

## Debunking the Hamas Myth

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MATHEW LEVITT, *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (Yale University Press, 2006), 324 pp., \$26.00.

As Mathew Levitt was completing what he calls the “first open sourced book” on Hamas, the radical Islamist group won a surprising victory in the Palestinian Authority’s January 2006 elections. In the aftermath, a debate quickly emerged among U.S. and EU policymakers about whether to continue funding the Palestinian Authority, now that a designated terrorist organization was running the show.

As such, the publication of Levitt’s book, *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, could not have been more timely. Through personal interviews, recently declassified documents, and court papers, Levitt debunks once and for all the myth that Hamas is composed of separate social, political and military branches.

Hamas, Levitt writes, has been able to maintain a “veil of legitimacy” by providing essential social services to the Palestinian people, which Hamas apologists argue are separate from its terrorism operations. By doing so, Hamas has been able to maintain its reputation, at least in some corners, as a legitimate alternative for the Palestinian people. But Levitt drills into the reader that Hamas’ three “separate” branches are

in reality intricately interrelated. He provides numerous examples of how charity committees, mosques, student unions, sports clubs and summer camps raise funds which eventually go toward terrorist operations, and indoctrinate and recruit many of the operatives themselves. Indeed, Levitt documents that senior Hamas leaders—including the late Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Abdel Aziz Al Rantissi, Mousa Abu Marzook, Khaled Mishal, and Jamal Tawil—have all simultaneously played roles in the group’s military and political wings.

The key to undermining Hamas, Levitt argues, is by understanding the secret of its success. Once a fringe group of Islamist radicals in a relatively secular society, Hamas gained prominence—and popularity—by providing much-needed social services, from hospitals and clinics to schools and mosques. Replicating the structure of its mother organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas has set up a social welfare and administrative branch (*dawa*) which has won the respect of many Palestinians by outpacing the corrupt and inefficient services previously provided by the secular Palestinian Authority government. Each year, state sponsors (such as Syria and Iran), charity fronts in the U.S., Middle East and Europe, and various money laundering schemes raise tens of millions of dollars to support this sophisticated social influence net-



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work. Much of this fundraising, moreover, has been made possible because Western policymakers remain under the illusion that the funds go solely towards providing social services to ordinary Palestinians.

Thus, while military action against active Hamas cells may be necessary, and could prevent future terrorist attacks, the permanent way to weaken Hamas is by displacing its social roots. Levitt offers a glimpse into how to do so. The first step, he says, is to freeze or otherwise put out of business those front organizations which support Hamas' social network. Once that lifeline is cut, the U.S., EU and Gulf states must step into the void and create a coordinated international aid effort to offer those services once provided by Hamas. The logic is clear; if the international community can provide transparent social services that are of better quality and more affordable than those of Hamas, it could create a rift between the group's moderates and radicals, since the former support it largely for its social services. And that, Levitt argues, will eventually lead to the organization's demise.

Yet these policy prescriptions come up short in several respects. Levitt himself admits that a renewed international aid effort is largely predicated upon cooperation with "a new moderate Palestinian government." Today, however, the Palestinian Authority is rapidly heading in the opposite direction. Furthermore, while an alternative to Hamas' social network would certainly degrade the group's power, state sponsors such as Syria and Iran are likely to remain loyal to their terrorist proxy. Finally, money may be important for preserving Hamas' popularity, but ideology plays a role as well. Levitt makes occasional calls for educational

reform throughout his book, but his actual policy initiatives are largely concerned with stemming Hamas' financial growth, rather than curbing its radical worldview.

Nevertheless, Levitt has provided a major service. A debate over how to undermine a terrorist organization cannot even begin if one buys into the idea of separate social and political wings. *Hamas* definitively dispels this myth. More important still, Levitt has shown us that the general idea of such a construct did not originate within Hamas itself. Rather, it was inherited from the group's predecessor and inspiration: the Muslim Brotherhood. Only by seeing precisely how the Muslim Brotherhood and its more radical offshoots prey upon Western democracies through their mastery of the art of rhetoric and propaganda can we begin to truly understand them—and to confront them. Levitt's work brings us a bit closer to that goal.

