, stipulating that the Middle East Quartet (UN, EU, Russia and United States) always placed conditions solely on the occupied but not equally on the occupier, they were prepared to discuss these same demands with the international community. However, because *Hamas* is on the US's and the EU's terrorist list, external actors could not enter into any discussions with *Hamas* about these conditions. *Hamas* officials insisted to me that, despite all the constraints on the movement, *Hamas* had in effect *implicitly* accepted all three conditions: 'The international community asks us to stop using violence. As long as they accept our right to self-determination and to resist the occupation, we will do so. They ask us to recognise the Israeli state. Well, apart from the question of which borders do they want us to recognise, Israel is a reality next door. They ask us to comply with previous agreements. We agreed to have President Abbas represent us … so that indirectly means we accept that as well. However, it is the occupying power which continues to break all international agreements and laws – but they are never given any conditions. That is the model of democracy we have next door to us!'

When asked specifically on their views on democracy, *Hamas* officials responded by arguing that they see democracy as a means rather than as an end in itself. The problem for *Hamas* has been that they were not allowed any possibility to prove their efforts at using this instrument – that is, at governing the territories. I asked them in particular about their autumn 2005 election manifesto entitled 'Change and Reform', which appeared to be a very different document from the 1988 *Hamas* Charter (which stipulates the 'liberation of Palestine' through the individual duty of *jihad* leading to the establishment of an Islamic state as its core goal).

Hamas officials explained to me how the movement had developed from its inception and more so since 1988. *Hamas* emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) whose Palestinian branch was founded in 1946 in Jerusalem. *Hamas*'s roots as a social movement can also be traced in the MB's main institutional embodiment, the Islamic Center (*al-mujamma' al-islami*) in the Gaza Strip. Formally legalised in 1978 by the Israeli military administration, the *Mujamma'* became the base for the development, administration, and control of religious and educational Islamic institutions in the Gaza Strip. From the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, the MB benefited from the Israeli government's support of non-violent Islamist, Palestinian factions. Israel then saw some benefit in having a useful counterweight to secular, nationalist Palestinian groups (then hijacking airplanes and conducting commando raids into Israel from neighbouring Arab states) like the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). Israel thus played a 'divide and rule' tactic by legalising the Islamic Center in the hope that it would emerge as a competing movement to the PLO. (Ironically it succeeded, with the culmination of a huge rivalry between *Hamas* and *Fatah*.) Following the first *Intifada* of 8 December 1987, the MB's Palestinian branch established *Hamas* as a subordinate organisation specifically to confront the Israeli occupation.

Figure 1. *Elections in Palestine, 25 January 2006. Top: An elderly Palestinian man shows his finger after voting at a polling station in the Khan Younis refugee camp south of Gaza Strip (photo: Reuters/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa). Bottom: Palestinian local observers start to count votes inside a polling station in Gaza Strip (photo: Reuters/Mohammed Salem).*

The *Hamas* 2005 electoral programme, however, makes no reference to the State of Israel and instead focuses on the people's needs: 'When the people voted, they voted because they expected reform and change and we had a political programme to achieve this: to address the corruption, the chaos, the lack of law and order. So first, we aimed to enhance the state of law and order. That is one thing we managed to achieve in Gaza. We also had plans to make our people less dependent on the Israelis by ensuring that we produce the basic needs of our people. We also planned to make Gaza cleaner and greener by planting more trees etc. This is important for Gazans' psychological and mental health too.' Progressive elements within *Hamas*'s political wing thus advocate a social, welfare democracy based on the response of political representatives to people's basic and political needs. When asked whether, as many secular Palestinians feared, *Hamas* had intended to establish Shar'ia law, they responded by insisting that such a law would be impossible in the Palestinian territories, and moreover that Palestine is neither Sudan nor Saudi Arabia nor Iran.[1] They acknowledged that a large number of Palestinians are either secular Muslims or Christians. Furthermore, they insisted that Palestinians share an Islamic culture. 'So we are not intending to have an Islamic state here: It is better to have a democratic state and culturally we are guided by Islam.'

Hamas had previously boycotted the elections of 1996: the leadership of the movement then felt that doing so would lend legitimacy to the PNA (the Palestinian National Authority), which was created out of what they considered as unacceptable negotiations and compromises with Israel. But *Hamas* left the door open for the movement's participation in future elections. Some might view such a take on the electoral process as a tactical move from *Hamas*, which had rightly read the Palestinians' discontent with *Fatah* in the run up to the 2006 elections. *Hamas* officials themselves are quick to point out that democracy is not just about elections. 'Because we are not an independent state, we agreed to share power with *Fatah* in order to achieve our goals. It is better to have consensus among Palestinians than to have a strong party voting for one initiative or the other. But *Fatah* was not prepared to surrender power easily. We also wished to have good institutions because unfortunately most of the institutions here – including Human Rights organisations, charity organisations, NGOs – are politicised. As in the West, we wanted to have a check and balance system to ensure that every citizen abides by the law. But democracy here also means fear from injustice, from poverty; and free media – here the media is biased. So this is another institution that we needed to reform – the media. One of the things we had hoped for was to emphasise that international

actors monitor funds they give to NGOs, and we wanted to also propose that we need projects to develop people's understanding of democracy through regular training programmes. We have a very complicated perception about democracy – people here live under a constant siege mentality. We had arranged for members of our Parliament to travel to Europe to see the British, Swiss and French parliaments in action. But now the people think that democracy is nonsense. If they vote *Hamas*, *Hamas* will be sieged. If they vote *Fatah* they vote for corruption which is what the West really wants. So you will see, in future elections here, fewer people will go out to vote.'

Palestinian factions today and perceptions in Europe

Palestine is an exceptional case study in that the Palestinians inhabit occupied territories and most policy makers work on the basis of an illusion of a 'state' or a pseudo state. Thus, one cannot focus on the perceptions of any Palestinian faction on democracy without taking into consideration the Middle East conflict between the Palestinians and Israel. The Palestinians have a long history of civil society activism, a core pillar of any transition to democracy. This is largely due to an embedded democratic ethos in Palestinian society. Democracy is a way of life, accepting the word of the majority. Palestinians are currently working together, via Egyptian mediation, on the details of a national government of consensus – but they must learn to accept each other. The PLO actually misrepresents the Palestinian population in its current structure and badly needs to be reformed. *Fatah* is fractured within. The critical and reflexive voices inside *Fatah* must be heeded by the old guard, although old habits die hard. *Hamas*, with its external and internal divisions, its military and political wings, its young and old guards, must continue to look at Sinn Féin and the IRA for important lessons to learn. It also needs to rein in ('other') militant groups launching rockets on the Negev and neighbouring areas.[2]

The problem, thus far, has been that both *Fatah* and *Hamas* see greater costs than benefits in reaching a compromise, but they need to *prioritise their national interest*.[3] Although some forms of democratic politics may be practicable even under occupation, grassroots forms of democratic politics may hold some promise for the peace process too. What Palestinians and the international community, the US and the EU in particular (if they want to engage), need to do is to focus on people's political rights and needs and on reconciliation between the various Palestinian factions. The international community in particular must not repeat its mistake of not recognising a Palestinian NUG – although, as far as this author is aware, only a technocratic, Palestinian, national government of consensus (with the sole purpose of preparing for the expected January 2010 elections) will be as far as the external actors will go this time round.

However, following the Israeli incursion into Gaza during December 2008–January 2009 (with its strong media images broadcast across the world), as well as the results of the Israeli elections of February 2009, at the time of writing there appears to be a significant, albeit slow shift in the US's and the EU's Middle East policy. There is now a stronger cohort of external actors' officials calling for a dialogic engagement with the *Hamas* movement. For the EU, the challenge remains that some member states, like the Czechs who currently hold the EU Presidency, remain ardent supporters of Israel. Another challenge faced by EU officials in particular is that they are often confused about messages coming from different voices within *Hamas*. The movement thus also, for its part, needs to get its act together and get organised in order to relay one message to the international community rather than competing discourses from different members. EU officials need to understand *Hamas* – how it is composed, who are the progressive voices within and without, their historical trajectories (many members emerged from refugee camps) and the challenges faced by a national liberation movement within the context of an occupied nation. Furthermore, violations and abuses of human rights (including unlawful arrests, torture and killings in detention of political rivals from *Fatah*) make a mockery of *Hamas*'s claims to uphold rule of law and order in the Gaza Strip and should not go unheeded by the international community.

On the part of Israel, a shift in thinking is needed – one that sees a radical move from an insular, military-minded and short-term focus on security (which some may feel has created an Israeli society based on fear and lack of trust of 'others'), to a wider and longer-term conception of what is really needed to safeguard the future of its own citizens and their right to live in peace: that is, a political solution to the Middle East conflict. For the sake of future generations in both Israel and Palestine, an acceptance of either side's rights and the required political negotiations are what the Middle East urgently requires.

A final note: challenges for researchers

Referencing/describing the views of *Hamas* interviewees as their 'perceptions' allows me, as an academic researcher, to highlight their views of the situation in Palestine and also to draw attention to notions of how they perceive third parties to view them. This in turn allows for some cognitive dissonance on both sides. Moreover, the difficulties and practical challenges confronted by a researcher in seeking to conduct work on this subject, and especially conducting fieldwork in Gaza, cannot be underestimated.

Notes

1 When it took over Gaza, *Hamas* in fact did not impose Shar'ia law or the wearing of the veil by Muslim women.

2 *Hamas* accepts the presence of other resistance groups within the Occupied Territories. They say they are prepared to rein them in once a ceasefire is agreed; to deny them the right to resist in the absence of an 'hudna' would start a civil war.

3 *Fatah* does see a great cost in not reaching an agreement with Israel, unlike *Hamas*.

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In 2007, Dr Pace was awarded a British Academy Larger Research Grant for a project on 'A "Modern" Islamic Democracy? Perceptions of democratisation in the Arab-Mediterranean world', to undertake research in Palestine and Egypt. (Dr Pace's recent fieldwork in Brussels was supported by her complementary ESRC project.) The British Academy-funded project concluded with a conference held at the University of Birmingham on 6 March 2009. Dr Pace's report of this may be found at www.eumena.bham.ac.uk/docs/marchreport09 final.pdf