Hamas’ surprising victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections of January 2006, the first democratic elections to date, has raised a number of questions—questions that are particularly compelling because of the movement’s impressive rate of success and its apparently unstoppable rise to power. The questions concern Hamas’ future policy, the next developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Palestinian Authority’s very existence and ability to function. Moreover, because Hamas itself was unprepared to handle such an overwhelming victory, it faced significant challenges in composing a Palestinian government without the support of any significant partners.

These challenges still exist nine months after the electoral victory, and the Hamas government still has difficulty fulfilling its daily functions. It is hampered by a financial crisis, the opposition by Fatah elements, an Israeli and partial international boycott, and the wariness of Arab governments who fear the implications of this victory in their own states. One of the most significant signs of Arab reservations about Hamas came in the important field of finance when the influential Palestinian-Jordanian Arab Bank Plc., the largest private bank in the Arab world, closed its branches in the PA. This act clearly resulted from several lawsuits being filed against the bank in the United States—lawsuits claiming that the bank supported terrorism by channeling financial aid to families of Palestinian terrorists, most of whom were Hamas members. The bank’s step indicates the effectiveness of global counterterrorism efforts but is also noteworthy because it was taken against a movement that won the only free democratic elections in the Arab world in years.

Hamas’ success in winning free elections is, indeed, a landmark event and took place within a political culture quite unique in the Arab region—a Palestinian culture marked by highly developed public opinion, pluralism, and a sense of democracy. The elections can also be regarded as another step in the U.S. campaign to promote democracy in the Middle East, much as it is trying to do in Iraq.

The democratic process in the Arab world began in 1992 with the first free elections
in Algeria, in which the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut—FIS) won the majority. Elections in Jordan followed in 1993; there the Islamic Action Front of the Muslim Brotherhood seized over one-third of the seats in the parliament. The Egyptian elections in December 2005 strengthened the Muslim Brotherhood in that country as well, despite the waves of arrests and other intimidation tactics used by authorities to limit the Brotherhood’s potential power. In Iraq, the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood—the Islamic Party—also supported the elections in the face of considerable opposition from within the Sunni community and many attacks on its members and its platform by various insurgent jihadi groups.

In the past fifteen years it has become almost axiomatic to say that, in free democratic elections in the Arab world, Islamic elements trump nationalist ones. A primary reason for this trend is the ideological vacuum in the Arab world, where Islamism, especially that extolled by the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood, is the only ideology left. Social injustices perpetuated by the ruling classes have fomented an almost apocalyptic sense of crisis in large segments of Arab society, which are increasingly receptive to the Brotherhood’s slogan “al-Islam hua al-Hall” (“Islam is the ultimate solution”). 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—the PLO/Fatah fell to Hamas, just as Algeria’s National Liberation Front fell to the FIS.

Al-Qaeda and Hamas

The democratic elections in Iraq and the Palestinian Authority, the semi-democratic elections in Egypt, and especially the policies of the United States and the actions of the Brotherhood have generated considerable discussion and concern over “Western democracy” in salafi-jihadi circles. Al-Qaeda and the salafi-jihadi movement as a whole pose a threat not only to the West and to Arab governments, but also to mainstream Arab Islamic movements belonging to the school of the Brotherhood. In the case of Iraq, jihadi have reached a consensus against participation in the democratic process regardless of what form it takes. But the electoral success of Hamas—an essentially jihadi movement, albeit one focused on local objectives and only against Israel—has presented an Islamist alternative to this rejection of democracy, and thus posed a serious challenge to the salafi-jihadi movement. The Lebanese Shi’a Hezbollah group poses a similar problem.

The dogmatic rivalry between Hamas and Al-Qaeda—two of Israel’s most obstinate adversaries—underscores the movement’s deep hostility both to democracy and to any kind of pluralist society. This tension is not new; it reflects, rather, an ongoing ambivalence toward Hamas over the past three to four years.1 On one hand, Hamas has conducted most of the terrorist activity against “the Jewish State” while adhering to jihadi tenets. It has also served as a model of jihadi sacrifice with its martyrs (shuhada) carrying
out over two hundred suicide bombings. On the other hand, however, Hamas is viewed as too closely aligned with Palestinian nationalism, conducting a “Jihad for the Homeland” instead of a “Jihad for Allah.”

Many salafi-jihadis see Hamas as an obstacle to al-Qaeda’s infiltration of the Palestinian Authority. It is a movement that cooperates with Shi’a Iran and Hezbollah; that defended, during the second Intifada, Yaser Arafat until his death in November 2004; and that, more recently, has shown signs of weakening 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 the salafi-jihadi movement, with a political and social doctrine that is perhaps best described as “evolution, not revolution.” The Brotherhood has a strong tendency to support, at least tactically, democratic processes in the Arab world in which its prospects of winning look promising.

Salafi-Jihadi Movements and Democracy

Islam’s interaction with democracy is of key importance for salafi-jihadi groups, which hold as sacred doctrine their rejection of both Western democracy and man-made laws in favor of the principle of divine law. Power derived from human beings rather than from Allah is, for them, a form of kufr or heresy. In recent years, the subject of elections has become more controversial as Muslims living in the West have increasingly questioned the religious legitimacy of participating in Western elections. Books on this topic, especially those opposing the participation of Muslims in democratic processes, are now translated by Salafi scholars and groups into English. In response to American efforts to bring democracy to the Arab world, salafi-jihadi groups contend that democracy not only is a heresy, but is also an integral part of the new “Crusader” campaign of colonialism (al-Hamlah al-Salibiyyah al-Jadidah) and the historical conspiracy against the Muslim world. Even more moderate Islamic elements in the Arab world, especially mainstream Saudi and Egyptian clerics and scholars, support this view, which contributed to the controversy surrounding the last Iraqi elections.

Democracy is also a threatening prospect for most Arab governments, be they kingdoms or republics. Arab nationalist scholars describe democracy as a form of “Western political-cultural imperialism or colonialism,” a description that reflects in part the ideological legacies of the Soviet Union and Arab socialism. Complicating the situation even more is the fact that, in many Arab countries, it is oppressed Islamic movements that are leading the opposition and the demand for civil rights. The Algerian FIS began this trend; the Saudi Islamic reform movement and others continue it.

In recent years, meanwhile, several famous fatwas from salafi-jihadi scholars have been issued against democracy and against elections. Salafi scholars and activists made intensive use of these fatwas in order to criticize the Palestinian elections in general and
Hamas’ participation in particular. On January 18, 2006, the webmaster of the Al-Maqrizi Center in London, which is headed by the Egyptian Islamist Dr. Hani al-Siba’i, posted on the jihadi forum Al-Hesbah the names of 102 Islamic clerics (some now deceased) who strongly opposed any participation in parliamentary elections in the Muslim world.3 Meant to discourage Hamas from taking part in the elections, the list included 52 Egyptians, 22 Saudis, 5 Jordanians (among them “Shaykh” Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi), 5 Syrians, 4 Moroccans, 2 Sudanese, 2 Lebanese, 2 Kuwaitis, an Iraqi, a Nigerian, a Mauritanian, and a Yemeni. The dominance of Egyptians and Saudis on the list reflects the important role they have played in the development of salafi-jihadi ideology, which is largely the product of the collaboration among Wahhabi scholars and Egyptian Brotherhood exiles in Saudi Arabia.

There were also four Palestinians on the list who had no links to Hamas or the Brotherhood. Among them, two individuals—Taqi al-Din al-Nabahani and Abd al-Qadim Zaloum, the founders and first two leaders of the Hizb al-Tahrir (Islamic Liberation Party—HT)—are particularly interesting. Another past HT leader, Ahmad al-Da’our, is listed among the Jordanian clerics. The presence of these HT leaders is significant because in the debate over the elections in Iraq, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority, supporters of salafi-jihadi ideology bestowed, for the first time, a sense of legitimacy on HT and its well-known rejection of democracy and elections. In pamphlets it published and distributed in the Palestinian Authority, and on its websites, the HT called for a boycott of the Palestinian elections, as well as those in Iraq. Several prominent members of the party took part in debates in jihadi forums on the Internet—the main platform nowadays for jihadi indoctrination and discussion—and were welcomed for their stance regarding elections. And several salafi-jihadis even relied on and circulated material issued by HT, including fatwas.

Though traditionally somewhat ambivalent about elections, HT developed its stronger, more assertive opposition to them in light of events in Iraq and Central Asia. Wide ideological gaps still exist between HT and salafi-jihadi groups—gaps made manifest by previous salafi-jihadi attacks on HT on a variety of issues. Nonetheless, their agreement on the issue of democracy and elections might provide a basis for closer relations in the future. Even though the HT regards itself as being in a theoretical phase (nazari) and not yet a practical one (‘amali), the dynamics of the global jihadi movement bring HT’s younger generation closer to jihadi ideas than to those of the Brotherhood.

The most popular rulings used by salafi-jihadi 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-Tartousi, the Syrian in exile in London; and the old-time ideologue of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Abd al-Qader bin Abd al-Aziz.4 jihadi sympathizers cited their writings quite often to intimidate Hamas prior to the elections.

Illustrative of the salafi-jihadi criticism of Hamas are the opinions expressed by Abu
Jandal al-Azdi, a Saudi cleric and one of the first leaders of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, who has been imprisoned there since 2003. In an interview, al-Azdi castigated Hamas for its support of Arafat and the Palestinian national struggle. Arafat, according to al-Azdi, was a murtadd—the worst form of apostate—“a greater enemy than the Jews” who should have been killed. Hamas’ support of Arafat was unforgivable because it poisoned the entire movement, turning all its members into infidels. Hamas also supported Mahmoud Abbas Abu Mazen, a “known Bahai” in jihadi eyes, and held discussions with the Egyptian intelligence services.

Al-Azdi’s main criticism of Hamas, however, centered on the distinction it makes between external and internal enemies, a distinction that Hamas adopted from Muslim Brotherhood doctrine and that al-Azdi and supporters of global jihadi firmly reject as being too narrow. In this, al-Azdi cited the Palestinian jihadi cleric Abu Qutada, who wrote,

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\text{[T]he 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 understands the Tawhid according to the understanding of the Salaf—the companions of the Prophet.}^6
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Al-Azdi also rejected the idea of any temporary truce (hudnah) with the Jews or Israel unless it included the strict conditions of Salafism. He concluded his article, nonetheless, by leaving an interesting opening for Hamas. He wrote that “the benefit of peaceful coexistence—sulh—for the interest of the Muslim public might be greater than war. In such a case you are even allowed to prolong the truce for more than ten years.” The traditional Islamic principle of community interest apparently carries weight even among the salafi-jihadis, and could plausibly serve in the future, provided the proper and compelling conditions, as the basis for a turn toward a more pragmatic, albeit still ideologically-extremist, orientation.

Responses to Hamas’ Electoral Victory

Hamas’ electoral victory created a vigorous debate in salafi-jihadi Internet forums, which subsequently lost some of its initial enthusiasm due to the “virtual Jihad” against Denmark during the cartoon crisis. 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 sharp 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 Kuwaiti salafi-jihadi cleric Hamed al-Ali, a very popular figure among the younger generation of supporters of global Jihad, exemplified the tone of the critics. In an article entitled “Hamas’ Dilemma,” which appeared in the jihadi internet forum Al-Hesbah on January 27, 2006, al-Ali criticized Hamas, even though he could not refrain from blessing them for their political achievement. According to al-Ali, Palestine remains the focus of the jihadi struggle and “a microcosm of the entire Ummah.” But Palestine is not, he explained, the sole “property of the Palestinians; hence, they cannot decide by themselves what way to choose.” Even though Hamas deserves applause for its electoral victory and for gaining the trust of the Palestinian public, “it is badly in need of the advice and guidance of the Islamic nation.” Hamas should therefore consult the rest of the Islamists in making its future decisions. It should also choose the only ideologically acceptable strategy of the Islamists, which is armed resistance to Israel.

By winning the elections and becoming a governing authority, al-Ali said, Hamas now has only two unacceptable choices: falling under a strangling siege, or following the path of Fatah—that is, compromising with the Jews. He outlined three challenges that currently confront Hamas. The first results from the contradiction between its Islamist ideology and its political position, which stands in opposition to that ideology. Every Islamic movement that joins the “path of democracy” faces this dilemma and trap. The second problem arises from the contradiction between Hamas’ solid, uncompromising positions regarding any concessions in Palestine and its need to soften those positions now that the movement is in charge of the government. Finally, Hamas now must confront the contradiction between its desire to preserve the honor and noble values of its martyrs and its desire to preserve its rule. Hamas is now, al-Ali explains, like a “sheep besieged by wild animals that want to suck her blood.”

In short, al-Ali criticizes Hamas for participating in a process that put the movement in an almost impossible situation. At the same time, however, he urges other Islamists to assist Hamas and guide it on the right path rather than condemn it and ignore its dilemma. Al-Ali’s “softened” words represent a sort of qualified salafi-jihadi patronage of Hamas. They further suggest that Hamas should bear in mind that its victory is not only its own, but one that should be shared with the rest of the Muslim world so as to avoid future mistakes.

Responses to al-Ali’s article covered a wide spectrum of opinion. Some stricter Salafists eschewed the “soft” tone, unable to forgive Hamas for disobeying Allah’s rules by participating in the elections. More sympathetic commentators, however, applauded Hamas for its social work among the Palestinians and noted the difficulty of fighting simultaneously on so many fronts. Some of these even called for modifying the Islamist project in Palestine by breaking it down into several stages. They asserted that improving the welfare of the Palestinian public is a noble phase in its own right, and one that only Hamas is capable of achieving. Less sympathetic were 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 salafi-jihadi responses to the Hamas victory have been deeply critical. Hamas entered a process that is fundamentally contrary to the salafi-jihadi worldview regarding democracy, elections, loyalty to Allah and refutation of Islam’s enemies (Al-Walaa’ wal-Baraa’). The salafi-jihadi critics also vehemently disapprove of the pragmatic or, to them, even opportunist nature of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Hamas leaders have thus far ignored such criticism. There is, however, a creeping sense of nihilism among many young Palestinians—a sense connected to the insurgency in Iraq and to the recent Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, to the global Jihad and to nihilism—that may increase in the wake of Hamas’ electoral success. The first salafi-jihadi Palestinian website and forum, AlOmmh.net, opened recently; its goal is to promote salafi-jihadi ideas among the Palestinian public and to encourage communication between Palestinian and other Islamists.

Hamas’ historic victory marks a turning point in the Palestinian Authority. The salafi-jihadi will certainly try to push Hamas into more hard-line positions by attempting both to color the political-ideological discourse of the Palestinian public and to recruit Palestinians for terrorism against Israel. If Hamas were to change its policy toward Israel or even abandon terrorism for a long temporary period, global jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda might well try to take up the “torch of Jihad” and establish affiliated groups within the Palestinian territories. The new situation in the Palestinian Authority is, moreover, markedly unstable. It is likely that Fatah could be dismantled, the Palestinian security forces changed, and new political, military and family alliances formed. Increased unemployment and financial difficulties will also probably contribute to an interim period of chaos. Such conditions may provide the salafi-jihadi movement with a golden opportunity to win support among the Palestinians in the Palestinian Authority, as they are slowly but surely now doing in some of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. So far, there is evidence of growing support for global jihadi groups in Gaza, as well as links between al-Qaeda elements in Sinai and Palestinians in Gaza. However, Hamas remains very cautious about establishing such links with salafi-jihadi, and not only because of the dogmatic rivalry between them. Hamas urgently needs the political and financial support of Arab governments such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, not to mention the European Union, and can therefore not afford any overt connections to global jihadi terrorist groups.

The issue of democracy and electoral participation will surely remain a controversial element in Islamist discourse as well. Hamas’ victory may sharpen the debate, however, and even shake the salafi-jihadi persistent opposition. If Hamas succeeds, even partly, in
directing the Palestinian Authority and improving the conditions of its people, it may serve for many Islamists as a model of successful Islamic Sunni rule. The “benefit and interest” of the Muslim public may play a pragmatic role here in justifying a change of policy, if not in the eyes of hard-line jihadi groups, at least in the eyes of Arab populations.

The debate over the democratic process in general and the Hamas victory in particular has calmed down in recent months since late spring. It has been superseded by other “hot” issues among salafi-jihadi—Sunni-Shiite conflicts, the killing of Zarqawi in Iraq, Hezbollah and its conflict with Israel, the growing jihadi insurgency led by the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the fate of the jihadi struggle in Saudi Arabia. The comparably more static situation in the Palestinian Authority on the one hand, and the cooperation of the movement with Hezbollah on the other, might have also contributed to the decline of interest in the matter. Yet, from time to time, the issue surfaces, especially when there are successful operations against Israel, such as the attack in late June against an Israeli post on the border with Gaza and the abduction of an Israeli soldier.

In some way, the Hamas victory might prove to be a turning point for larger segments of Arab societies in the region, especially those that are influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and its “evolutionary,” rather than “revolutionary” approach to implementing its agenda. But future elections in Arab countries will undoubtedly reignite controversy, especially whenever they are held in the shadow of American efforts to counter salafi-jihadi terrorism by promoting democratic processes in the Middle East. As such, the salafi-jihadi movement will continue to challenge the legitimacy of elections and the groups that participate in them in their struggle to win the support of Arab and Muslim hearts and minds.

NOTES


2. See, for example, The Doubts Regarding the Ruling of Democracy in Islam, 2nd ed. (London: Al-Tibyan Publications, 2004). This collection of Salafi positions and rulings does not name its author(s).


4. For the best list of Jihadi-Salafi writings on democracy and elections, see the section on “democracy” at al-Maqdisi’s website—Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad—http://www.tawhed.ws/c/?i=91. Abu Omar Seyf, 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 at http://www.tawhed.ws/r/?i=3639.

5. See online at http://www.tawhed.ws/r/?i=1508&c=1573.

6. Ibid.


Hamas' unwillingness to apply the shari'a in full is also dealt with in detail. The author cites numerous verses about God's rule and uses Q. 9: 31 (â€œthey have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from Godâ€, transl. Arberry) to â€œproveâ€ that following non-Islamic legislation â€œjust like Jews and Christians did by following â€œtheir rabbis and their monksâ€ in this verse â€œactually equals worshipping other gods, thus constituting polytheism. Jihadi-Salafis often use the concept to portray relations between Muslim- and non-Muslim states, particularly if these result in alliances against other Muslims, as loyalty to â€œinfidelsâ€ who should be disavowed instead. Considering this interpretation of the concept, it is hard to think of how Hamas can be criticised. Hamas' victory may fuel support for the right-wing Likud party, which argued that Israel should have opposed elections in which Hamas took part. The US and the international community are also in fix, and will demand major concessions from Hamas before they do business with it. Hamas is currently maintaining a ceasefire, but remains committed to the armed struggle, the destruction of Israel and retaliatory attacks on Israeli civilians. Hamas is led by a complicated and covert system that was established in response to Israel's assassination of several of its top leaders in recent years. Some of its top leaders live in exile in Syria and Lebanon. 

Reuven Paz, â€œSalafi-Jihadi Responses to Hamasâ€™ Electoral Victory,â€ Current Trends in Islamist Ideology 4, November 1, 2006. For some of the first reports, see Khaled Abu Toameh, â€œAl-Qaida-Linked Terrorists in Gazaâ€ Jerusalem Post, February 6, 2005; â€œAl-Qaëdia Claims Attack on Palestinian Official,â€ al-Arabiya, May 21, 2006; Khaled Abu Toameh, â€œAl-Qaida in Palestine Issues Death Threat Against Abbas. Global Salafi-Jihadists: Current and Future Threat. The Salafi-Jihadist ideology began its modern global proliferation during the decade of the Soviet-Afghan War from 1979-1989. Affectionately calling themselves mujahedeen (freedom fighters), jihadis came from around the Muslim world to fight in Afghanistan. Likewise, the term salafiyya jihadiyya, or Salafi-Jihadi, is not a phrase or term assigned to this group of terrorists by outsiders, rather, it is a self-subscribed honorific used in their own correspondence and publications. Burns, Nicholas and Jonathon Price, eds. Blind Spot: Americaâ€™s Response to Radicalism in the Middle East, Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 2015. Dabiq Magazine [Islamic State translated English edition]. Issue Nos. Leaders and ideologues of the Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups advance the idea that al-Qaedaâ€™s global network needs more support from like-minded Muslims around the world, who are willing to help its jihad. Therefore, in order to catalyze support, mobilize the base, and expand awareness of the Syrian jihad, they are waging an active â€œanti-Russian ideological warâ€ on the Internet. Abu Saloh believes that the victory of the Ahlus Sunnah (Sunni Islam) begins precisely with the holy land of Sham, where the Prophet Muhammad and his Sahaba (companions) shed their blood to raise the banner of jihad. Spreading classic works of Salafi-Takfiri thinkers help legitimize anti-Russian Jihadi ideology and stoke the fire of jihad.