

On Hamas: A fresh analysis of an old 'problem'

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Hamas[1] is the natural product of an unnatural circumstance: "it is a response like in the chain of cause and effect arising from the cruel circumstances of life under occupation." [2] However it is a new link in the chain of the Palestinian struggle or as Dr. Hisham Sharabi articulates, Hamas is the "true fida'i (self-sacrifice) resistance in Palestine since the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada." [3] In quintessence its supporters consider Hamas a vanguard of emancipation, a multidimensional organisation of pious, upright citizens who defend the interests of their grassroots constituency and is celebrated for their readiness to consult its support base and its emphasis on self-sacrifice. [4] Ergo it is a combination of two things; religious drive and a political drive for liberation, and it is in turn the context that decides which takes the lead: a context which is created by Israel. This essay shall endeavour to challenge the Western perception of Hamas as a 'terrorist organisation' through a critical and objective analysis of its history, ideology and politics. The Western framework has created a discourse where Hamas is caricatured as a "terrorist organisation" pursuing a Taliban-styled theocracy and thus the primary obstacle to peace; Steadman has even depicted it as a "total spoiler". [5] This dominant Western rhetoric enforces the portrayal of Hamas as a static organisation, its violent and 'fanatical' behaviour rendering it as innately characteristic while contradictory evidence is marginalised as irrelevant. This is why Hamas is worthy of study – the exhausted myopic approaches have failed to understand Hamas – and for peace ever to be achieved this paradigm must be broken so that there can be communication: after all communication is the genesis for change.

Understanding the history of Hamas and its evolution through time provides the conceptual structure needed to then understand its ideology and politics to then determine whether it is an organisation of terror. Hamas' history shall be explored within three main parts: the Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimun), 1970s/80s and the restructuring of the Brotherhood, and the emergence of Hamas. Hamas is an offshoot off the Muslim Brotherhood and according to the Hamas Charter (1988) considers itself part of the Palestinian Brotherhood, despite being a natural extension of Palestinian resistance in its various manifestations Hamas' characteristics; ideology and structure are a reflection of the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood in turn is Egyptian in origin and founded in 1928 by Hassan Al – Banna; the organisation combines the spiritual element of the Hasafiyah Sufi order with the teachings of Islam from the Salafi School. The Brotherhood was concerned with the Palestinian struggle; this was evident in their abundant show of support during the Arab Revolt of 1936 where moral and material aid was provided, i.e. the issuing of declarations and pamphlets attacking the British for their policies and the ordering of a boycott of Jewish magazines in Egypt. [6] The movement had a popular appeal especially in Palestine where by 1943 it had formed a branch in Gaza called the Makaren Society of Jerusalem, however the ultimate expression of the Brotherhood's concern was its active participation in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Thus the Brotherhood appeared sincere in its religious conviction for the liberation of Palestine, it consequently grew because of this. Hamas mirrors the essence of the Brotherhood which took to the masses the concerns of the intellectuals and transformed it into a grassroots movement; it was an organisation that transcended the mosque-goers but one that appealed to all parts of civil society in order to rehabilitate and create a renaissance of the *Ummah*.

The organisational challenges of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood and its consequent restructuring laid the groundwork for the Brotherhood's appeal and growth. For example Sheikh Yassin established the Islamic Centre in 1973 (*al-Mujamma al-Islamia*), which allowed for all the religious organisations and institutions to be dominated by the Brotherhood, this in turn permitted for a more united Brotherhood of the Gaza Strip, West Bank and Jordan. Thus the strengthening of the Palestinian Brotherhood triggered for it to become more amenable to political and ideological

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approaches and coupled with the success of the Iranian Revolution, the Brotherhood stepped up its political activity especially in Palestinian universities. The Brotherhood unlike now was able to spread its influence without Israeli interference and rally support for the Islamic movement. Ziad Abu-Amr describes it doing so in two specific ways: *Zakat* – alms giving which helped thousands of needy families, *Waqf* – the Brotherhood had control of this religious endowment which gave it significant access to the population and the use of mosques for political activity and to recruit[7]. Despite its restructuring there was still dissatisfaction within the Brotherhood for its failure to engage in fighting the occupation and this remained its weakness against the nationalists until the Likud Party came to power in 1977. Likud sought to weaken the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) by decapitating its leadership and suspending municipal elections, moreover it advocated an explicitly religious claim to the West Bank and Gaza and began the immediate expansion of Jewish settlements. Coupled with Egypt's 1978-9 decision to make peace with Israel leaving the PLO, which rendered Fatah's lack of success more glaring, the appeal of a religious response increased hence the growth of the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood capitalized on this new arena of political contestation and discontent, with its insistence on a one-state solution, a return to Islam and on meeting people's social needs the Brotherhood's popularity grew – dominating student politics through the 1980s. Hence the emergence of Hamas was in part a direct result of the continuing rivalry between the Brotherhood and other factions.

Hamas meaning "zeal" was born of the Intifada, which "marked the beginning of the true political revival of the Islamic forces." [8] The First Intifada was a result of a myriad of socio-economic and political causes e.g. the economic growth of the 70s which was eroded by the recession of the 80s where only 20% of graduates were able to find jobs [9] thus causing frustration and the rise and drop of expectations that provides fertile ground for political violence. The uprising was triggered by the tension created by many tit-for-tat murderous actions such as an Israeli troop raid of the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) wounding dozens, which was in turn avenged by an Israeli settler being stabbed to death in Gaza's town square, this furor prompted an Israeli truck to "accidentally" run down four Palestinians on the 8th December 1987. This elicited demonstrations all over the Occupied Territories. Nonetheless the establishment of Hamas was not a clear cut and instantly conscious decision but one which evolved over time, as during the outbreak of the Intifada the Brotherhood was faced with an ideological problem as it could no longer sit on the sidelines especially with regard to its bitter rivalry with the PLO. The wave of religiosity, which it had ignited during the 80s, created a united Islamic nationalist dimension of armed struggle and it could not afford to lose the younger strata of the Brotherhood who were eager to participate in the uprising. The solution was the creation of an ostensibly separate organization out of the Muslim Brotherhood to take responsibility for its participation in the Intifada – so if the Intifada failed the Brotherhood could disclaim Hamas [10]. However with its success Hamas became a credible and convenient name for a rehabilitated Muslim Brotherhood enabling it to attract new followers. After the Intifada Hamas' influence spread, its military and social operations increased and the Brotherhood's shift from pan-Islamic to Palestinian nationalism and its commitment to armed struggle won the loyalty of many Palestinians.

Neither Hamas nor its ideology is static; both are affected by political chance, nonetheless certain ideological truths have remained the same – ideology is malleable but not infinitely so. Many perceive Hamas' ideology and political worldview to be a narrow doctrinaire struggle; one between Islam and Judaism [11], but closer studies of its communiqués, memoranda and charter show a more multi-dimensional view. Historians such as Matthew Levitt concentrate solely on Hamas as an establishment to "eliminate the state of Israel" [12]; there may be a doctrinaire flavour as the movement does use an Islamic discourse to galvanise the masses but there is an oscillation between Hamas depicting the struggle as a purely ideological one and a resistance to a foreign occupying power. Then again this, as Hroub argues, creates a dilemma in its ideology: does it "give precedence to Islamicizing Palestinians or Palestinianizing Islam [13]?"

Hamas' aims, strategies and philosophy are spelled out in the Charter it issued on 18th August 1988 where it notes its rationale and position on central issues such as the Palestine problem. Article 14 of the Charter for example claims the solution of the Palestine problem is the uprooting of the State of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic State in its place [14]. Thus undeniably religious discourse is dominant, although there is a focus on fighting for one's rights, land, values and justice the Charter does this all with an underlying spirit of Islamic Jihad and its potential to galvanise support. A key word is "Jihad" which literally translates to "struggle" however the Qur'an notes two types of Jihad: the non-violent personal struggle for virtue and morality and the lower Jihad of self-defence which can involve

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taking up arms in a "holy war". The Western perception of Hamas as a "terrorist organisation" is only advocated by a narrow interpretation of Article 8 of the Charter that lists its motto where "Jihad is its methodology"[15]. It is important that this is understood in the context of Al Banna's purpose of the Brotherhood, which was the rehabilitation of the Ummah, "beginning with the individual, then family, then society"[16] in order to combat the colonial hegemony as united and cohesive. Thus in the context of Hamas, Jihad is the struggle and the art of resistance. Husam al-Nasir advocates that Jihad "must be understood in the broad sense of the word, fought on many fronts, it is a military, political and ideological Jihad to liberate the Ummah and its heart, Palestine."[17]

The Charter candidly portrays the centrality of the doctrinal basis of the struggle, but we cannot subsume the entire struggle under this rubric. Hroub argues that "Hamas' doctrinal discourse has diminished in intensity since the mid-90s and references to its charter by its leaders have been made rarely, if at all,"[18] and recently we have seen Hamas focusing more on the multidimensional issue of the usurpation of Palestinian land and how to end the occupation. Moreover Hamas' ideology lists a fundamental strategy of "the Three Circles"[19] where it claims there is a division of responsibilities between the Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims to fighting "world Zionism and imperialism"[20], and that for Palestine to be free it must be done in "tandem with the liberation of neighbouring parts of the Islamic Ummah."[21] Furthermore Hamas has proven itself able to free itself from dogmatic ideology, Abu Marzouq claims that Hamas really understands that the liberation of Palestine is organically lined to a level of political development and cultural resurgence of the Umma as a whole, not just Palestine.[22] This is why Jihad is not just armed violence or to articulate in Western parlance - "terrorism", it involves a cultural and political struggle. Nonetheless the Hamas Charter has been used to propagate a view of a "terrorist organisation" bent on being a hindrance to peace, although Hamas has claimed that international conferences are a "waste of time, a king of child's play"[23] Zaid Abu-Amr has argued that Hamas does not wish to project itself as an obstructive force "may there be a chance, however slim of finding a solution."[24] Ergo Hamas' ideology is vexed and complimentary: it must not be viewed as static or stamped as terrorism, as like Hamas it evolves over time and its Charter is understood differently within the context created by Israel.

Hamas may be a self-consciously ideological organisation, which paints itself as the vanguard of the Islamic state, however like all organisations it is confined by necessity and opportunity where its politics become defined by political theory and pragmatism. Hamas since its birth has sponsored forums, political gatherings and Islamic exhibitions especially in university campuses that serve as its vehicle of influence. It issues statements, brochures and commemorates martyrs as well as organising demonstrations and strikes[25]. Hamas' politics of charity and educational work however has been claimed by the West as merely ways to promote "driving Israel into the sea." [26] Levitt has claimed its politics are all part of an "apparatus of terror"[27] and any view that conflicts with this stereotypical image is brushed off an ill informed "anti-Israel diatribe." [28] Levitt has also accused Hamas of having blurred the lines between political/charitable work and terrorism but this essay maintains that no line has been blurred but a new line of resistance has been created by Hamas. Levitt along with the Western paradigm have forgotten that it is not the "battery of mosques, orphanages, summer camps" that are "integral for incitements and the radicalisation of society" to "brainwash Palestinians to die as martyrs" but it is the context. A context created by Israel where there is 33.5% Palestinian unemployment, where 75% of the population lives below the poverty line of \$2/day and where 30% of Palestinian children under the age of 5 have chronic malnutrition[29]. Hamas is not the art of terrorism but the art of resistance: "Palestinian people have the right to have Hamas fulfil its role defending them, politically, socially, financially and in terms of security." [30]

Hamas' politics of resistance since winning 44.5% of the vote in 2006 has manifested itself in many ways primarily the regularisation of the informal economy. Although the Hanieh government was expected to crumble under the weight of a continuous siege, ironically Gaza's markets and cash flows have actually grown since Operation Cast Lead[31]. This "new" economy is organised tightly by Hamas where it maintains a high level of internal discipline that has greatly limited the possibility and scale of irregularities, it also counterbalances the dysfunction of the administered economy thus keeping a lot of its supporters loyal. The "new economy" also permits for Hamas to "look after its own" for example the 5000 tunnel owners and its 32 000 civil servants[32]; this level of organisation is reflected in its ministries and agencies which is in turn complemented by the grassroots organisation of Hamas (*i.e. its Mass Action Apparatus*). Hamas politics of resistance have demonstrated its ability to not only survive but also rebound and even innovate.

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The Dual Contract also delineates Hamas' politics, where on one hand it defends the right of people to express their opinions and select their leaders and on the other hand it insists politics must be safeguarded from self-interest. This contradiction is at the very heart of Hamas' political theory: a contract between the people and their representatives (safeguarding free will) and one between the people and God (safeguarding divine design). This contract is the foundation of Hamas' political theory as it is neither a theocracy nor a democracy but a hybrid of both, where humanity according to Hamas is to be free – "to do as one wishes and submit oneself to God's will"[33]. This may in turn appear contradictory in a 'secular' context but for Hamas there is no contradiction; freedom is in a sense rising above one's baser instincts to fulfil one's destiny; by being God's agent one is fulfilling one's destiny and is thus free[34]. Hamas translates this into two words that sums up its decision-making: *Shura* (consultation) and *Ijma* (consensus). To legitimise the authority of a state it must consult the people, hence elections, and there must be consensus on decisions made. Ergo Hamas' political theory echoes notions of popular will, social contracts and representative authority but notions that are all tempered by God.

Hamas has found itself in a world of contradiction between ideology and political reality, rhetoric and decision-making, commitment to its constituency and a religious militant doctrine. However we too have found ourselves studying Hamas through a Western social science shaped deeply by binary opposites, or as Derrida would describe – "traces": modern – traditional, democratic – terrorist, these in turn suppress cross-over elements (traces) of the opposite term. They are also associated in clusters which obscures 'traces' e.g. 'modern' is associated with terms such as 'liberal', 'democratic' and 'non-violent' which encourages us to assume that the sighting of one element of a cluster of binary pairs means that the whole cluster must apply. This approach to the study of Hamas only hinders our understanding of the organisation: we must move beyond this dichotomy. This is what this essay has endeavoured to do, to observe it's evolution through the Muslim Brotherhood, to appreciate its adaptations to a context created by Israel, to argue that its ideology is not static nor one of "terrorism" but a politics of resistance sobered by religion. Injustice naturally gives rise to resistance (self-determination by armed struggle is permissible under the United Nations Charter's Article 51) but the distortion of the Palestinian resistance has clouded all reasonable dialogue and created a Western public consciousness casting the Palestinian as a "terrorist" when all he is, is searching for his freedom. Under these circumstances it is difficult for the prose of reality to conquer the poetry of dogmatic ideology.

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- [1] Hamas is an acronym for *Ḥarakat al-Muqawamat al-Islamiyyah*
- [2] Hroub, Khaled, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (America: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000), p 5.
- [3] Sharabi, Hisham, "That the Palestinian Entity May Be a Democracy, Not A State [Run] by the Security Services", *Al-Quds al-'Arabi* (London) 8th December 1993.
- [4] Gunning, Jeroen, *Hamas in Politics* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2007), p 95.
- [5] Ibid 2.
- [6] Hroub, Khaled, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (America: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000), p 12.
- [7] Abu-Amr, Zaid, (1993) Hamas: A Historical and Political Background, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, **22**(4), 5 – 19.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Gunning, Jeroen, *Hamas in Politics* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2007), p 35.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Hroub, Khaled, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (America: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000), p 43.
- [12] Levitt, Matthew, *Hamas* (Virginia: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006), p 8.
- [13] Hroub, Khaled, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (America: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000), p 44.
- [14] Hamas, The Hamas Charter, Article 14, 1988, available at: <http://www.thejerusalemfund.org/www.thejerusalemfund.org/carryover/documents/charter.html> [accessed 8 April 2011]
- [15] Ibid. Article 8.
- [16] Tamimi, Azzam, *Hamas: unwritten Chapters* (England: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2007), p 4.
- [17] Al-Nasir, Husam, *Harakat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya (Hamas): Islamic Resistance Movement*, (London: Muslim Palestine Publications, 1990). Pp. 18 – 22
- [18] Hroub, Khaled, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (America: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000), p 44.
- [19] Hamas, The Hamas Charter, Article 14, 1988, available at: <http://www.thejerusalemfund.org/www.thejerusalemfund.org/carryover/documents/charter.html> [accessed 8 April 2011].
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] Hroub, Khaled, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (America: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000), p 47.
- [22] Ibid 48.
- [23] Hamas, The Hamas Charter, Article 13, 1988, available at: <http://www.thejerusalemfund.org/www.thejerusalemfund.org/carryover/documents/charter.html> [accessed 8 April 2011].

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[24] Abu-Amr, Zaid, (1993) Hamas: A Historical and Political Background, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, **22**(4), 5 – 19.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Alexander, Yonah, *Palestinian Religious Terrorism: Hamas and Islamic Jihad* (America: Transnational Publishers, 2002), p 9.

[27] Tamimi, Azzam, *Hamas: unwritten Chapters* (England: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2007), p 2.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Levitt, Matthew, *Hamas* (Virginia: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006), p 5.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Sayigh, Yezid, (2010) Hamas Rule in Gaza: 3 Years On, *Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, **41**(4), 1 – 9.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Gunning, Jeroen, *Hamas in Politics* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2007), p 63.

[34] Ibid 64.

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