

Hamas Looking for Friends

by Michael Curtis



Personal rivalries in political organizations sometimes are akin to civil war. The story is told of the vicious remark by the prominent British Labour Party politician Ernest Bevin of his fellow politician Aneurin Bevan, creator of the British National Health Service. Someone remarked of Bevan that he was his own worst enemy to which Bevin in his Cockney accent replied, "Not while I'm alive he ain't." A similar temperament of antipathy has existed for more than twenty years between the leaders of two rival Palestinian organizations, Fatah and Hamas, two groups within the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the PLO.

Unexpectedly, on September 17, 2007, Hamas, which has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007, unleashed what can be considered either a political earthquake or simply a shock. At a moment of economic and humanitarian problems in Gaza, Hamas has made a bid for reconciliation with its Palestinian rivals, as well as making overtures to Iran which is presently supplying it with \$15 million a month, and also with Egypt which it wants

to open the Rafah border with the Gaza Strip.

Hamas announced it had agreed to disband its Administrative Committee for Gaza, a body set up in May 2017 that acted as a virtual government. Further, it suggested that Fatah send its officials to help govern Gaza, called for a nation-wide election, the last of which was in 2006, and expressed a desire for unification with Fatah and a Palestinian government of national unity. Hamas had already issued a new statement of general principles and policies and appeared to be softening its normal extreme political positions.

The immediate question is whether the two formerly hostile groups will be cooperating with no tears, no fears, together. The present Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, insists there is no disagreement between Fatah and Hamas on belief, on policy, or resistance against Israel. But internal and external factors suggest other problems. Memories are still bitter of the military defeat by Hamas of Fatah in fighting that led to Hamas taking control of Gaza, first militarily and then politically when Hamas won a plurality in the parliamentary election in January 2006. Internationally, Hamas is regarded as a terrorist organization by the US and other countries while Fatah is not.

Fatah founded by Yasser Arafat in 1959 in Cairo, where he was born, as a political movement and in 1965 as a political party is the largest group in the multiparty PLO. Until his death in 2004, Arafat was chair of the PLO, chair of Fatah, and president of the Palestinian Authority. He was succeeded in these positions by Mahmoud Abbas who like Gilbert and Sullivan's character Pooh Bah holds numerous exalted offices.

Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) founded in 1987 as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, was created to liberate Palestine, end the State of Israel and the Jewish presence, and establish an Islamic state. It always challenged the mainstream PLO organization, as well as continuing to attack

Israel by rockets and by fighting three wars against Israel since 2008.

Not surprisingly, Abbas' rhetoric is multi-voiced, depending on his audience. An example of this is that as head of Fatah he embodied the policy of rejection of Israel and its right to exist, yet he also from time to time appears as a moderate, and publicly recalls the letter of September 9, 1993 sent by Yasser Arafat, as "chair of the PLO," to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Arafat had written, "The PLO recognized the right of the State of Israel to live in peace and security...it declares that all outstanding issues relating to permanent status will be resolved through negotiations." However, though Arafat signed the Declaration of Principles for Peace between Palestinians and Israel, he organized two Intifadas, in 1987 and 2000, uprisings and attacks on Israeli civilians.

The change in Hamas rhetoric in September 2017 results from a number of factors: pressure by Egypt which has given some aid to Hamas which agreed in early 2017 to set up a buffer zone on its Gaza border to limit movements of jihadists in the Sinai Peninsula; poor deteriorating economy with insufficient health and water supplies; high unemployment rates and 6,000 taking early retirement; Abbas reduced funding to Gaza to pay electricity bills, stopped or cut salaries for government workers and former prisoners in Gaza, and cut payment for prisoners in Israeli jails; reduced medical border crossings for Gazans; help to Gaza from Qatar was cut; the reappearance of a formidable politician former security chief Mohammed Dahlan the organizer of the Fatah campaign against Hamas twenty years ago; the unexpected large street protests, one of which numbered 10,000 people; the stronger action by Saudi Arabia against Islamist groups, especially those with ties to terrorists; and the Israeli decision to build an underground wall that stretches along the 37 mile line with Gaza, using sensors, drones, sky balloons, and radar, to prevent Hamas

digging tunnels to attack Israeli civilians.

Perhaps above all, the new direction results from the change in Hamas leadership in 2017 with the election of Ismail Haniyeh , former prime minister, as the head of its political bureau, and Yahya Sinwar, an extremist leader of the military wing of Hamas and a man who was personally responsible for killing alleged collaborators. Leadership has passed from the exiled political class living abroad to the military leaders based in Gaza. Haniyeh, replacing the former leader Qatar based Khaled Meshaal, is known for his approval of terrorism, emphasis on jihad as a religious duty, anti-Americanism and condemnation of the US for killing Osama bin Laden, liberation of Palestine, "from the river to the sea," and refusal to recognize Israel.

Can Hamas bridge the existing differences and move to reconciliation with Fatah, and will any changes lead to peace with Israel? It still remains true that Hamas refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist. It has not renounced terrorism, but then nor has Fatah according to its spokesman Osama al-Qawasmī. In a broadcast on August 23, 2017, that spokesman proclaimed that armed resistance, popular resistance was legitimate. Nevertheless, agreement on this hostility against Israel does not necessarily mean any further definite steps to reconciliation with Fatah. Indeed, rebuilding bridges to Iran and dependence on it for financial and military support, and for training of its military wing, suggest a more independent attitude.

The Biblical question, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" remained unanswered. In spite of the softening of the rhetoric of Hamas it is difficult to believe that a terrorist organization can change its spots and become peaceful and statesmanlike.