

HAMAS: Non-Violent Political Activities

Amber Gray

Department of Political Science
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA 23284
grayad@vcu.edu

Abstract

This paper explores the non-violent political activities of the Palestinian group Hamas. Analyzing the non-violent activities of Hamas as a political party and a provider of social welfare to the Palestinian people and furthermore, this research explores the effects these activities have on the support, perception, and functioning of Hamas as a terrorist organization. The effects of Hamas's non-violent political activities have favored the organization in the past and continue to provide full support for the military wing and its terrorism.

Key words: HAMAS, International Terrorism, Palestine, social and political activities

Introduction

The militant Islamist group Harakat al-Musqawamat al-Islamiyyah, meaning "Islamic Resistance Movement" (or the acronym Hamas) was founded in 1987 as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood with the sole objective to eliminate the State of Israel and create, in its place, an Islamist state occupying the territory that is now Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. Today, this goal remains intact and efforts to achieve it are carried out within three arenas: political, social, and military.

This paper will analyze the non-violent activities of Hamas as a political party and a provider of social welfare to the Palestinian people and furthermore, the effects these activities have on the support, perception, and functioning of Hamas as a terrorist organization. For although these activities are non-violent in nature and are labeled such that they distinguish themselves from the use of terrorism, as stated by Palestinian Brigadier General Nizar Ammar, "the difference between the [political, social, and military] wings of Hamas is often a fiction."¹

Hamas has always been involved in Palestinian-Israeli relations and domestic Palestinian politics but it was not until the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, in which it won the majority of seats, that Hamas officially entered the political arena.² Given the extremist nature of Hamas, this victory raises many questions regarding how the organization came to be so embraced by the Palestinian people that it won over the majority and replaced Fatah, the party which has dominated the Palestinian Authority (PA) for decades. The initial decision to participate in the elections stemmed from several factors; the death of President Yassir Arafat and the unpopularity of his successor, Mahmoud Abbas; internal problems of corruption and dysfunction within the Fatah-led government; and the increasing reputation of Hamas's efficient

¹ Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006) 23.

² Michael Herzog, "Can Hamas Be Tamed," *Foreign Affairs* 85.2 (2006): 83-94.

social services and military.³ Additionally, securing a place in the legislative body meant that Hamas could avoid any repressive measures dealt out by the PA.⁴ With this goal at hand, Hamas adopted a strategy in which it created an altered version for the public sphere, transforming in order to allow itself the perception of a legitimate political party.

According to pre-election polls, support for Hamas proved to be more of an issue with frustration in regards to the PA's corruption and the suffering economy than the extremist nature of Hamas.⁵ Hamas ran for election under the name "Change and Reform" and created a platform which focused more on solving domestic issues, steering clear of addressing ideological struggle.⁶ A Change and Reform Election Manifesto was issued, stating the positions and goals of the party, specifically relating to principles, domestic and international policies, administrative and anti-corruption reform, rights and liberties, education, culture and media, health, housing, and agriculture.⁷ The Manifesto diverged greatly from Hamas's founding document, the Islamic Charter, which portrays jihad goals of the organization with visionary language around quotes from the Qur'an and the Muslim Brotherhood's founder, all in a timeless context, whereas the party's platform focuses only on the present situation of the Palestinians and with no mention of the destruction of Israel or use of the Charter's ideology.⁸

While this transformation most likely facilitated the win, strategic efforts by Hamas surely remained a secondary cause in relation to the anti-Fatah sentiment among the population. Azzam Tamimi, a Palestinian scholar, attributes the success to four main factors, all of which profess Fatah's failures; the primary reason being Hamas's commitment to the "Palestinian dream," whereas many believed Fatah to have lost sight of this; secondly, the image of Hamas as a provider of services to the population; third, was its Islamic ideology in comparison to Fatah's secular nationalism; and fourth, the failure of the peace process under the rule of Fatah and the success accredited to Hamas for the recent withdrawal of Israel from Gaza.⁹ These reasons for voting in favor of Hamas seem sensible until taking into account the ramifications of dueling parties comprising an already feeble legislature and the reaction of Israel and others involved in the region who classify Hamas as a terrorist organization.

Shortly after the election, the Middle East Quartet, comprised of the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations, threatened to halt assistance to the PA unless Hamas agreed to recognize Israel, renounce violence, and accept the previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements.¹⁰ Hamas rejected the request and starting in April 2006 assistance was discontinued, resulting in a severe financial crisis for the Hamas-led PA.¹¹ With living conditions declining and the government unable to function without international aid, hostility between Hamas and Fatah escalated to violent outbreaks resulting in the deaths of more than 100 citizens.¹² In February of 2007, Hamas and Fatah signed an agreement forming a unified government as an attempt to stop the violence and reclaim aid, but the neither occurred and in June violence

³ Herzog 84.

⁴ Menachem Klein, "Hamas in Power," *The Middle East Journal* 61.3 (2007): 442(18).

⁵ Herzog 84.

⁶ Herzog 85.

⁷ Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: A History From Within* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2007) 292-316.

⁸ Klein 442.

⁹ Tamimi 220.

¹⁰ "Hamas: Islamic Resistance Movement," Global Security. Available at www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hamas.html. Accessed June 27, 2008

¹¹ globalsecurity.org

¹² [global security.org](http://globalsecurity.org)

erupted throughout the territories resulting in Hamas's takeover of Gaza.¹³ President Abbas declared a state of emergency, ousted Hamas, and formed a new government with the support and approval of the international community.

Gaza under Hamas's rule has been virtually cut off from the rest of the world and, as Tamimi states, is "facing the prospect of becoming literally the world's largest prison camp."¹⁴ On June 4, 2008, President Abbas called for dialogue with Hamas, whose leaders replied insisting that there is nothing political to discuss, insinuating that their control of Gaza is legitimate.¹⁵ Meanwhile, on June 19th, an Egyptian-mediated cease-fire between Hamas and Israel went into effect, which has lifted some border restrictions, allowing much needed aid to cross into Gaza.¹⁶

This occupation of Gaza and other successes of Hamas as a political party have been made possible by the nature of its social wing. The social welfare and administrative branch (the *dawa*) provides the organization with a means to recruit, employ, and disguise its members, as well as form physical and administrative resources, which exist to further the goals of Hamas. The social system also works as an instrument to incorporate its radical ideologies into the lives of the Palestinian people in order to sway ideals within the community towards Hamas's fundamentalist thinking. This social base has allowed the group to transition from a fundamentalist militant group to a political party.

The origins of Hamas's *dawa* stem from the Muslim Brotherhood, who learned from experience that when focusing activities on education and preaching, domestic and international governments would leave them alone.¹⁷ Hamas's founder, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, had been an activist in the Muslim Brotherhood and headed the organization's original social welfare institution, the Islamic Center, in Gaza.¹⁸ The Center exists today as one of Hamas's most successful institutions in that it has flourished into a system of grassroots social organizations throughout the West Bank and the Gaza strip, all of which support the military wing by providing a refuge for handling funds, spreading propaganda, recruiting and employing militants, and sustaining logistical support.¹⁹ This support base formed by the *dawa* allows for Hamas to further its goals of destroying Israel by providing a means to fulfill efforts of guerrilla warfare and terrorist activities.

The extensive social welfare organizations provide Hamas with necessary human resources by recruiting, employing, and disguising its operatives. Charity committees, mosque classes, student unions, sports clubs, and summer camps are run by *dawa* activists and use the activities of these various institutes to recruit the Palestinian youth in attendance.²⁰

Within a six month timeframe in 2003, five suicide bombings were carried out by members of a single soccer team associated with a mosque run by Hamas.²¹ The Dab al-Rakmah, a school and cultural center in Gaza that has known ties to Hamas, uses the building to

¹³ global security.org

¹⁴ Tamimi 264.

¹⁵ Mohammad Yaghi "Reconciling with Hamas." *The Washington Institute*. June 18, 2008. Available at www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2904. Accessed June 27, 2008.

¹⁶ "Officials: Israel to renew food deliveries to Gaza," Associated Press. June 28, 2008. Available at www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/06/28/news/Israel-Palestinians.php. Accessed June 28, 2008.

¹⁷ Levitt 24.

¹⁸ Levitt 23.

¹⁹ Levitt 24.

²⁰ Levitt 83.

²¹ Levitt 84.

find recruits.²² A Hamas military member, Salah Arouri, was apprehended by Israeli police in 1991 and confessed to being given an assignment that involved recruiting a squad in Hebron [University] and obtaining weapons.²³ Hebron University has faculty partaking in Hamas activism, one such professor was arrested in 2002 for holding meetings with operatives.²⁴

The dawa also provides jobs for its members, which offer a legitimate position within a charitable organization as well as a mask for participating in guerrilla or terrorist activities. The medical director of a Hamas-supported clinic in Ramallah, Mahmud Rumahi, also interrogated by Israeli officials, admitted to overseeing the Hamas military spending for the region within the confines of the clinic.²⁵ There are also employees of Hamas charitable organizations who directly participate in and organize terrorist operations; some examples include committee members transferring bomb-making materials, providing shelter and assistance to fugitives, transferring and purchasing weapons.²⁶ The United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA), a U.N. agency created to address the needs of Palestinians, has been known to employ Hamas militants. The director of food supplies for Gaza refugees at the UNRWA office in Gaza admitted to using a U.N. vehicle to transport weapons, explosives, and armed militants to carry out terrorist attacks.²⁷

The existence of charities, schools, mosques, and hospitals within the dawa not only facilitate in the support of its members and their operations but also provide Hamas with physical resources. Several libraries have been funded by Hamas in the West Bank, which can be used as a tool to spread propaganda and facilitate research.²⁸ Hospitals provide resources to acquire chemicals that can be used in making explosives.²⁹ In regards to mosques, Palestinian scholar, Ziad Abu-Amr states, "[they] have been one of the most effective means of expanding Islamic influence. Unlike other institutions, the mosque remains open all the time. Being a sanctuary, the mosque could be used as a place for political work and organization, away from the eyes of interference of the Israeli authorities."³⁰

In order for Hamas to achieve the goal of ousting Israel, radicalization of the population is a necessity. Mobilizing the community with its doctrine would result in transforming the secular and nationalistic contention with Israel into a potent religious movement. The living conditions and poverty levels in the Palestinian territories are such that any form of aid would be welcomed with open arms; something Hamas certainly takes into account when avidly pursuing its role as a social welfare provider for the people. For Hamas, doling out aid is the perfect opportunity to share its radical ideologies and gain sympathy with those who are more difficult to reach through other means.

Children who are brought up within the institutions of the dawa are taught the virtue of martyrdom and are desensitized to violence and encouraged to participate in it.³¹ According to an Israeli Security Agency report, children are desirable operatives for Hamas because, "the innocent appearance of children and young people arouses less suspicion and enables them to

²² Levitt 84.

²³ Levitt 85.

²⁴ Levitt 85.

²⁵ Levitt 87.

²⁶ Levitt 88.

²⁷ Levitt 95.

²⁸ Levitt 98.

²⁹ Levitt 99.

³⁰ Levitt 100.

³¹ Levitt 111.

more easily blend in crowded places. Moreover, children and teenagers are seen by the terrorist organizations as more easily influenced and constitute an easier recruitment base for suicide attacks.³² The methods of radicalization starts at a primary level, but also extend to higher education and education within the mosques. Propaganda, rallies, and student associations in favor of Hamas exist on most of Palestine's university campuses.³³

The effects of Hamas's non-violent political activities have favored the organization in the past and continue to provide full support for the military wing and its terrorism. The social welfare institutions and political party act as a veil of legitimacy to maintain the perception and image of the group such that it attracts, converts, and mobilizes Palestinians toward a religious movement. Conditions within the territories act in favor of this strategy in that to needy Palestinians, the veil is also a safety net. Until the population can receive full assistance from other sources, Hamas will continue to maintain control in the region.

References

- Michael Herzog, "Can Hamas Be Tamed," *Foreign Affairs* 85.2 (2006): 83-94.
- Menachem Klein, "Hamas in Power," *The Middle East Journal* 61.3 (2007): 442(18).
- Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006)
- Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: A History From Within* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2007)
- Mohammad Yaghi "Reconciling with Hamas." The Washington Institute. June 18, 2008. Available at www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2904. Accessed June 27, 2008
- "Hamas: Islamic Resistance Movement," *Global Security*. Available at www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hamas.html. Accessed June 27, 2008.
- "Officials: Israel to renew food deliveries to Gaza," *Associated Press*. June 28, 2008. Available at www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/06/28/news/Israel-Palestinians.php. Accessed June 28, 2008.

³² Levitt 112.

³³ Levitt 128.