

{JANUARY 28 2006}

# DEJA VU!

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If Ariel Sharon had not been in a deep coma, he would have jumped out of his bed for joy.

The Hamas victory fulfils his most ardent hopes.

For a whole year now, he did everything possible to undermine Mahmoud Abbas. His logic was quite obvious: The Americans wanted him to negotiate with Abbas. Such negotiations would inevitably have led to a situation that would have compelled him to give up almost all of the West Bank. Sharon had no intention of doing so. He wanted to annex about half of the territory. So he had to get rid of Abbas and his moderate image.

During the last year, the situation of the Palestinians got worse from day to day. The actions of the occupation made normal life and commerce impossible. The West Bank settlements were continuously enlarging. The Wall which cuts off about 10% of the West Bank was nearing completion. No important prisoners were released. The aim was to impress on the Palestinians that Abbas is weak (“a chicken without feathers”, as Sharon put it), that he cannot achieve anything, that offering peace and observing a cease-fire leads nowhere.

The message to the Palestinians was clear: “Israel understands only the language of force.”

Now the Palestinians have put in power a party that speaks this language.

Why did Hamas win?

Palestinian elections, like German ones, consist of two parts. Half the members of parliament are elected on straight party lists (like in Israel), the other half are elected individually in their districts. This gave Hamas a huge advantage.

In the party lists elections, Hamas won with only a slight majority. This would suggest that as far as the general political line is concerned, the majority is not far from Fatah – two states, peace with Israel.

Many of the votes given to Hamas had nothing to do with peace, religion and fundamentalism, but with protest. The Palestinian administration, run almost

exclusively by Fatah, is tainted with corruption. The “man in the street” felt that the people on top don’t care about him. Fatah was also blamed for the terrible situation created by the occupation.

Also, the glory of the martyrs and the indomitable fight against the immensely superior Israeli army added to the popularity of Hamas.

In the personal-regional elections, the situation of Hamas was even better. Hamas had more creditable candidates, untainted by corruption. Its party machine was far superior, its members far more disciplined. In every district, there were several Fatah candidates competing with each other. After the death of Yasser Arafat, there is no strong leader capable of imposing unity. Marwan Barghouti, who could perhaps have done the job, is held in an Israeli prison – another big Israeli gift for Hamas.

People who believe in conspiracy theories can assert that it is all part of a devious Israeli plan.

Some people even believe that Hamas was an Israeli invention right from the beginning. That is, of course, a wild exaggeration. But it is indeed the case that in the years before the first intifada, the Islamic organization was the only Palestinian group that had practically a free run in the occupied territories.

The logic went like this: Our enemy is the PLO. The Islamists hate the secular PLO and Yasser Arafat. So we can use them against the PLO.

Moreover, while all political institutions were banned, and even Palestinians who worked for peace were arrested for carrying out illegal political activity, no one could control what was happening in the mosques. “As long as they are praying, they are not shooting,” was the innocent opinion in the Israeli military government.

When the first intifada broke out at the end of 1987, this was proved wrong. Hamas was formed, partly in order to compete with the Islamic Jihad fighters. Within a short time, Hamas became the core of the armed uprising. But for almost a year, the Israeli Security Service did not act against them. Then policy changed and Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader, was arrested.

All this happened more through stupidity than design. Now the Israeli government is faced with a Hamas leadership that was democratically elected by the people.

What now? Well, a strong feeling of *deja vu*.

In the 70s and 80s, the Israeli government declared that it would never ever negotiate with the PLO. They are terrorists. They have a charter that calls for the destruction of Israel. Arafat is a monster, a second Hitler. So, never, never, never . . .

In the end, after much bloodshed, Israel and the PLO recognized each other and the Oslo agreement was signed.

Now we are hearing the same tune again. Terrorists. Murderers. The Hamas charter