

What role does religion play in Hamas' political behaviour?

Written by Maciej Osowski

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MACIEJ OSOWSKI, MAR 14 2011

Hamas was founded as a paramilitary wing of Muslim Brotherhood, therefore its roots, ideology and mission have been explicitly linked to Islam. For Hamas, Islam has been not only a religion which guides its organisational aims, but also a source of law (sharia) to be introduced in the future Palestinian state, as well as a common denominator for different aspects of the organisation's activity, such as charity services and suicidal bombings. At the same time, Hamas is a political organisation whose leaders are elected democratically, closely dependent on individual *Usras* (cells) and on popular support from the Palestinian community.

In view of the above, it is argued that as long as Islam has served as the origin and basis for the Hamas' existence, it has gradually become an instrument of politics used to achieve certain aims as set in the organisation's charter. The argument will proceed in three steps. First of all, the Hamas' emergence will be outlined, and a role of religion in the process will be discussed. This will be followed by a discussion of the Hamas's charter and ideology, and the extent to which they add a religious dimension to the organisation's political actions. Finally, an analysis of how religion is used in current political activities of Hamas and if it is used instrumentally for political gains will be given.

Hamas' emergence

Hamas was founded as a resistance wing of a religious organisation, therefore its today's direct link to religion is the result of continuity in its organisational development. The idea of founding a resistance arm of the Muslim Brotherhood was slowly rising among younger leadership of the Brotherhood since the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, when united again Gaza and the West Bank were going through political changes. With other organisations gaining support of young Palestinians with promises of struggle against oppressive Israeli state, the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood realised the need for resistance. Younger leaders of the organisation were allowed to engage with Hamas construction as long as it stayed separate from Muslim Brotherhood[1]. Eventually, Hamas eclipsed the Muslim Brotherhood and took over its duties to the community. Incorporating members from the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas tied itself even closer to Islam. In brief, religion played a central role in the founding of Hamas, so it was only natural that it would also take a central place in its activities, including political ones.

However, contrary to what the Orientalist approach, it was not religion that was the cause of violence. It can be argued that in the case of Hamas, Islam was incorporated into the strategy of violence (resistance) when the Muslim Brotherhood's opponents (for example secular Fatah) had already gained popular support by promising resistance as response to Israeli violence[2]. To survive and keep expanding, the Brotherhood had to absorb the philosophy of fight. With hindsight, it can arguably be seen that that decision was unfortunate as Hamas in fact eclipsed Brotherhood. Nonetheless, it cannot be said whether, if the Brotherhood had stayed aside from involving with resistance, it would have survived in the same structure. Be it as it may, incorporating religion into resistance helped Hamas build the position it currently enjoys.

Charter , mission and ideology

A study of the role of religion in Hamas' political behaviour, as is the case of every political organisation, demands an

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analysis of its Charter, mission and the main objectives. Here, it must be emphasised that calling Hamas a political organisation is not an overstatement. Although 90 percent of Hamas' budget goes into charity and its social functions, Hamas recognises itself as a political organisation not just by its mission but particularly by behaviour[3]. Adopted on 18 August 1988, Hamas' Charter, or *The Covenant*, is a comprehensive manifesto comprising thirty six separate articles, all of which promote key Hamas' objective. Most of the articles commit Hamas to two most important aims: to destroy the Jewish oppressive state, and to follow Allah's words by creating Islamic state from the Mediterranean to Jordan river. This is a clear demonstration of how deeply Hamas identifies itself with Islam. There is no excuse to abandon main religious and at same moment political aim which is the replacement of Israel by the Islamic Palestinian state: "The land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf (Holy Possession) consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day. No one can renounce it or any part, or abandon it or any part of it. (Article 11)"[4]. Despite its extremist, Hamas' leaders still back the organisation's behaviour with the Charter articles. Suffice it to mention that on 9 April, 2008, Hamas Culture Minister Atallah Abu Al-Subh stated that "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is the faith that every Jew harbours in his heart"[5]. Clearly then Hamas Charter is used to fulfil political aims, even if that means recalling most absurd anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of world Jewish domination.

On the other hand Hamas political connection with religion through its Charter and ideology can be challenged when a number of iconoclastic statements made by Hamas leaders are taken into account. Perhaps the most significant is one made by Khaled Meshal, dated on 21 April 2008, during a meeting with the former US President Jimmy Carter. There, Meshal agreed that Hamas would respect the creation of a Palestinian state on the territory seized by Israel during the Six-Day War of 1967, provided that this agreement is ratified by the Palestinian people in a referendum[6]. If that proposition had been honest (which was never validated as the offer was rejected by Israel), it would have meant a major change in the link between Hamas' politics and Islam. It would have meant the rejection of religious claims whereby the entire Palestinian territory can only belong to Muslims. Not to distance itself from Islam too much on the political level, Hamas later publicly offered a long-term *hudna* (truce) with Israel, if only Israel had agreed to return to its 1967 borders and to grant the right of return to Palestinian refugees. Israel did not respond to the offer either. In November 2008, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, declared that Hamas was willing to accept a Palestinian state within the 1949 armistice lines, and offered Israel a long-term *hudna* if Israel recognised the Palestinians' national rights[7]. Proposing the *hudna*, used by Mohammed as described in Koran, allowed Hamas to stay on the political scene as an Islamic movement and not to lose its right-wing supporters.

However, the problem with religion in politics does not stop here. Hamas' members will not be able to fully represent Palestinians even when democratically elected, as long as major state players do not acknowledge them as such representatives. It is Hamas' Charter which prevents it from obtaining such acknowledgement as it is not accepted in its current form by the US, the UK, the EU or any other Western state. Although the Charter is crucial in connecting Hamas with its supporters, at the same time it excludes the organisation from international politics and reduces its chances for real success. Arguably Hamas leaders realise where the problem lies, however it is not easily soluble. Many of them would like to reform the Charter, seen as it not only draws on the Qur'an but also on an anti-Semitic forged text from the beginning of 20th century, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*: "Today it is Palestine, tomorrow it will be one country or another. The Zionist plan is limitless. After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook, they will aspire to further expansion, and so on. Their plan is embodied in the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion', and their present conduct is the best proof of what we are saying"[8].

While leaders can see the need for the reform of the Charter, they are also conscious of possible problems it could bring[9]. On the political stage of Palestine, they can be charged with accusation of betraying Islam, thus losing their right-wing supporters, both voters and donors. Nevertheless, the members of Hamas more often call for reform of Charter. For example, in 2007, Mousa Abu Marzook, the deputy of Hamas' political bureau, described the Charter as "an essentially revolutionary document born of the intolerable conditions under occupation" in 1988[10]. Finally, according to the 2006 investigations by the Israeli daily newspaper *The Jerusalem Post*, the representatives of Hamas in Beirut, Damascus and London did intend to rewrite the Charter[11]. Those plans were probably stopped by the Jewish invasion of Gaza in 2009, when the accusations of Jewish conspiracy and calls for Jihad were again politically profitable for Hamas.

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To sum it up, even if the Charter is reformed, this will not be a reform which would make Hamas more secular since such a transformation is not electorally profitable for the organisation. As long as Hamas keeps religion in the centre of its ideology, it can survive on the political stage of Palestine, as an opposition to the secular Fatah. In political terms, that is the main reason why religion will stay important in Hamas' political behaviour. This argument will be elaborated on in more detailed later in the essay.

Hamas' political behaviour and framing

Hamas' political behaviour is tightly connected with its other field of actions, such as charity, sport clubs or supporting mosques. In political terms, Hamas cannot stop placing Islam in the centre in its programme for various reasons. In the first place, Hamas voters and supporters are used to a situation in which Islam is central to Hamas' political functioning and to its charity work. Deviation from Islam in political behaviour would lead Hamas to a compromising gap and a loss in supporters. This in turn would lead to a cut in funding the organisation receives and its marginalisation[12]. This is clearly not going to happen as not only does the leadership realise the consequences of such a step, but also it has never had any intention of doing so in the organisation's history. What is more, Israel's more violent and repressive position against Palestinian Arabs only encourages the leadership to use the faith argument all the more fervently as it gains Hamas supporters from lower middle class of Palestine. This in turn brings new members into organisation and strengthens it. Thus the circle of political gain closes. Furthermore, new members have an influence on shaping the politics inside Hamas. And as they joined organisation on the wave of a religious call, they tend to vote for religiously orientated leaders[13].

The second reason why Hamas follows religion in its political behaviour is the specificity of the Palestinian political scene. On a daily basis, Hamas opposes Fatah which describes itself as nationalistic but secular organisation. Hamas, from the early days of its existence, have gained members and support describing itself as an Islamic liberation organisation which will lead to the creation of the Palestinian state, standing in opposition to Fatah. In this environment, there are no incentives for Hamas to move away religion in its political behaviour. As long as Fatah keeps underlining its secularism, Hamas will keep emphasising its religion-driven politics to attract right-wing Palestinians[14]. This behaviour shows that not only is Hamas religiously driven in its politics, but first and foremost that Hamas uses religion instrumentally to gain support. This in turn shows that Hamas is political organisation in advanced phase of development, an argument to be further elaborated on later in the essay.

According to the Social Movement Theory, political organisations are not always loyal to one ideology only but, depending on current leadership or need for support, they emphasise selected elements of their mission, politically profitable for them in a given moment. This is the so called framing or moving the frame, and it is easily observed in Western political organisations. Hamas, with its instrumental use of religion or its Charter to achieve political success, is yet another case in point of such pattern[15]. There are many examples of such behaviour in Hamas history. Starting with the 1993 incorporation of suicidal bombings, religiously attached to Shi'a part of Islam, not Sunni which Hamas traditionally represents. This difference did not stop Hamas from adopting the strategy, as long as they found it useful in their political fight with Israel.

The next case of framing is the political religiousness demonstrated by Hamas is case of January 2005 boycotted presidential election, in which Mahmoud Abbas was elected to replace Yasser Arafat. Despite this move, Hamas did participate in the municipal elections held between January and May 2005, in which it took control of Beit Lahia and Rafah in the Gaza Strip and Qalqilyah in the West Bank[16]. In this case claiming that presidential elections were Jewish conspiracy did not stop Hamas from taking part in municipal elections as the latter were a big chance for Hamas' victory. Finally, a case of framing its ideology by Hamas is its views on the peace process with Israel. From the early beginning, Hamas was excluding peace agreements with Israel, and stigmatising those supporting it as betraying Islam and the Prophet Mahmoud's orders. It was successful in gaining political support from Palestinians. Since Hamas has real influence on the government, especially in Gaza, it is ready for a long-term ceasefire *hudna*, if Israel is ready to acknowledge the existence of a Palestinian state in Gaza, West Bank and East Jerusalem[17]. Therefore, it does not exclude the acceptance of Israel as a state. These examples clearly demonstrate how Hamas is using religion and, to be more precise, selected parts of religious preaching to back its current political aims.

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This essay has argued that religion plays crucial role in Hamas' political behaviour. Hamas established its identity around Islam when the organisation was being created, thanks to which it could later back its political behaviour with selected religious commandments. Through the description and analysis of the founding of Hamas, its Charter and ideology, and finally through the discussion of its political behaviour and interests, it has been demonstrated that Hamas places Islam in the centre of its political actions. At the same time, however, Hamas is a political organisation at a relatively high level of development, and still it uses only selected religious elements depending on what kind of religious commitment is profitable for it in the current political situation. In this respect, Hamas does not act differently from many Christian-orientated parties in Europe that also use religion selectively to gain support of the Christian orthodox for their actions. These analogies can potentially serve as future research material.

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Written by: Maciej Osowski
Written at: Aberystwyth University

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Written for: Jeroen Gunning

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About the author:

Maciej Osowski has a M Psych degree in Work and Organizational Psychology from Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań. He was a member and Branch President of Conservative Liberal Koliber Association. He is currently a student of International Politics/Intelligence at Aberystwyth University.