



## “ Hamas: Weaponizing Civil Society and Social Services”

by Edwin Tran

The rise of militant jihadist organizations in the Middle East is often thought of in simplistic and blanket terms. Unfortunately, diverse and distinct groups, such as Hezbollah and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, are grouped into a single category, and are often explained in broad terms. This phenomenon arises in the case of Hamas; here, many individuals identify the organization with qualities such as anti-Semitism and suicide terrorism, and at the same time fail to recognize the nationalistic nuances that exist in it.<sup>1</sup> The formation and rise of Hamas cannot be simplified in this way. Rather, understanding Hamas's popularity requires an examination of the factors that contributed to its rise. Indeed, Hamas's modern appeal and electoral popularity can be traced to its early participation in Palestinian civil society and in its emphasis in providing social services for residents of the Gaza Strip.

This emphasis on social service and civil society can be found in the theoretical framework established by Professor Sheri Berman of Columbia University. In her article, "Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society," she posits a

foundational perspective on the rise of Islamist organizations and the transition in which many engage themselves to become integrated into the political fabric of their respective countries. Using Egypt as her primary case, Professor Berman asserts that recent trends in Islamist-regime relationships have become dominated by a competition of power between an incumbent regime and the "revolutionary" Islamist challengers who seek to become more engaged in the politics of the nation.<sup>2</sup> She expands on this point further, noting that "this stalemate... is largely a consequence of Islamists' ability to expand their presence in civil society... [and] is thus best understood as a sign of... profound political failure, and an incubator for illiberal radicalism."<sup>3</sup> In other words, states are the primary caretakers of their people and a key aspect in this is the provision of social services for a state's citizenry. As states begin to fail in providing citizens with functions such as hospitals and food banks, an equivalent decline in state capacity and state legitimacy follows. Citizens become disenfranchised with the incumbent government and must seek other sources for their needed

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2008), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Sheri Berman, "Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society," *Perspectives on Politics*, 1 (2003), 258.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

social services. This creates a situation that is exploitable by Islamist organizations, causing many groups to quickly mobilize in order to provide individuals with these missing services.<sup>4</sup> In this case, the advancement of civil society should be examined as a decrease in state capabilities and, simultaneously, as an expansion of revolutionary sentiment and governmental dissatisfaction.<sup>5</sup> While her research focused on the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Professor Berman does make the declaration that Egypt can be representative of other Middle Eastern countries, citing Hezbollah in Lebanon as another example of this phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> It is possible, then, to transport this theoretical model and apply it to Hamas's rise in popularity.

An examination into the historical context surrounding the organization's founding provides key insight into how Professor Berman's social service analysis plays into Hamas's prevalence. The organization began as a branch of Hassan al-Bana's Muslim Brotherhood, with many mosques and schools being affiliated with the entity. As noted by Professor Jonathan

Schanzer of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Muslim Brotherhood began its first forays into the Palestinian territories between 1946 and 1948, creating branches of the Brotherhood in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.<sup>7</sup> The enterprise here, as explained by Professor Michael Jensen of the University of Copenhagen, was to develop charities and educational structures while working closely with local mosques.<sup>8</sup> One particular group, the al-Mujama' al-Islami, would emerge from the mind of Ahmed Yassin, a graduate of Al-Azhar University in Cairo and well-versed in the principles and tenets of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>9</sup> Founded in the 1970s, Al-Mujama' al-Islami followed a path typical of many Brotherhood-affiliates, focusing on the idea of *dawa*, or charity. Indeed, many of the services provided by al-Mujama' al-Islami included small medical clinics, meal provisions, and youth clubs.<sup>10</sup> This focus reflected the official Muslim Brotherhood tenets of non-violence and charity. Yet, it must be understood that this organization was still barely a footnote in the politics of the wider region. For decades, a group from across the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>8</sup> Michael I. Jensen, *The Political Ideology of Hamas: A Grassroots Perspective* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2009), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Mediterranean Sea has been in the hearts and minds of many Palestinians. Yasser Arafat's Fatah was the foremost figure of the Palestinian struggle, having fought against the Israelis for decades and being successful in promoting the resistance to a global audience.<sup>11</sup> Fatah had become so recognized on both local and international scales that "Arafat became the de facto head of the Palestinian people... [and] the PLO was recognized as the unquestioned leader of the Palestinian people."<sup>12</sup> As the 1970s came ahead, there were new developments that suggested a change in the dynamics of the Palestinian political landscape. While Ahmed Yassin's Al-Mujama' al-Islami was not as glamorous as Fatah, the Yassin's focus on civil society and social service would prove essential in local recognition.<sup>13</sup>

A radical development in Ahmed Yassin's al-Mujama' al-Islami occurred in 1979, when the organization's political and social branches were granted legal licensing to operate openly in the Gaza Strip.<sup>14</sup> This legal allowance by the Israeli government gave Yassin the opportunity to use his newly founded

Islamic Center to serve as a central hub for Brotherhood activities in the Gaza Strip.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, Ahmed Yassin and his group expanded on their charitable services by creating a bureaucratic administration focused on recruitment and the effective provision of social services.<sup>16</sup> Shortly after Yassin's Israeli approval, "the center boasted an aggressive network of health services, day care, youth activities, and even food services that won the support and loyalty of the destitute Palestinians living in Gaza."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the organization began to develop new schools, mosques, and even aided in the construction of the Islamic University of Gaza.<sup>18</sup> These actions were further compounded by an increase in funds given to the organization by many Gulf States, increasing the group's capabilities and potential reach.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, we have the rather lax involvement seen in the actions of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The PLO and its key group, Fatah, were residing in Lebanon from the 1960s to 1982, and were then exiled to Tunisia following the course of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Michael I. Jensen, *The Political ideology of Hamas: A Grassroots Perspective*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (Yale University Press: London, 2006), 10.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Michael I. Jensen, *The Political Ideology of Hamas: A Grassroots Perspective*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 15.

the Lebanese Civil War.<sup>20</sup> Arafat and Fatah were separated geographically and politically from the Palestinian territories. Arafat was unable to have any concrete influence in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and ultimately, his organization's actions were relatively ineffective at changing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the other hand, Ahmed Yassin's created a sense of solidarity and empathy between the peoples of the Gaza Strip and Al-Mujama' al-Islami. Yassin's organization was on the ground and providing concrete social services, acutely aware of the fact that "both the Israeli government and Palestinian leadership [had] consistently failed to provide these essential services to the Palestinian community."<sup>21</sup> The failure of the state, which or lack thereof, gave Yassin and the Muslim Brotherhood the opportunity to come in and create their own social service and civil society apparatuses.<sup>22</sup> To add credence to this point, Sheri Berman's description of the delegitimizing state can be applied to Yasser Arafat's PLO, which at this time was far from the Palestinian territories and ineffectual at providing governmental

services of their own.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Ahmed Yassin and his organization were conducting grassroots operations that provided him keen insight into the needs and struggles of the local Palestinian populace. It is important to note that on the eve the First Intifada, Yassin had developed a web of schools, charities, and mosques that would provide the foundational backbone for Hamas to pivot off from.<sup>24</sup> In short, "Hamas was able to rapidly to take over... precisely because it was not, in fact, a new movement at all. Right from the start, the organization had made use of the Islamist network and the institutions established many years earlier."<sup>25</sup>

This began in 1982, when Ahmed Yassin founded the al-Mujahideen al-Filastininun, an organization that focused on a weapons procurement and other militant aims.<sup>26</sup> Five years later, in 1987, the First Intifada broke out. The Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine was initially split on its course of actions. Some desired to maintain the positions of non-violence, while a smaller group of younger Brotherhood members wanted to support more hawkish, military

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Sheri Berman, "Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society," 258.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Michael I. Jensen, *The Political Ideology of Hamas: A Grassroots Perspective*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, 10.

ventures. In 1987, this cadre officially rebranded to become Hamas.<sup>27</sup> While a more militant branch, the organization maintained its connections with the wider Muslim Brotherhood and importantly, never dropped the traditions of social service and civil society. These sentiments were clearly expressed in Hamas's founding charter, published in August 18th, 1988. In Article 20 of the charter, it is declared that "Islamic society [Hamas] is one of solidarity... We face no escape from establishing social solidarity among the people... so that if one organ is hurt the rest of the body will respond with alertness and fervor."<sup>28</sup> The diction in this statement is key, as it links Hamas directly with the Palestinian people. This emphasis on solidarity creates an image of Hamas as a protector or guardian of sorts. More emphasis on this social service aspect is addressed in a direct Islamic recitation which is found within the charter: "What a wonderful tribe were the Ash'aris... [who] would collect all their possessions and then would divide them equally among themselves."<sup>29</sup> This passage emphasizes the foundational element of social service that existed in

Hamas's predecessor. The charter highlights the fact that while Hamas may have formed to distinguish itself from the Muslim Brotherhood, it would continue on with the principles of charity and social service. It affirmed Hamas's own role as being both a military organization and as a revolutionary challenger seeking to control the Palestinian territories.

Thus, the official formation of Hamas acts as a bookmark highlighting the first real challenger to the legitimacy of Yasser Arafat and the PLO. Fatah and the PLO, in the wake of the First Intifada, found themselves to be surprised by the organization.<sup>30</sup> The anti-Israeli revolts and uprisings that characterized the First Intifada became ideological battlegrounds that split Palestinians between the long-standing PLO and the upstarts of Hamas.<sup>31</sup> Hamas began to imitate some of the PLO's strategies, distributing leaflets and using their previously established social service networks to mobilize support for the Intifada.<sup>32</sup> It soon became clear that the failure of Fatah in producing any secure gains for the Palestinian people since its inception in 1959 was beginning to take a toll

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> "Hamas: Charter (August 1988)," in *The Israeli-Arab Reader*, ed. Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin (Penguin Books: New York, 2001), 343.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

on the organization's popular support. Indeed, during the course of the Intifada, " Hamas began to exploit the general frustration in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, where many Palestinians were losing confidence in Arafat's leadership."<sup>33</sup> Here, Professor Berman's analysis of the group feels almost prophetic. The "declining effectiveness and legitimacy" of the Palestinian-Arafat state was eroded by "the rise of revolutionary movements and their attack on the status quo."<sup>34</sup> In the case of Fatah, this declining legitimacy arose due to Arafat's inability in securing concrete gains for the Palestinian people and for his recognition of an Israeli state.<sup>35</sup> From here, Hamas's competition with Fatah seems to be a textbook case of Professor Berman's framework. Hamas would weaponize civil society, doing so through its network of social services.<sup>36</sup> Ideological fronts opened in areas such as university campuses across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.<sup>37</sup>

The holistic nature of Hamas and its background under Al-Mujama al-Islami resulted in massive popular support amongst many Palestinians. The

combination of Hamas's participation in civil society, as exemplified by their actions toward education, and in acts such as the provision of welfare and charity, culminated in a significant rise in Hamas membership. Professor Jonathan Schanzer, for example, noted that "swelling the ranks of Hamas supporters, to the surprise of Fatah, was the Palestinian intelligentsia, including teachers, students, doctors, lawyers, and accountants."<sup>38</sup> It is understood by many scholars that Hamas continues to maintain its strong roots with the middle classes of the Gaza Strip.<sup>39</sup> In addition, Hamas's focus on providing charitable services to the lowest classes of Palestinian society further contributed to their acceptance amongst a wide socio-economic array of Palestinians.<sup>40</sup> As noted by a Palestinian named Nidal who had participated in the First Intifada, it became clear that Hamas had reached a critical mass in its popular acceptance. In an interview, Nidal revealed that despite Hamas's usage of Islamist rhetoric, Palestinians were flocking to the organization's banner because the end goal of the organization was in line with that of the Palestinian

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Sheri Berman, "Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society," 259.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, Hamas vs. Fatah, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Sheri Berman, "Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society," 259.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, Hamas vs. Fatah, 26

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, Hamas vs. Fatah, 28.

<sup>39</sup> *Erased in a Moment: Suicide Bombing attacks Against Israeli Citizens*, 64.

<sup>40</sup> Michael I. Jensen, *The Political Ideology of Hamas: A Grassroots Perspective*, 6.

populace.<sup>41</sup> It was possible, according to Nidal, to look past the religious nature of the organization in order to emphasize unity and national solidarity.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, scholars noted that by the end of 1989, Hamas had secured, at the very least, massive acceptance amongst the Palestinian populace.<sup>43</sup> Even to this day, Hamas has maintained its position as a provider of social services; the destitution in which many Palestinians live are key avenues for Hamas to build on in order to maintain its popularity.<sup>44</sup>

It becomes evident that the rise of Hamas, this jihadist organization, emerged not out of simplified terms like culture and religion. People did not join Hamas a desire to create a unified Islamic caliphate, nor did they join in order to eradicate the global Jewish population. Rather, the emergence, acceptance, and surging popularity of Hamas can be derived from its participation in civil society and its clever use of social services. Using Professor Sheri Berman's scholarship as a framework, it becomes clear that in conjunction to this history of social service, the rise of Hamas was also dependent on the weakening legitimacy of Fatah. By the end of

the First Intifada, Hamas commanded a huge amount of respect and loyalty, especially amongst residents of the Gaza Strip. These factors provide key foundational elements that highlight the reasons as to why Hamas has continued to have the popularity it maintains today. The story of Hamas and Fatah is a duet defined by the success of each organization in garnering the support of the people. It was never about Islam, or culture, or even Israel to a degree. It has, and always will be about the will of Palestine and knowing the people's needs, wants, and hopes

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<sup>41</sup> "Nidal," in *Homeland: Oral Histories of Palestine and Palestinians*, ed. Staughton Lynd, Alice Lynd, and Sam Bahour (Olive Branch Press: New York, 1994), 270.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, *Hamas vs. Fatah*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*, 5.



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