

What Motivates Islamic Political Organisations in the Middle East?

Written by Tom O'Bryan

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The debate over the ability of political participation to moderate the ideology of radical organisations is a long-running one, and not just in the Middle East. Here, the examples of Hezbollah and Hamas will be used to largely dismiss El-Ghobashy's statement about what motivates Islamist parties. Firstly, an attempt will be made to identify exactly what Islamism entails, before arguments that such political parties are primarily motivated by the institutional rules of participation will be rebuked. The case will subsequently be made that despite recent electoral participation, many Islamist organisations, including Hamas and Hezbollah, can still be considered ideologically motivated parties. However, ultimately, it is difficult to judge the long-term aims of these organisations, as political participation may just be a temporary 'stop-gap' on the way to fulfilling long-term Islamist reforms. Furthermore, each Islamist party is motivated by ideology to a different extent, and there is varying commitment to Islamism by different factions within each party.

The very term 'Islamist', or at least its application in the West, is highly problematic. A range of false assumptions are often made about what exactly being 'Islamist' entails. However, while scholars of the Middle East must attempt to allow to minimise the impact of these assumptions upon their studies, some form of definition is needed here to make an 'Islamist political organisation' an operational concept for analysis. Schwedler acknowledges this complexity in her definition, which argues that 'the term *Islamist* captures, at most, a shared commitment to the implementation of Islamic Law (shari'ah) in all spheres, but not the significant variation in tactics, strategies, or even specific objectives.[1]' This shari'ah law stems directly from the Qur'an, and guides Islamist movements. While there are several significant questions regarding just how Islamist both Hamas and Hezbollah are, they appear to still be motivated by Islamist ideologically at least to some extent. This claim will be backed up in further depth later in the essay.

Firstly, the argument that commitment to the commandments of Islamist ideology has been marginalised in recent decades by the constraint of the institutional rules of participation will be analysed. Both parties here have enjoyed impressive levels of electoral success. Hamas's biggest coup so far came in the Palestinian parliamentary elections of 2006, in which it won a majority of the seats[2]. Hezbollah has also gained significantly through elections, winning 10.9% of all parliamentary seats in the general election of 2005[3]. Evidently, therefore, both are participating in, and consequently legitimising, the secular democratic nature of the governmental systems of Lebanon and Palestinian territories. For Islamists, 'secular democracy is a deliberate violation of divine laws and a reversion to the days of pagan ignorance.[4]' The aim of Islamist movements is to establish an 'Islamic state', governed by Qur'anic shar'ia law. In their earlier days, both Hamas and Hezbollah mentioned the establishment of such a state in Palestine and Lebanon as a key priority. Indeed, 'Hizbullah adopted the more extreme form of revolutionary activism promoted by Tehran in the early 1980s with the aim of converting Lebanon into an Islamic state.[5]' Similarly, Hamas 'paints itself as the vanguard of the Islamic state it hopes to establish.[6]' Yet, participation in the current secular democratic system arguably conflicts with Islamist ideology, and suggests that these parties are now motivated by the institutional rules of participation. While an Islamic state may have been an early priority for Hezbollah and Hamas, it is certainly true to say that such revolution is no longer at the forefront of their respective political agendas. Indeed, 'the Hamas leadership has by and large dropped its absolutist demands regarding an Islamic state.[7]' However, as will be argued later in the essay, this participation does not necessarily indicate that Hamas or Hezbollah have

What Motivates Islamic Political Organisations in the Middle East?

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abandoned their Islamist ideologies.

Waging jihad is also considered to be one of the fundamental commitments of Islamist organisations, and some scholars would argue that Hamas and Hezbollah have both neglected their duties in this regard, due to the institutional rules of participation which now constrain them. Commonly, (and incorrectly as will later be established), jihad has been simply defined as 'the Islamic injunction to fight injustice and eliminate usurpers[8]', the usurpers in question normally being Israel or the USA. This fight, at least in theory, provides the whole *raison d'être* of the Hamas and Hezbollah. Some analysts have even gone as far as claiming that 'Hezbollah leaders made their sacred obligation to conduct jihad against 'the usurpers of Muslim lands' – the Israelis – their top priority,[9]' and Hezbollah is now in fact the official Lebanese national resistance movement. However, one could argue that the institutional rules of participation are forcing Hezbollah to abandon its ideological Islamist commitments to wage jihad against Israel. Even entering into a ceasefire agreement with Israel, as Hezbollah has done on numerous occasions (most recently in 2006), could be interpreted as at odds with Qur'anic passages which supposedly urge violent jihad. Consistent with the Kantian democratic peace thesis, whereby democracies do not wage war against each other, Hezbollah's decision to negotiate with a view to ending conflict is motivated by the electorate's apprehension of war and the inevitable hardship and suffering it would bring. As Norton argues, 'Hezbollah remains profoundly aware of the political costs of bringing destruction down on the heads of its supporters, and this further reduces the prospect that Hezbollah will initiate attacks on Israel.[10]' Yet, as will be elucidated later, this does not indicate that Islamist ideology no longer guides the conduct and policies of Hezbollah, as this tactic of strategic negotiations and ceasefires is entirely consistent with Qur'anic guidance.

The fact that Islamist organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah have begun to participate in elections and politics within their respective states does not mean that they are no longer motivated or directed by Islamist ideology for several reasons.

Firstly, the fact that Hamas, for example, entered into a ceasefire with Israel in 2008 for six months does not mean that participation has constrained it to the extent that it has forgotten its founding ideological roots. While, as has already been established, some would see this breaking with the fundamental Islamic doctrine of jihad holy war, a vast range of Qur'anic verses support this strategy of conciliatory engagement. The Qur'an states 'cast not yourself by your own hands into destruction[11],' and in this context, can be applied to mean that jihad should be pursued provided that victory is realistic. While Hamas may still be fundamentally committed on a long-term basis to the holy war to bring down the Zionist state of Israel, Hamas is significantly inferior in military terms compared to Israel. The total budget of the Israeli Defence Force is \$14.31 billion[12], meaning that in both weapons and personnel, it is much more powerful than any resistance Hamas could currently provide. Thus, a futile all-out violent war attempting to purge the Middle East of Israel would essentially be Hamas casting itself into destruction by its own hands, in the very words of the Qur'an. This therefore discredits El-Ghobashy's statement, and indicates that Islamist political organisations still are driven by ideology. It could be considered to be in the long-term strategic interests of Hamas, or any other Islamist political organisation, to engage with Israel and to enter the domestic political environment as a supposedly secular force, until the time comes when victory is realistic, and the Islamist doctrine of jihad may be pursued. This provides ideological justification for the strategy of both Hamas and Hezbollah in engaging with Israel.

The conception of jihad given before, that it is above all a violent military campaign against invading infidels, does not acknowledge the wider meaning of the doctrine of 'jihad'. This violent image is how Islamist organisations are typically portrayed in the Western world, fatally misunderstanding the various Qur'anic interpretations of 'jihad'. Any range of activities which involve a struggle 'advancing the moral or political betterment of Islamic society[13]' can in fact be considered jihad. Harik argues that 'in this respect, Hezbollah could easily justify membership in the Lebanese Parliament. Islamist MPs would be able to use that forum as a means of drawing attention to the sub-standard conditions in Shiite areas...or corruption that prevented improvement.[14]' Therefore, the fact that Hezbollah has participated in Lebanese elections and is represented in parliament, enables it to further the interests of Islam, which is entirely consistent with the Qur'an. This deeper conceptual understanding of jihad can in fact be interpreted as consistent with Islamist ideology, which appears to still be important to the direction of Islamist parties today.

Many have even claimed that democratic systems force such parties to adhere to the institutional rules of

What Motivates Islamic Political Organisations in the Middle East?

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participation above their previous guiding ideological principles, particularly if the supposed 'incompatibility between Islam and democracy[15]' is true. This is, however, entirely false. The fact that an Islamist party is participating in a democratic system does not mean by any means that it has abandoned ideological commandments. For Hamas, consultation has always been key to Islamist ideology, and it now sees elections as the most effective vehicle for engaging with the populace. It has been argued that 'Hamas roots this in various Qur'anic injunctions where the Prophet exhorts his followers to consult, or God exhorts the Prophet to consult his companions.[16]' The common claim that Islamist organisations participating in democratic elections without overthrowing the system and establishing an explicitly Islamic state have abandoned their Islamist ideology therefore appears to be incorrect. A recent public statement made by senior Hamas leader Ismail Haniya said that Hamas would accept a peace deal with Israel if the Palestinian people approved it in a referendum[17]. While some would cynically dismiss this as 'populism' driven by the very nature of participatory competition in an election, deeper analysis would reveal that this is entirely consistent with Qur'anic law and Islamist ideology. The supposed incompatibility between Islamism and democracy is just one of many Western false assumptions about the Middle East.

The argument that Hezbollah's 'ideology bent to pragmatism[18]' in participating in democratic elections, and not establishing an Islamic state, can be contested. To expect Islamist organisations to be able to enter the political arena and immediately be able to enforce root and branch sweeping change to the very nature of the state is unrealistic. One of the most crucial figures in the history and development of Hezbollah, Sayyed Fadlallah, claimed that establishing an Islamic Lebanese state was not realistic, at least not initially, arguing that 'such a system could not be imposed on Lebanon's large Christian community and would also be rejected by secular Muslims.[19]' This relates back to the Qur'anic teaching on not casting oneself into destruction by one's own hands (see citation 11). Perhaps the establishment of a fundamentally Islamic state run by shar'ia law in Lebanon, or even Palestine, is unrealistic at first. Furthermore, questions about the compatibility of Hezbollah engaging in elections in Lebanon and winning seats in parliament with Islamist ideology were answered, when Ayatollah Khameni of Iran gave his blessing to that particular course of action[20]. The very fact that Hezbollah felt compelled to consult him for his take on the legitimacy of this shows that Hezbollah still are very much driven by Islamist ideological commands. The assumption that the fact that an Islamic state has not yet been established does not take into account the ability of such organisations to understand their long-term interests, and to engage strategically in politics.

Therefore, there are a wide range of examples and arguments one can point to that indicate that Islamist organisations that have engaged in the democratic elections of secular states are not necessarily entirely tied by the institutional rules of participation, and are still motivated at least in part by the commandments of Islamist ideology.

Finally, the fundamental contradictions within El-Ghobashy's statement will be analysed. The last point in the previous section regarding short- and long-term aims ultimately leads to questions regarding the very motivations of leaders and organisations. It is almost impossible to judge which factors (over any other number of factors) fuel an actor's behaviour. In stating that Islamist political organisations are now more driven by institutional rules of participation than ideological commandments, El-Ghobashy ignores 'the question of whether an actor is sincere in her apparent acceptance of the rules of the game, or whether she is secretly waiting for the opportunity to implement a radical agenda.[21]' There is no certain way of knowing whether the leaders of Hamas, for example, base their actions on a fundamental commitment to Islamist ideological commandments, or whether in reality they have abandoned these commandments and have become a populist party constrained by the institutional rules of participation. Perhaps Hamas is simply waiting for the right opportunity to create an Islamic state in the style of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, or is building up arms and soldiers before launching a war of jihad to rid the Middle East of Israel and Zionism? Ultimately, this is mere tautological speculation, one of the many reasons why El-Ghobashy's statement was unfalsifiable and subsequently incorrect.

Indeed, even if one were able to prove that one Islamist organisation was so constrained by the institutional rules of participation that it had lost any commitment to ideology, this would only provide information on that one Islamist organisation under scrutiny. Hamas, for example, is very different from Hezbollah, and in fact this lack of uniformity is true for all Islamist parties. It is a common mistake to 'essentialise' the Middle East as a whole, and to fail to take into account the significant differences between entities there; between Islamist political organisations for example. As Popper outlined, essentialism can be defined as 'characteristics...being attributed to all members of the group or

What Motivates Islamic Political Organisations in the Middle East?

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other societies either by over-generalisations or by unstated references[22].’ Furthermore, to treat an Islamist political organisation as a unitary actor, in the fashion that El-Ghobashy does, is to fail to appreciate the different factions within each organisation. In Hezbollah, for example, one wing of the party supported participating in the system, supposedly bowing to the institutional rules of participation, while others supported remaining steadfast to ideological commandments. Sayyid Nasrallah and Sayyed Fadlallah, for example, supported participation, while Subhi al-Tufayli explosively opposed it[23]. El-Ghobashy is thus guilty of essentialism in trying to create a universal law applicable to all Islamist political parties, even if they were unitary actors, in this case. The failure to take this into account fatally weakens her argument.

To conclude, El-Ghobashy was wrong to argue that Islamist political organisations are now more motivated by the institutional rules of participation than by ideological commandments. The fact that many of these organisations, like Hamas and Hezbollah, have participated in elections does not necessarily mean that they have abandoned Islamist ideology, and ultimately one can only ever offer an estimated guess as to which factor has influenced that organisation’s actions more than any other factor. Furthermore, all Islamist organisations are very different, and are constrained by the institutional rules of participation to differing degrees. El-Ghobashy’s attempt to forge a universally applicable law about what motivates Islamist organisations is misguided.

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