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Hamas and Palestinian Politics

AITANA BOGDAN

The rise of Islamist movements has long been a matter of great concern for both Western and secular Arab governments. While the first are suspicious of their ultimate goals, the Arab governments are fearful of the growing power of any movement they have trouble controlling. The first Islamist movements started to appear in the 1930s and increased dramatically in numbers in the 1950s and 1960s. By the late 1970s they were already becoming important political players in many different Arab states. At the time the main goals of these organizations were to establish an Islamic state and impose the *Shari'a*. As these radical goals proved to be unattainable they were soon replaced by a more moderate and pragmatic approach. This was not, however, the case with all Islamist organizations. In time a split occurred among the various movements. A minority of them turned to terrorism, at home and abroad, while the majority renounced violence and focused on creating grassroots networks to attract popular support. It was this latter category that in the end decided to enter the political arena through the electoral process. As a result most of these Islamist movements moved in the direction of establishing political parties, where this was permitted by the authoritarian regime in power¹.

The aim of this article is to focus on the second type of Islamist organizations in an attempt to determine whether their inclusion in politics is beneficial or harmful for the process of democratization in the Middle East. Because of the vastness of the subject I decided to select only one movement, which I consider to be representative for this group, namely the Palestinian Hamas. The arguments comprised in this article will fit into two categories. On one hand I will attempt to demonstrate that Hamas is undergoing a process of transformation, moderating its ideology according to the political and historical context. On the other hand, I intend to prove that some of Hamas' distinctive features make its inclusion in Palestinian political life an advantage for Palestinian democratization.

Historical Background

Palestinian Islamism represents a unique case in the history of Islamist movements in the Middle East. On one hand, it appeared later than most Islamist movements in the region, acquiring its final shape only at the beginning of the First Intifada in 1987. And secondly, its origins are not closely tied to the decline of

¹Nathan J. BROWN, Amr HAMZAWY, Marina OTTAWAY, "Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, no. 67, March 2006, pp. 1-19/p. 5.

Arab secular regimes. Quite the opposite, Palestinian political Islam, after 1970 became eclipsed by the strong Palestinian national movement¹.

As in other countries from the region, the disaster of the 1967 war triggered an ideological shift in the Palestinian territories, as the focus shifted from the external arena (against foreigners and Israel) to the internal arena (against the ruling elite). Therefore, people came to believe that the Palestinian struggle could only be successful if all secular Arab regimes were eliminated².

Nevertheless, starting with the 1970's a series of important events made the Islamic radicals in the Palestinian territories quickly lose the influence they had acquired immediately after 1967. The first of these factors was the emergence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), a secular movement, which took upon itself the responsibility of conducting armed struggle against Israel³.

The second factor was the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Palestinian territories starting with 1967. The Muslim Brothers had a reformist approach to the idea of establishing an Islamic state, and they applied this ideology to the Palestinian territories⁴. The rise of political Islam in the Territories was partially facilitated by the Israeli authorities who viewed this new ideological trend as a useful tool for undermining the power of Palestinian nationalism⁵.

The Brotherhood was represented in the Palestinian territories through three main bodies that constituted the base for the later formation of Hamas. These bodies were: the Islamic Centre (al-Mujamma' al-Islami), the Islamic Association (al-Jam'iyya al-Islamiyya) and the Islamic University. The spiritual leader of the Islamic Centre was Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who later on became the spiritual leader of Hamas⁶.

All three organizations were constructed around the reformist approach of the Brotherhood. They were designed to reform Palestinian society in order to prepare the new generations for the future jihad against the state of Israel. This is why the members of these organizations restrained from performing anti-Israeli activities and instead concentrated their effort toward de-legitimizing the PLO⁷.

Once the Intifada erupted the members of the Muslim Brotherhood were faced with a serious dilemma. They could either renounce its de facto accommodation with the Israeli occupation or lose completely Palestinian support for their cause. After an initial stage of hesitation, they settled for a compromise, which consisted in the creation of a separate organization out of the Muslim Brotherhood to take responsibility for its participation in the Intifada. Thus, in the case

¹ Beverley MILTON-EDWARDS, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, I.B.Tauris Publishers, London and New York, 1999, p. x.

² Meir HATINA, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine*, The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2001, p. 17.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁵ Graham USHER, "What Kind of Nation? The Rise of Hamas in the Occupied Territories", *Race & Class*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1995, pp. 65-80/p. 66.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

the Intifada failed, the Muslim Brotherhood could shed all the blame on Hamas, and thus escape possible Israeli repercussions¹.

Hamas, which means *zeal* in Arabic, being an acronym for al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Resistance Movement) was formed on December, 8th 1987, as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. In a way the outbreak of the Intifada and the appearance of Hamas were the consequences of two different but parallel changes that were taking place in the Palestinian territories at the time. While the first event reflected the general Palestinian mood towards the failure of all struggle against Israel, the second event represented the increasing consciousness of resistance and confrontation among Palestinian Islamists².

Through its active participation in the Intifada and the growing awareness of its relationship with the Brotherhood, Hamas managed to put an end to the PLO's critics concerning the nonparticipation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the armed struggle. From that point on, Yassin and other Muslim Brotherhood leaders began to admit openly the connection between Hamas and the Brotherhood, forwarding the idea the Hamas is nothing but a reformed active wing of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brethren³.

Structure and Leadership

In what concerns its structure, Hamas is composed of three interrelated wings. The political and social welfare wings deal with the organization's social, administrative, political and propaganda activities. The military wing engages in covert activities such as executing suspected collaborators, surveilling potential targets, procuring weapons and carrying out guerrilla and terrorist attacks⁴.

The executive body of Hamas is the Political Committee, which is believed to be composed of around fourteen members, located both within and outside the Palestinian territories. This body directs the activities of Hamas representatives overseas, the political office, the information office, the para-military apparatus and the Department of Affairs of the Occupied Lands (responsible with the movement's charitable and teaching activities). The Political Committee acts a consultative council and decisions are usually taken through consensus. In all its actions, the Political Committee must take into consideration the opinions expressed by the external members of the Political Bureau, the members of the Gaza Strip Steering Committee and the prison leadership⁵.

The external members of the Political Bureau are based primarily in Lebanon, Syria, Qatar and Iran. They include prominent leaders, such as Musa Abu Marzuq,

¹ *Ibidem*.

² Khaled HROUB, *Hamas. Political Thought and Prattice*, Institute for Palestine Studies, Washington DC, 2000, p. 36.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁴ Matthew LEVITT, *Hamas. Political, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, p. 9.

⁵ "Dealing with Hamas", *International Crisis Group Report*, no. 21, Amman/Brussels, January 2004, pp. 1-42/p. 10.

Khaled Mishal, Imad Alami, Mohammad Nazal and Usama Hamda. The exiled leadership is especially influential in formulating Hamas' relations with the Arab world and Iran¹.

The Gaza Strip Steering Committee was initially led by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and comprised Brotherhood veterans, such as Abd-al-Aziz Rantisi, Mahmoud Zahhar, Ismail Haniyya. This organization plays a key role in the decision-making process within Hamas, as it reflects the views of the internal membership of the Political Committee and its input is solicited on almost every issue. On some matters affecting the Palestinian Territories it acts as an autonomous body, while on broader issues, like negotiations with Israel it needs to consult with the external members².

The West Bank political leadership has been seriously diminished by Israeli arrests and killings, and all efforts to rebuild it have been hampered by the continuing Israeli military actions. Today, it no longer has identifiable public leaders, it does not operate cohesively and it is geographically fractured, thus exerting only a limited influence in the region³.

The prison leadership has been another key-element in Hamas policy-making, especially because its members enjoy a special legitimacy that allowed them to impose their own vision regarding the organization's actions. It is therefore unlikely that any political initiative within Hamas would succeed without their consent⁴.

Aside the Political Committee, in the beginning Hamas was divided in several functional branches whose operations were further broken down by region. These branches included:

- a. a social welfare and administrative branch – *the dawwa* – responsible for recruitment, funding and social services;
- b. Al-Mujahideen al-Filastininun, a branch responsible for arms procurement and military activities;
- c. a security branch – *Jehaz Aman* – responsible for collecting information and identifying, interrogating and killing suspected collaborators;
- d. a media branch – *the A'alam* – responsible for producing and distributing leaflets, staffing press offices and addressing propaganda issues⁵.

This structure remained unchanged for the first years of Hamas activity and started to transform only in the 1990s in order to adapt to the continuous Israeli attacks against the organization. Thus, in 1991, the Mujahideen al-Filastininun branch was incorporated into a recognized Hamas military wing under the name of Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades⁶.

Although in principle autonomous, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades are known as a disciplined body whose commanders implement policies devised by the Hamas leadership rather than their own. According to Israeli sources, the size of the Qassam Brigades revolves around 1000 men, located mainly in the Gaza Strip⁷.

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Matthew LEVITT, *Hamas...cit.*, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁷ "Dealing with Hamas", *cit.*, p. 11.

Ideology

Hamas' ideological platform is best reflected in its Charter which was issued on August, 18th 1988. At the beginning of this charter Hamas defined itself as a "Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood" and the general content of the Covenant does not differ much from positions taken by the Muslim Brotherhood on the same issues. However, it is clear even from the beginning that unlike the Brotherhood, Hamas' main aim is not the reformation of society but the liberation of Palestine through violent jihad¹.

In the charter, the religious discourse is dominant. In what concerns Palestine the document states that

"the land of Palestine is an Islamic trust (waaf) upon all Muslim generations until the Day of Resurrection. It is not right to give it up nor any part of it" (art 11)².

The solution to this problem is, according to Hamas, the resort to violent jihad. Jihad, as set forth in the charter is designed to prevent infidels from ruling over the land of Islam³.

In regard to peace negotiations and initiatives, the charter clearly states:

"What are called 'peaceful solutions' and 'international conferences' to solve the Palestine question all conflict with the doctrine of the Islamic Resistance Movement, for giving up any part of the homeland is like giving up part of the religious faith itself" (art. 13)⁴.

The Hamas Charter also mentions other organizations active in the Palestinian territories, like the PLO, which is portrayed as a "*father, brother, relative or friend*" as the two movements have a common goal. However, in another section of the document, Hamas' criticizes the PLO's secular orientation and its recognition of the State of Israel⁵.

In addition, Hamas' ideological platform has important pan-Arab and pan-Islamic elements. This is reflected in the way Hamas portrayed the Palestinian cause as the foremost cause for Muslims throughout the world because of Palestine's unique sanctity and its special status within Islam⁶.

However, as the organization evolved so did its ideology. For example in the first two years of Hamas' existence (1987-1989), the preliminary identification of friends and foes presented no difficulty, as the picture was rather oversimplified. However, in subsequent years, Hamas' discourse entered a phase of transformation as its leadership became aware of the fact that it was unwise to expand the list of one's enemies. Hence, the movements started to reduce and neutralize its enemies whenever possible⁷.

¹ *Ibidem*.

² Khaled HROUB, *Hamas. Political Thought...cit.*, p. 273.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 269.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 274.

⁵ Ziad ABU-AMR, "Hamas: A Historical and Political Background", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XXII, no. 4, Summer 1993, pp. 5-19/p. 13.

⁶ Khaled HROUB, *Hamas. Political Thought...cit.*, p. 48.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

While at the beginning the Charter mentions "enemies" in very general and vague terms, leaving much to the imagination, since the early 1990s Hamas' political thinking has been re-orientated, much under the influence of the organization's external leadership. This new attitude has been reflected in several of Hamas' actions, such as the establishment of contacts with Western states and international bodies¹.

In the following years, Hamas' political view of the "enemy" and of Israeli supporters refined even more. In regard to the "principal enemy" Hamas began to clearly differentiate between Judaism as a religion and Zionism as a political movement. Thus, the primary enemy of the Palestinian people became the Zionist movement and the Zionist entity. This type of distinction can be observed in the following quote, attributed to the leadership of Hamas:

"The non-Zionist Jew is one who belongs to the Jewish faith, whether as a believer or due to accident of birth, but does not relate to the above ideas and takes no part in aggressive actions against our land and our *umma*. The Zionist, on the other hand, is one who embraces the aggressive Jewish ideology and becomes an instrument for the realization of those ideas on our land and against our *umma*. On this basis, Hamas will not adopt a hostile position in practice against anyone because of his ideas or his creed but will adopt such a position if those ideas and creed are translated into hostile or damaging actions against our *umma* and our nation"².

The relationship established between politics and morality is yet another central issue for Hamas' ideological stance. As many other Islamist movements, whether conscious or not, Hamas has the tendency of transferring individual morality (consistent with Islamic values) to the political activities of groups, states and international organizations, without regard for the huge differences between individual and group behavior³.

For example, Hamas has constantly rejected such principles as those expressed by Hans Morgenthau, who stated that "there is no morality in politics" and "interests come before principles". Despite being reluctant to publicly compromise its ultimate objectives, Hamas has not let its actions be solely governed by religious and moral dictates. Rather, it operates in a context of opportunities and constraints, conflicting interests and cost-benefit considerations and is attentive to the fluctuating needs and demands of the Palestinian people⁴.

Through the relations it established with the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the post-Oslo period, Hamas proved itself capable of political pragmatism and political awareness.

Since its foundations in the 1980s Hamas became the second major player on the Palestinian political arena, constituting an alternative to the PLO and other pre-existent factions. At a time when the PLO was seeking accommodation with Israel and the United States, Hamas emphasized the need for a continuous resistance until the full recovery of Palestinian rights. However, this secondary status

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 50-51.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

⁴ Shaul MISHAL, "The Pragmatic Dimension of the Palestinian Hamas: A Network Perspective", *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 29, no. 4, Summer 2003, pp. 569- 589/p. 570.

was both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, its position did not allow it a say in decisions concerning the rights of Palestinians. While on the other hand, the same incapacity both relieved the movement of compromises made during periods of crises and gave it a flexibility of action that was not available to the Palestinian leadership¹.

The signing of the Declaration of Principles (DOP) in September 13th, 1993 between Israel and the PLO became a turning point for the evolution of Hamas' ideological platform, as the provisions listed in the document contradicted its most basic principles. Firstly, the DOP renounced violence and relinquished the Palestinian claim to 78% of British Mandate Palestine, thus effectively challenging Hamas' long-term goal of establishing an Islamic state in all of Palestine via a violent jihad. Secondly, by acknowledging the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority and its auxiliary structures, the declaration threatened Hamas' own legitimacy, military capabilities and social service network².

Nevertheless, the high level of popularity enjoyed by the Palestinian Authority prevented Hamas from challenging it directly, and forced the organization to renounce some of its more radical claims and enter a phase of moderation. This pressure to moderate led Hamas to adopt several policies driven by self-interest and self-preservation rather than ideological convictions. Consequently, Hamas subdued its criticism of the Oslo Accords and refrained from directly denouncing the Palestinian leaders associated with Oslo, such as Yasser Arafat. In the same time, the organization started to use its welfare services to increase its influence and popularity at the expense of the PLO³.

Yet, Hamas could not afford to distance itself completely from its original ideological roots, for this threatened to alienate its more radical supporters. Hence, its leaders decided to opt for a middle path that best served their interests. While avoiding using strong religious arguments to denounce the Oslo Accords, they employed a more pragmatic method by criticizing the PLO for gaining meager territory and abandoning Jerusalem and the settlements to Israeli control. Furthermore, Hamas justified its refusal to abandon jihad on practical grounds, such as the fact that the Israeli withdrawal was incomplete according to UN Resolution 242. This position was by its nature inherently paradoxical as the 242 Resolution contravened Hamas' ideology by recognizing the State of Israel. Still, did not stop Hamas from using this argument in its criticism of the Oslo Accords⁴.

As a consequence in the aftermath of Oslo, Hamas appeared as a pragmatic political force, with a flexible ideology. Musa Abu Marzuq, the head of Hamas' Political Bureau at the time clearly expressed this perspective by stating that tactics and policies could change, depending on the advantage to be gained⁵.

Another key historical moment for Hamas' relations with the PA and PLO was the signing on September 28, 1995 of the Oslo II Agreements. At the time, the

¹ Khaled HROUB, "Hamas After Shaykh Yasin and Rantisi", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, Summer 2004, pp. 21-38/p. 23.

² Shai GRUBER, "Hamas: Pragmatic Ideology", *al Nakhlah – The Fletcher School Journal for Issues Related to South East Asia and Islamic Civilization*, Spring 2007, pp. 1-10/p. 5.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

Palestinian Authority found itself under considerable international pressure of putting an end to Hamas' terrorist activities, which was reflected in Article 14.3 of the agreement. Hamas was also torn between the need to preserve some of its more basic ideological principles and the threat of entering an armed conflict with the PA. The organization's solution was to develop a policy of controlled violence that was formalized in a 1995 agreement between Hamas and the PLO. According to the agreement, Hamas would refrain from attacks against Israel from PA-controlled areas, but left open the possibility of attacks from areas remaining under Israeli control. This agreement is yet under proof of Hamas' pragmatism and awareness of the political context¹.

A third important re-evaluation of Hamas' ideological stance took place in 1996 in the context of the first Palestinian elections. Islamist thinkers distinguish between four main strategies that mark the behavior of Islamic movements: reformist (operating through education and preaching), communal (focusing on social services), political (operating through mass mobilization) and combatant-political (use military force to put pressure on the ruling elites). In reality, starting with the 1940s most Islamic movements, depending on the social and political context, have adopted mixed elements from these strategies. Therefore it comes as no surprise, that a close study of Hamas' strategies would reveal the same type of approach. Moreover, we encounter here the same ambiguity I have discussed in the previous chapter, in what concerns adopting a firm position on key issues. As such Hamas neither fully accepted, nor totally rejected the PA's legitimacy, which becomes apparent if we look at the organization's behavior over the issue of participating in the PA's executive and representative institutions².

On one hand, Hamas needed access to the power and resources offered by the Palestinian Authority in order to ensure its survival and continuous growth. On the other hand, collaborating with the PA would have led to a serious decrease in the organization's legitimacy and popularity, especially as this decision could have been interpreted as a deviation from the Islamic principles. In the end, it was precisely this dilemma that defined Hamas' strategy for the future³.

In his book *The Palestinian Hamas*, Shaul Mishal identifies four possible strategies that Hamas could adopt in regard to participation in elections and attempts to evaluate the possible advantages and disadvantages of each of the four alternatives:

One: Hamas participates in the elections

Two: Hamas boycotts the elections and is contented with calling the people also to boycott the elections

Third: Hamas boycotts the elections and also attempts to disrupt them by force in order to de-legitimize them as well as the whole peace process

Fourth: Hamas participates under a different name⁴.

¹ *Ibidem*.

² Shaul MISHAL, Avraham SELA, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000, p. 51.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

Table 1

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Alternative Positions Toward the Elections¹

Alternative	Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Hamas participates in the elections	Gaining the highest percentage of the votes Confirming the movement's popularity Preventing political isolation Preserving the popular support won during the Intifada Securing a greater chance to influence the evolution of the Palestinian politics and especially of the peace process	Difficulty in playing both the role of political participation and violent resistance Giving significant legitimacy to elections, thus indicating Hamas' compromise toward the two-state solution If it does not win a majority, the act will appear as a reflection of popular consensus
2. Hamas boycotts the elections and calls the people also to boycott	Diminishes the legitimacy of the elections and consequently of the entire negotiation process If it manages to stop the elections entirely then it puts a stop to the process of negotiations Affirming Hamas' capability of political action Deepening Hamas' popularity and power	Political isolation of Hamas, which may lead to an increase in the strength of Fattah The movement loses the political warranty that supports the policy of resistance to the occupation
3. Boycott and attempt to disrupt the elections by force		It may lead to the outbreak of civil war, for which Hamas would be held responsible by the Palestinian people It may not succeed in foiling the elections which means popular losses in addition to human casualties The PA may force the organization into political isolation
4. Participation under a different name	Guaranteeing non-isolation and preservation of popular basis	It may not gain the same percentage of votes, as through participation in the name of Hamas Confusing the public

In 1996 in spite of the internal debate, the political leadership remained opposed to participation. They supported their decision by making reference to several practical considerations. Firstly, although the elections were to be held under international supervision, it was doubtful they would be fair. By adopting a majoritarian method, rather than proportional representation, Arafat had effectively increased the chances of Fattah, the ruling party at the expense of the other popular political forces. Secondly, even if the elections were fair Hamas had to

¹ *Ibidem.*

evaluate which of the four alternatives was most beneficial. According to a poll conducted in May 1995 by the Palestinian Research Centre in Nablus, Hamas had only 12 percent of the population's support, hence its chances of winning were close to zero¹.

There were also considerable differences in opinion between the Hamas leadership located in the Gaza Strip and those from the West Bank. Because of the PA's tighter control in the Gaza Strip, the former were more inclined to participate in elections, than the latter².

In the end, Hamas reached a compromise with the PA, by agreeing to do not more than passively boycott the elections and not to interfere with the Palestinian public's freedom to decide. Mishal defined Hamas' attitude as a kind of "positive ambivalence". In practice this meant avoiding official participation in elections while at the same time displaying an informal presence in the election process to avoid political marginalization³.

On the other side, Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestinian Authority pursued a two-fold policy when it came to Hamas aimed at both co-opting and weakening it. On one hand he started a systematic crackdown, by arresting Hamas activists and closing the movement's newspaper (*Watan*). In the same time, however, he held official talks with Hamas leaders encouraging them to participate in the elections. He even offered to extend the candidate registration period beyond that stipulated in the election law to give the Hamas leadership more time to take a decision regarding participation⁴.

The situation changed dramatically with the new Palestinian elections in 2006, yet another turning point in Hamas' ideological and political evolution. The death of Yasser Arafat and the decline of the ruling party Fatah were only two of the key factors that determined Hamas leadership to actively participate in the electoral process, something they had refused to do ten years before.

The period between the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000 and the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006 can be characterized by Hamas' short relapse into ideology and then a return to pragmatism. The Al-Aqsa Intifada increased popular support for Hamas and allowed the organization to reach the same power status as that enjoyed by Fatah. Between 2000 and 2004 there was a pattern of rising Hamas support paired with falling Fatah support that concluded with Hamas receiving 44.45 percent of the votes compared to Fatah's 41.43 percent in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. With these votes, Hamas managed to gain an overwhelming parliamentary majority: 74 seats compared to the 45 of Fatah⁵.

Hamas' relapse into a rigid ideological stance is most noticeable through its behavior at the beginning of the Second Intifada. In early March 2000, when the Intifada was entering its sixth month, Hamas launched the first suicide attack since 1997. Through these violent measures, the movement managed to regain its position at the forefront of Palestinian politics and outbid Fatah and all other political and military factions. Furthermore, suicide bombings were not the only methods

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Lamis ANDONI, "The Palestinian Elections: Moving Toward Democracy or One-Party Rule?", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, Spring 1996, pp. 5-16/p. 7.

⁵ Shai GRUBER, "Hamas: Pragmatic Ideology", *cit.*, p. 6.

used by Hamas to strengthen its position, it also deployed roadside bombs, organized armed attacks on IDF posts and targeted settlements and military installations with mortars, grenades and Qassam missiles¹.

This situation lasted up to 2003, when with the help of the Egyptians and American support, Hamas was persuaded into declaring a *hudna*, a one-sided ceasefire that was to last for one year. Here we can notice again, the pragmatic character of Hamas' actions, who realized that it had more to gain from accepting this compromise than by continuing with terrorist attacks. It had become clear at the time that the Palestinian population were not willing to support any longer an organization that continuously attracted Israeli attacks in the Territories. However, Israel decided not to respect the provision of the agreement and on 21 August 2003, seven weeks into the undeclared truce, Israeli forces assassinated Isma'il Abu Shanab, one of the more moderate voices within Hamas and the "engineer" of the *hudna*. Angered by this action, Hamas resumed its suicide attacks².

After the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004, Hamas' ideology underwent another significant transformation, easily noticeable in the organization's electoral platform drafted for its campaign in the fall of 2005. This draft was proposed to the other Palestinian factions in May 2006 by a victorious Hamas as a basis for a coalition cabinet. Although Hamas leaders continuously emphasized their strong adherence to the organization's basic principles, the aforementioned document clearly reveals a dramatic change in ideology. The fourteen-page Electoral Platform for Change and Reform constitutes the most detailed vision that Hamas has ever presented concerning all aspects of Palestinian life. What is most surprising about this document is the virtual absence of military resistance from the platform. In the single direct reference to "armed struggle" the emphasis is on the right to end the occupation by using all means available, including military ones. Furthermore, the participation in elections is presented as a way of supporting the resistance³.

In addition, the document focuses mostly on the domestic scene, laying particular emphasis on governance and reform. In fact, religious references are relatively few, only amounting to about a page and a half out of the document's fourteen pages. Despite being very few the references to Islam are nevertheless very important for the understanding of Hamas' electoral platform. Islam is clearly mentioned as a basic reference point in six vital fields: education, social policies, religious guidance, legislative policy, family issues and culture policies. The remaining eleven articles of the electoral platform (internal politics, foreign policy, administrative reform, public freedoms and citizens rights, youth issues, housing policy, health and environment policy, agriculture policy, economic, financial and fiscal policies, labor issues and transport policies) make no mention of religion whatsoever⁴.

The same ideological shift can be observed in the cabinet platform document delivered by Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh on 27 March 2006 in a speech before the newly elected Parliament. All throughout the speech, Haniyeh's tone was moderate and conciliatory toward the other Palestinian factions. The theme of "dialogue, cooperation and consultations" was a constant. Nevertheless, Hamas did not

¹ Khaled HROUB, "Hamas After Shaykh Yasin and Rantisi", cit., p. 26.

² *Ibidem*, p. 27.

³ Khaled HROUB, "A 'New Hamas' Through its New Documents", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, no. 140, Summer 2006, pp. 6-24/p. 8.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12.

substantially alter its position regarding two significant points: the recognition of the PLO-Israel agreements and the two-state solution proposed by the international resolutions on Palestine. Haniyeh did not completely reject these points, but promised that his government will deal with both "with high national responsibility" while protecting the rights and interests of the people and national principles¹.

All in all it's clear that both these documents indicate Hamas' desire to present itself as a moderate Islamist movement that can be trusted by both secular and religious Palestinians. Furthermore, although this ideological evolution has been promoted by the middle ranking leadership (technocrats and Western-educated elite) with some of the more orthodox elements expressing their reservations, there has been no visible internal rift concerning the new direction, which appears to have been embraced and advocated by all members of the movements².

Political Integration

Taking into consideration Hamas' historical background and its ideological evolution scholars worldwide have been able to construct some very strong arguments both in favor and against the organization's integration in Palestinian political life. Among the scholars who have strongly argued in favor of Hamas' inclusion are Khaled Hroub, Alastair Crooke, Beverly Milton-Edwards, Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, while in the opposite camp we encounter Matthew Lewitt, Robert Satloff and Martin Kramer.

According to the first, the presence of Hamas on the Palestinian political scene and its competition with PLO is a definite advantage. On one hand, Hamas' creation led to the establishment of a system of checks and balances within the Palestinian political system. By constantly challenging the PLO's decisions and actions, Hamas took upon itself the role of a political opposition. Through its actions, it tried to prevent Yasser Arafat and the ruling party Fattah from gaining complete control over the Palestinian society and establishing a personalistic authoritarian regime. Secondly, by always formulating its strategies in accordance with the needs and demands of the Palestinians, Hamas has acted as a political party representing the interests of a particular social group. Hence its integration in Palestinian politics would come as a natural step, towards achieving a higher level of political pluralism in the Territories. While the more secular forces within Palestine were represented by the PLO, the more religious factions had in turn their own representative, through the voice of Hamas. If we take into consideration the fact that both political pluralism and the presence of a political opposition are key features of democracy, then we can safely state that at least from this point of view, Hamas' presence proved a stimulus for Palestinian democratization.

A third argument in favor of Hamas' integration takes into consideration the evolution of the peace process. Alastair Crooke and Beverly Milton-Edwards emphasize the fact that a successful peace settlement with Israel requires a critical mass of ground support and cohesion³. Therefore, a peace process capable of

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 17-18.

² *Ibidem*, p. 22.

³ Alastair CROOKE, Beverley MILTON-EDWARDS, "Elusive Ingredient: Hamas and the Peace Process", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 39-52/p. 42.

reaching a lasting conclusion must be as inclusive as possible, requiring the support of all significant political actors within the Palestinian Territories¹. In their opinion, the possibility of Hamas recognizing Israel as a political reality is not a utopia if we look at the movement's concept of a long-term cease-fire, which is deeply rooted in the Islamic approach to conflict resolution. This concept can be considered an "interim option" which provides Hamas an exit from its formal position demanding the recovery of all historical Palestine². As mentioned above, such references have been present in Hamas' rhetoric starting with the early 1990s and repeated since by various spokesmen, the most recently by Prime Minister Haniyeh in his 2006 speech before the Palestinian Parliament.

Nevertheless, the basic question remains: can the leopard change its spots? There are scholars who argue that Hamas' involvement in the peace process or resolution cease-fire is a strategic mistake. They perceive such participation as an Islamist strategy to position themselves better to pursue armed struggle in the name of Islam and begin a process of Islamization of Palestinian society. However, Crooke and Milton-Edwards challenge this opinion by emphasizing Hamas' constant ideological transformation. According to them Hamas has developed a political agenda and ideas that have considerably distanced the movement from its original 1988 Charter which called for the liberation of Mandate Palestine. Furthermore, the movement's mechanism for recognizing Israel, based on the concept of a long-term cease-fire is analogous to the political evolution that occurred at an earlier stage with Fattah³.

In regard to the accusation that Hamas' integration would inevitably lead to an Islamization of Palestinian society, the two authors are equally skeptical. It is their belief that it is impossible to predict the impact that regional Islamist movements may have on the West Bank and Gaza. On the other hand, it is clear the continuation of the current socio-political conditions cannot but strengthen Islamism's appeal to the population as

"in a situation where ordinary life supports collapse, when the governing authority fails, employment evaporated, food become scarce and hope is abandoned, Islamists offer a meaningful alternative"⁴.

Nevertheless, recent events have not supported Crooke and Beverley Milton-Edwards' theory as Hamas' refusal to disband its military wing and stop its attacks on Israel has led to the outbreak of a new conflict in the Gaza Strip. Not only did the peace negotiations not improve but the peace process was halted entirely, as neither the West nor Israel have accepted Hamas as a legitimate political actor.

A fourth argument in favor of Hamas' inclusion has been formulated by Mahmoud Abbas, the new president of the Palestinian Authority. Abbas decided to adopt an entirely different strategy when dealing with Hamas than his predecessor. He opted to deal with the Islamists. Abbas' agenda consisted of policies aimed at stabilizing both the domestic and international political environment, something he could not hope to achieve without Hamas' cooperation. In addition, Abbas was interested in organizing new elections that would enable him to remove rival

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

² *Ibidem*, p. 45.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

Fattah power centers and regenerate the Palestinian political arena. As a consequence, in exchange for cooperation, he offered Hamas power-sharing through integration in PA institutions on the basis of elections. He argued that once in the Palestinian Legislative Council, Hamas could no longer ignore the laws that were passed by it. Hence it would have to reject either the logic of political incorporation or the logic of military independence; it could not embrace them both¹.

Abbas' strategy was based on the idea that once elected; politicians generally focus on staying in office. Consequently, the advocates of Hamas' integration hold that Hamas officials will be more concerned with delivering services and governing than with planning and committing acts of terrorism. Furthermore, Hamas' inclusion would avert the risk of civil war that would push the Palestinian society further on the road to violence and authoritarianism. Abbas' approach was additionally supported by the fact that the Palestinian Authority no longer had the means to disarm Hamas through force. Hence, any attempt from the part of the PA's security forces to arrest Hamas militants or confiscate their weapons would have met violent opposition².

Abbas also took into consideration the process of Palestinian democratization, which could not be achieved without the participation of all segments of Palestinian society, including the Islamists. By encouraging Hamas' integration Abbas hoped to regulate Palestinian politics so as to ensure that any divergence of views could be expressed through legitimate political channels rather than violence³.

However, Palestinian political reality appears to contradict Abbas' strategy. Firstly, after acquiring political power Hamas did neither eliminate its military wing, nor renounce terrorist activities. Secondly, in spite of all Abbas' efforts a civil war did start in 2006 in Palestine between the rival factions of Fattah and Hamas, a conflict that is still active in 2009. The fact that the two main political groups in the territories still consider military conflict a valid way of solving their differences is an indicator of the slow pace of Palestinian democratization. Although nowadays the prospect of a unity government is yet again on the negotiating table, the reality is that Palestinian politics are still caught in a deadlock.

The fifth argument supporting Hamas' positive impact on Palestinian politics refers to the legitimacy factor. On one hand, by participating in elections as part of the political system defined by the PA and created under the Oslo framework Hamas has conferred de facto legitimacy on the system. This is a very important step for Palestinian democratization, as elections, are according to Dahl a fundamental institution of democracy. By joining the electoral process, Hamas has both recognized its importance and accepted its limits, which marks a positive departure from its previous terrorist behavior. In addition, Hamas' inclusion confers the Palestinian government with a legitimacy that the PA has always lacked⁴. In the long term this would allow Palestinian elites to engage in a much-needed reform of the institutional system, which would enhance its democratic character.

A last argument brought in favor of Islamist integration in Palestine takes into consideration Hamas' long experience with social services. It is important to note

¹ "Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration", *Crisis Group Middle East Report* no. 49, 18th January 2006, pp. 1-46/p. 3.

² Haim MALKA, "Forcing Choices: Testing the Transformation of Hamas", *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 4, Autumn 2005, pp. 37-54/p. 43.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

here that Hamas won the 2006 elections by presenting an alternative to the corruption and incompetence of Fattah. From this perspective, the Palestinian society needs a government that doesn't use foreign aid for personal purposes and is dedicated to the solving of the critical social and economic problems affecting Palestinian society. In this respect, Hamas has a certain experience, as throughout time it has developed a social welfare network which has replaced in a certain degree the lack of a state social welfare system. This commitment to social issues is reflected in the organization's electoral promises, as they were summed up by Mahmoud Zahar: the creation of an efficient education system, the reconstruction of Palestinian infrastructure and the establishment of an efficient healthcare system¹.

Nevertheless, Hamas' reputation for able administration seemed to crumble, when the organization was actually forced to address concrete Palestinian social problems. Its inability to meet the challenges of governance after forming the government soon became obvious for everyone. In the end, it was this inability that encouraged Hamas to sign the Mecca Agreement with Fattah, opting for the solution of a National Unity Government².

When the organization entered office on 29 March 2006, the government coffers were all but empty, as a result of a series of political decisions that had eliminated most of the PA's regular income sources. For example, the most significant source of revenue was the monthly transfer of \$50-60 million in Palestinian taxes and fees collected by Israel, which was severed by the Israeli government after Hamas' victory. Another important source of revenue was the direct and indirect donor subventions to the PA's Single Treasury Account, which were halted pursuant to the Quartet decision to discontinue relations³.

Consequently, it becomes clear that the poor performance of the Hamas government was not entirely its fault. Thus, the argument in favor of Hamas' integration remains valid. What needs to be taken into consideration is the fact, that the inclusion of Islamist organization in the political process may prove detrimental for Palestinian politics because of an indirect effect, such as foreign intervention. Because of the fact that the international community a priori decided not to recognize the Palestinian electoral option and adopted several drastic economic measures, we cannot efficiently evaluate Hamas' performance as a governmental party.

Among the most fervent critics of Hamas' integration is Western scholar, Robert Satloff. From the start he dismisses all arguments in favor of Islamist inclusion, by cataloging them as either naïve or defeatist. Satloff challenges the opinion of Alistair Crooke and Beverley Milton-Edwards by stating that an acceptance of Hamas as a legitimate partner for negotiations would permanently endanger the entire peace process, as the organization will never make peace with Israel. The only two options available are either a *tahdiya* (brief lull in fighting) or a *hudna* (long-term armistice) – neither of which approximates peace, or even recognition of Israel⁴.

¹ Esther PAN, "Hamas Role in Palestinian Elections", December 2005 at Council on Foreign Relations, http://www.cfr.org/publications/9485/hamas_role_in_palestinian_elections.html (accessed on 01.06.2009).

² "After Mecca: Engaging Hamas", *Crisis Group Middle East Report*, no. 62, 28 February 2007, pp. 1-40/p. 2.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Robert SATLOFF, Robert MALLEY, "The Hamas Dilemma: A Debate on Alternative Strategies", *Policy Watch Special Forum Report*, no. 1359, 26th March 2008 at <http://www>.

Furthermore, Satloff does not believe in Hamas' capability to change. Although the organization may exhibit strategic flexibility and occasional moderation, it is highly unlikely to change any aspect of its fundamental strategy. Once in government, Hamas will begin by focusing on fighting corruption and improving social services and gradually proceed to Islamize social, cultural and education life in Palestinian society. Hamas' immediate objective is according to Satloff to expand and deepen its control over all aspects of Palestinian society¹.

Moreover, the author puts forth three main arguments against Hamas' integration. Firstly, by voting for Hamas, Palestinians have expressed their support for a party that advocates violent jihad as a form of achieving Palestinian legitimate rights². From this perspective, Hamas' victory instead of symbolizing a new stage of Palestinian democratization is actually a step backwards toward a violent approach on politics.

Secondly, the case of Hamas cannot be compared to that of other moderate Islamist movements participating in elections because several key factors are absent. The relatively few successful examples of cooptation of Islamic parties, such as Turkey, occurred only in countries that enjoyed strong institutions, powerful security apparatuses and a supreme guarantor of the sanctity of the political system. Neither of these elements can be found in the Palestinian case³. Hence, the argument that the inclusion of Islamist groups has had no recorded negative effects is not applicable in this case.

Thirdly, Satloff draws the attention on the long-term effects that Hamas' inclusion would have on the Palestinian society. He criticizes those scholars who argue in favor of Islamist inclusion by stating that once in power Islamist movements fail in government, thus undermining the appeal of the Islamist model. It is his belief that this type of approach overlooks the potential of radical Islamist parties, who once in power may decide to maintain their position despite political failure⁴. However, Satloff's last argument does not confirm in reality, as none of the Islamist groups gaining political power through participation in elections has refused to step down at the end of their mandate.

Satloff's opinion has been shared by two other renowned Western scholars, Matthew Lewitt and Martin Kramer. The first believes that Hamas' participation in the electoral process is a way of fulfilling the group's main objective of undermining the Palestinian secular authority and promoting its violent Islamic agenda. In support to this claim, Levitt bring a direct quote from Mahmoud Zahar one of Hamas' leaders who states that "Hamas' participation in the parliamentary elections will completely destroy the Oslo Accords⁵".

Similarly to Satloff, Martin Kramer questions the veracity of Hamas' ideological shift, which he believes to be only superficial rhetoric. To support his argument, Kramer makes references to the organization's history. According to him, Hamas has acquired political power much too easily. Before 2006, Hamas has never sat in

washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2735 (accessed on 09.06.2009).

¹ Robert SATLOFF, "Hamas Triumphant: Implications for Security, Politics, Economy and Strategy", *Policy Focus*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, no. 53, February 2006, pp. 1-63/p. 5.

² *Ibidem*, p. 7.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Matthew LEVITT, *Hamas...cit.*, p. 240.

opposition, joined a larger coalition or accepted any type of compromise. As we cannot speak of a long-term commitment to political participation, it is only natural to question the organization's sudden desire to engage in legal political activity¹.

Furthermore, by acquiring power so easily, with little compromise, Hamas has been able to preserve its military wing intact. Kramer's belief is that in such a situation the organization has no incentive to transform. Instead, Hamas can focus on its three main goals. First, it will seek to consolidate its control over all Palestinian institutions in the detriment of Fattah. Second, it will gradually proceed to Islamize Palestinian life. And third, it will impose its own view of the Palestinian future, drifting away from the proposed two-state solution². By implementing these objectives, the Hamas government would effectively put an end to Palestinian democratization.

Kramer and Satloff's arguments appear to be supported by some inflammatory statements made by the organization's main leaders. For example, Khaled Mishal stated that in more than one occasion that the democracy preferred by the United States and its allies is a democracy that fits the norms and agenda of those states, but is completely different from that of Hamas. The Hamas version of democracy is based on the Islamic democracy which has as a founding principle divine sovereignty³.

On the other hand, there is little evidence yet of Hamas officials seeking to implement the *Shari'a*, either at a local or national level. Moreover, where vigilantes or "morality police" have surfaced, Hamas officials have been quick to characterize them as isolated incidents and not general policy⁴. Mishal himself has claimed that Hamas does not intend, at this stage to apply the *Shari'a* within the Palestinian Authority⁵.

In addition to the authors previously mentioned, there is another category of scholars who have adopted a middle path regarding Hamas' integration. Among them is David Makovsky who supports Hamas' participation in politics, as he considers it a sign of Palestinian democratization. He introduces, however one important condition. According to Makovsky the international community must stay united and force Hamas to choose between its political and military wings. To grant de facto legitimacy to the organization would be wrong, as it would undermine Palestinian moderates⁶.

All in all, a comparison of the arguments mentioned above with the political reality in the Palestinian Territories cannot lead to any valid conclusions. The strong determination of both the Quartet and Israel not to recognize Hamas as a legitimate political actor makes it almost impossible for any research to efficiently evaluate the impact of Hamas' integration in Palestinian politics. Although, up until now Hamas did neither attempt to Islamize Palestinian society or tried to unlawfully

¹ Martin KRAMER, *Power Will Not Moderate Hamas*, 27 March 2006 at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/print.php?template=C06&CID=919> (accessed on 02.06.2009).

² *Ibidem*.

³ Asaf MALIACH, "Hamas' Post-Election Strategy: Step-by-step to the liberation of Palestine", 5 February 2006 at http://insct.syr.edu/Events_and_Lectures/IDC_Videoconference/Hamas%20reading.htm (accessed on 02.06.2009).

⁴ "Enter Hamas...cit.", p. 13.

⁵ Asaf MALIACH, "Hamas' Post-Election Strategy...cit."

⁶ David MAKOVSKY, *Don't Make Exceptions for Hamas*, 24 January 2006 at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=892> (accessed on 02.06.2009).

increase its power within Palestinian institutions, this does not mean it has had a positive impact on Palestinian democratization. On the contrary, a result of Hamas' integration was the outbreak of a civil war, a worsening of socio-economic conditions in the Territories and finally the outbreak of a new military conflict with Israel in Gaza. Furthermore, the international community has put an end to all peace negotiations as long as Hamas stays in power. Therefore, it is my belief that more time has to pass in order for scholars to be able to draw some relevant conclusion regarding the impact of Islamist inclusion on the democratization process in Palestine.