

WHAT NEEDS TO BE SAID ABOUT HAMAS

By Robert M. Schaible, for *Maine Voices for Palestinian Rights* (2014)

We often hear that the Hamas charter calls for the destruction of Israel, and this is true. But we know that charters are often more rhetorical tools than guidelines for actual policy. Another official document, however, needs to be part of this conversation. In the 1890s, the Jewish National Fund gave as its stated aim: "to redeem the land of Palestine as the inalienable possession of the Jewish people." This aim was not kept a secret, so the Palestinians knew what the Zionists had in mind for them. From the time of that declaration to the present day with Mr. Netanyahu's insistence that settlement expansion in Palestinian territory must continue, the Zionist intention to dispossess Palestinians of their historic homeland, which they have inhabited for close to a millennium and a half, has been *the core of both their rhetoric and their policies*. Not even one political party in Netanyahu's government has a charter/platform that recognizes the Palestinians' right to a state of their own, and a couple even explicitly forbid such a concession. Is Hamas to be condemned for doing exactly what Israel does: deny the other's right to a state?

The point is: Once we mention Hamas's charter, we've not sufficiently discussed the issue. Israelis and many Americans call Hamas a "terrorist" organization. But even one of the former Shin Bet directors featured in the award-winning film "The Gate Keepers" acknowledges that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. And every Shin Bet leader in this documentary clearly states that Hamas should be included in formal negotiations.

When we hear Hamas called "terrorists," we should know that two former Israeli prime ministers, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, were regarded in the 1930s & '40s by the British and the American governments, along with Albert Einstein & many other prominent Jews of the time, as terrorists. They saw themselves, just like members of Hamas, as freedom fighters and resisters. A quote from Mr. Shamir, 1943 should give us pause in uncritically accepting Israel's condemnation of Hamas.

"Neither Jewish ethics nor Jewish tradition can disqualify terrorism as a means of combat. We are very far from having any moral qualms as far as our national war goes. We have before us the command of the Torah, whose morality surpasses that of any other body of laws in the world: 'Ye shall blot them out to the last man.' But first and foremost, terrorism is for us a part of the political battle being conducted under the present circumstances, and it has a great part to play: speaking in a clear voice to the whole world...: it proclaims our war against the occupier."

The point is that when one side in hostilities lacks an army, that side often finds its only recourse is through what the other side calls "terrorism," and the Jews used it (as freedom fighters against the British, now called occupiers after Jewish immigration to Palestine was no longer allowed), and the Palestinians have used it against their Israeli occupiers. As Israeli General Matti Peled put it, "Terrorism is a terrible thing. But the fact remains that when a small nation is ruled by a larger power, terror is the only means at their disposal. This has always been trueIf we want to end terrorism [against Israel], we must end the occupation and make peace."

Hamas also calls for the killing of Jews, and one can easily understand why this is seen as another instance of inexcusable anti-Semitism. But Israel's actual practice has long been the equivalent of such a call--that is, Israel's military kills Palestinians almost at will, and claims to be highly moral in the process. Palestinians are routinely called "vermin," "animals," and "cockroaches" not only on Israeli social media, but by members of the military, the Knesset and the rabbinic establishment. Such language and such policies do not give Israelis any moral advantage in a comparison with Hamas.

Hamas leadership offered Israel a 30-year truce in 1997 if Israel would abide by international law regarding the Palestinians. The offer was made through King Hussein of Jordan, who took the message from Hamas's political chief, Khaled Meshal, asking that Israel pull back to the '67 borders. Israel's response was an attempt to assassinate Meshal shortly thereafter. In 2002 Hamas publicly endorsed the Pan Arab League's full acceptance of Israel by all 22 Arab nations if Israel would end its

occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and recognize Palestinian rights under international law. Israel found ways to ignore or dismiss the peace initiative. Similar efforts to operate on the basis of diplomacy were made in 2006 via a letter to G. W. Bush, and twice to Obama in Feb. and June of 2009.

Why does Israel refuse these openings to peaceful dialogue with Hamas? It is the best guess of many informed observers that such offers are unacceptable to Israel because Israel wants only one thing: total control of all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. To negotiate fairly and seriously with Hamas (or with the Palestinian Authority, with whom it negotiates but not in good faith), would mean an end to that grand design.

Finally, on more than one occasion Hamas leadership has stated that an agreement with Israel which is approved in a fair referendum by the Palestinian people will be accepted by Hamas. Whether or not they mean that, I can't say, but they've put their word out there and it's a matter of record that Hamas has actually been better at keeping its word with truces than has Israel.

Here's one example. In June 2008 Hamas agreed to a ceasefire with Israel. This truce placed certain requirements on each side. Hamas was to stop the rocket firing into Israel; Israel was to significantly increase the amount of material allowed into Gaza. Keep in mind that Hamas had the tougher job since Israel had only to manage its own policies, whereas Hamas had the job of policing several splinter groups. According to the *NYT* (12/19/08), Hamas "was largely successful. . . . It imposed its will and even imprisoned some who. . . were firing rockets." Before June, more than 300 rockets were fired into Israel" monthly. In July/August, that number had dropped 90-97%. According to Harvard's John Mearsheimer, by Sept/Oct. "a total of two rockets were fired . . . none by Hamas." So Hamas was 99.9% faithful. Mearsheimer pointedly noted: "Even Israel's Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center admitted Hamas "had been careful to maintain the ceasefire."

Israel's baseline for compliance was the 500-600 truckloads of goods and materials entering Gaza daily before the siege. Hamas understood Israel would open its borders significantly, but Israel never went above 90 truckloads, a 15-18% compliance. On Nov. 4, 2008, Israel more forcefully broke the truce by attacking Gaza, killing 6 Palestinians. Mearsheimer called it "the first major violation of the truce," a violation that led to a resumption of the violence on both sides.

Terrorism is usually defined as any act that willfully targets civilians. Hamas's firing of rockets into Israel qualifies as terrorism by this definition. So do the suicide bombings during the 2nd intifada. What about Israel's record in this regard? For all its talk about "most moral army" and its dropping of leaflets to warn civilians to get out of harm's way, Israel has killed Palestinian children at a rate 12 times that of Palestinian killings of Israeli children. Israel's leaders try to claim the children were being used as shields, were put in harm's way by their parents, were too close to militants, etc., but the great number of deaths of children, women, and the elderly, the deliberate targeting of hospitals and schools—all of these facts, which have been noted and censored by virtually every international and Israeli human rights organization, are grisly testimony that Israel operates as a terrorist state. Also, both the 2011 Goldstone Report and an exhaustive Amnesty International report found no evidence that Hamas used human shields during Operation Cast Lead (2008-09), but they found considerable evidence that Israel's troops did. A startling instance of Israeli terrorism in full view of international journalists happened July 15, 2014. Four boys—Ismail Mahmoud Bakir, 9, Ahed Atef Bakir, 10, Zakariya Ahed Bakir, 10, and Mohammad Ramiz Bakir, 11—were playing soccer on a Gaza beach when an Israeli gunboat targeted them with deadly accurate missiles. Those journalists on the scene stated it could only have been a deliberate targeting of innocent boys.

The killing of innocent people is wrong! By anyone! However, neither Israel nor its supporters can claim a higher moral ground upon which to condemn Hamas. And if terrorism is to end, then Palestinians must receive the justice Israel has denied them for 75 years and counting.