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Meir Hatina. *Islam and Salvation in Palestine.* Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2001. 180 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-965-224-048-4.

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Origins of the Islamic Turn in Palestinian Politics

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Meir Hatina's narrative of the history of the militant Palestinian Islamist organization Islamic Jihad shares both the hallmarks and the pitfalls of narrow empirical political science. *Islam and Salvation in Palestine* is carefully grounded in the proper Arabic texts, including the written work of Fathi al-Shiqaqi and other founding members of the movement, as well as party organs, articles, and interviews in the Arab press. Hatina wisely avoids the moralizing that surrounds discussions of Palestinian terrorism. He demonstrates that suicide attacks have served to neutralize Israel's overwhelming military power with a newfound "balance of fear" (p. 88). He also correctly concludes that Palestinian Islamist violence cannot be depicted as "blind fanaticism" (p. 123).

On the other hand, Hatina locates Palestinian Islamism, in general, and Islamic Jihad in particular, within a purely Palestinian political trajectory. The result is a narrative of a major Palestinian phenomenon without reference to Israel and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Thus, Palestinian Islamist politics are depicted as emerging entirely in reaction to the failures of the secular nationalism and the political complacency of the Muslim Brothers prior to the outbreak of the first *intifada* in 1987. The *intifada*, according to Hantina's account, was set in motion by a chain of events triggered by the violence of Islamic Jihad. Hatina sets out to provide an objective assessment of the origins and objectives of a key Palestinian movement. But the absence of context–notably the bloody realities of the Israeli military occupation and Israel's refusal to acknowledge Palestinian claims–leave the impression that the Palestinians bear sole responsibility for the violence and extremism that have shaped their struggle.

The most precise way to describe this study is as a work of "textual" (dare I say "Orientalist") social science. It is based entirely on published sources and reveals little knowledge of the harsh realities of Palestinian life. It is a book populated by competing theologies and tactics rather than people. Hatina made no effort to interview leaders, members, or supporters of the movement he describes. It is a work where the transliterations from classical Arabic are flawless but Bir Zeit University is mistakenly located in Ramallah (p. 23).

Despite these reservations, Hatina tells a compelling story. He demonstrates the historical significance of Islamic Jihad (also known as Palestinian Islamic Jihad), which, though it has been overshadowed by the much broader-based Hamas, was established almost a decade earlier. He traces the odyssey of a cohort of Palestinian students caught in the political ferment of Egypt in the 1970s who went back home to found an organization that helped spark a transformation in Palestinian politics. Fathi al-Shiqaqi, whose ideas and charisma dominated Islamic Jihad until Israeli agents murdered him in 1995 (a fact that Hatina, not coincidentally, ignores), is typical of the social origins and ideological bent of the group as a whole.[1] He was born in 1951 in a West Bank refugee camp and was a fervent supporter of Nasser's brand of Arab nationalism during his early years. The Arab defeat in 1967 precipitated his turn toward Islam and a new brand of political activism. He went to Egypt in 1974 to study medicine. There, he and group of like-minded students of similar origins developed a critique of the older generation of Muslim leaders in Palestine, particularly the leadership of the Muslim Brothers.

According to the prevailing view at the time, the priority for Muslim activists should be unity within the international community of believers, the *umma*. Only then, would a confrontation with Israel be successful. Islamic Jihad turned this approach on its head.

"Inasmuch as the Jewish presence in Palestine serves as a palpable symptom of Muslim inferiority in the modern age, the commitment to Palestine cannot be framed in the narrow context of Palestinian or Arab nationalism. The Palestinian problem, the movement argued, is a purely Islamic issue, and this is the key 'to every serious strategy aimed at the liberation and unification of the Muslim nation.' It is here that Islamic Jihad's ideological innovation lies, i.e., raising the flag of jihad in Palestine involves a commitment to two interrelated goals: the liberation of Palestine and a pan-Islamic revival in the region. The failure of the Islamic trends–both traditional and radical–to position the Palestinian cause as their top priority constitutes a denial of the unique position of Palestine in the Qur'an and in Muslim history. It also removes millions of Muslims from the struggle against Israel and its patron, the West." (p. 51)

This line of thinking led to a new set of priorities for the nascent movement, including the practice of immediate and violent confrontation with the Israeli enemy, a reaching out to the international Muslim community (notably Iran, an unusual ally for an exclusively Sunni Muslim organization), and an emphasis on political over social and cultural programs.

Between 1981 and 1987, the leaders of Islamic Jihad devoted their energies to recruitment within the mosques of the Gaza Strip and the Islamic University there and, soon after, launched a series of attacks on Israelis. According to Hatina, this military activity was made possible through alliances with Islamist-oriented factions inside the ideologically nebulous Fatah movement. The attacks intensified during the period between May and October 1987 when six Islamic Jihad activists escaped from a Gaza jail and remained at large. Israeli forces were unable to track down the last members of the group until a shoot-out in the Shaja'iyya neighborhood in Gaza, Islamic Jihad's "Alamo." These events, particularly the final denouement, raised the prestige of Islamic Jihad in particular, and the popularity of direct and violent confrontation with Israel, more generally. By the first week of December, a full-fledged uprising, the first *intifada*, broke out. On December 11, Islamic Jihad published the first call for a general strike, a development that marked the beginning of the institutionalization of the *intifada* as well as the central role of Islamic Jihad in its unfolding.

>From that point on, however, Islamic Jihad was eclipsed by the much larger Hamas, the militant wing of the Muslim Brothers. Hamas was formed just as the *intifada* got started and, in no small measure, as a response to the Islamic Jihad's popularity and willingness to commit brazen acts of violence against the Israeli military occupation. "The establishment of Hamas on the eve of the *intifada* and its perpetration of violent acts against Israel reflected the process of 'Palestinization' that had taken place in the Brother's ranks during the 1970s and 1980s. It attested to the movement's acceptance of the order of priorities laid down by the Islamic Jihad–'Liberated Palestine before Muslim Palestine' " (pp. 39-40).

In addition to the narrative account of Islamic Jihad's founding and the development of its ideology, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine* includes chapters on the complexities of the organization's relations with the PLO, Hamas, Iran, and Hizballah. Adroit political maneuvering has allowed Islamic Jihad to survive, albeit with difficulty, in territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority in the wake of the Oslo Accords–which it adamantly opposes–while also keeping it from being swallowed by Hamas. In the wake of the expulsion of much of Islamic Jihad's leadership from the occupied territories to Syria and Lebanon, the organization's ideological and political association with Iran has been transformed into a close

attachment with Hizballah with the result that Islamic Jihad has become a quasi-military organization. The final chapter discusses the organization's use of symbols and imagery to perpetuate a political mythology which validates the movement's conception of religious self-sacrifice. An appendix includes an English translation of selections from Islamic Jihad's Internal Charter.

Hatina has done an admirable job of using the relevant primary sources to demonstrate the historical significance of Islamic Jihad and its ideological and tactical innovations without succumbing to the standard cliches that surround most discussions of militant Islamist groups. This is no mean achievement given the current political climate in the West.

But the case of Sami Al-Arian, according to Hatina a founding member of Islamic Jihad, also indicates the dangers of the author's narrow focus. Al-Arian was arrested by American security forces on February 20 in a sweep of alleged members of the organization. Al-Arian is a professor of engineering who has lived in the United States for almost thirty years. He has been under scrutiny since "terrorism expert" Steven Emerson fingered him in the notorious PBS documentary "Jihad in America" in 1995. As a result of the allegations, Al-Arian's employer, the University of South Florida, placed him on leave but was forced to reinstate him in 1998, when authorities found no evidence of criminal activity against him. This sequence of events replayed itself last fall when the university tried to revoke his tenure after a "prime-time smearing" on the Fox News Channel's *The O'Reilly Factor*.[2] Sami Al-Arian's major crime, it appears, is his advocacy of Palestinian rights within an Islamist discourse. Currently, such views are tantamount to treason in the United States. Hatina's book will doubtless serve as "academic" fodder for the state's case against him. Unless Palestinian politics are placed within the context of the violence of the Israeli occupation, advocates for Palestinian rights–particularly those of an Islamist bent–will be marginalized as fanatics or terrorists.

Notes

[1]. Vincent Cannistraro, a former chief of CIA counterterrorism operations and someone clearly in the know, repeats this fact in an article titled "Assassination is Wrong–and Dumb," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2001, A29.

[2]. Eric Boehlert, "The Prime-Time Smearing of Sami Al-Arian," Salon.com, January 19, 2002.

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