

Whitewashing Hamas Is a Mistake

by Ed Husain
January 11, 2012

Last night, I attended an Intelligence Squared Debate in New York. As expected, the debate was spirited and lively. How could it not be? The motion was “The UN Should Admit Palestine as a Full Member State.”

As is the norm with almost all debates on the Arab-Israeli conflict, emotions were high and sparks flew. Daniel Levy, an Israeli citizen with a British background, abandoned proverbial British reserve and stiff-upper-lip culture. Levy was impressive, his arguments coherent, and his presentation was passionate, to put it mildly. You can view the full video [here](#).

While I was pleased that Levy and Mustafa Barghouthi, a prominent Palestinian politician and peace activist, won the debate, their whitewashing of Hamas left me deeply disturbed. Barghouthi cited a recent statement from Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal that allegedly commits to nonviolence. Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh, the Qassam Brigades, and other Hamas leadership figures clearly did not get the memo. They are yet to confirm that Hamas will adopt nonviolence.

Levy was right to highlight that the United States engaged with terrorists during the Sunni awakening in Anbar, and now is in discussions with segments of the Taliban. But to suggest that this means Israel should now engage with Hamas without preconditions is dishonest and insensitive to realities on the ground. Problematic though they are, neither the Taliban nor the Sunni awakening are lobbing rockets into the United States, as Hamas is with Israel. Granted, one way of disarming Hamas is to bring it into the political process. But to do so with eyes closed, to deny Hamas’ militant nature, undermines the credibility and honesty of Barghouthi and Levy. Worse, it gives the signal to other terrorist organizations that while they conduct a campaign of violence, they can rely on left-leaning opponents (Levy) and peace activists (Barghouthi) to advance their political cause by using a single statement disavowing violence (Meshaal) as a fig leaf to obscure Hamas’ continued commitment to violence.

Hamas is a terrorist organization. It remains so. It actively seeks Israel’s destruction. These facts must be accepted, not ignored, while attempting to disengage Hamas from violence and move it closer, where possible, to other Islamist movements in the region that have opted for nonviolence. Ending Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories and admitting it to the UN can be one way of attempting to end the current cycle of violence.