

# Hamas and Palestinian Nationalism

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Similar to the central role it played in the first intifada (which erupted in December 1987), the Islamic Resistance Movement (known better by its Arabic acronym —Hamas) has also been playing a central role in the second Palestinian intifada (which erupted in September 2000). Its use of religious symbols and motives both constituted the igniting spark for the two intifadas and is today one of the main factors contributing to the continuation of the current intifada. Thus Hamas has shown great capacity for mass mobilization of Palestinian society.

The establishment of Hamas in 1987 reflected the increasing power and influence of the Islamic current in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Aware of this developing current, the national leadership headed by the PLO also used Islamic symbols and rhetoric in an attempt to increase its legitimacy and for mass mobilization among the Palestinians. An example of the PLO's awareness can be seen in the May 1992 elections for the Chamber of Commerce in Nablus in which the national list run under the title "The National-Islamic Current." Another example is Fatah activists raising of open Korans in their student council electoral campaign at Al-Najah University in Nablus.<sup>1</sup>

Today, Hamas enjoys wide popular support in Palestinian society. Although its principal basis of support comes from marginalized groups, its social base also includes representation from almost all social strata – those with higher education alongside the illiterate and those with only basic education; businessmen and farmers; laborers and white-collar employees such as lawyers and doctors; the young and the old; women and men.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Hamas plays multiple roles and is a multi-faceted phenomenon. On one hand it is part of the larger phenomenon of radical Islam. As such, it advocates the establishment of a supra-national Islamic state based on the laws of the sharia'a. On other hand, it is part of the Palestinian liberation movement, shaped by the rhetoric and symbols of Palestinian nationalism, with the goal of liberating historic Palestine. Hamas has had to formulate its ideology internally through a power-struggle with the PLO, a more highly institutionalized national movement, over the heart of the Palestinian political community, and externally through an armed struggle against Israel. In other words, Hamas has come to constitute both the main internal opposition to the PLO and the Palestinian Authority (PA) as well as an external military opposition to Israeli colonization.

This reality poses great challenges for Hamas. How can it reconcile its universal Islamic doctrine with a territorially (Palestinian) focused nationalism? This dilemma has become even sharper since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in June 1994 following the Declaration of Principles in September 1993. Another challenge is how to reconcile between its advocacy of jihad against Israel and pressures from Israel, the PA, and international actors to stop armed attacks against military and civilian Israeli targets.

The purpose of this article is to propose a conceptual framework to explain the dominant socio-political status of Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, its ability for mass mobilization, and its capability for overcoming the aforementioned dilemmas. This framework will propose that the explanation of these issues is connected to three main factors: First, the failure of the PLO to achieve what in the eyes of the majority of the Palestinian consider as a minimum for political settlements with Israel. Second, Hamas' effective co-optation and Islamization of secular Palestinian nationalism. Third, Hamas' ability to interpretate Islam in a way that enables it to maintain a balance between pure ideological discourse and vision and realistic and pragmatic political behavior. This development has a profound impact on the nature

of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on one hand and the nature of the Palestinian political community on the other. This will be clarified through a comparison of the Palestinian context with the Algerian one.

This framework is important, because in spite of the increasing volume of academic research on Hamas, attempts to theorize about the main sources of its mass mobilization and popular support are still very limited. Most research either focuses on one dimension of the movement or on a number of dimensions but without connecting them theoretically and coherently. In addition, the theoretical tools available to social scientists are not applied to the case of Hamas. Such an application, which will be carried out in this article, will locate Hamas in a larger perspective beyond the Palestinian and even the Arab-Islamic context.

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<sup>1</sup>Ronni Shaked and Aviva Shabi, *Hamas: Palestinian Islamic Fundamentalist Movement* (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 243. (Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup>Shaul Mishal & Avraham Sela, *The Hamas Wind--Violence and Coexistence* (Tel-Aviv, 1999), p. 9 (Hebrew).