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Book Review

Levitt, Matthew. 2006. *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*. New Haven: Yale University Press. xi +324 pp. ISBN: 0-300-11053-7 (pb). Price: £10.99.

Reviewed by Bjørn Møller [2 May 2007]

Quite a lot of attention has in recent years been paid to economic foundations of terrorism, including the role of Islamic charities, the possible use of the *hawala* system for money transfers to Islamist terrorists, etc. Unfortunately, the growing saliency of these issues seems to be accompanied by a relaxation of academic standards, with the implication that it matters more whether what is being claimed fits the general picture (as politically defined) than whether these claims rest on a sound research basis. Matthew Levitt's book on the Palestinian organization Hamas belongs to this category of books with a politically opportune message based on a very weak scholarly foundation.

The gist of the author's argument is that Hamas is, by its very nature, a terrorist organization, and that all its other activities are therefore merely means to the end of waging a terrorist war against Israel and for the establishment of a caliphate covering the entire territory of the former Palestine. As a hypothesis, this is not even *prima facie* plausible as it fails to explain why Hamas – or rather what the author rightly claims to be the basis and precursor of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, *al-Ikhwan* – did *not* take to violence or terrorism until the outbreak of the first Intifada in 1987. Even if one accepts that Hamas is today a terrorist organization (as international organizations such as the U.N. and the EU have agreed), it surely does not logically follow that it is *only* a terrorist organization and that all other activities should be seen in this light.

If one accepts that terrorism is a strategy to which organizations resort when it is deemed opportune, it follows that other strategic paths (e.g., running for elections) may also be pursued, either alternating with terrorism or as parallel tracks. These alternative paths should then be assessed in their own right rather than simply as contributions to terrorism. For example, if providing social services enhances popular backing and is manifested in votes for elections, this would appear as an entirely satisfactory explanation for why an organization might choose to provide such services.

The author apparently does not accept this logic, but sees all of Hamas's non-terrorist activities and organizations as means to recruit future terrorists, e.g., for suicide missions, and to finance these terrorist activities, e.g., by paying compensations to the families of suicide bombers. To substantiate this claim he mainly uses the observation that money is fungible, i.e., that funds *may be* transferred from A to B, which is not the same as proving that they *are* indeed transferred. When it comes to explaining (away) obvious non-terrorist expenses such as the running of health clinics, he reverts to circular logic according to which such services function to increase support for Hamas and is interpreted as *ipso facto* support for its terrorist activities. The author thereby disregards the actual services such clinics deliver to the Palestinian population. When it comes to the identification of those facilities that are part of this alleged terrorist support structure, the main evidence consists of claims that this and that organization (even the national Red Crescent society) has been "infiltrated," a very flexible term indeed. What might otherwise have been a useful enumeration of organizations linked to actual terrorism is thus rendered useless by a lack of reasonable standards of evidence.

Besides the flawed logic, the book suffers from terminological obfuscation. The author uses the

term *dawa* in an unusual way, compared to what, say, the entry on *Da'wa* (by M. Canard) in the renowned *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) has to say about it. According to the latter, *da'wa* is the message (either from God to Muslims or from Muslims to prospective converts to Islam), whereas Levitt employs it to refer to structures used for proselytizing. Of course, structures such as mosques, madrassas, health clinics, or football teams may be used as means to deliver *da'wa*, but it is rather odd to refer to them as *da'wa* as such.

Its 61 pages of endnotes notwithstanding, the book's documentation is inadequate as the author fails to apply any scholarly methodology (or even plain common sense) to assess which sources are trustworthy and which are likely to be biased. Besides newspaper articles (mainly western or Israeli newspapers), he uncritically bases his account on U.S. and Israeli intelligence information – not the classified reports, but unclassified and presumably “sanitized” versions. He even appears to believe that relying on Palestinian (i.e., *Fatah*) intelligence data bestows special credibility, rather like accepting whatever Republicans write about Democrats (or vice versa) as inherently credible for no other reason than that both sides are from the United States.

All-in-all, a disappointing book.

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