The Palestine Center

INFORMATION BRIEF

The Jerusalem Fund for Education and Community Development

The Rising Support for Hamas and the Roots of its Success in Palestine
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Overview: Hamas' victory over Fateh in the 2006 Palestinian elections came as a shock to the international community. Hamas' success forced the world to re-evaluate previous notions of Hamas' popular support in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. While it is important to ask if this victory was indicative of an increase in Palestinian support of violence, it is also crucial to explore the alternative factors affecting Hamas' increased popularity in Palestine. By examining the impact of Hamas' local presence in the Palestinian community, it is evident that violence is not the determining factor influencing Hamas' popularity. Rather, the victory suggests that Hamas is more than merely an Islamic group or only a resistance movement. An analysis of Palestinian public opinion polls, the influence of Islam and the effect of social programs and institutions reveals that Hamas, through its religious and political rhetoric, has distinguished itself as an all-encompassing social, political, religious and nationalist force in the political and social spheres of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The Muslim Brotherhood, the Creation of Hamas and the First Intifada

Prior to Hamas' creation and more currently recognized role as the social and political entity that exists today, the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine generally handled social efforts and Islamic programs. Originating in Egypt in 1928 under the auspices of Hassan al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood began as a movement concerned primarily with the propagation of Islamic values and traditions.[1] Hassan al-Banna believed that British and Western dominance in the Islamic world, and more specifically Egypt, was a consequence of society's departure from Islam. According to al-Banna, the only solution to remedy the situation and flourish as a society was a return to Islam. In order to help society restore its Islamic roots, Hassan al-Banna started the Muslim Brotherhood which began establishing itself in Egypt as a group that provided people with important institutions like banks, youth group organizations, medical clinics and more, while also offering society a clear Islamic message.

While the Muslim Brotherhood, under the leadership of al-Banna, was generally more focused on the reform of society, the organization gradually became more politicized. Hassan al-Banna's mission with the organization was "to accomplish two objectives: the independence of the Muslim land from foreign domination, and the establishment of an Islamic sociopolitical system (unity of ummah)."[2] Because of this globalized worldview that represented the Brotherhood's Islamist essential philosophies and actions, the organization eventually expanded its efforts, establishing Muslim Brotherhood factions throughout Egypt and the Islamic world at large. The Brotherhood grew rapidly during the 1930s and 1940s, and "by the early 1950s, branches had been established in Syria, Sudan, and Jordan."[3] It was not long until the Brotherhood reached "the Gulf and non-Arab countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia."[4] The first Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood group was founded in 1946 in Jerusalem. Later in the year, the organization spread to Jaffa, Lydda, Haifa, Nablus and Tulkarem.[5] As in Egypt, the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood initially concentrated its efforts on social concerns, promoting Islamic values and establishing institutions and social programs in the region. The birth of the first *intifada*, however, drove the Muslim Brotherhood to participate in the politics of the Palestinian resistance.

Originally acquiring its legitimacy by its involvement in social welfare programs, *zakat* donations, *waqf* administration and youth clubs, the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood eventually faced criticism for its lack of involvement in the Palestinian resistance and struggle against Israel.[6] When the first *intifada* erupted, the Muslim Brotherhood had experienced such great pressure from the Palestinian community that it was compelled to rethink its role in the resistance. Eventually, the Muslim Brotherhood concluded that if it wanted to maintain a following in Palestine, it could no longer avoid the political aspect of Palestinian

society. The eventual consensus was to establish a political wing of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood that was devoted to resistance in Palestine.

On 11 February 1988, a leaflet was released designating Hamas as *"al-saa'id al-qawiy* (the arm of strength) of the M[uslim] B[rotherhood]."[7] The formation of Hamas as a response to Palestinian pressure on the Brotherhood proved to be a crucial factor in the subsequent Palestinian support for the Brotherhood. By creating a political branch that was dedicated to resisting the occupation, the Muslim Brotherhood (and consequently Hamas as well) demonstrated its solidarity with Palestine and its commitment to the plight of Palestinians and their daily struggles. The Muslim Brotherhood's newly discovered legitimacy in Palestine thus aided Hamas' ability to establish itself as a driving force in the region. Hamas' role as a movement that joined with Palestinians in resisting the occupation during the first *intifada* provided the group from the very beginning with the identity of being a viable alternative to the Palestinian Authority (PA). As Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela explain, during the first *intifada*,

> At a time when the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] appeared to have abandoned the armed struggle and to be willing to accept a territorial compromise that would leave the Palestinians only a small fragment of Mandatory Palestine, Hamas clung to established national values, which were encapsulated in the notion of relentless armed struggle until the complete liberation of Palestine.[8]

To this day, Hamas has continued to identify itself as the Palestinian resistance movement that "pledge[s] never to give up the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people…"[9] Therefore, from its inception, Hamas has continually represented itself as the organization that will fight for Palestinian rights and, until it achieves its objectives, will never be diverted from this path.

Hamas' Institutions and Social Programs

While Hamas' main goals relate to the establishment of a liberated, autonomous Palestinian state, its short-term goals are motivated by the insufficiency of social development in the Palestinian community. In an effort to meet the more immediate needs of Palestinians, Hamas has developed an extensive social welfare network. For example, Hamas has attempted to temporarily alleviate economic dependency by helping Palestinians gain "extra income through the 'production of honey, cheese-making ventures, and home-based clothes manufacturing."[10] Drawing from its roots as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and a grassroots social movement, Hamas has continued the Brotherhood's vision of building a social structure in Palestine and creating charitable institutions for the people. As Sara Roy notes, "at a time when other political factions have given up working with Gaza's many youth clubs, Hamas remains active and is attempting to build a power base from within these clubs and within other youth-centered organizations."[11] In connection with this social work, Hamas has also demonstrated its unremitting efforts in Palestine through its attempts to improve and maintain the Palestinian educational system during the first *intifada*. During this time, the PLO-affiliated "Unified National Leadership insisted on the participation of all students in the general strike, which led to the closing down of schools, whereas Hamas exempted educational establishments from general strikes and called on students to attend class."[12] While the PLO was trying to rally Palestinians to fully dedicate themselves to these strikes, which were ultimately limiting their education, Hamas concentrated its efforts on providing students with accommodations where they could meet and continue their education, regardless of the strikes. In other words, while the PLO was busy stripping Palestinians of their education in order to resist the occupation, Hamas made education a priority, providing spaces for education while still allotting time to participate in the *intifada*.

Hamas' many social programs speak to the group's ability to deliver on its self-proclaimed role as a provider for the Palestinian community, illustrating its unwavering commitment to the Palestinian cause. However, while Hamas continues to establish and maintain charitable organizations in Palestine, the Palestinian Authority has been known to close these institutions because of American and Israeli pressure to dismantle Islamic movements. For example, in response to this foreign pressure, "in 1997 alone…the PA closed down over 20 charitable institutions belonging to Hamas."[13] Aside from the PA's blatant disregard for the civilians who had once benefited from these charities, this action also exemplifies how the PA's role as a body expected to work and speak for Palestinians has, throughout the years, been

transformed into a corrupt authority, willing to place its own political concerns above the wishes and best interest of the Palestinian people it supposedly represents.

Hamas as an Alternative to the Corrupt Fateh

From 2000 to 2006, the percentage of Palestinians who believe that corruption exists in the PA has steadily increased.[14] This accusation is not unwarranted, especially when considering the PA under the late Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat. Areas like the Gaza Strip witnessed excessive displays of wealth in the late 1990s when, simultaneously, the unemployment rate of the Gaza Strip was about 40 percent and "more than half of the 1 million Gazans lived in refugee camps."[15] What's more, PA officials have established monopolies on goods (such as steel, wheat, meat, wood, cement, flour, etc.), amounting to a total of approximately 27 monopolies with direct connections to PA officials.[16] Thus, in order to gain Palestinian support, Hamas has argued against the corruption in the PA, declaring its own ability to strictly adhere to honest politics. For example, in an interview with Mouin Rabbani for the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Khaled Meshaal, the head of Hamas' politibureau since 1996, elaborates on the issue of corruption in Palestinian society and its effect on Hamas' victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections:

> First, corruption had become a real burden on the [Palestinian] people, so reform and changing this terrible reality had become a popular Palestinian demand that Hamas could not afford to ignore. Our participation [in the 2006 Palestinian elections] was by popular demand, because the people had no confidence that those responsible for the corruption were capable of fighting it.[17]

In this case, Hamas was able to win Palestinian approval by comparing itself to Fateh and asserting itself as a trustworthy group through its anti-corruption discourse. Jacob Shamir and Khalil Shikaki provide a clear analysis of the difference of opinion regarding Palestinians who typically support Fateh and those who typically support Hamas, explaining,

> At stake for those who support Fatah is the attainment of independence and sovereignty in a state in the West Bank and Gaza; clean and good governance can be achieved later on…For those who support Hamas, on the other hand, the question of establishing a state, though important, is not sufficient. The nature of the state and the pre-state entity, the PA, matters…Hamas voters focus on clean governance; they want a pre-state authority and a post-independence state free of corruption.[18]

This trend was particularly evident in the 2006 elections. In fact, a poll conducted after the 2006 elections found that 49.8 percent of Palestinians believed Hamas or Islamic Jihad to be the most capable of fighting corruption, compared with the 37.2 percent who believed Fateh to be the best candidate for this assignment.[19] What's more, this poll showed a rise in the importance of corruption for Palestinians when selecting a candidate.[20] Therefore, regarding these responses to this particular poll, it appears that there is very likely a connection between Hamas' victory and its ability to fight corruption.

Hamas and Islam

One of Hamas' more distinctive qualities is its emphasis on Islam. In addition to its self-proclaimed role as a legitimate and honest replacement to Fateh, Hamas also acts as a religious alternative to the secular Fateh. According to Khalil Shikaki, an exit poll after the 2006 elections revealed that "Hamas voters tended to be more religious – those who described themselves as 'religious' chose Hamas over its rivals by 52 to 48 percent, yet almost two-fifths (38 percent) of the 'somewhat religious' voted for Hamas, as did nearly a fifth (19 percent) of those who described themselves as 'not religious.'"[21] Therefore, it seems that for those Palestinians who identify themselves as "religious," Hamas' apparent adherence to Islamic principles is more appealing than Fateh's secular rhetoric. However, as this study shows, Hamas also received support from those who described themselves as "somewhat religious" and "not religious." So, why did Hamas, a self-defined Islamic group, receive votes from Palestinians who expressed their convictions to be generally less religious? To begin to answer this question, one should recognize the overlap between Hamas' Islamic and nationalist dialogues.

Article 12 of Hamas' Charter states, "Nationalism from the point of view of the Islamic Resistance Movement is part and parcel of religious ideology. Nothing is loftier in nationalism or deeper in devotion than this: If an enemy invades Muslim territories, then Jihad and fighting the enemy becomes an individual duty on every Muslim."[22] In other words, the necessity of resistance applies to both nationalism and Islam, and thus has the ability to exist simultaneously under the banner of Palestinian nationalism. Accordingly, this fusion and coexistence between Islamism and nationalism has proven to be a useful tool for Hamas' ability to differentiate itself from other groups in Palestine. Khaled Meshaal illustrates this point through his Islamist-nationalist rhetoric, maintaining that, "What Hamas brought to the Palestinian arena was the Islamic, the religious dimension. Equally important, it introduced this dimension to the battle without it being at the expense of the nationalist dimension, because there is no contradiction between the two. The Islamic movement is a nationalist movement."[23] Consequently, those who have defined themselves as "somewhat religious" or "not religious" may be inclined to follow Hamas because it does not represent itself as solely an Islamic group. Instead, it incorporates Islamism into its nationalist dialogue, rather than finding a place for nationalism in its Islamism. As Khaled Meshaal suggests,

> Hamas' priority today is liberating the nation, expelling the occupation, ending Palestinian suffering, and achieving the right of genuine self-determination on the land. These are the priorities today, which intersect with those of all our partners in the Palestinian arena, whether Fatah, the PFLP or the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Islamic Jihad, or any other independent faction, as well as the Palestinian elites and masses inside and outside…Once the occupation is ended and sovereignty on the ground is achieved, the state will be established, and in that phase, collectively, as Palestinians, we will discuss and determine the state's identity in keeping with the rules of democracy.[24]

In other words, Hamas' primary objective is its nationalist agenda (such as establishing an independent Palestinian state); it is only after those nationalist goals succeed that Hamas would shift its discourse to a more Islamist and religious-oriented discussion. Thus, Hamas expands its potential to reach Palestinians who may not agree with its Islamism but do believe that Hamas is more capable than Fateh in fighting corruption, or that the movement implements more effective measures for the success of establishing an independent Palestinian state.

Hamas and Violence

One cannot discuss popular support for Hamas without mentioning the reason for its notoriety: violence. Authors such as Quintan Wiktorowicz and Mark Juergensmeyer[25] have covered the relationship between the poor economic situation and political oppression of those who have resorted to using terrorist methods in response to their oppressor. While this theory may be applicable to some Palestinians who have resorted to violence as a result of their daily injustices, it is certainly not an explanation for all. Similarly, it would be unfair to claim that, simply by association, all Hamas supporters are additionally in favor of violence as well. In fact, "throughout 2005, more than 80 percent of Palestinians told pollsters that they backed a ceasefire with Israel."[26] If violence was so unfavorable for the majority of Palestinians, then there must have been another reason factoring into Hamas' success in the 2006 elections. According to Shikaki,

> Over the last decade, Palestinians' support for violence has been a function not of political extremism but of threat perception. Support has gone up or down depending on developments on the ground such as collective punishment, Israeli settlement activities, home demolition, the building of the separation barrier, steps to isolate Jerusalem's Palestinian residents, and so on.[27]

Contrary to what one might assume, Hamas' violent attacks have been calculated responses that consider the social, economic and political atmospheres at the time of the attacks. The approval of Hamas' decision to launch suicide attacks during the second *intifada* in 2001 is linked to "the extreme brutality of Israel's assaults on Palestinian towns, villages, and refugee camps and the wanton destruction of property and agricultural land."[28] Without the existence of such despair and anger, it is unlikely that

Hamas would have continued to enjoy support and popularity among Palestinians, while also continuing its military attacks.

A more explicit case that exemplifies the correlation between Hamas' violence and Palestinian public opinion were the events during the Al-Aqsa *intifada* and the subsequent Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip. In December of 2003, following the escalation of violence during the second *intifada*, former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, announced his Disengagement Plan for Palestine. The plan was implemented in August 2005, resulting in the dismantling of all settlements in the Gaza Strip and four in the northern West Bank.[29] According to Shamir and Shikaki, the disengagement in the Gaza Strip greatly affected Palestinian public opinion in two ways: "it boosted the popularity of Hamas in the Palestinian public at the same time that Israel's insistence on a unilateral process considerably weakened the Fatah leadership and eroded Abu Mazin's political assets in the eyes of the Palestinians."[30] Because the dismantling of settlements occurred shortly after the violent outbreak of the Al-Aqsa *intifada*, many Palestinians viewed the Disengagement Plan as a direct result of the violence that ensued during this time. What's more, the *intifada* and the succeeding disengagement followed Hizballah's successful incursions against Israel in southern Lebanon. Consequently, many Palestinians believed that the victory enjoyed by Hizballah's use of armed methods in southern Lebanon would have a similar effect in Palestine. According to Shamir and Shikaki, "63 percent of Palestinians believed that the Palestinians should emulate Hezbollah's violent methods."[31] This statistic coincides with the two-thirds of Palestinians who, when presented with Sharon's Disengagement Plan, "viewed it as a victory for armed resistance… This perception was further consolidated throughout 2004 and 2005, reaching 84 percent in September 2005 during the actual withdrawal."[32] The results of these polls reveal the importance of timing when Hamas plans its terrorist attacks. Therefore, the corresponding rise in support for Hamas during this time is not surprising if one considers the political climate of Palestine and the similarities in, and influence of, Lebanese-Israeli politics during this time.

Conclusion

This analysis of Hamas' popularity thus proposes that Hamas' support-base is influenced by the group's ability to characterize itself as a comprehensive movement. As stated by Khaled Meshaal, "It [Hamas] is an Islamic movement, a nationalist movement, a militant movement, a political movement – in addition to its cultural and social dimensions, its service functions, and its institution building. So you cannot say that Hamas is only a religious, or only a political, or only a military, or only a religious and social movement."[33] Hamas' claim to be an all-encompassing organization has presented the movement with the ability to reach the religious, the secular, the violent, the non-violent, those in need of social welfare programs and those who are against the corruption that they maintain exists in PA institutions. This inclusive approach culminated in Hamas' victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections. With its present role as the governing body in the Gaza Strip, in connection with the current focus in the media on the Israeli siege in the Gaza Strip, Hamas and those who support it have the potential to play a crucial role in the following years of the Palestinian resistance against the occupation and the struggle to obtain an internationally recognized, autonomous Palestine.

** This information brief was written by Palestine Center intern Katharine Forman, a graduate of Skidmore College, as culmination of her research during the Summer 2010 Internship Program. The views expressed within are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of The Jerusalem Fund or its educational program, The Palestine Center. This brief may be used without permission if credit is given to the Center.*

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[1] *Ikhwan Web: the Muslim Brotherhood's Official English Website*, "Hassan al-Banna and His Political Thought of Islamic Brotherhood," http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=17065 (accessed, August 11, 2010).
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Mohammed K. Shadid, "The Muslim Brotherhood Movement in the West Bank and Gaza," *Third World Quarterly*, 10.2 (April 1988), 654.

[6] Ahmad Rashad, *Hamas: Palestinian Politics with an Islamic Hue*, (United Association for Studies and Research, Occasional Papers Series No. 2, December 1993), 3.
[7] Ahmad Rashad, *Hamas: Palestinian Politics with an Islamic Hue,* (United Association for Studies and Research, Occasional Papers Series No. 2, December 1993), 7.
[8] Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 15.
[9] Khalid Mish'al, "We Will Not Sell Our People or Principles for Foreign Aid." *Guardian* (January 31, 2006).
[10] Michael Frederic Brown, *Hamas' Development Efforts in the Gaza Strip: Grass Roots Initiatives, Democratic Participation, and the Role of Women* (United Association for Studies and Research, Occasional Papers Series No. 10, February 1997), 5, citing: Beverley Milton-Edwards, "The Rise of the Islamic Movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Exeter, June 1991, pp. 278-279.
[11] Sara M. Roy, "Gaza: New Dynamics of Civic Disintegration," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 22.4 (1993), 29.
[12] Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000), 238.
[13] Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, (Washington, DC: Institution for Palestine Studies, 2000), 241.
[14] According to Khalil Shikaki, "For the last five years, PSR polls have shown that more than 80 percent of the public believes the PA to be corrupt." See: Khalil Shikaki, "The Palestinian Elections: Sweeping Victory, Uncertain Mandate," *Journal of Democracy* 17.3 (July 2006), 122.
[15] Cheryl A. Rubenberg, *The Palestinians: In Search of a Just Peace*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), 254.
[16] Cheryl A. Rubenberg, *The Palestinians: In Search of a Just Peace*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), 258; For more specific examples relating corruption to the existence and PA control of monopolies in Palestine, see Chapter 6 in Cheryl A. Rubenberg's *The Palestinians: In Search of a Just Peace*.
[17] Khaled Meshaal, "A Hamas Perspective on the Movement's Evolving Role: An Interview with Khalid Mishal: Part II," By Mouin Rabbani, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 37.4 (Summer 2008) 68.
[18] Jacob Shamir and Khalil Shikaki, *Palestinian and Israeli Public Opinion: The Public Imperative in the Second Intifada*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 139.
[19] Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research, "Results of PSR's PLC Exit Poll – 15 February 2006," http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2006/exitplce.pdf (accessed August 10, 2010).
[20] Ibid.
[21] Khalil Shikaki, "The Palestinian Elections: Sweeping Victory, Uncertain Mandate," *Journal of Democracy*, 17.3 (July 2006), 120-121.
[22] Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000), 276.
[23] Khaled Meshaal, "The Making of a Palestinian Islamist Leader: An Interview with Khalid Mishal: Part I," By Mouin Rabbani, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 37.3 (Spring 2008), 70.
[24] Khaled Meshaal, "The Making of a Palestinian Islamist Leader: An Interview with Khalid Mishal: Part I," By Mouin Rabbani, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 37.3 (Spring 2008), 71-71
[25] See *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* by Quintan Wiktorowicz, and *Terrorism in the Mind of God* by Mark Juergensmeyer.
[26] Khalil Shikaki, "The Palestinian Elections: Sweeping Victory, Uncertain Mandate," *Journal of Democracy*, 17.3 (July 2006), 121.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Khaled Hroub, "Hamas after Shaykh Yasin and Rantisi," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33.4 (2004), 26.
[29] Jacob Shamir and Khalil Shikaki, *Palestinian and Israeli Public Opinion: The Public Imperative in the Second Intifada*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 6; For a backgrounder on the Disengagement Plan, see the Council on Foreign Relations, "Middle East: The Disengagement Plan," Sharon Otterman, http://www.cfr.org/publication/7737/middle_east.html (Accessed 11 August 2010)
[30] Jacob Shamir and Khalil Shikaki, *Palestinian and Israeli Public Opinion: The Public Imperative in the Second Intifada*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 101.

[31] Jacob Shamir and Khalil Shikaki, *Palestinian and Israeli Public Opinion: The Public Imperative in the Second Intifada*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 72.
[32] Jacob Shamir and Khalil Shikaki, *Palestinian and Israeli Public Opinion: The Public Imperative in the Second Intifada*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 101.
[33] Khaled Meshaal, "The Making of a Palestinian Islamist Leader: An Interview with Khalid Mishal: Part I," By Mouin Rabbani, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 37.3 (Spring 2008), 69.