

# From Arms to Ballots: The Politicization of Hezbollah and Hamas

Written by Sarmad Ishfaq

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SARMAD ISHFAQ, JUN 2 2019

It is indeed remarkable how Hezbollah and Hamas, once purely armed movements, have become successful political parties today. In fact, research indicates that politicization is one of the key avenues for an armed group's decline and eventual end. A seminal author in the area of terrorism/counterterrorism, Audrey Kurth Cronin, identifies politicization as one of six primary ways an armed group ends. In another one of her works, she highlights joining the political process as one of the seven key elements vis-à-vis the decline and end of armed outfits in contemporary times. Furthermore, she has voiced parallel sentiments in her books such as 'How Terrorism Ends'. In her article, Benedetta Berti exclaims that in recent times '...armed groups have shown an increased interest in creating political parties to take part in institutional politics'. Authors Anisseh Van Engeland and Rachael M. Rudolph preface in their book that, 'There has been an increase in participation of resistance movements in the political process'. The authors identify the successful transitions of Hezbollah, Hamas, African National Congress (ANC), and Sinn Féin and also elaborate on how their transitions crystalized. Discussing the transitions of armed organizations to politics, Benjamin Acosta remarks that many armed movements turn to nonviolent political routes due to their dissatisfaction 'with the limits of political violence'. Susanne Martin and Arie Perliger, find in their journal article, that out of 203 armed groups, almost a quarter of them created or became political parties. In their article, Leonard Weinberg and Arie Perliger identify how armed groups end most frequently – they categorize an armed group opting for non-violent tactics (including politicization) as the third most frequent cause. Lastly, an examination of 648 armed organizations that existed between 1968 to 2006 revealed that the primary channel for an armed outfit's demise was via politics – this was true 43 percent of the time.

However, what factors are integral in *aiding* an armed group's transition to politics? The answer to this question, I argue, lies within a group's organizational structure, leadership, and public support. More specifically and importantly, I posit that a group that maintains a hierarchical and centralized organizational structure, strong leadership, and considerable public support, will have a greater chance to successfully transition into politics. I am by no means asserting that any armed group that has all three facets will politicize successfully – but instead am merely highlighting which factors are important in helping the politicization process. To validate my thesis, I elaborate on the cases of Hezbollah and Hamas – both of which were armed movements originally but have since then transitioned into successful political parties in their respective administrative systems. Aside from mentioning both groups' backgrounds, goals, and ideologies, I detail how the aforementioned three facets were in play for both aiding their transition.

### The Facets

#### *Organizational Structure*

The organizational structure is a system that highlights how activities such as responsibilities, roles, and rules are directed in order to fulfil organization objects. Although, centralized and decentralized organizations both have certain pros and cons attached to them, in the case of transitioning from arms to politics, it is more viable to have a hierarchical/centralized structure. This is because strategic decision-making is concentrated towards the top, while subordinates must carry out implementation lower down. Furthermore, a hierarchical organization enforces control on

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its members (everyone is answerable to someone above) which ensures the minimization of dissent. Cronin remarks that when it comes to the efficacy of negotiations with state authorities, hierarchical armed organizations have an edge over groups that cannot control their members' actions. Hierarchical groups are more likely to have a capacity for top-down communication, coherent programs, centralized decision-making, and consistent enforcement of the group's objects. It is no coincidence that national armies as well as many armed resistance groups use this kind of organizational structure.

## *Leadership*

A strong leadership, whether singular or plural, is indispensable for a group's long-term survival and unity. Strong leaders and/or an effective leadership structure can disseminate orders and messages efficaciously. Furthermore, their decisions are primarily met positively due to the influence of the leaders and the rank and file's faith in them. Therefore, it will be easier for a group with strong leadership to convince the entirety or at least the majority of the group to politicize. For example, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness emerged as persuasive, forward-thinking, and military-authoritative leaders for the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and Sinn Fi n. They both slowly but surely began to push for politicization. The watershed events between Britain and the IRA/Sinn Fi n were the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and Gerry Adams' declaration to end IRA's armed struggle in 2005. Nelson Mandela played a similar role for the ANC. Once the leader of the militant wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe, Mandela later pushed for the ANC to become a proper political party after his release from jail in 1990. In 1994, Mandela, ever the magnetic leader, became the first African president of South Africa. Contrary to centralized groups with strong leaders, cellular structured groups lacking strong leadership are harder to politicize since dissent is easier.

## *Public Support*

No organization can truly thrive without public support – the more people behind a group, the better. A huge motivator for armed groups to politicize is their large support base, which could equate to a sturdy vote bank in the future. On the contrary, lack of public support can also act as a motivator for the group to renounce violence and become part of the political process – acting as a survival instinct. The preceding was true for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. Due to the FARC's alienation from the populous and its decreasing military strength, the only viable solution for survival left was to enter the political arena. However, it is always better to have considerable public support when politicizing as will be evidenced by the cases of Hezbollah and Hamas.

## **The Case of Hezbollah and Hamas**

### *Hezbollah*

Hezbollah was founded in 1982 in order to end the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon. Hezbollah's spiritual leader was the deceased Hussein Fadallah, although others dispute this. Hezbollah is considered a resistance group, and is popular in Lebanon and the world as it fought for the liberation of South Lebanon and won by inflicting a severe defeat on Tsahal. Where the Lebanese government and the army failed to provide security to the nation and its citizens, Hezbollah rose and filled this vacuum overcoming Israel. The group's ideology is bound to Islam and their aims include installing an Islamic republic in Lebanon and defeating Zionism.

Hezbollah is very effectively structured and hierarchical in its organization. It has several major wings, which include: political, military, secret services and social services. At the apex of its structure, is the Majlis al-Shura, which comprises of seven members (some sources cite higher numbers). The Majlis is divided into 7 committees dealing with ideology, legal affairs, politics, information, finances, military, and social affairs. This same structure is replicated in the group's main operational areas – Beqaa, Beirut, and the South. Beneath the Majlis al-Shura, is the Majlis al-Shura al-Karar, the second highest leadership authority, and the Maktab al-Siyassi, a supervisory organ. The group is identified as being very hierarchic and homogenous (it has only witnessed one dissention). Since the Lebanon civil war, the group reorganized itself and became a 'highly structured, sophisticated, and tightly controlled machine'. After this organizational change, Hezbollah peaked with institutional coherence – and they have made no major alterations since the 1990s. Encapsulating and taking benefit from the advantages hierarchical groups provide,

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Hezbollah displays its effectively layered top-down organizational system

Hassan Nasrallah, the group's charismatic and popular leader (the Secretary-General), provides centralized guidance to the group. A 2008 Arab poll showed him to be the most admired Arab leader in the world. He has been the group's head since 1992. The Majlis al-Shura is the group's uppermost body and its collegial leadership comprises of seven members led by Nasrallah. The Shura makes decisions and provides oversight to all major functions of the group. Power is shared among the seven members of the Majlis and decisions are made either unanimously or by majority vote (which are religiously binding on all). This illustrates democratic centralism in the decision-making process. The Shura also tends to be composed of six clerics and one lay leader to preserve the group's religious proclivities – this probably aids in decision-making as well due to a similar clerical mindset. Hezbollah's second-in-command affirmed that there is a singular leadership that makes decisions on politics, jihad, and social welfare – a centralized command structure. When the group first contemplated entering the political theatre and contesting the 1992 elections, it formed a 12-member committee of its top leadership (including Nasrallah) to vote on the issue. By a vote of ten to two, the group decided that political participation would aid rather than impede the resistance movement. These recommendations were submitted to Ayatollah Khomeini, who gave permission to proceed and so the political wing was formed to oversee the upcoming elections and future political activity. The group and its leadership are influenced by Iran and seek the Ayatollah's guidance in certain matters.

The group's popularity in Lebanon began with its armed resistance against Israel. Since then, they have created a social welfare network all around Lebanon that helped them augment and maintain their popularity and legitimacy. Hezbollah has three associations under its welfare umbrella. The first is the Jihad al Binaa that deals with constructing houses destroyed in war, digging wells, maintenance of roads etc. The second is the El-Jarrah, which takes care of prostheses and sends people abroad for heavy surgery. The third, Nova' Nasat al Shahid, is devoted to serving the families of martyrs. The welfare network helps all Lebanese regardless of religious or political affiliation. Hezbollah still maintains a military wing to defend civilians from Israel as was evidenced by Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006 and due to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon's Chebaa farms. Israel's past misadventures in Lebanon, ironically, helped create Hezbollah and have also helped proliferate the group's appeal and legitimacy. Due to Hezbollah's popularity, it is one of the largest parties in Lebanon and has governed the country in the past. In 2018's election, the party and its allies secured 40 seats in the Lebanese parliament out of a total 128 seats.

## *Hamas*

Hamas' founder and spiritual leader, Sheikh Yaseen, formed the group in 1987 from the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine after the Intifada. Initially a wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas became a separate entity due to its popularity during the Intifada where it militarily fought against Israel. They were actively pursuant of an occupation-free Palestine and did so via an organized armed struggle. Islam and jihad underpin Hamas' ideology – they seek to free Palestine and implement Islamic law; give the people their rights; as well as bring Palestinian refugees back home.

After Sheikh Yaseen was assassinated by Israel, the elites of Hamas restructured and reorganized the group. The main restructuring being the creation of the politburo. The politburo is the principal authority and handles policy formulation, which are in turn, implemented by local branches or committees. The politburo has four sections from which it comprises its membership i.e. Gaza, West Bank, abroad, and Israeli prisons. The group also has a Majlis al-Shura, which oversees Hamas activities in Palestine and elects all politburo members. Local sub-committees in the West Bank and Gaza implement the Shura's decisions on ground and report back to it. The group is divided into political, military, security and information bodies. They are known to be an extremely well-organized and structured group even though divisions do exist relating to ideology, politics, military, etc. Author and lecturer Rachael Rudolph emphasizes that to prevent divisions from morphing into fissures and fragmentation, Hamas 'combines democratic centralism with that of Islam' – this type of structure is common among Islamic resistance movements because it inhibits internal divisions. This system has been imperative for Hamas due to the collegial and collective leadership of the group (discussed ahead) which often has various perspectives on different matters.

The group is headed by a collective leadership, which exists inside Palestine (Gaza and West bank) and outside it

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(Syria, Lebanon, Jordan), and has both independent and interdependent policy-making and implementation capacity. The leadership structure is mutual and disagreements between leaders are not uncommon especially due to them being present inside and outside Palestine. Disagreements also arise due to the leaders' differing mindsets (moderates versus radicals) on distinct issues. Hamas' leadership structure, like Hezbollah's, is characterized by democratic centralism. This means decisions are made via voting and the majority-decision becomes binding on all members. This collegial leadership structure was even present and in effect when Sheikh Yaseen was the spiritual leader. With regards to the political arena, Hamas had dabbled in politics much earlier than their 2006 electoral victory. In the 1990s, Hamas' leadership decided to adopt an electoral strategy and partake in municipal elections. In 2006, however, Hamas created its political wing, Change and Reform, but there were disagreements regarding the extent of politicization. The 'outside' leadership such as Khaled Mashal perceived the armed struggle as the primary means of resistance and sought to reduce the price of politicization while 'internal' leaders like Ismail Haniya wanted to fully integrate into the Palestinian governance structure. Despite the varied stances, these organizational-political questions did not divide the group. This is owed to the group's organizational structure, democratic centralism, and also their understanding that divisions and splinter groups would hamper them like it did Fatah.

Vis-à-vis public support, they have maintained their popularity not only due to armed resistance, but also due to their social work (like Hezbollah), which includes education, charity, social integration for women. In fact, Hamas has been called the most integral social services actor in all of Palestine. In her book, Lihi Ben states that by 2000, Hamas or its affiliated charities ran around 40 percent of the social associations in Gaza and West Bank. Furthermore, she states that by 2005, along with other Islamic charities, Hamas was supporting 120,000 individuals with monthly financial aid in Gaza. Unlike the Arafat administration and their excessive spending on its officials, Sheikh Yaseen was popular for never taking money for himself or his family – he would distribute it among the Palestinian people. Hamas provides these welfare benefits to anyone irrespective of religion and political affiliation. Hamas' support doubled between 2000 and 2005 due to the second Intifada (and Hamas' resistance to Israel), Fatah's political failures, as well the continued provision of welfare services by Hamas. As Hamas' strength augmented throughout the years, the opportunity to become a serious political party was too good to pass. Hamas, through their newly created political wing, Change and Reform, made the transition in the 2006 elections. They campaigned and won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections (74 out of 132 seats). After a consensus-based decision was made in the group, it ran a united and concerted campaign, which led to their success.

## Parallels between Hezbollah and Hamas

Vis-à-vis the three facets, both Hezbollah and Hamas draw many parallels to each other. Both groups have a well-defined organizational system akin to a military's, which engages employees in a systematic manner and ensures proper execution of orders. They both have strong leaders and leadership structures that promote democratic centralism to subdue dissent. Although Hamas' leadership was divided along moderates and radicals when the question of politicization arose, democratic centralism ensured all leaders obeyed the end decision. Hezbollah, too, has a collegial leadership structure but it appeared more coherent on politicization perhaps due to a lack of internal-external leadership schism like Hamas' and also due to the predominant clerical mindset of the leaders. Lastly, both organizations enjoyed (and still do) massive public support due to humanitarian efforts aimed at the local population. This is why both parties have had success in elections and are even today one of the primary political parties in their respective countries.

## Conclusion

Hezbollah and Hamas' cases give credence to how imperative a hierarchical organizational structure, robust leadership, and healthy public support are in terms of politicization. As already mentioned, I argued that these facets help *aid* politicization (but do not themselves *determine* politicization success). Every armed resistance movement is distinct in many respects as is the environment they operate in. This denotes that different internal and external factors can adversely or favorably affect the politicization process –what this means is that an armed group that satisfies all three facets could still fail in transitioning and vice versa. That being said, in my opinion (and based on what academics cited above have stated) these three facets display how fundamentally significant they are in facilitating politicization. Hezbollah and Hamas would have had a harder time (in the least) or would simply not

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survive as political parties if their organizational structure did not control dissent, if their leadership was divided on important matters, and if they did not have the public's potential votes. Not only will studying other successful transitions such as the ANC and IRA reinforce the significance of these facets, but also studying questionable transitions such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) will further highlight their importance.

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**Sarmad Ishfaq** is the CEO of the think tank, Paradigm Shift. His work has been published in *The Diplomat*, *Middle East Monitor*, *Harvard*, *Open Democracy*, *GVS*, and *Eurasia Review*. He has also been published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Social Identities*. Previously he worked as a research fellow for the Lahore Center for Peace Research. He has a master's degree in International Relations from the University of Wollongong in Dubai where he was recognized as the 'Top Graduate'.