

Propaganda for the educated

About the book *Hamas: The Quest for Power* by Hamas experts Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell

By Matthias Küntzel

In June 2024, eight months after the worst anti-Jewish massacre since the Holocaust, Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell published their book *Hamas: The Quest for Power*. This is a revised and updated version of their previous volume, *Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement*, which appeared in 2010.

Beverley Milton-Edwards was formerly Professor of Politics at Queen's University Belfast and is now a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs, based in Doha. The Council's website lists her as an occasional advisor to the Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs. She is the author of *Islamic Politics in Palestine* (1996), which recounts the prehistory and history of Hamas based on interviews with 34 Palestinians.

Stephen Farrell is a journalist who has worked as a Middle East correspondent for the New York Times and was head of the Reuters bureau in Jerusalem until 2022.

Like the 1996 Milton-Edwards study, this latest publication is based on interviews with Hamas cadres and sympathizers, including prominent leaders such as Mahmoud Zahar, Abdel Aziz Rantissi, Ismail Haniyeh, Ahmed Yassin, Khaled Meshaal, and Yahya Sinwar. "The purpose of the book," the authors write, is "to give insights into how Hamas was born, grew, and thrived in the ... Palestinian Territories." (X)

The current volume by and large achieves its stated aim, with the caveat that important external factors, such as Hamas' close cooperation with Iran, hardly play a role.

The 15 chapters of the book are arranged partly chronologically and partly topically. Chapter 1 begins with the dramatic events of October 7 and the first

months of the Gaza War. The following six chapters trace the development of Hamas and its history from the 1930s to the recent past. Chapters 8-14 deal with individual phenomena such as the culture of martyrdom, the situation of women, the question of voter turnout, and the transformation of the Gaza Strip into “Hamastan.” In the final chapter, the authors return to the massacre of October 7, 2023.

The historical sections of the book begin with the pivotal role of the Salafist preacher Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, who was killed near Jenin in 1935. They provide information about the precursor organization, *al-Mujamma' al-Islami* (The Islamic Center), founded in 1973 by Ahmed Yassin, which saw itself as an alternative to the PLO and was therefore supported by Israel until the early 1980s. We learn about the outbreak of the intifada at the end of 1987 and the founding of the Islamist Hamas, which in its early days continued to fight not Israel but the secular PLO.

This changed in 1989 when Hamas for the first time kidnapped and killed Israeli soldiers. The strategic shift was consolidated in 1991 with the founding of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the organization’s military wing. Then, in 1994, Hamas responded to the Oslo Accords signed by Israel and the PLO in 1993 with its first round of suicide bombings in Israel, aimed at torpedoing the peace process. This Hamas terror campaign contributed significantly to the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister for the first time in 1996. After the Camp David peace process promoted by Bill Clinton failed in the summer of 2000 due to Arafat's intransigence, the second intifada began, during which Hamas killed hundreds of Israelis in suicide bombings. Finally, we learn how Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006, following Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, and secured sole control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 after bloody fighting with Fatah.

Terror against dissenters and political competitors runs like a thread through the history of Hamas. One contemporary witness reports that the followers of Sheikh Izz ad-Din Qassam had anyone who spoke ill of their leader killed (27). As regards the Mujamma, the precursor to Hamas: “After Friday prayers, burning torches were held aloft as Mujamma thugs set fire to libraries, newspaper offices, billiard halls and bars. They burned cinemas and cafés, closed liquor stores, and ran intimidation campaigns.” (43) After the Oslo

Accords, Hamas considered all supporters of this peace agreement to be collaborators who deserved death: “The PA [Palestinian Authority] proved unable to stop the killings, and bodies of Palestinians began to turn up bearing the marks of summary execution.” (69) Hamas was no more squeamish in its treatment of Fatah supporters after seizing power in the Gaza Strip: “At a Fatah rally to commemorate the death of Arafat in November 2007, Hamas forces killed six people and wounded 100.” (202)

Girls and women were and continue to be particularly badly affected. "Gangs of Hamas 'enforcers' stormed into classrooms demanding that bareheaded girls put on the hijab. ... Whenever they saw a woman without a veil they attacked her and sometimes threw acid in her face. ... Before long, bareheaded women were being stoned and abused in the street; their moral and national commitment was openly questioned."(150) Terror as far as the eye can see.

The authors report on this, but shy away from calling a spade a spade: the words “terror” and “terrorism” do not appear in their work. Instead, they attempt to link Hamas' violent actions to the organization's supposedly noble motives. They claim, for example, that Hamas wants to use violence to achieve “their political goals of freedom and independence.” (XI) The question of what “freedom” means in a strict Sharia society and how the noble claim can be reconciled with the massacre of October 7 is not asked. Instead, even the Qassam Brigades are celebrated as freedom fighters who seemed “effortlessly to combine dedication to cause and country—the liberation of Palestine.” (108) In the concluding sentences of the book, the authors express their belief that Hamas's “fundamental causes” will serve as an inspiration to the disadvantaged throughout the world: “Even if the Qassam Brigades could be beaten, the fundamental causes that Hamas championed still had the power to draw support and galvanize the Palestinian people, as well as an increasing number of the disenfranchised in the Global South and the marginalized in the West.” (271)

Sentences like this remind the reviewer of the slogan “Globalize the intifada” and, beyond that, the world-revolution jargon of the 1970s, when parts of the Western left chose Mao or Pol Pot as their role models without considering the millions of murders their heroes were responsible for. And, indeed, Milton-Edwards and Farrell do not seriously acknowledge the specific features of

October 7—the sadistic slaughter of hundreds of unarmed civilians amid cries of *Allahu Akbar*.

The fact that the victims were burned alive, beheaded, tortured, and raped does not shock them or even cause them to pause for a moment. For them, the killing of 1,200 Israelis merely confirmed the “grim and consistent pattern” (95) of violence and counter-violence that has defined the conflict for decades. As Hamas experts, they do not take a position on the massacre, but instead practice apparent equidistance: critics of the massacre are quoted without comment, as are Hamas's justifications.

In the case of October 7, however, equidistance means taking sides with the attackers. And indeed, Milton-Edwards and Farrell report with barely restrained enthusiasm on the two years of preparations and the supposed success of the massacre. Hamas had proven, they write (IX), “that it had the strategic capacity to deliver a humiliating body blow to a military machine that claims to be the best in the Middle East.” Hamas' attack had “certainly raised its profile, viralizing its level of fame, or notoriety.” (263)

In doing so, both authors have accurately captured the pro-Hamas sentiment in Western academic circles. But the price for this is high. Their stance requires ignoring the real motives behind the October 7 attack, such as antisemitism and the idea of jihad.

In 1996, Beverley Milton-Edwards devoted several pages of her aforementioned monograph to antisemitism in the Hamas Charter. This Charter, she wrote at the time, gave the impression that its author had kept the pages of the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” open beside him. But in 2024, after the anti-Jewish massacre of 2023, the antisemitism of the Charter warrants a mere 13 lines, i.e., is effectively ignored. (18)

Elsewhere in the book, the authors quote Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantissi: “In the name of Allah we will fight the Jews. ... By God, we will not leave one Jew in Palestine. We will fight them with all the strength we have.” (10) Rantissi does not refer to Israelis or Zionists, but to “Jews.” He does not even want to accept these Jews as second-class citizens under protection, as was customary in early Islam. He is determined to make the Middle East *judenfrei* according to the

Nazi recipe. And yet Milton-Edwards and Farrell do not want to see this as a case of antisemitism. They distort the plain meaning of Rantissi's statements, by reinterpreting them as an expression of his desire to have control over Palestinian land. (10)

Furthermore, they downplay the role of religion. On October 7, the cries of *Allahu Akbar* (“Allah is the greatest”) that accompanied the onslaught testified to the perpetrators’ firm conviction that the massacre was God's will. This explains the enthusiasm of the murderers and the cries of triumph that rang out during the slaughter. However, these cries of *Allahu Akbar* are not mentioned in Milton-Edwards’ and Farrell's book. Moreover, the suicide bombings—the hallmark of Hamas—are reported in detail, but always in an understanding and uncritical manner. Milton-Edwards and Farrell present, for example, the case of the Palestinian Maryam Farahat, who became famous under the name *Umm Nidal* (Mother of the Struggle). “She ... was a folk heroine to Hamas diehards after having given three of her sons as ‘martyrs’ for the cause. She was even filmed with her youngest son before the suicide mission in which he died, telling him not to come back to her unless he was a ‘*shaheed*’ (martyr).” (156) Here, the authors rationalize this bloodthirsty fanaticism as resistance.

Milton-Edwards and Farrell have written a book that provides much interesting information drawn from numerous interviews with members of the founding generation of Hamas and their successors. However, they have lost their critical distance from the subject of their investigation. As a result, the book also propagates Hamas ideology in a form acceptable to many Western intellectuals.

Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *Hamas: The Quest for Power*, Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2024. 332 pages. \$ 58.00 (cloth).